

3 Elijah in the Wilderness

On Mount Carmel Elijah was undisputed master. He told the King to eat and drink, anticipating the end of the drought, while he himself climbed to the top, and there bowed down to the earth in prayer. Seven times he sent a servant to look out to sea, and on the seventh time his servant returned to say that a small cloud had appeared on the horizon. Elijah needed no further sign. He sent word at once to Ahab: "Harness the chariot and go down before the rain stops you." The drought was over, and before long the ground would be too full of water for a chariot to make its way down the mountain. The King obeyed, and the rain was already falling in torrents when he mounted his chariot and headed for the royal city of Jezreel.

Elijah, seized with a sudden burst of energy, tucked up his cloak and ran ahead of the King, reaching the walls of the city before him.¹ His day of action had come. The drought had ended and Elijah was convinced that Baal's day in Israel was over. The people of the city would surely rise to drive out the enemy, just as the witnesses on Carmel had slaughtered his prophets in the Wadi Kishon. When they heard of the events on the mountain, they would know why the drought was over - and they would know what to do with the Queen's temples and all the paraphernalia of the false god. No priest of Baal would be left alive in Jezreel - and soon in the whole of Israel. The prophet, the son of the wilderness, was now at the very walls of Jezreel, eager for Yahweh's triumph. The voice that had come from the wild country, crying out for the living and personal God of the wilderness, was ready now to shout to the city, proclaiming Israel's return to the God who had given her all her cities.

Triumph, vindication, vengeance, but above all a sweeping change of heart through the whole nation, the opened eyes of Israel recognising at last who was their God, and Who their God was; the total victory of Yahweh winning back his people, was Elijah's confident expectation. And the rain poured down in torrents, as if to drown forever the memory of Baal. Yahweh had spoken, visibly, and the answering shout from Israel must sweep aside the Phoenicians and the Baal shrines forever.

Elijah knew that the intervention of God could never be fruitless, never an idle display, but must drive on to the most awesome, exciting and terrible conclusion. What he did not realise was that Yahweh had hardly begun his work, and that the conclusion was still a long way off. There was much more to this dialogue than Elijah realised, and Yahweh was leading him towards the real encounter and confrontation, for which Mount Carmel was only a preparation. Elijah thought he had almost finished, but Yahweh knew he had barely begun, and that the way ahead lay through bitter trial and disappointment.

¹ IK18:39-46

There was more to the dialogue, more to Yahweh and to Israel, and more to Jezebel, than Elijah had reckoned on. When the king reached the city, he went straight to his wife to break the news of their defeat, but Jezebel was not one to concede the war because she had lost a battle. Ahab may have been rattled, but she was made of stronger stuff. The drought was over - whichever god had ended it. That meant that the kingdom was safe and on the road to recovery. The city was quiet whatever weird and wonderful things had happened on Mount Carmel, and, apart from general rejoicing at the thunder of continuous rain, there was no sign of any popular uprising. The people were probably already thanking their baals, regardless of Elijah's claims. Whatever had shaken her husband in the woods of Carmel, the city was a different place, where she, and he if he had the courage, still held control. The only massacre here would be the quick and decisive execution of Elijah.

The prophet, waiting eagerly outside the city, perhaps for word of the court's submission, or a popular uprising, received instead Jezebel's promise of his own death in revenge for the slaughter of her prophets. Beyond that, there was nothing: no rapturous acclaim, no outburst of enthusiasm for Yahweh, no revolt, not a tremor in the population. It seemed that whether they thanked Yahweh or Baal for the rain, they did not see that it made any difference to life or to business, which would soon be back to normal. Elijah was learning that a visible display of Yahweh's reality such as he had witnessed on Mount Carmel, could produce no widespread or lasting change of heart. A dramatic show of divine activity produces only fleeting and superficial repentance, an equally dramatic and brief display of enthusiasm. The slaughter in the Wadi Kishon had exhausted Israel's conversion.

The power of Yahweh displayed on Carmel was not force to cow his opponents but an answer to vindicate his servant's trust. For those to whom the trust meant nothing, its vindication meant little more: a nine hours' wonder perhaps - but Elijah, who stands outside the city speaking of loyalty and a new commitment to Yahweh, is once again a voice crying in the wilderness and a sound falling on deaf ears. Yahweh's intervention would not be without effect - but its effect was only to confirm the ignorance and disobedience of Israel. Having already ignored his voice in the traditions of their past, they were not interested in who or what had spoken on Mount Carmel.

Confident of Israel's apathy, Jezebel stood her ground. She called the prophet's bluff - and Elijah was shattered to find he had no more than bluff behind him. For the first time, he was afraid. He who had so calmly answered the fears of the widow and those of Obadiah, he who had faced the king and challenged the Baal prophets, was now, suddenly, afraid. For all the blood that had flowed on Mount Carmel, it was not after all the Baal party that was wrecked by the intervention of Yahweh, but Elijah himself who was broken by its failure. All his former confidence collapsed. He had nothing in reserve, for only the power and reliability of Yahweh backed him up, and now it seemed that Yahweh's intervention had achieved nothing. Here in Jezreel, Jezebel was in firm control and the people indifferent to both miracles and slaughters. Elijah was alone. His

hopes so cruelly dashed, he now faced unexpected and total failure right where he had expected triumph. It was a failure he could not face. He turned and fled for his life.

There is a mistaken idea among us that allegiance to an exclusive god somehow suited a more primitive, narrow-minded and parochial people than we are. We also suffer from the notion that "ancient peoples" were easily impressed by miracles. But as the aftermath of Carmel shows, both these assumptions are wrong. The mass of people in Elijah's Israel agreed with the eclectics and skeptics of our own day. They happily tolerated any and every god, and they refused to be moved by miracles. Only Elijah was loyal, and he believed before there was any miracle.

For Elijah it all ended in defeat - a draft of cold reality that nearly destroyed him. It shattered his hopes and mocked his whole life of implicit commitment to Yahweh. But it was also the beginning of a new encounter in which he would learn all over again to know Yahweh, and to know him better than before. This, too, is what I meant in the previous chapter when I said that relying on the intervention of God is not avoiding responsibility but assuming even greater responsibility. God does not always offer an easy way out, but often a difficult and challenging one - fraught with danger. It may be more testing than the original problem.

Elijah fled from Israel and made his way south into Judah.¹ Feeling no safer there, he continued on to Beersheba, where he left his last follower and went on alone. Beyond Beersheba, there was only the wilderness and eventually the blistering desert, where he felt he would be beyond the reach of Jezebel and safe, at least to die without further torment. With safety came exhaustion and despair. His last energies had been spent in the panic of escape, and now that it was over, he felt only that he would be better off dead. There in the wilderness, where drout never ends, he found the thin shade of a furze bush and, sitting there, cried out to his God:

"Yahweh, I have had enough. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."
(IK 19:4)

In the depths of depression, worn out by all his excessive activity and sinking into despair, Elijah wanted only to sleep, and never to wake again, but his sleep was disturbed. He was roused by a messenger from Yahweh. (It may have been a miraculous voice and visitation, or simply a passing herdsman who took pity on him, for either could be described as an "angel of Yahweh".)

While he slept, an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked round and there at his head was a scone baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. But the angel of Yahweh came back a second

¹ IK 19:3f

time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, or the journey will be too long for you." So he got up and ate and drank, and strengthened by that food he walked for forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

(IK 19:5-8)

Mount Horeb in the wilderness (also remembered as Mount Sinai) was a place where the Israelites had gathered when they were still nomads, wandering in the desert. There, according to their traditions, they had met with Yahweh and received the laws of their community. So Elijah's flight had brought him back to the beginning, to meet with Yahweh on the desert mountain where Yahweh had first met with Israel.

On Horeb he took shelter in a cave, and there he waited until Yahweh should come and speak to him. There was nothing else to do. He had no plans, no prospects, no further understanding of Yahweh's will for him or for Israel. He could only wait until he recognised the voice of Yahweh speaking to him again.

Eventually, there came a terrific wind,

so strong it tore the mountains and shattered the rocks before Yahweh. But Yahweh was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But Yahweh was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire there came the sound of a gentle breeze. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then a voice came to him which said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I am filled with jealous zeal for Yahweh Sabaoth, because the sons of Israel have deserted you, broken down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I am the only one left and they want to kill me."

(IK 19:11-14)

It is sometimes thought that the point of this story is God's gentleness, like a soft breeze and not like fire and earthquake. But that is not quite right. This is the story of Elijah's meeting with Yahweh, and like the story of Mount Carmel, it tells us not what God is like, but how he speaks, or communicates. Wind, fire and earthquake are part of the coming of Yahweh - they are its effects or its heralds - but only in the still, small breeze does Yahweh come to communicate with his servant.

