

God's purpose

As he approaches the age of 75, a former master of the Dominican order finds himself pondering the eternal question – the same question God put to Elijah

By TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE

I SUPPOSE that nearly everyone asks the question “What should I do next?” at some time in our lives; as one finishes one’s education, perhaps, or when struck by some sort of mid-life crisis, or as one nears the end. My latest book, and probably my last, *Alive in God: A Christian Imagination*, was published last autumn. It includes most of what I have been wanting to say during the last few years. Of course, there is no reason to expect that God would want anything in particular from me now. Even in the gerontocracy of the Catholic Church, bishops offer their resignation at this age and hang up their mitres. But I had a feeling that there might be some new task to be done, or question to explore, or challenge to which I must respond. So I asked for six months’ sabbatical to ponder this. My idea was to listen to the Lord by studying the Scriptures, to have times of silence and see what, if anything, I might hear.

I began with a month in the Dominican Biblical School in Jerusalem, and flew back to England a couple of days before lockdown. Then the sabbatical was gobbled up in responding to a tsunami of emails and Zoomed meetings, preparing articles and homilies. As for so many people, social isolation did not turn out to mean endless free time. But in the rare moments of silence and tranquillity, the question continued to haunt me: what, if anything, comes next? What does the Lord want of me?

WHEN I PREACHED on Elijah’s visit to Mount Horeb in 1 Kings 19, I found a sort of nonanswer which may resonate with others. Elijah flees the horrible Jezebel who, infuriated by his slaughtering of the prophets of Baal, seeks his life. He staggers to the Mount of God, seeking God’s help. The narrative pivots around the question that God puts to Elijah both before and after the great epiphany. In the RSV this is translated as “What are you doing here?” In the Hebrew, there is no reference to doing anything: “What are you here for?” It has an uncanny resemblance to the question I had been putting to myself.

God’s questions are far more disconcerting than his commandments. At the beginning there is God’s question to the fallen Adam who is hiding in the Garden of Eden, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). There are God’s terrifying

questions to Job: “Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me” (38:3). Jesus concludes the parable of the Good Samaritan with a question: “Which of the three proved neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” (Luke 10:37).

John concludes his Gospel with an enigmatic question to Peter: “If it is my will that he [the Beloved Disciple] remains until I come, what is that to you?” Revelation is usually thought of as God telling us what to do but more often it is being put on the spot by God’s probing, disconcerting questions.

So alone on the mountain, Elijah is confronted with the question we all ask sometimes: “What are you here for?” He thinks he knows the answer. Unlike God, Elijah rages and roars like a mighty storm, a great fire, a human earthquake. “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts.” “I alone am left, and they seek to take my life.” I, I, I. It’s all about him. He thinks it is time for God to pull his weight in the Elijah story.

But God subverts his narrative. He commands Elijah to play his part in a story that is not primarily about him. He must go and anoint the King of Syria and the King of Israel. And then there is the real blow. He must anoint his successor. He is about to be replaced. And it is simply untrue that it is he and he alone who has been faithful. Seven thousand knees have not bowed to Baal nor mouths kissed him.

ELIJAH HAS A pivotal role to play in the story of our salvation. So much so that in the time of Jesus, many awaited his return from heaven. They even wonder if John the Baptist or Jesus might be Elijah come back. But that is not the role that Elijah thought he had, which revolved around himself. “What are you here for?” Not for what he thought.

St John Henry Newman famously said:

“God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught.”

Every one of us, I expect, comes to our Mount Horeb from time to time to ask what is the purpose of our lives. It may be as we finish our education and ponder our career choices. In Richard Linklater’s marvellous film, *Boyhood*, Mason is sitting in the desert with a new friend, wondering what it is all about.

She replies that although people often are told to seize the moment, “it’s the moment that seizes us”, as it seized Elijah on the mountain.

Halfway through our working life, we wonder whether we need radically to change direction. Think of people who have startled their friends by giving up lucrative jobs in the City to become school teachers. Or maybe when we are old, like me, we ask whether there is any last task or project I should take up. But in every case, the liberation is to find oneself in some narrative which is not about me. We know that we are not created for naught, but what we are created for is to play some walk-on part in God’s universal drama.

WE MAY NEVER know for what we are here. All we can do is to listen to the Lord who does not bellow but speaks in a low whisper, a still small voice, in what Lukasz Popko OP of the Biblical School tells me is best translated as “a thin silence” (1 Kings 19:11-12). What I hear may be some major new orientation of my life, or just a small nudge to do something today.

“And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” (T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets). This has been the experience of my non-sabbatical. The question remains: what am I here for? It does not matter that the answer is no clearer. Terry Eagleton claims that “the most flourishing acts are those performed as though they were one’s last, and thus accomplished not for their consequences but for their own sake”.

I just know what I must do today, which is to answer the editor’s request to write for The Tablet’s 180th anniversary year on what it is like to turn 75.