

WHAT IS THE SPIRIT SAYING TO METHODISM?

The second of a series of three articles by Rev Tom Stuckey former President of the Conference

Ministerial Madness

Does the Methodist Church have a future? In my first reflection on the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18-19), I concluded that a church suffering from amnesia has no future. To effectively serve the present age we must return to the narrative experience of the past. This is a constant theme of the American Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann who argues that 'subversive narrative' enables 'public possibility'. The prophets of Baal had lost touch with the subversive narrative of Israel and were servants of an institution wedded to power, fertility and growth. Our secular Western culture is driven by money, production and consumerism. Its priests are the technocrats and managers. Ministers and leaders in a declining Church now find themselves acting as managers and technocrats. The second key issue to be confronted is Methodism's loss of theology. Theology holds the 'subversive narrative' of God. Only when theology permeates our hearts and souls do we cease to be ecclesiastical functionaries caught up in exhausting activities which, in many cases lead to emptiness, break down and burn out.

Christina Maslach suggests that 'burnout' may not be caused by vocational or personal weakness but rather by the organization's 'structural stressing'. The prophets of Baal were expected by the royal institution to deliver the goods. Methodism, once described as a Church 'short in theology and long in organisation' is particularly prone to 'structural stressing'. Its reshaping schemes descend from on high consuming the time and energy of people in the circuits. Under the pretext of mission in some cases these rationalizations of structure take energy away from mission which is already taking place.

The modern minister has to cope with the additional pressure of advanced information technology. It was supposed by some that speeding up communication would give people more time to do things that mattered. According to Maslach the opposite has happened as people are now required to do two non-complementary tasks. They are still expected to do what they did before but now have the additional task of responding to and producing data for the technological machines we have created. The end result is that people have less time than they had before thus making work expectations unreasonable.

Brueggemann argues that Elijah, unlike the prophets of Baal, gives voice to a subversive narrative of 'hurt and amazement'. It seems that he has theology in him. Does this mean that he should be the ministerial model for today?

Let's indulge in some imaginative fantasy and compare Elijah with a modern minister. He begins the day by preaching a sermon on 'How long will you hop about from one leg to the other?' (v.21). Following a morning and afternoon of denunciations he engages in a property matter repairing a ruined altar (v.32). Next he organizes some blood letting, first of a bull and then of his ministerial antagonists. Devotions follow. He prays for fire and then, after he has climbed a mountain, prays for rain; the latter proving more difficult. The day ends with him running 17 miles to Jezreel and overtaking Ahab's chariot on the way. It was a busy day. It ends with Elijah having a nervous breakdown!

All the stress indicators of breakdown are present; the fear and the flight, the abandoning of his companion, his lack of appetite, his paranoia and his whining self-pity. Yvonne Warren in her survey of Anglican clergy in two dioceses says: 'Guilt is often a major preoccupation for clergy. They feel that they have 'let God down'... 'they can never get it right' or do enough.' Elijah's model of ministry is flawed by his own egocentricity.

What happened to his theology? He lost it on Mount Carmel through relentless activity and was forced through a breakdown to discover it again on Mount Horeb. Horeb was believed to be the ancient home of God. In this place of retreat God again comes in a way reminding us of Moses. Israel's past becomes present holding the possibility of a future. Sadly Elijah doesn't get the message! We hear the same whining words (v. 10 & v14). Furthermore he fails to obey God. He does not anoint Jehu as king nor does he see the significance of 'seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Elijah's theology of success, growth and glory needed to be radically transformed.

John the Baptist was viewed as a messianic figure, a reincarnation of Elijah. His re-enactment of the Mt Carmel judgment ministry leads to imprisonment. In a similar depression he questions his ministry. The answer comes through words from the past and the recognition of Jesus in the present. John for all his greatness has now become least in the kingdom of God (Lk 7.28). A future for Methodism will not be secured by messianic ministers or by Connexional strategic exhortations. It lies in the renewing of the hearts and minds of the people in our pews. Methodism is declining because the people in our pews are no longer being fed with the Word of God. We need to be theologically equipped to recognise that 'God is with us' not only in the spectacle of earthquake, wind and fire but in the vulnerability of a gentle whispering sound.

In my Presidential address of 2005 I called for repentance and a rediscovery of theology and Spirit. I stated that 'structures, plans, re-organisations and re-shaping do not give life, only the Word of God and the Holy Spirit energise'. When are we going to learn that lesson?

Next time: Repairing the altars of sacrifice