On Mount Carmel, Elijah had called on Yahweh. He had set the subject and tone of the meeting, according to his needs and perceptions. He had cried out to God and God had answered him - impressively, but in the end ineffectively. Here on Mount Horeb, however, it is Yahweh who has called Elijah. Defeat and despair have reduced the prophet to the point where he expects nothing and has nothing further of his own to propose. God himself can now set the tone and subject, speaking to the prophet in his chosen accents. Although the gentle breeze is far less impressive than the fire from the sky, it will be far more effective.

On Mount Carmel and Mount Horeb Elijah experienced the reality of God. He met Yahweh as God: personal, real and ultimate: not a real object but a real person, not an ultimate idea but the ultimate person. He spoke to God, and God spoke to him.

Perhaps our main test for the reality of anything is its resistance: it is solid. Daydreams and fantasies will bend and change with my own desires and expectations. They continue to reflect my own mind and sometimes my own will. But real things are independent of me. They continue to be themselves and behave according to their own nature, regardless of what I expect or desire. If I want to adapt any real thing to my needs, I have to take account of its independent nature. I can't make a saucepan out of grass or a rope out of stone. A stump of wood in the ground is real because it resists and hurts my foot, even tho I didn't see it. My pretend sports car may crash into the wall without doing damage, for it is not real. Real insight, born of real experience, checks and corrects us, obliging us to accept what we didn't expect; but imagination, ever obliging, will turn out theories to fit in with anything we want to believe. A Father Christmas, or a saviour, or a God who never inconveniences us, turns out to be a convenient product of our imagination. But a real person is a discovery: surprising or disappointing or baffling us. What is real is resistant, because it is true to itself - its own nature or logic or character. It will not just become whatever we want it to be.

On the other hand, we know we are relating to a person, and not just a thing, when that person does respond to us, meeting - sometimes to our surprised delight - our expectations, wishes and needs. A baby grows in the knowledge of persons, its awareness of others and of itself, by responding to them and seeing them respond to it. The baby finds that it's no use crying for the light on the ceiling. It won't come, even if you want it. But you can cry for your Mum. She will come. Those who show themselves aware of us, who respond to the wishes we try to communicate, become significant persons for us. A God, or a Father Christmas for that matter, who does answer our wishes, personally expressed in a prayer or a December letter, becomes for us a person - a real someone.

So if things simply conform to our wishes and never resist us, they are not real but dreams. Yet we only recognise persons when we find we can communicate our wishes and expectations to them, and that they respond. To discover the reality of God, who is utterly personal, involves us therefore in apparently contradictory experiences. God answers us, because God is personal; but he does not answer, because he is real. God responds to us, yet he resists us. He meets us, and yet he eludes us. Because he is personal, he communicates, and we can communicate with him, but because he is real and beyond our expectations, he baffles us. When we presume on him, he is not there. When we want him to behave our way, he goes his own way. When we try to ignore him, we stumble against him. He answers our prayer with fire from heaven, then, when we expect victory, he sends us running into the wilderness.

On Mount Carmel, Elijah had thought he was demonstrating Yahweh to Israel. But he was in fact meeting him, discovering him in a closer, more personal encounter. Because

he is personal, Yahweh answered; but because he is real, a person in himself and not a projection of Elijah's wishes, his response did not meet Elijah's requirements, and in the end it baffled and broke him. Fleeing for his life from Jezreel to Beersheba to Mount Horeb, Elijah encountered the reality of Yahweh as one who spoke to him not according to his expectations, but as God really is.

God is real, but not a mere thing, waiting to be unearthed and examined by our investigations. God is personal, and therefore we discover God only because God communicates with us. Both as real and as personal, God is prior to us, greater than us, transcending us. The initiative is always God's, and it is his reaching out to us that counts - his interest in us, rather than our interest in him. In fact, when God does reveal Godself, when he speaks to us, he shakes the very foundations of our being, to renew them in the deeper, fuller, wider reality of a relationship with him. By communicating with us, he makes us real; by speaking to us as person to persons, he makes our personality absolutely real. Whenever, therefore, we think we are establishing God's reality and personality, God is in fact creating and establishing ours.

It is not an intellectual exercise, but a total and harrowing encounter. When you "establish" the existence of God, you can't just walk away saying "How interesting - it really is true", for someone with an utterly overriding claim on you has laid hold of you. Because he is personal, you have entered a relationship with him. Because he is real, that relationship will not be available to your wishful bending and moulding. And because he is God, it is total and exclusive. You are now his, created by your relationship with him, in which he responds to you as personal, but shows himself too real for your expectations.

