

Dear Friends,

After all the build-up and hype, it is curious how soon the excitement of England winning or not winning in the football is forgotten. In a similar way by Monday morning the Wimbledon finals, which seemed so important and aroused such strong passions, are old news and we cannot even remember who the winners were. Partly this is because we are back to work after the weekend break, but it also seems that the joys of triumph or the disappointment of failure are short-lived. We cannot keep intense feelings going for very long.

The same sort of thing happened to the first of the great Hebrew prophets, Elijah, who was given the mission to call the rulers of the northern kingdom of Israel back to God's ways when they had gone astray. This was the unsavoury king Ahab and his even more unsavoury wife Jezebel. They "did what was displeasing in the sight of the Lord," almost a technical term for abandoning the worship of the one true God and lusting after pagan gods. Elijah has a great victory, showing the emptiness of the worship of Baal, but it does him no good. The euphoria does not last. He is driven by the king and queen's hatred into the desert, where he feels empty and hopeless. He lies down under a broom tree (Moses' burning bush) and wishes the Lord would take his life.

It is in this extremity of despair that God comes to Elijah. Angels give him food and drink, the wherewithal for him to journey on to the holy mountain of Horeb (the same as Sinai where Moses received the tablets of the law). There at the mouth of a cave Elijah sees the fire, earthquake and tempest but God is not in any of those. God speaks to him in a 'still small voice,' or as one version puts it, 'the sound of sheer silence.' Elijah is given further instructions for carrying on his mission.

This story occurred in readings last week. It is one of my favourite passages of Scripture (1 Kings ch. 19), but I find it hard to say why. I was, though, pleased to discover that it was a favourite also of a writer I very much like, Thomas Hardy. In his early days he was drawn to the Christian faith and even thought of being ordained. As his life developed, however, he would not be called an orthodox believer, but he did retain a love of the story of Elijah and would make a special point of being in church when the passage was to be read, noting the dates in the margins of his family Bible.

I think what I like (perhaps Hardy liked this too) is the idea that God's voice is not necessarily to be heard in big dramatic happenings, but is best heard in stillness and quiet - which means that we need to be quiet and still if we are to be open to hearing God speaking to us - in all the ways he does, not just in words, but in our lives, in people, in the events that take place in the world.

From time immemorial people have found a need to withdraw from the hurly burly of ordinary daily life in order to be quiet and alone, and be with God in the silence and solitariness. We see the regular pattern in the life of Jesus himself, when he frequently withdraws to the desert in order to renew himself with the life of God, especially when is preparing for some great undertaking to come. So he says to the disciples in this Sunday's Gospel, 'You must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest a while.'

Daily times that we give to prayer, laying aside everything that normally occupies us, can be a way of resting for a while in God, but it is good also to take a longer period of time to go away somewhere different to make a retreat, perhaps in company with others similarly engaged. These days there is a great variety of different types of retreat available, some based on silent reflection with Scripture, some centered on an activity such as painting or even walking. Instead of having a retreat director giving talks to a group, it is possible now to make a retreat with a personal guide to talk to each day and receive advice from, a retreat which can be specially geared to where each person is.

I would encourage anyone who feels called to this to go on retreat. It can be for any length of time: even just a weekend can pay dividends. It is simply laying aside everything that ordinarily fills our lives and just being there with God. We can of course be with God wherever we are, whatever we are doing, but taking time out has a particular value. The same is true I think of holidays, where not trying to do too much is perhaps the best approach: just enjoying being away in a different place and giving oneself to the experience is enough.

A book I once read called *From the Holy Mountain*, by William Dalrymple, recounts a journey the author made visiting the ancient Christian sites of the Middle East, beginning in the north in Turkey, then working south through Syria, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and ending at a monastery in the desert of Egypt. Here he said to one of the monks, 'God is everywhere, in every place and time. Why do you have to come to the desert to find him?' He replied, 'Yes, that is right, God is everywhere, but the desert is very good for getting to know yourself, and if you do not know yourself how can you know God?'

I think he is right that the two go together, for what we discover as we get to know ourselves more truly and deeply is the presence of God, the Spirit of God at the heart of our human self, beneath all the anxiety and confusion we go through. It is the 'still small voice' within us and to hear it we need to let go into silence and stillness.

Wishing you happy days, Fr. Robin (robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk).