

GEMMA SIMMONDS CJ - CHURCHILL SERMON 15.2.2026

**Conspiracy Theories, Resistance, and the Courage to Change**

**Readings: Psalm 2    1 Kings 19:9–13    Romans 12:1–2**

If, like me, you are a jobbing theologian with a background in the media who teaches Christian spirituality and specializes in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, you occasionally get asked to do peculiar things. Some years ago, I was invited to go to the University of Trnava in Slovakia to speak at a conference on conspiracy theories. ‘But I know nothing about them’, I bleated. This did not worry my hosts, and as you may already have discovered, knowing nothing about a topic they have to speak on rarely worries most academics. We settled in the end on my speaking about conspiracy theories in light of Ignatius’ Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. I was serious about knowing as much about conspiracy theories as could fit on a small postage stamp until research revealed to me the full glory of QAnon and the Pizzagate scandal which falsely claimed that a Washington pizzeria called Comet Ping Pong was the centre of a child-abuse ring in which the alleged ‘elixir of youth’ was harvested from children for the rejuvenation of society’s elites: Hilary Clinton, Barak Obama and the like. What astonished me at the time was not just the ludicrous claims of these theories and the fact that some 17 million avid online readers around the world were inclined to believe them, but that my audience in Trnava included a 5 star general of the Slovak army and two gentlemen who bore the unmistakable stamp of what is euphemistically known as homeland security. They said that they were considerably worried about the effect that conspiracy theories had had on their country, including the role they played in preventing a significant percentage of the population from accepting vaccination during Covid, which tragically led to a particularly high mortality rate. They also stated their belief that within two years war would break out between Israel and Palestine and that a major European political figure would fall victim to an assassination attempt. At the time I was sceptical as to the likelihood of this happening but remembered their words subsequently when current events in Gaza began to unfold and their own president was shot five times.

Conspiracy theories are part of the noisy world we live in. I’m not just talking about the literal noise of university life: music through walls, late-night conversations, drunken carousing outside your window, but the internal noise: Who am I becoming? What should I do with my life? What if I’m not good enough and fail? What if I succeed and still feel empty? What if the world falls apart before I work out how to negotiate my way around it? Those are the personal questions but they are joined by increasingly loud noise stirred up by communications media, the noise of violent discourses fostered by nationalism, populist leaders feeding the public a shrill diet of antagonistic scapegoating for society’s ills and fostering a culture of racism, prejudice, class war, misogyny and the inability to tolerate any opinion but one’s own.

Into that noise, today’s readings speak with surprising clarity. Psalm 2 opens with a question: ‘Why do the nations rage?’ It’s an ancient poem, but it could have been written yesterday. The world feels turbulent - politically, socially, environmentally. People push, pull, compete, resist. Everyone seems to be grasping for control and with AI, deepfake and their like pumping dubious or blatantly false information into our flailing minds, it’s difficult to know what to believe and who we can trust. The psalmist sees this chaos and says: there *is* a centre of gravity, a deeper stability. There *is* a God who is not panicked by the noise and is not the purveyor of the noise. Behind the psalmist’s theology and much of our own longing is a craving for something solid and trustworthy, something that doesn’t crumble or prove false when everything else does. Psalm 2 is not asking us to ignore the world’s turmoil. It’s asking us to see it for what it is and then to ask where we anchor ourselves within it. That is at the heart of the Rules for Discernment.

In our first reading we meet Elijah in 1 Kings 19. Elijah is on the run from a tyrannical king: exhausted, burnt out, frightened, and hiding in a cave. He’s done everything he knows how to do in God’s service, and it hasn’t been enough. Many of us know that feeling, and some of us are living it. God tells Elijah to stand on the mountain, because God is about to pass by. And then comes the drama: a great wind, an earthquake, fire - all the things

that characterize God's power in the Hebrew Scriptures, but the text says: 'The Lord was not in the wind... not in the earthquake... not in the fire.' And then there comes a sound of sheer silence, a still, small voice. It's counter-intuitive - we expect God to be like today's populist leaders - to shout, to prove something, to overwhelm us, but the story suggests that the deepest truth often comes quietly, that clarity often arrives when the noise finally settles, and that transformation begins not with spectacle but with stillness. We cannot hear our own life speak if we never turn down the background noise. Many Christmas carols emphasize the silence of the Incarnation, 'He came all so still where his mother was, as dew in April that falleth on the grass'. 'When peaceful silence lay over all, and night had run the half of her swift course, down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all-powerful Word' (Wisdom 18: 14-15). Lent, which begins next week, invites us to enter into that peaceful silence and hear the 'still, small voice' amid the tumult of deafening propaganda, consumer pressure and inner turmoil.

Paul, writing to early Christians in Rome, gives a challenge that is both spiritual and profoundly human: 'do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' Paul doesn't say: withdraw from the world. He doesn't say: reject culture, or learning, or even ambition. He says: don't let the world squeeze you into a shape that isn't yours, don't let the toxic noise around us enter into and mould your mind.

University is full of pressures to conform: to a certain career path, a certain personality, a certain way of thinking, a certain definition of success. The wider world is also full of pressures and noise that seeks to persuade, to mould our fears into prejudices, our justifiable anxieties about our future into antagonism towards a manufactured threatening 'other'. This is what lies at the heart of conspiracy theories. Paul's invitation is a kind of resistance, a refusal to let external pressures dictate our inner identity, and then he offers an alternative: be transformed, not by someone else's agenda, but by the renewing of your mind, a slow, steady reshaping of how you see yourself, others, and the world.

For Christians, that renewal is rooted in God. For Ignatius of Loyola it's rooted in the Principle and Foundation that lies at the heart of his *Spiritual Exercises*, which claims that human beings were made to know, love and serve God. That is our fundamental purpose and where we will find true fulfilment and happiness and where the common good will best be served by faith, hope and love. Therefore we don't allow our deepest choices to be moulded by desperate self-preservation but by an inner freedom that is best found in God and patterned by Jesus, who told us that to find our heart's desire we needed to learn to let go of what the world tells us is essential to happiness: riches, power, consumption in favour of faith in God, ourselves and others, hope and love in the same.

Psalms 2 shows us a world in turmoil. 1 Kings shows us a God who meets us in quiet. Romans 12 shows us a path of transformation that resists the pressure to conform. Together they offer a pattern: **See the world clearly - Seek inner quiet - Choose transformation over conformity**

This is not just a Christian message, it's a human one, but for Christians, it's anchored in the conviction that God is present not only in the dramatic moments, but in the whisper, the stillness that calls us back to ourselves and to God-in-us. Today's readings invite us to rediscover the God who is not competing with the world's noise but quietly renewing our mind and heart if only we will keep them open. If you feel overwhelmed, burnt out, or directionless, you're in good company - Elijah was too, and the turning point came not when he tried harder, but when he finally stopped long enough to listen. So here is the question these readings leave us with: where is the quiet in your life, not the absence of sound, but the space where you can hear what is true? We don't need to have all the answers or to pretend we're fine when we're not. But Lent invites us to take some time to step out of the chaos and noise of the wind, the earthquake and the fire and listen for the whisper. Because sometimes the most courageous thing we can do is to be still long enough to explore and to be transformed into the person God made us to be in faith and hope and love. Amen