(I could equally well have said "Because she is personal, you have entered a relationship with her..." What is in question here is not God's identification as male, and not as father, but as personal. The story emphasises the sheer personality of God: that God is a speaking, sharing, desiring, loving, communicating being - utterly personal, beyond the limitations of any possible sex role. To meet God as personal is to go beyond any and all male or female images. I cannot help feeling that, heavily "masculine" though the story of Elijah is, it is still one of the places in the Bible where God surpasses the "masculine" image for a transcendently personal one.)

Our relationship to things is one of mastery, or at most enjoyment and appreciation. Our relationship to persons is one of communication and trust. Our relationship to God has to be that of total trust in the face of One whose communication with us (his "word") becomes the foundation of our personal existence. In the story of Elijah, we learn that a bolt from the blue, a miraculous sign, far from giving easy certainty, only leads the more quickly to a crisis. It rushes those who have witnessed it into wilder, more challenging uncertainties, where only deep and personal trust will hold its ground. In the midst of miracles, the only way to survive is by confidence in the God who has shown himself so real, so personal, so powerful and so far beyond control or prediction.

Elijah survived, because he recognised and trusted Yahweh as personal, as one who would communicate with him. When he thought he had failed and that all was lost for Israel, he instinctively turned to Yahweh, if only to ask for death. "Yahweh, I have had enough. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." The basis of any right relationship with God is trust. It may be no more, in the darkness of defeat, than a conviction that there is no one else to turn to; that there is nothing else for it but to hand yourself back to him. But because that is personal trust, it will even then be the beginning of great things. It will be the turning point where God begins again to act, and to act decisively for his people.

Elijah, for all his passionate conviction and ascetic dedication, had been ready to give up. The failure even of Yahweh's intervention had destroyed him. But in the wilderness he found that Yahweh had not given up, and would not allow him to do so either. Defeated and humbled, stripped of all plans and hopes, he was ready to listen to God, and so he discovered that there was still work for him to do. When Yahweh spoke to him, it was not to accept his resignation or even to express sympathy for him, but simply to give him his next instructions:

A voice came to him which said, "What are you doing here Elijah?" He replied "I am filled with jealous zeal for Yahweh Sabaoth, because the sons of Israel have deserted you, broken down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I am the only one left and they want to kill me." "Go," Yahweh said "go back by the same way to the wilderness of Damascus. You are to anoint Hazael as king of Aram. You are to anoint Jehu as king of Israel and Elisha as prophet to succeed you." (IK 19:13-16)

Far from being relieved of his burden after he had "done his best", Elijah had to begin again, learning to trust Yahweh in a renewed struggle for the hearts of Israel. Although he saw no sign of loyalty in them, and no further way of appealing to them, Yahweh saw what he did not. Far from releasing Elijah from an impossible task, he renewed his commission and broadened it. Elijah was to go back with a mission to Israel and her neighbours that would affect their history for years to come.

On Mount Horeb, Elijah learnt not to be more gentle, nor to be more "spiritual", in the sense of "other-worldly", but to be more patient. That is to say he learnt to trust Yahweh more deeply and persistently, for Yahweh would not be panicked or hurried. Whatever the apparent turn of events, he has the freedom of years to work in. Israel will be converted in time. Meanwhile, there is work for his servants to do which does not consist of winning instant battles by Yahweh's power. It is not immediate miracles, but the long and slow passing of history that will prove the prophet right.

That is the kind of God Yahweh is. To discover him is to discover someone who lays hold of you, claiming your trust, and that trust - the biblical virtue of faith - is anything but an escape from responsibility. True, you do sometimes experience the miraculous intervention of God, but in the wake of such miracles comes the challenge, as real and undeniable as the real God himself, to greater involvement and commitment, to deeper, more enduring trust. The God who spoke on Mount Carmel and Mount Horeb is more real than anything else you might depend on, challenging you to face him and to trust him even against all "realistic" considerations.

That trust returns to the struggle at the very moment when all hope seems to be lost. That commitment takes up the task again at God's command, even when experience has proven it futile. To encounter the Living God as Elijah did, is to find that the One who approaches you draws you on into action, loyalty, obedience, beyond the natural limits of hope. The scope of God's action is the whole of history and if you dare to obey him, the scope of your service may well be as wide. You may find yourself committed to tasks too large for a lifetime, working to a target which only future generations will attain. You can no longer limit your involvement to what is at present possible, but may find yourself committed to goals that your people will not reach till long after your lifetime.

