

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

After the rich diet of feasts and festivals that we've been having in previous weeks, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity, all coming very soon after the other. Now, things calm down liturgically as we enter the season of ordinary time and for many weeks now there won't be any such large festivals, and we'll be wearing green to mark that ordinary season.

The readings shift over the summer, and we're following a track of readings that goes through particularly picking up Old Testament, significant Old Testament themes and readings, so that's the track that we'll be following over these next few weeks. So, we start today with the story of Elijah, a reading from I Kings. It's been very important in my life because it played a key part in giving me a nickname that I have had for over 30 years.

Let me just tell you how that came to happen, because it's true. Before I went to college, I did some gardening for a lady called Mrs. Bruin and she thanked me by giving me a large fruit cake of a kind that you'd never find over here. And I went up early, I took it with me to college. I went up early to play rugby, and you can imagine after training every day, people would go to each other's rooms. People soon gravitated to my room because I had an enormous fruit cake that needed eating.

You can imagine it didn't last long. So I wrote a note to say, "Dear Mrs. Bruin, thank you very much for the cake. It didn't last very long." Within a week, I went to the Porter's Lodge one morning to get my mail and there wrapped in newspaper was another enormous large cake from Mrs. Bruin, so that night I read the lesson in the college chapel and the lesson set for the day was the one we've just heard. So I wrote to Mrs. Bruin again and said, "You've made me feel like Elijah," because I quoted I Kings 19 verse 6 that we've just heard.

"Behold there was a cake," so she must've liked that as every fortnight for the next three years, a huge fruit cake would arrive at the college for me. So, it wasn't long before I was called Cake, that became my nickname. And there are still in England several dozen people who only know me as Cake. So you can imagine, I've always enjoyed this reading from I Kings, so I'm

going to take the opportunity to speak about it. It's a passage that comes after a very famous story.

You may remember that one of the highlights of Elijah's career is... If prophets had careers. They probably didn't think of it in those terms. Ministries. He challenged 450 of the prophets of Baal to some sort of prophetic showdown. So he got two bulls and he said, "Right, if your... You call on your God, the God of Baal, to set your bull on fire, and then I'll see what I can do with my God."

So the 450 prophets tried and tried and tried, and they called on their God, the God of Baal to set the bull on fire. Nothing happened. Then Elijah took his turn and you'll remember he doused the bull in water and called on God, and woof, up went the bull, thereby humiliating the 450 prophets of Baal who had gathered against him. But Jezebel, the Queen who appears at the start of the story, gets mad and we can see there issued a threat to Elijah. You might think that Elijah, the prophet, who just taken on 450 prophets and won a dramatic victory, would be able to ignore the threats of Jezebel, but he couldn't. In his moment of great triumph, Elijah was afraid. He got up, fled for his life, and that's where the story picks up.

When we meet to Elijah in the story, he's hurting. He was having one of those "now what" moments, which sports people are very familiar with. I remember reading a great book by my favorite footballer Tony Adams, and it talked about how... When I say footballer, just understand soccer player. It talked about when he won the FA Cup final, the biggest game in England, he went back home and he didn't know what to do. He ended up turning on the TV, watching the game all over again because he wrote about the emptiness of his life that he won the FA Cup. Now what?

That's what Elijah was feeling. He's beaten the prophets of Baal. Now what? And moments of despair often follow on the heels of moments of great triumph and success. We could all know that. I moved to my dream house. Now what? I've got the job I always wanted. Now what? I finally managed to retire early. Now what? The kids have left home. Now what? Elijah was hurt, he was burnt out. He was depressed, thinking, "Now what?"

And if this amazing, powerful man of faith can feel such things, it's no wonder we do. These feelings of

desperation come to us all, which is why I've always taken great comfort in the Psalms in such times where the feelings that Elijah is feeling at this time are so well expressed. When we don't have the words to express our feelings, even those feelings of sheer desperation, we can often turn to the Psalms and find those words there.

Just look at the Psalm set for today, verse six, "Why are you so full of heaviness, oh my soul. And why are you so disquieted within me?" That could be the prayer of Elijah as he hides in his cave, could be our prayer in whatever situation we find ourselves. We can take the words of the Psalms and make them our own prayer. So firstly, Elijah is hurting and secondly, he goes into hiding. He went into the wilderness and made a long journey to Horeb and found a safe place in a cave, and we could see the extent of his despair because he expresses the feeling that God might let him die there.

I'm interested to see that he's not admonished for those feelings. There's no comment he's made after Elijah expresses how he feels. No voice comes to him saying, "Now come on, Elijah. Pull yourself together. Go out and carry on being a prophet." There's no such admonition in this context. God responds by feeding him with a cake. He rests, eats and exercises, all things which are good for us when we find ourselves in despair, and like Elijah lose all sense of perspective. God cares for Elijah and provides him with a safe place to hide.

Where do we go to hide? Where do we feel safe? There are many options, some better than others: alone with a bottle, in the midst of a large crowd. Elijah discovered his place, his hiding place, his safe place was with God. We come to the climax of the story. Elijah was hurt, he hid, and then he heard. He came to hear an amazing sound, the sound of silence.

A mother once took her young child to Durham Cathedral, an amazing Gothic Cathedral in the north of England and at the end of the service, the organist obviously got carried away, and as the clergy processed down the aisle just pulled out all the stops on the organ. The sound reverberated around the cathedral, and a little boy put his hands over his ears and said, "Does God always have to be so loud," to which the answer to the question is no. God isn't normally so loud. We can see that in this service, in this reading.

God tells Elijah to stand on the mountain as he was about to pass by. There was a great wind, but God was not in the wind. There was an earthquake, but God wasn't in the earthquake. There was a fire, but God wasn't in the fire, and after the fire there was the sound of sheer silence, and God was in the silence. Elijah recognized that, covered his face, and went out to meet with God.

The story of Elijah reminds us to seek God's presence in the simplicity of silence. We don't need to go off to certain places or certain programs to find God. We can take the advantage of seeking solace and silence, and there are... It's not hard to find the silence around us if we look for it early in the morning, late at night, even in the middle of the day, if we find a quiet place. The spiritual practice of silence positions us to be more fully present with God, we're to find those times of silence in the course of our day. We can try and push out the noise that surrounds us and see what W.H. Auden called auditory chastity. It's there if we look for it.

And one final comment before I close, which is about God's timing, and I was struck while reading this verse, that there are two sections of the text you might have noticed, which are almost identical. Twice God asks Elijah, "What are you doing here?" Elijah gives the same answer both times, but after the second time, Elijah is given an instruction. He's told to return to Damascus where he anoints a new king and appoints a successor. The time to go out and do that wasn't after the first question. God waited til Elijah was rested, restored, and ready to hear what he had to say to him.

God's ways are not our ways. His timing is not our timing. As we've seen, Elijah hurt, hid, eventually heard.

Amen.