

Thursday 21st May 2020

“The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.”

1 Kings 19:11-13

This passage takes place shortly after the dramatic showdown on Mt Carmel (18:20-39), when Elijah had challenged the priests of Baal to demonstrate that their god was more powerful than Jehovah. Following their abject failure, Elijah had all the priests of Baal slain (18:40) and now Elijah is on the run from the vengeful queen Jezebel (19:2-3).

Elijah knows well the power of his God; even before the spectacle on Mt. Carmel, Jehovah had brought a young boy back to life (17:22) at Elijah’s request. And yet, Elijah instantly recognised that God was in neither the wind, the earthquake nor the fire but was instead to be found in the gentle whisper. As soon as he hears it (19:13) Elijah recognises the presence of God (as he shows by covering his face) and goes out to receive instruction. This is a man completely in tune with God.

It is no surprise that this passage appealed to John Greenleaf Whittier. A prominent anti-slavery campaigner, Whittier was a member of the Quaker movement. Accordingly he shared with them a belief in the importance of a personal direct relationship with God, valued simplicity, honesty and non-violence and believed that faith had to be made manifest in one’s actions (*“In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead”* – James 2:17). In 1872, he wrote a poem railing against the intoxicating, showy vanity of modern religious experience and urged the reader to seek the “still, small voice” of God rather than chasing the “earthquake, wind and fire”. We sing the final verses of that poem as the hymn, “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind”.

We live in an era of 24 x 7 x 365 rolling news; our senses are assailed on all sides by shouted opinions and ultimately meaningless distractions; and many of us find that the sheer pace of modern life overwhelms us. When we feel helpless, constantly tossed about, what wisdom and relief we find in John Greenleaf Whittier’s call to quiet contemplation and devotion.

*“Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.*

*Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.”*