

QUESTIONS GOD ASKS: WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

1 Kings 19:1-18;

Mt 11:28-30

I remember, when Angela and I were still dating, one night we were on our way somewhere and we picked up another young couple who were hitch-hiking. They sat in the back and without any conversation we proceeded on our journey. Eventually I decided to try and make some conversation, and so, half turning around to them, I said, 'What are you doing?' I meant it as a question about whether they were studying or working or whatever, but the young chap thought I suspected he was up to something in the back seat. 'Nothing!', he replied.

'What are you doing here, Elijah?' God is saying in effect to Elijah, 'This isn't where you are supposed to be. What has got you to this place?' And what had got Elijah to that place was that he really didn't want to have anything to do with God or anyone else. He is tired of being a prophet; tired of working for God. In fact, he is tired of life. He is depressed and disillusioned. He is burnt out.

Maybe there are times when we find ourselves in a similar place – we feel depressed, disillusioned, worn out. We don't feel motivated in our faith or our work for God. Notice some of the things that God does to help Elijah. He provides food and allows him to rest. Later on, God directs Elijah to delegate some of his work and involve other people. Things like that may be necessary for us if we are feeling burnt out.

But the most important things that God does for Elijah are not physical or material things. They are rather spiritual things; they have to do with Elijah's relationship with God. Elijah is out of step with God, and until that is corrected nothing else is going to have much effect.

The first thing that God does is to get Elijah to stop and take stock of his life. Twice God asks him that question, 'What are you doing here?' God gets him to press the pause button and be still for a while. Maybe like me you have had the scary experience of teaching someone to drive. When I taught my children, I told them that the most important thing about driving is to know how to stop. No matter how well you might drive a car, if you don't know how to stop, you are heading for a nasty crash. The same is true in life. I remember seeing an advert some time ago, promoting some new car or other. It's punch line said 70mph to zero in 4.5 secs. Normally manufacturers boast about how quickly a car can accelerate, not how quickly it can stop. And that is the story of our world, isn't it – keeping going, moving faster.

God says, 'No, the wheels weren't made to keep going without a stop'. How often in the Bible don't we read words like 'Wait upon the Lord; be still and know that I am God.' Eugene Peterson translates that last verse like this, 'Step out of the traffic. Take a long, loving look at me, your God.'

This is how he puts those verses we heard from Matt 11, 'Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life.' Do we know how to stop? To stop at least for a while each day; to stop for a longer time at least once a week.

The second thing God gets Elijah to do is to **listen**. It's connected to the first one; you can't listen if you haven't first stopped. How do we listen? How do we hear God? Its interesting to me that when Elijah goes outside the cave to listen for God, the voice does not come through the loud outward noises of the wind and earthquake and fire. It is only when there is complete silence that Elijah is able to discern God's whisper.

And so it is with us. Too often we are surrounded by the physical sounds of people and radio, traffic and TV and mobile phones. Everything is clamouring for our attention, but we need to try and discern that quiet whisper of God's voice. Sometimes we need to push those other voices back for a while so that we may hear that other, deeper, more important voice. Henri Nouwen, a spiritual giant of recent times said this, 'Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life.' That is a challenging comment, isn't it? Nouwen points out that the word 'absurd' comes from the Latin word for 'deaf'. If we are deaf to God's voice, we are in danger of living an 'absurd life' – a meaningless existence.

How do we discern God's voice? Someone has written, 'God's whisperings normally come to us in the form of a distinctive thought. Thoughts influenced by God usually have a certain 'feel' about them. They prompt us', this person says, 'to do loving things and not destructive things; they lead us in the direction of a more creative life; they do not accuse or condemn, but urge us towards a better and more positive way of doing things.'

God wants to communicate with us. Often the problem is not that God is not speaking, but rather that we are not listening. God can speak to us through the Scriptures, through other people, through a sermon, through the circumstances of our lives. If it is something particularly important God will often use more than one of those means.

The last thing that God does with Elijah is that He helps him to see things from God's perspective and not merely from his own human point of view. When we are down and disheartened as Elijah was, it is easy to allow negative thoughts and feelings to dominate our lives. We often lose our sense of worth and wonder if our lives have any purpose at all. But God makes it clear to Elijah that He still has work for him to do – he is not useless in God's eyes. God also points out to Elijah that he is not the only one standing up for what is right. There are at least 7,000 others in Israel who have not bowed down to the pagan gods.

When we see things from God's perspective, we realise that God's priorities are different from the world's. With God, faithfulness is more important than success; quality is more important than quantity; the eternal is more important than the temporal, people are more important than things. 'Your ways are not My ways, nor are your thoughts My thoughts', God says. We need to try and see things from His perspective and according to His priorities.

'What are you doing here, Elijah? This isn't where you should be.' God doesn't condemn Elijah and give up on him. He offers him strength for his body and for his spirit. And then God uses the opportunity to get Elijah to stop - to push the pause button for a moment. He also gives Elijah the opportunity to listen again to God's voice; and finally, He helps Elijah to see things from a better perspective.

Stop. Listen. Look. It's like when we cross a road. Stop. Listen. Look. May God help us to do that as we walk life's road with Him.