

Thought for the week

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, 'We are so afraid of silence that we chase ourselves from one event to the next in order not to have to spend a moment with ourselves, in order not to have to look at ourselves in the mirror.'

Why are we afraid of silence? In the Old Testament reading, God keeps asking Elijah what he is doing. He has just had a contest with the prophets of Baal and won. He'd had Baal's prophets killed and Queen Jezebel threatened to kill him. So, he ran away. What is Elijah doing? He's hiding, in a cave on Mount Horeb. Elijah hears God tell him to come and stand on the mountain. When Moses stood on Mount Horeb, God gave him the ten commandments accompanied by earthquake, wind and fire. Elijah is expecting something similar – that God will appear and rescue, vindicate and maybe praise him. But there is only the sound of silence, until God speaks again, the same question – 'What are you doing here?' – making it clear that what Elijah needs to do is go back and get on with his work. He is to anoint different kings and make Elisha a prophet in his stead.

What does that have to say to us? Life can throw tough stuff at us, even or especially when we are being very faithful. We can hope for strong appearances from God, clear guidance from above when we call for help. But sometimes it is only when we slow down enough to catch up with ourselves that we are still enough for God to get a word in edgeways. Keeping busy can be a way of distracting ourselves, a way of avoiding the truth we don't want to see.

It was in the quiet of the early morning that Peter heard Jesus calling him to get out of the boat and to walk to him on the water. Peter, having spent time with Jesus, is filled with a mixture of faith and doubt. He is like all of us as we experience the push-pull factor of faith and fear.

If, having slowed down enough to be still and silent and to listen, we believe we hear Jesus' voice (God's, if you prefer), how do we know it is real? If it leaves us experiencing an increase of hope, love and faith, then we can be confident that it is truly his voice, and we can test this by talking with our Christian friends. If the voice leaves us feeling confused, tied up in knots, and our hearts sinking, we can probably discern that this is not the voice of Jesus. Again, we can test this with our friends. Sometimes we don't so much hear a voice but have a sense of the reassuring presence of God with us – and that might just be enough.