

The God who encourages - 1 kings 17:1-5; 19:1-18

Sometimes life is just flippin' hard. For whatever reason life can work to get us down and we struggle. Whether it's work pressure, family pressure, financial pressure; whether it's illness, or bereavement; whether things have just not gone to plan and you feel backed into a corner; or maybe you just can't work out why life feels flippin' hard but it is and you just feel like there's this great weight and pressure on your shoulders and all you want to do is crawl into a dark space and hide.

Sometimes life is tough and difficult.

There's generally, though not always, a time when you want and need to talk to someone. You need a moment of offloading and then encouraging. Someone just to set your mind at ease or refocus you. Or maybe the listening ear is just enough of an encouragement to know that someone cares.

All of us, at one point or another, need encouraging.

In our reading today we see Elijah needing encouragement.

For those of you who don't know much about Elijah or those who need a reminder, Elijah is one of the great prophets of God in the Old Testament. In Chapter 18 of 1 Kings, he stands up singlehandedly against the false prophets of the God Baal, he challenges them to a contest – whose God listens and acts the most – and when God sends down fire from heaven, it's a pretty clear sign that Elijah has won.

But with victory comes a threat to his life. You could easily think that the response from a great man of God would be continued defiance, standing up against the enemy and boldly proclaiming the truth of God. But he doesn't, he crumbles and he flees. In his moment of victory, his life falls apart. "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

It's a heart-breaking scene.

But surely, people of God shouldn't struggle like this, should they? If God is on our side and we're praying enough then won't that make us bullet proof against depression, anxiety and worry?

No, because all of us are human, none of us are bullet proof and the trials of life can hit all of us hard. All of us need encouraging but in the right way.

Now, I'm going to caveat this sermon by saying that I'm not a mental health professional, I'm a vicar. If you are struggling with your mental health, there is no shame in getting help. Just as you would get help if you broke your leg, so get help if you are struggling with your mental health. What we are looking at today is how God encourages Elijah and builds him back up and then practically think about how we can be encouragers as well who mirror what God does.

1) God builds Elijah up – food and rest

The first step on the road for God encouraging Elijah is by showing that he cares – practically. Elijah is a broken man and what he needed at that point was care, rest and recovery. What do these things say to Elijah? They tell him that he's not worthless, that he's not a failure and he's not being consigned to the scrapheap. Instead, they are a reminder of how much he is loved and that he still has a part to play in God's story for the world.

When your self-worth has vanished, what you need is someone to say that they are still precious in the sight of God and others. That encouraging may well need to be practical things that take time and effort. In the same way that our worship is about showing what God is worth to us, what we are prepared to do for others shows what they are worth to us. And to paraphrase Jesus, when we do things for others, we do them for Jesus.

So, step one, encouraging is showing someone practically that they are of worth.

2) God speaks in peace

There are times when people need encouraging with a kick up the backside, they need a little reminder that there is a task to do and they need to get on. But you never give someone a kick when they're down.

The scene on the mountain is such a fascinating one. Elijah has poured out his heart and now God tells him to stand on the mountain as he passes. Think of an image of God and what it must be like for God to pass by – power, majesty, authority – well:

there's a great destructive wind, but God isn't in that

there's a powerful earthquake, but God isn't in that either

there's a raging fire, but again, God isn't in that!

Then there's the sound of a gentle whisper.

The original Hebrew could be whisper or just a silence. But either way it's a moment of peace and God is in it. For me, that silence is one of the most powerful things in the Bible. God doesn't ball out Elijah and tell him to snap out of it and get his act together, no, he speaks peace into Elijah's life.

It's a simple bit of compassion and sensitivity. God can read how Elijah is feeling and he responds appropriately. I know I've had some people like this in my life, the gentle calm encouragers, those who through peace, build up and restore someone.

I know I've worked under the opposite, those without an ounce of comprehension when someone is visibly struggling. They seemed to think that the louder they shouted the more effect their words would have. Except, the louder they shouted the more the defences went up and the lower people sank.

But words of peace are the most powerful ones, they are the words that sink to the heart and bring a calm to a troubled mind.

3) God gives him a companion

It can be lonely doing God's work, it can be lonely simply walking through this world. I was reminded of these words from Ecclesiastes:

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour:

If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.

But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” Eccle 4:9-12

We are not people who are designed to be on our own. We are created as sociable beings who mutually support one another. It's called community, we're created to be in community and the church should be the ultimate community.

Elijah had worked on his own and then struggled with working on his own and he could do it no more – there was no one to help him up, so to speak.

But after being restored and given peace, the best encouragement for Elijah was to know he wasn't alone. God gives him Elisha to share the work and he says, by the way, there are still 7000 in Israel who still follow him Elijah probably knew this but he'd lost focus. On his own he'd lost perspective and couldn't see what was around him.

When someone walks alongside you, it's a powerful piece of encouragement. That's why meeting together with other Christians is so important. We need encouraging, they need encouraging. You can't do that if you never see each other! Church on a Sunday, homegroups, morning prayer, these are opportunities to encourage and be encouraged.

They'll also be times when you might spot that someone needs practical help or words of peace spoken into their lives.

I'll admit that some people will be better at encouraging than others! The book of Romans talks of encouraging being a spiritual gift and I think you can see that in some people. But all of us need to be people of encouragement in whatever way we can. In a hurting and difficult world if people of faith do not encourage what hope is there?

So, may this church be a place of encouragement. May we have eyes to see, ears to listen, hearts that are open and hands ready to serve. That as God is the God of encouragement, may we be people in his mould walking and supporting one another in this journey of faith.