

How to Fail Successfully

Bill MacCurtain, S.J.

Bill MacCurtain is a member of the Jesuit Community at Mount Street in Central London. In this article he reflects on the lessons that can be learnt from the Bible story of how Elijah found the Lord in the midst of silence, not in the turbulent motion of the elements.

People tend to cite religion as the cause of war, and politicians as the authors of all our woes. And you can hardly blame them. What politician has not emerged at the top of their profession, only to have fiery coals heaped on their head? Charged with sleaze and corruption, or at least ineptitude, they are unceremoniously dumped in favour of the next deluded candidate who thinks that he or she will have a better time of it. Elijah the Tishbite was no exception to this universal rule.

In the *First Book of Kings* we read that Yahwism had become threatened to the point of extinction in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Ahab. His Phoenician wife, Jezebel, had imported the worship of Melkart, the Baal god, and imposed it on the populace. So God commissioned Elijah to sort out the crisis. He conferred on him unlimited powers and gave him a free hand to do whatever Elijah thought best.

Now Elijah was just an ordinary fallible chap like you and me and, like you or I might have done in the circumstances, he used his God-given powers to call down a drought on the kingdom for a few years to show them who was in charge and allow them time for the message to sink in. Ahab and the people thought this was a pretty horrible thing to do, but because Elijah was the only one who could summon back the rain clouds, the King could not touch him. He was in a very strong bargaining position.

So Elijah eventually summoned Ahab to the bargaining table. He proposed that he and the prophets of Baal should have a trial of strength: they would each prepare a sacrifice and each would call down fire from heaven. Whoever was successful would then show up the other as a charlatan before the assembled populace. First the prophets of Baal put on a spirited performance, chanting and cavorting about, slashing themselves with much blood-letting, but to no avail. All the while Elijah goaded and jeered from the sidelines. Towards evening Elijah prepared his altar and sacrifice. He even asked some of the spectators to come and pour water over it until the whole place was awash. He then called down fire from heaven which consumed the altar, the sacrifice and even the water. The outcome was never in doubt: Elijah won hands down.

The people, no doubt, applauded and went home. All Elijah had achieved by his autocratic showmanship was to alienate the people and make a mortal enemy of Jezebel. His enterprise had completely failed to turn the minds and hearts of the people back to the love of Yahweh. He took himself off in a sulk, lay down under a bush in a fit of depression and wished he were dead. But God did not wash his hands of Elijah. On the contrary, He was waiting for Elijah to be in the right frame of mind to be open to a bit of advice.

God loved and cared about Elijah just as much as he cared about Elijah's mission. He sent an angel to massage his bruised ego and to lead him back through the history of his people to Mount Horeb. There He put on a spectacular show for Elijah, full of sound and fury, but God was not to be discerned in the tempest. Instead He manifested Himself in a gentle breeze.

If only we could believe sufficiently in God's love for each of us, we would no longer have anything to prove. Vying with one another for acceptance and respectability is no job for a grown up. A yearning for that unconditional love and acceptance which our parents, for all their efforts, fall short of supplying is tendered to us now by a loving Father. If we could be gentle with ourselves and with one another, we could grow up to be the children of God. Perhaps we need to embrace failure in order to have the humility to spend the night on a bare mountain.

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