

**New Kilpatrick
Sermon
5th November 2017
1 Kings 19:1-13**

Loving Spirit... imagination of heaven... midwife of creation... may we be shaped and reshaped by your creativity... enough to send us from here... not with wise arguments... but with generous inspiration... So be it... Amen

Bonfire night was always a special night when I was growing up... We lived in a cul-de-sac in Gourock... where all the children... were within seven or eight years of age of each other... and on Guy Fawkes night... we all built a huge bonfire in what we called the field... scrub land at the base of a moor behind us...

We'd collect firewood for a week beforehand... and on the 5th November... all the families would gather round the fire... We'd sing... We'd all have sparklers... We'd have empty glass milk bottles which would be half buried in the ground in which we'd place rockets... light them and watch explode in the sky...

After which we'd all go to Aunt Nancy's... who's garden had a back gate that opened to the field... and there we'd all have soup and sausage rolls... and stay up late... Guy Fawkes night was a great night... everyone would be happy... we'd all be celebrating...

So imagine the shock of discovering one of the best nights of the year... was rooted in the oppression of Catholics... and religious violence of the times... of Guy Fawkes being hanged... drawn and quartered... of priests being stretched on the rack... where on the one hand there were laws against catholicism... and the Spanish Inquisition against protestants on the other... all of which the BBC delivered over three graphic episodes... the last of which aired last night...

There has been quite some discussion about just how graphic some of the scenes have been... but it has shown honestly how base humanity can get... and what was taken as everyday entertainment... in the name of Religion...

The most frightening thing being all this grew in the echo of the reformation... which we spoke of last week... on the 500th anniversary... and while we can see what was positive in the reformation in terms of education and technology and printing and having the bible

in a language everyone could read... this week... through the story of Guy Fawkes... we see the worst of it... the prejudice... the violence... the fear... all sides experienced in the name of God...

And still we hear that phrase... still there is no letting of it... the zealous loud clamour of those who claim to speak on God's behalf...

There is a story in the Bible... that speaks into that... of a zealot... a prophet called Elijah... who hurled insults at the prophets of Ba'al... won a competition on Mount Carmel... about whose God is bigger and more powerful...

But because of that... he has to run for his life... But he is enflamed with being the only prophet left... The people have turned away from God... and only he remains... but he has left Queen Jezebel with a red face... and with righteous indignation he runs... finding himself on Moses' mountain...

And there... as with Moses... something strange happens... There God asks Elijah... "What are you doing here?"... and Elijah replies... "I am moved by zeal for the Lord"... You can hear the adrenaline shouting... He has taken on the prophets of Ba'al... and won... his God is bigger and louder than the others... He watched as Ba'al's prophets were routed... and he has new zeal for God...

But hardly has he finished speaking... when he has to bury himself in a cave as a violent whirlwind passes by... and against the rock face throws himself... but only a breath after that a violent earthquake shakes the mountain and he has to hold on... and then within an inch of his life a ferocious fire moves through...

And you would expect a God whom Elijah claims is more powerful than Ba'al... to be identified with the power of earthquake, noise of wind, fear of fire... for God has just destroyed the Ba'als... but God is found in none of these...

Silence falls... and in the sound of silence... God speaks... a daughter of a voice... a still small voice... And asks Elijah the same question as before... "What are you doing here?"... And Elijah's *answer* is exactly the same as before... "I am moved by zeal for the Lord!"... Elijah still voicing the masculine version of religion...

And it is as if the still small voice morphs into a great sigh from God... for Elijah has missed the point... completely... so much so... God finishes with Elijah and calls him to appoint another in his place... Elisha... whose story we will tell another time...

Elijah... like the zealous religious leaders of the reformation... like Guy Fawkes and his cronies... like the Inquisition... who all claimed zeal for the lord... with a loud voice and powerful Religion... who used God's name as a weapon... completely failed to understand what happened on that mountain... that in times of noise and violence... when everyone else is shouting... leadership... particularly religious leadership... is not found in the thunder... fire... or whirlwind... Religious leadership calls for a different way... the way of the still small voice...

Jonathan Sacks says... In an age of fear... moderation is hard to find... and harder to sustain... Who wants to listen to a nuanced argument when what we want is someone to convince us we were right all along... which is perhaps why masculine politics is so much in the headlines today...

In turbulent times... there is a great temptation for religious and political leaders to be confrontational... with a lot of shouting... and tweeting... and blaming... In such times... we fail at our peril to hear the still small voice... the more reasonable... nuanced... rational voice...

Our history... is full of people who have killed... in the name of the God of life... We have seen war waged... in the name of the God of peace... we have seen faithful folk of different faiths and denominations hated... in the name of the God of love... and we have witnessed cruelty and greed... in the name of the God of compassion...

What Elijah failed to see... and so many after... is that God's voice was NOT heard in earthquakes... whirlwinds... fire... in the confrontation and shouting... God speaks... sometimes hardly heard under the clamour and volume of those who claim to speak on God's behalf... with a still small voice...

Let us do what Elijah didn't do... and put a marker down... and say what God is not... and what God does not claim for Godself... Let us admit Elijah got it wrong... the

violence of religious fear and oppression... of religious zeal that would blow up parliament and write laws against catholics... the religious fervour that designs inquisition... and as much as any religions fanatics today... a religious zeal that sees another's faith as morally wrong... and thus able to be denounced or destroyed in God's name... is wrong...

God is not the loudest... Faith is not in the earthquake... wind or fire... God is the still small voice... the voice of reason hardly heard in a time of fear and arrogance... drowned out by those who use God's name to shout down and demonise others... Listen to the still small voice... for the voice that says... "Not in my name!"...

A contemporary faith surely is one that does not shout down others... does not belittle others... but defends love wherever it is found... defends grace wherever it is offered... defends compassion whenever it is shared... in Isla's name... in our name... in God's name...

References

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| Jonathan Sacks | The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning |
| Nancy deClaissé-Walford | http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=608 |
| Roger Nam | http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1714 |