

Every so often I will find myself discussing with people different people who have left a mark on their lives, who have influenced their way of thinking. Many of us will look back to particular teachers in school or college. I have often referred to my Physics teacher, total eccentric, brilliant teacher, devout Anglican who got me thinking about issues of faith. Over the years, as I have developed my own thinking, I have come to be indebted to a number of Christian leaders. One of these for me is Bishop Richard Holloway, former Primus of the Church of Scotland. He is a writer who has appealed to me since I first heard him speak at a post Easter Clergy Conference shortly after I went to Ahoghill. After his retirement he wrote a particular book, ‘Leaving Alexandria’. When I first heard of it I thought it referred to a shift in his theological thinking – Alexandria was one of the centres of theological thinking in the early Church.

As I discovered when the book arrived through the post, the Alexandria Bishop Holloway is referring to is, in fact, the district in Glasgow where he had grown up, the son of working class parents with little or no Church connection. He remembers the poverty of Glasgow in those days, the distances his father had to travel to obtain work. He had been drawn into the life of the local Parish and, encouraged by the Rector, Richard had been sent to school with a religious community in England and for a while he had joined the community and they sent him to Ghana. During his time there he left the community and returned to Scotland to be ordained in the Episcopal Church of Scotland. Apart from a short period in Union Theological College in New York, he spent his early years working in the Gorbals district of Glasgow.

His book is a very honest book in which he confronts his times of failure, his strengths and weaknesses, his disappointments and frustrations with himself, his unease with the structures of the Church, his experience of doubt. As I read it, I realised why this man's writings had appealed to me, how I could see something of my own haphazard journey to faith in his.

He recalls one particular period early in his ministry when, in his own words, 'God went absent'. To the outsider his had been a successful ministry. He had taken over a Parish and breathed new life into it; he had reordered the Church, developed the worship; he had involved the Parish in social action in the community.

And in the midst of it, 'God went absent'. He didn't seem to be there anymore, in prayer, in worship, in what he was doing. He felt he had two choices. He could abandon all idea of God, to take the view that there was nothing beyond our own experience – or he could seek to rediscover. He rejected the first option of radical disbelief and embarked upon the second. His subsequent ministry and writings bear witness to his journey of rediscovery.

This particular section struck a chord with me as I reflected on Old Testament lesson set for today, as we continue to follow the story of Elijah. In previous readings we have seen a strong and confident Elijah; the prophet who confronted the prophets of Baal, who denounced Ahab. Today we see a different Elijah as he flees from the wrath of Jezebel. He had been in danger before – but this is different and we find him hiding in a cave on Mount Horeb.

At the heart of the story is the question, ‘What are you doing here Elijah?’ It is a question of someone who is not in the right place, someone who is on the run, on the run from Jezebel, from God, from himself. Elijah pours out a string of complaints. ‘This job is too hard, I can’t do it by myself.’

We have that wonderful account of God revealing himself – not in wind, or earthquake or fire but in a gentle whisper, a still small voice.

Which of us cannot at some time identify with Elijah as he hides in the desert cave; with Richard Holloway as he felt ‘God had gone absent’? There may be a particular reason, a personal crisis, a serious illness or bereavement – or it may just come upon us. We may hear that voice, we may ask ourselves, ‘What am I doing here?’ This is not where I should be, this is not where I want to be. We feel a loneliness within ourselves, going through the motions of worship, of prayer, of service.

As I re-read the passage we read this morning, the thought struck me that it was not Elijah who sought out God it was God who had sought out Elijah. ‘Be still’, the psalmist said, ‘and know that I am God’. The God we seek, the God we serve, the God we seek to avoid is present. Present at the mouth of whatever cave we may be sheltering in; present even in his apparent absence.

It is in the stillness, when the striving and the fretting stops, that we sense his presence, that we are present to him. We realise that we are heard, that we are understood, and that we are not alone. I will close with the blessing I will often use at the end of our services, which I will always use with confirmation

groups at the end of our last session and with each 6<sup>th</sup> class at the end of their end of year service.

Go, and know that the Lord goes with you:  
let him lead you each day into the quiet place  
of your heart, where he will speak with you;  
know that he watches over you –  
that he listens to you in gentle understanding,  
that he is with you always,  
wherever you are and however you may feel:  
and the blessing of God Almighty,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit  
be upon you and remain with you always.  
**Amen.**