

Soul-silence

1 Kings 19:9-18
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

“Well, it was like this....”

Peter shifted in his chair and looked indulgently at the grandkids swarming about his feet.

“Tell us a story, Grandpa,” one of them had said. “A story about Jesus,” one of the others had begged. And then suddenly they were all there, tired and fractious at the end of the day, pushing and shoving, noisy and wild, boisterous and buffeting – roiling and boiling like waves on the lake. Just like....

“It had been a long day. We’d crossed the lake to have some peace and quiet, but thousands of people turned up, wanting to hear Jesus teaching. Hungry mouths everywhere and no food. Then Jesus had somehow fed everyone from 5 loaves and two fishes, and we were all thinking “what’s going on here?”.

And then almost before we knew it, Jesus was piling us into the boat to go back across the lake. “I need to pray,” he told us, and we knew that was that. Prayer was like food and drink to Jesus. As we pulled off from the shore, we saw him heading for the hills.

But soon our attention was fully needed on the boat. The wind got up... Whooo.” Peter added the sound effects. “The waves grew higher, we began to rock from side to side.”

The children were entranced. They joined in with the sound of the wind. Suddenly they *were* the wind and the waves, the rocking and the shouting.

And Peter was back there, in the boat. Miles from shore in a storm the like of which he’d never seen before. With the sense of being totally out of control. Of being at the mercy of the pounding waves. With the realisation that none of their skill and experience mattered a jot in the face of the ferocity of that storm. With the fear, gnawing in the stomach, paralysing the brain...

And with the terrifying figure coming for them across the water....

And then - the voice. Just Jesus’ normal everyday voice yet miraculously audible through all the noise - “It’s me. Don’t be afraid.”

And, in that instant, that piercing moment of calm. The storm raging all around. But in Peter’s soul, complete calm. Utter trust. He and his companions could do nothing. But Jesus...the violent power of the wind and waves was as nothing compared with the quiet power of Jesus.

It hadn't been bravado, or even stupidity, which had caused him to step out of the boat – it had simply been that he wanted to be as close as possible to Jesus. And even when the fear had grabbed him again, when his focus on Jesus had faltered and he'd begun to sink, Jesus' outstretched hand and knowing words had steadied him....

"And that day, kids," Peter concluded, "I discovered that I needed to focus on what Jesus can do, not on what I can't."

Of course – that's only a story built around the story. Written to help us to think about how we face the challenges in our lives. About whether we look to our own strength. Or to God.

It could equally well have been based on the Elijah story we heard earlier. Elijah's hiding in a cave. His backstory is of trying to counter the wicked king Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel, and their determination to turn the people of Israel towards worshipping other gods. There's been a dramatic showdown where the One True God has revealed his power and the Baal worshippers have been defeated. But far from Ahab and Jezebel turning back to God, they have turned on Elijah, and he's had to flee for his life.

And when God turns up, Elijah is seriously off with him. "I've done all this, and it hasn't worked..." (Subtext – "I'm a miserable failure and I give up".)(With a side-serving of – "and it's all your fault").

And then - after all the drama, wind, earthquake, fire - the sound of sheer silence. A piercing moment of calm, where God *is* to be found.

And as we heard, Elijah then focusses on what God can do, rather than on what *he* can't, offers the situation to God, and acts on God's response.

So – two stories – of trials and turmoils, of God breaking in, and of those involved eventually focussing on what God can do, rather than on what they can't.

And I guess many of us have had similar experiences. When we feel at our wits' end, we cry out to God, and – almost because there is no alternative – we trust in what he can do.

But most of life isn't like that. Most of life is just every day.

We try hard. We do our best. We keep plodding on – doing what we can do. Maybe even, consciously or subconsciously, avoiding what we can't.

But what if we learned how to take the focus off ourselves – and on to what God can do?

What if we were more willing to give things a whirl?

I'm not talking about crazy things that put ourselves or others at risk of harm. (Remember in the temptations, Jesus declined to throw himself off the roof of the temple.)

But maybe some of the things which put us outside our social comfort zone. Some of the things which we could do to share God's love more widely, if only we dared.

Like not saying people's 'no' for them, but sensitively going ahead and inviting or offering – "Would you like to....?" "Why don't you come...?". "Can I help?" "May I pray for you?"

Like writing that letter to our MP about something that God has put on our hearts?

Maybe even thinking about what to say when someone asks us what difference God makes in our life?

Yes – we might be powerless to get what we might call a 'positive' answer in any of these situations....

....but what if we felt brave enough to stop focussing on what we think we can't do – and instead focus on what God can?

In this morning's stories this insight came through a deep encounter with God, brought on by a crisis, a drama.

But it doesn't have to be like that. We have the opportunity to encounter God whenever we wish – through prayer. That's what the heart of prayer is – encountering God.

And yet it's so easy for prayer to become just a shopping list. Of asking God to do things. Maybe sometimes we go further - ask for advice, and try to listen. But – honestly- how often do most of us just seek to spend time with God just so we can be with God?

In every day terms I see it a bit like this... I love getting a WhatsApp from my kids. I love it when they ask me things. I love it when they tell me what they are doing. But I love it even more when we actually get to spend quality time together – it enriches and deepens our relationship, it gives me space to appreciate who they really are. And best of all, is that silent hug – when words aren't necessary. That moment of sheer silence.

The more we pray, the more we learn to find and appreciate that place of what we might call soul-silence. Of just being in the presence of God. Of seeing God as God is, close and loving, almighty and powerful.

We'll find it in different places. In actual silence. In listening to music. In walking in the fresh air. In liturgy, communion, or places such as this special building. We are all different.

But that place, that place of sheer silence – that is where Elijah encountered the Living God, where Peter encountered the reality of Jesus. And it is where we encounter the God who we know as Creator, Christ and Spirit – and where we learn to see what God can do – rather than focussing on what we can't.

And where we hear Jesus' quiet and powerful voice saying "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid."

So how about if we challenge ourselves to spend some of our prayer time not talking, not even listening, but allowing ourselves to just *be* with God – to appreciate not just God’s presence, but also God’s awesomeness, God’s immensity, God’s power. It may take practice, but I promise it is do-able!

And from that place to begin to focus so much less on what we can’t do, and so much more on what God can.