

August 11, 2024 (Trinity 11) – Revd Wim Kuiper
Anglican Church Arnhem & Nijmegen

Readings: 1 Kings 19.4-8; Ps 34.1-8; Eph 4.25-5.2; John 6.35, 41-51

Last Tuesday, on the 6th of August, we had one of the major feast days on the church calendar. But unlike in the churches of the East, it doesn't get much attention in western churches. In the Anglican tradition we are not even used to translate to the next Sunday, which in my view is a pity. I am talking about the Transfiguration of our Lord. You know the story of how Jesus took three of his disciples and went up on a mountain. And all of a sudden he became dazzling white and there was a cloud and in it a voice from heaven saying 'this is my beloved son'. And then there are those great prophets of Israel, Moses and Elijah, speaking with Jesus. So at this moment of his transfiguration, Jesus is strongly linked to these two towering figures from the Hebrew Bible. But at the same time, he is clearly marked out as the One who goes far over and above them. He is clearly revealed to be the beloved, only Son of the Father, the core of our Christian faith.

Last Sunday we heard of Moses with the people of Israel going hungry in the desert and God's provision of manna, the heavenly bread. These Sundays we read from John's gospel how Jesus fed the thousands and, what is more important, how he then offers himself to all through the ages, as the true bread from heaven, the bread of life. And today we have this short fragment telling us about the prophet Elijah. How he ended up in the wilderness at some point and received God's provision by finding one broom tree, providing him some shade. And God's messenger providing a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water and having to wake him a second time, telling him what he should do next.

The Bible is a bit like a classical piece of music in which the same line of a melody reappears again and again in different variations. A phrase or motif, in musical terms an ostinato, that continues to resurface. And when it does, you think, yes, I have heard that before. The ostinato of God's interventions against the earthly powers of evil, worshipping the false kind of gods, and the suffering that they cause. The ostinato of God's calling on a people and on individuals to show a different way of life, drawing them closer towards himself. The ostinato of God's providence and sustenance for those who fear him, especially in places that are called 'the wilderness'. All of these motifs can be found also in the magnificent story of Elijah. Including some of the classical ques such as the number 40. So let us take a closer look at what is told about this prophet, to see how his story may inspire us today.

Just before today's passage begins, Elijah has had his glorious mountaintop experience. On mount Carmel he had defied all the prophets of Baal, when God rained down fire only on his altar, in the end consuming these false prophets and showing how useless and wrong worship of Baal was. But the powers of evil don't let go easily and the furious queen Jezebel issues a death warrant for Elijah. So he flies for his life towards the desert, ending up completely on his own. From the height of his success, Elijah plunges into the depth of what we would call today a depression or a severe burnout. Even this great prophet at that point had lost all hope. He is no longer willing to carry on with God's mission. He shares his wish to die with the Lord. Frankly, something that can happen to all of us and has happened to

many. A situation for which, nowadays, there is fortunately much more understanding and professional help available. Help that we should never hesitate to accept if needed. But we should also never give up to turn to God in prayer at such times. Because it is precisely at those very low points in life that God may draw us to himself in a more profound way. This is certainly what happens to Elijah. Suddenly there is an angel of the Lord who brings him some food and drink. Such angels may of course present themselves to us as well, as one of our fellow human beings. Reaching out to provide whatever kind of food and drink is needed. We ourselves may even be called to be such kind of angels, when God hopes to use us as his channel for his provision. We may be called to be like that solitary broom tree. A tree that is known for showing up in unlikely places. Not really great in terms of the amount of shadow that it offers. But even providing a little can be enough and life changing the person who receives it. Elijah regains his strength and he is able to continue his journey. The recovery does take some time, there is no quick fix. The angel has to wake him twice. God may take his time and so we may need some patience. And so he wanders for another 40 days through the desert. Hear the line of the melody reappearing. Moses and the people of Israel having 40 years of desert experience, before entering the promised land. Jesus tempted for 40 days in the wilderness before properly starting his earthly ministry. And here is another ostinato. Elijah coming through the wilderness is provided with another mountain top experience of God. This time not in fire and light but in a 'still small voice', a wonderful way of self-revelation, that echoes the way in which God showed himself earlier to Moses, passing him by, while covering his eyes.

In our days, God has made himself even much more visible and tangible in his Son Jesus Christ. Whose divine nature was first revealed in the clearest way at his transfiguration on the mountain. And he continues to reveal himself to us in Word and Sacrament, at least every Sunday, in ways that become more and more familiar to us. But perhaps also in new and surprising ways. He continues to provide for us with what we need to serve him. To sustain us when we are journeying on our own winding path across deserts as well as fertile lands, through valleys and perhaps also on mountain tops, every now and then. He calls on us to be used by him as his instrument to provide for those around us. So let us stay open to God, in his own way drawing us ever nearer to Jesus, showing us how to follow him. Amen

1 Kings 19.4-8; John 6.35, 42-52