

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: 1 Kings 19; 9-13: Some Notes

We have just had all the noisy and violent crowd stuff; Elijah versus the prophets of Baal. (The latter sponsored by that caricature villainess, Jezebel – a foreign princess who had brought her foreign gods and nasty ways to Ahab’s Court.) There had been a very one-sided competition to get a sacrifice ignited without matches. Elijah had won hands down, and had girt the cheering crowd to slaughter all the losers. When Ahab told Jezebel what had happened, she vowed to have Elijah murdered – no dutiful wife simpering in the background here. When she said Kill someone, Ahab didn’t have any control over the situation. Elijah flees for his life, and with Divine help he gets back to Horeb/Sinai, the mountain where the Ten Commandments were given to the Exodus Israelites and the Covenant created that King Ahab with a lot of help from Jezebel is busy breaking.

There couldn’t be a greater contrast than that between the worship competition and Elijah here alone with God. Earthquake, tempest, etc were traditional God on the mountain top stuff – in very early days, God was probably thought of as living on the mountain top. (Think of the gods on Mount Olympus in the Classical tradition.) The mountains feature in New Testament teaching too, and in many old traditions – Everest was holy until the climbers got to the top. Note the 40 days and nights travel time – that familiar way of describing a long period (and in this case a long journey... and of course Elijah is back where Moses spent 40 days with God.

But the power of this Bible passage lies in the experience that follows and contrasts with earthquake and storm, variously translated as: “the sound of sheer silence”, “the still small voice of calm” (Whittier’s hymn), and “the sound of a gentle silence”, “a soft whisper”, “and a gentle and quiet whisper.

Revolution and the overthrow of two kingdoms, and the death of Jezebel, and the transfer of the prophetic ministry from Elijah to Elisha, come out of this encounter with God in the silence. It might be worthwhile reading the passage and then taking five minutes of collective and individual silence... to see what each person hears, and to see whether (with only the leader allowed to look at her watch) it seemed to others more or less than five minutes.

How do we get on with silence? Do we get much of it? Do we find God in the silence? Have you done a silent retreat; and did it inspire you or depress you. (Absolute silence is very rare, unless of course you have major hearing problems – though many “deaf” people actually hear a lot of noise, Are we among those who think something has gone wrong when there is silence? How do we react to John Cage’s silent music? What happens when the intercessor offers silence during the church intercessions? How do we benefit from the Two Minutes Silence?