To discover God is to find yourself impelled towards putting things right. The target he gives you may be very different from that of Elijah, but like him you will find yourself pitched against odds that mock any hope of success. You are one voice, one small individual caught up in a problem that involves millions, but you are led to speak and act, to struggle and endure, as if you believe in a future that no one else even understands.

That is where God takes you: not into a haven of comfortable contentment, but into a battle against the odds. You can easily find yourself alone, like Elijah outside the walls of Jezreel. You may camp outside the wire of a cruise missile base, calling for an end to suspicion, madness and death, only to find that the power of governments carries on regardless, and the inertia of peoples is hardly touched by your efforts. Industrial and military spending rolls on with its own inevitable, explosive logic. Your protest is easily misrepresented by vested interests and misunderstood by a shallow and gullible public. The world is immune to your feeble gestures, and independent of any need to justify its own convictions.

Or you may strive to bring justice to the oppressed, only to discover why they are so easily oppressed - how much is going against them. You may find yourself meeting the needs of the poor and inadequate only to find yet greater needs surfacing and yet more inadequate people, while all the time those who could help leave you alone with your hopeless task. Condescending politicians condemn your views with faint praise, or dismiss them as impractical. Panels of well-lettered and persuasive experts rule out your proposals as unrealistic, drowning them in a flood of facts and statistics. Powerful interests feel free to ignore you, or if they do take notice, soon show how much of the public's attention their money can buy. Intensive advertising, massive investments and movements of capital undo overnight what years of patient labour have achieved. And

the great majority of people remain indifferent, content with ignorance and all too ready to yield to a pull that requires only puppet-like responses.

The issues which involve us now may well be far from Elijah and his politics, but they will be crucial issues in the politics of our day, where God is still very much involved. If you dare to believe in him, you will be involved. If you discover him and so become his servant, this is the kind of commitment into which he will lead you. I do not mean that only believers will rise to the challenge - many non-believers do so - but all real believers will be with them, facing the challenge. If you believe in Elijah's God, your faith will not relieve you of responsibility but will draw you on into difficulties that call for deeper faith and more enduring commitment.

The existence of God - his reality - is not a proposition to argue about, but an approach to which we must submit. You encounter the reality of God not as the passive object of your scrutiny but as an active, personal, and commanding voice to be trusted and obeyed. There is no other way to discover him. You cannot arrange to observe or study God while avoiding the dangers. You cannot be academic or detached with God, watching from a safe distance. There is no distance between the knowledge of God and the unpopular commitments into which he draws you. For he comes surrounded with involvements.

The faith which God provokes is not just intellectual faith assenting to doctrines, but active faith: trust and commitment that is dangerous and harrowing. That is one reason why the subject of his existence is so controversial: few will accept the encounter in which alone we discover him - in which he approaches us as the real and challenging God. Even of those who think they believe in him, many cannot accept him for who he is, and in fact confuse the issue by making up their own god under his name.

If you dare to believe in Elijah's God, you will find your trust and loyalty stretched to the limit, and beyond the limit. You will find that he calls you back to the scene of failure to begin again on his instructions alone. But he is no tyrant, grinding out the last drop of your energies to meet his own requirements. The "angel of Yahweh" meets Elijah still forty days' journey from Horeb; refreshes, restores and encourages him so that he can go on. He is not left alone in his night of despair, and when Yahweh comes and speaks to him, he shows him his way forward. Tho God calls for trust, it is only trust he requires, no other qualification or resources. If he is a challenge to his prophet, he is also the ground of his hope, giving back to him, against all hope, a new lease of life and action.

If you do discover God, you discover yourself claimed, challenged, and endowed with new meaning and purpose. To relate to God, rising to that challenge, is to find that God relates to you, recreating and enhancing the person you are. For he challenges you not as a God who takes, but as a God who gives, carrying you beyond your breaking point, putting you together again after defeat and renewing in you his own limitless, untiring commitment. Elijah fled to the wilderness to die there, convinced he had no more to offer, but Yahweh drew him on to Mount Horeb and from there sent him back to continue the struggle, reinvigorated and renewed with an even larger purpose.

God is real as one who is personal, responding to us and encouraging us to seek a response. He is real as one who is independent of us, with his own will and purposes which we cannot mould or force. He is real as one who draws us into real involvement, into action that has real and challenging consequences. The God who is real responds to us, resists us, involves us and commits us. To say with Elijah that Yahweh is God and is winning back our hearts is to recognise in the very reality of God no opium of the people, no comfortable escape from life's problems and agonies, but a challenge to accept him for who he is and for who he intends us to be. It is to exist in his presence and in relationship with him, acknowledging that we are his people.