

Most of us have been in a situation where we are absolutely exhausted and at our wits' end. It doesn't have to be a terrible crisis – a baby that simply doesn't sleep is quite enough to push many parents dangerously close to the edge. A series of unrealistic deadlines at work, or the strain of caring single-handed for a partner or parent with dementia can have the same effect. We can probably cope with the one-off emergency. There will be time and space afterwards to get ourselves back in one piece again. It's grinding, relentless hopelessness that knocks us out in the end.

So what was it that reduced Elijah to the point where he simply couldn't carry on any more? Eliminating the prophets of Baal would be reasonably tiring. But if you read back a couple of chapters, and look at a map, there's a lot more to it. You also have to remember that Ahab was a Bad King in the very best '1066 And All That' tradition, and that his wife Jezebel was a jezebel, as well as the most influential Baal-worshipper in the country.

Elijah appeared out of the blue in Samaria, to tell King Ahab that because God was angry with him there would be a drought in Israel that would last until he – Elijah – decreed that it would end. This not being the best way to win favour at court, Elijah then scuttled off to a rocky valley, where he was fed by ravens until the stream dried up. God then sent him to live with a widow at Zarephath, fifty miles away on the coast, and provided an unfailing supply of oil and flour. That's also where Elijah brought the widow's son back to life.

Three years later, Elijah got word from God to go and tell Ahab that the drought would end. He went back to Samaria, and insisted that Ahab summon all the Israelites, including the eight hundred and fifty pagan prophets that Jezebel maintained, to meet him on Mount Carmel. It must have taken some time to get everyone together but when they were all there, Elijah first trounced the Baal prophets and then persuaded the repentant Israelites to kill them. Then he told Ahab that it would rain – and it did. According to the Bible, Ahab set off in a chariot, and Elijah ran in front of it, in pouring rain, about ten miles to Jezreel. There he heard that Jezebel intended to kill him, so he fled, first to Beersheba, about a hundred miles away in the Negev desert. He begged God to let him die, but instead he was fed by angels and went on, without any more food, for another forty days until he reached Mount Horeb. Finally he staggered into a cave. Did he sleep? Did he simply collapse? Did he struggle to stay awake in case someone came looking for him, or a wild animal attacked? We don't know, but he was completely exhausted. He was alone, two hundred miles from home with no food or water. If he tried to go back the queen would have him killed. And, as far as he knew, everything that he had hoped and worked for was lost.

Was it a real wind, a real earthquake, a real fire? Or was it the incessant churning and clamour of his thoughts, coupled with fear, hunger and exhaustion that overwhelmed him? It could have been both. Mount Horeb, otherwise known as Mount Sinai, was undoubtedly a holy place. But not until the turmoil died down could he hear God speaking to him, quietly, reassuringly, trustingly.

At first sight, the only thing our Old Testament and Gospel readings seem to have in common is a storm. But there are other important similarities. It was only a couple of days since Jesus

and the disciples had heard that John the Baptist had been beheaded. Jesus had wanted to be alone, but the crowd had waylaid him; he had taught, healed and eventually fed them. At last he was able to send the disciples off in the boat to go back to the other side of the lake, and get some time to himself. Left to themselves, the disciples would have discussed John the Baptist's fate. Could the same thing happen to Jesus? Surely, as he was the Messiah, he was invincible. But they were not, and perhaps they could be in terrible danger. While they were considering this, they found that they were in very real and immediate danger. A sudden storm had sprung up, and they could no longer control the boat. As experienced fishermen they knew only too well what could happen, and they struggled to avoid going under. When a ghostly figure appeared to be coming towards them, it just added to their terror.

Then Peter did something which, on the face of it, was quite mad. 'If it's you, Lord, tell me to walk on the water!' There was a raging storm. Everyone was needed to help keep the boat afloat. If Peter went overboard they wouldn't be able to save him. Any ghost or evil spirit or hallucination could have answered 'Yes – come on!' But over the side he went, and for a moment or two it seemed that all would be well, until reality struck home. The howling gale, the crash of the waves, the boat out of reach in one direction and the ghostly figure out of reach in the other. His confidence was shattered, and he started to sink.

By the time Elijah reached Mount Horeb he had done great things for God. He had trusted him for food, for healing and for his own safety. He knew his own shortcomings only too well. He felt that he had failed, and he asked God to be allowed to give up and die. But he had never doubted God. Peter, on the other hand, was young, enthusiastic, probably terrified, and desperate to prove himself. Jesus gave him the opportunity, and he failed. Elijah's plea was for release. Peter's cry was for rescue. Both were answered.

Elijah could not hear God in the wind, the earthquake or the fire, but God was there, waiting until he was ready. Peter heard Jesus at the height of the storm. Sometimes our circumstances are so tumultuous that we have to wait for them to ease before we can pray. Sometimes our need is so urgent that all we can manage is a desperate yell. One thing is certain. God will be there when we call for him.