

# Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7), Year C

Text: 1 Kings 19:4-8

*Elijah walked a whole day into the wilderness. He stopped and sat down in the shade of a tree, and wished he should die. 'It's too much, Lord', he prayed. 'Take away my life; I might as well be dead!'*

## Discouragement

It's true that everyone gets discouraged and down at some time. What gets us down varies from person to person. What may be a difficulty for you, may not be a problem for others. But when discouragement hits us, it seems that we are in the middle of a giant problem; everything seems a terrible mess; there is no way out and we think we are alone because no-one else understands how we feel. We lose perspective as our problem looms larger and more consuming than it ought.

In today's Old Testament we hear about God's prophet Elijah. Now, if you know anything about Elijah, he was a man who certainly knew how the power of God changed lives, so it comes as a bit of a surprise when we hear that he had become so down and discouraged that he wanted to die.

Elijah knew God's power. Remember how he prayed for rain and God relieved the suffering brought about by such a terrible drought. Remember how Elijah, through the power of God, kept a widow and her son from starving, by always keeping food in the cupboard throughout the famine. Recall how Elijah restored a young boy to life again.

Elijah lived at a time when even the people of God were bowing down to the Canaanite god, Baal. He had challenged the Baal worshippers to set up a sacrificial altar and to call on Baal to set it alight. Nothing happened.

Likewise, Elijah set up an altar, doused his sacrifice with water. He called on God to light his sacrifice and we are told, *"The Lord sent down fire, and it burned up the sacrifice, the wood and the stones, scorched the earth and dried up the water in the trench (1 Kings 19:38).* Elijah had witnessed the power of God in so many clear and obvious ways.

But when Queen Jezebel swore that she wouldn't stop until she saw Elijah dead, the wind was blown out of Elijah's sails. His courage disappeared like a fog on a breeze. He went into hiding and the waves of depression started to crash over him. He became so upset that his whole view of life became distorted. He was blinded to the great things that had previously happened. He ran away into the wilderness and finally collapsed under a juniper tree. He exclaimed, *"It's too much, Lord. ... I might as well as be dead."* We can all relate to this kind of helplessness and discouragement, even to the point that we have no idea where the future will take us.

There are several things worth noting about Elijah that help us understand how he became so discouraged.

Firstly, he was a wreck. He was afraid of Jezebel, so full of fear he took off into the wilderness; without any thought of how dangerous the wilderness was for the unprepared. He didn't dawdle. He ran for his life into that unfriendly place and dropped exhausted. He was physically exhausted, mentally and emotionally shattered; he felt useless; he simply wanted to die.

When our bodies and minds are tired, over-worked, it's easy to get a distorted view of the facts and become discouraged and to despair.

Secondly, Elijah believed he was all alone. We see a lonely man, sitting under the shade of a tree by himself which is a symbol of how Elijah saw himself amongst his own people. He believed that everyone from the king and queen down to the humblest person had deserted God so what was the point of continuing to be God's spokesman to such people. *"All they want to do is kill me"*, Elijah complained.

Loneliness can lead to despair. No one cares. No one understands me. No one notices me or anything I do. I try my hardest but I don't seem to accomplish anything. Everyone else can do great things but I'm not very good at anything at all. This feeling of loneliness contributes to feelings of discouragement.

Thirdly, Elijah was disappointed with God. He felt as if God had let him down. Elijah expected God to get rid of Jezebel and all her wickedness. Evil has won the day and is ruling the world. (Don't we, like Elijah, often feel that evil is out of control). The prophet thinks that if he can't rely on God then he might as well give up and die.

Fourthly, he was disappointed in himself. Here he is sitting under the shade of a bush out in the wilderness. What a sorry sight. Couldn't he be a bit stronger and fight off these feelings of discouragement?

Elijah was exhausted, lonely, disappointed and he sums up how he feels. *'It's too much, Lord'*, he prayed. *'Take away my life; I might as well be dead!'*

You may stand in judgment of yourself.

You may judge yourself as worthless and useless.

You may think that you aren't able to do anything that is right.

You may think that everyone has abandoned you and feel so terribly alone. You may want to curl up in a ball, hide from everyone and wish you could die.

You may have such terrible feelings about yourself and the way life is going.

You may think that God has given up on you.

But remember that when we are discouraged and despairing, we have a distorted view of reality. It is our feelings that have gone on a downhill slide. The bigger picture, what is real, is still the same.

And that's what happened to Elijah. He felt he was all alone, abandoned, discouraged, depressed, and disappointed in God and in himself. He believed that God had let Jezebel beat him down to this snivelling little man under the juniper bush. That was despair and discouragement talking.

God was closer than he realised. He sent an angel with a loaf of bread and a jar of water. Elijah sat up and ate and drank, and immediately went back to sleep. Again the angel woke him and told him to get up and eat. Elijah thought that God had

abandoned him. He thought that there was nothing left for him to do. But God had other ideas.

I know it's easy to say, but when we are in the middle of some discouraging events and we feel miserable, we should remember that we are only looking a small part of the picture. Often it is when we look back that we see that we had a false view of reality. Things weren't that way at all. They just seemed that way.

God intervened and spoke to Elijah in a soft small voice on Mt Sinai. God doesn't leave us high and dry even though we may think that way. He is there when everything else may be taken away. He has promised to stand by us through days of plenty and the days when we lose everything.

When friends leave, when money is lost, when families fall apart. Jesus is not a fair-weather friend who lets you stand alone when depression comes. He has promised to stand with you through the good and bad, even when your moods lead you to say and do things you would not normally do.

Your moods and feelings make no difference to his love. If you are depressed, trust God to help, he is the "*Father of all compassion and the God of all comfort.*" Talk it over with him. Tell him your problems, tell him your mistakes, your hurts, your disappointments, your loneliness, your frustrations, that have caused you to feel so low. And even if you feel so low that you feel you can't even do that, remember he will always be there with his help and ready to listen when you are ready to go to him.

God came to Elijah and gave him food to replenish his strength for the mission God was about to give him. We have something even better – the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ. He says, "*Stop grumbling among yourselves. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever*" (John 6:43,51). We are very fortunate that we have the love and presence of God revealed to us in such a clear way through Jesus. Just as God nourished Elijah with bread, we too are nourished and strengthened with the living bread, Jesus.

Discouragement can come in many ways. You may be an enthusiastic member of the congregation, but no one shares your vision of what the church should be doing. You may feel as if there is nothing left in your marriage. You may have a chronic illness and days and hours seem so long. You feel as if there is no joy left in your work. You feel down hearted about the path your children are taking. Whatever it is that gives you these feelings of discouragement, remember Elijah and the way that God sustained him through all his feelings of discouragement. And just as God needed Elijah to keep on going, so also God needs and wants us to continue to serve him.

Just as God cared for Elijah, God cares for you too. Just as God helped and encouraged Elijah so too he will help you in your time of discouragement. Just as God needed Elijah to carry out God's work, so too he wants you and me to do whatever we can for him.

Come out from under the shade of the broom tree, be encouraged; God is your strength and confidence.

The psalmist said it well, "The Lord is near to those who are discouraged; he saves those who have lost all hope" (Psalm 34:19). Amen.