

Magdalen February 11th 2018

Readings: I Kings 19:1-16; Mark 9:2-11

Today, as many of you know, is known in some circles as “Halfway Hell”, for the term is half over; and it needs to be explained to those of you who are from outside Oxford, that Week 5 of any given term here (though it must be admitted that some scholars argue for Week 6) is the very worst week that can possibly be imagined, and it is non-optional to enter “5th (or possibly 6th) week Blues”. During this week, undergraduates know for a fact that the term will never end; and even if it does, they will not be able to complete all the work that their unfeeling tutor has thrust upon them. Woe, woe, and thrice woe.

Not only that, but it is Hilary Term, which for many people is by far the worst of the three. And not only that, but today second year undergraduates, who feel that they have only just arrived, and indeed are just on the point of enquiring the way to the Library, suddenly realise that their undergraduate years are half over. More woe.

What can we say to ourselves, faced with this grim reality? And what about those other even grimmer realities that you have brought with you to this beautiful chapel this evening?

Well one thing that you might do is to look at those readings that you have just heard. Elijah (we may confidently say) is feeling quite as bad as anyone here tonight. He has in the previous chapter completed his remarkable triumph over the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel, and finished it with butchering the lot of them. This did not go down well with Jezebel, Mrs Ahab, who was really rather fond of these prophets, and a good deal more powerful than her husband. So she is going to kill him (and she has Form, as the police say). So Elijah does the sensible thing: he runs to Beersheba at the opposite end of the country, and sulks. And wishes he were dead (have you ever felt like that? Well, just hang on; there may be hope for you here).

Note that he has not lost his trust in God; he just doesn't think that God can handle Jezebel. And what happens?

"He lay down and slept under a juniper tree"; and an angel touches him "Arise and eat": "a cake of bread baked on hot stones and a jar of water". Life looks suddenly rather different, because the God who has always been there, but not all that obviously (does this ring a bell with you?) is suddenly a bit more visible. Notice the effortless ease, the use of ordinary things, w. which God, almost unremarked, deals with our misery. However, that does not make it comfortable, because he has now to walk for forty days and forty nights to Horeb. When he gets there, the sulking continues, but he is summoned by the word of God, but has to learn that this God is not a chest-thumping sort of deity, in the hurricane and the earthquake and the fire; instead God speaks to him in a "tiny whispering sound". Then it turns out that Elijah has a job to do (and so do you, by the way, so pay attention). And the job is the dangerous one of anointing a prophet in succession to himself, namely Elisha; and, more dangerous yet he has to anoint a new king in Syria, and another in Israel. So there is a first thought about how God might deal with your misery.

Then there was the gospel that you have just heard, the lovely story of the transfiguration.

Once again some anguish is detectable, for Jesus has started telling his disciples that he has to die (they, of course, do not understand a word); and now he takes his inner cabinet (Peter, James and John the sons of Zebedee) up the high mountain. Then things start to happen:

- A glimpse of the truth: whitened clothes, chatting as (at least!) an equal with Moses and Elijah (the latter reminiscing about his own anguish?)
- Peter's bright idea: "Let's build a camping-site" (Mark charitably comments that he had "no idea how to reply because they were in a panic")

- A cloud and a voice, and we do not need to be told that this is God. So the Almighty is in this reading also.
- Suddenly looking round, no one but only Jesus: is that enough?
- Then they must go down the mountain (those glimpses of divinity are only given us briefly, and we must deal with reality)
- As they go, Jesus tells them, “Don’t tell anyone till Son of Man is raised from the dead”
- They obey but haven’t the slightest idea what he is talking about (what’s “Resurrection?”, we hear them ask, as they scratch their heads)
- Instead of asking Jesus that one, they ask him “What about Elijah coming first?” To which they get the answer that “He did and they did to him what they wanted”; at this point we work out that it has to do with John the Baptist and his murder by Herod. Once again, this is Not Very Comfortable – but at least God is in charge.

And so what about you tonight? Whatever the anguish that you have brought here this evening, God is in your story, and, as in those two readings, can cope, effortlessly.

But notice: it won’t stop there. You will find, like Elijah and Jesus and Jesus’ inner cabinet, that you have a job to do, one that only you can do.

Finally, it might help you to notice (or will this simply add to your sense of woe?) that on Wednesday Lent will be starting, and that may be a time to watch God at work in your life, and to journey towards Easter listening to God’s leading.

Are you up for it?