

## The Revived Son

I spoke to a mother recently, whose son is very unwell.  
She does not attend Church  
But had been sent a talk on the internet from a Christian Friend  
The friend had not given any explanation  
But in the talk the speaker had spoken of the way that children could be taken out of wheelchairs through miraculous signs.

The woman I had spoken to was very upset  
Was this a hint that she had done something wrong, or something she could do for her son  
And she was sceptical about this message, could such a miracle really be believed in  
And she was angry because she didn't know why she had been sent the message  
Was this wheelchair part aimed at her  
Or was there just general encouragement  
She was both confused, angry, annoyed...

And I sympathised  
At the lack of any surrounding context  
The presumption of this preacher suggesting that people could be taken out of wheelchairs  
And the form of faith that wants to live in denial about reality.

I recently heard a very different interview with a woman who was facing a terminal cancer diagnosis  
And had prayed that God would not heal her,  
But that God would transform her through the experience.

The interviewer later commented that when he himself had gone through having to give up sport due to a problem with his hip,  
Every Christian in his charismatic fellowship had suggested that he be healed.  
And none had suggested that he might grow through the experience.

I relate these stories.  
The woman with the ill son  
The woman who prayed to be transformed through cancer

The man who was expected to be cured of the hip injury

Because I have views about these stories....

They seem to be on the one hand a story about a woman who accepts this world as it is, and yet believes that God can still be present.

And a group of people who live with a world that is not,  
And if we just put enough pressure on God, then God will fix our problems  
And that the only thing which we are lacking is faith.

And I tell these stories because we will have our own stories  
About prayers which have not been answered  
Or perhaps learning to temper our prayers, to make them more possible

Perhaps too we have had experiences with Christians who seem to have a faith in God that we could never get near, and not only are we daunted by their faith,  
But also that we find them insensitive, irritating, and their lives infected with a kind of dishonest positivity which we find grating, and in denial.

So why tell this story about Elijah which seems to be much closer to these stories of miracles  
And further away from the woman who prayed to be transform through her cancer.

I want us to think about this story,  
And see what is going on,  
How it stretches us, but also about how we find our home in it.... And I think that is why this story is different from the story if the American preacher, there is something hectoring and alien and distant about this story, whereas I am very fond of Elijah and the widow from Zarapeth.

The Elijah story begins in the kingdom of Ahab - a wicked king who is entranced by his wife's gods, and his lost faith in the possibilities of Israel's God. I think the biggest problem for Ahab is that God is a limit on his pride - whereas the false gods only want to be sacrificed to, in order that you still get your own way. God brings you into a different kind of story. These idols are story-less gods.

Then Elijah stands up before Ahab and says there will not be any rain in the land - as the Lord lives he says - the God before whom I stand - and this idea of God living - that is the

key idea - there is a God alive, shaping, being, seeing, present, in relation, in newness, in bring the world into being, in shaping the universe towards justice, in loving people.

The Bible almost never has the statement - "God exists:"  
But frequently says "God lives". God is alive.

And now the story is much more interested in Elijah,  
There is no rain, but he goes to a brook called the Cherith, and God says I will provide water from the brook - which is a miracle because every other stream is dried up, and you would expect a brook to be the first place to dry  
And then he will used ravens to bring him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the afternoon.

I quite like this life that Elijah now has for himself - what does he do all day apart from eat. Elijah is the great introvert of scripture so he will enjoy being by himself.

But after a number of days, God has a change of plan  
The brook dries,  
And now he says, I want you to go to a city called Zarapheth, in Sidon - so in Lebanon, a foreign country, and there is a widow who is going to provide for you in the way that the Ravens did. I have decide we are going to switch caterers from Ravens to foreign obscure widows.

This such an odd choice of God's - not just a foreigner, but a foreign widow.

And Elijah goes to Zarapeth where he is surely not popular either because people have heard of the prophet from Israel who caused the drought, and they are collateral damage.

So he meets the widow there, and she is gathering sticks,  
And the first thing he says to her is "Give me something, give me water, just a little"  
And she goes to bring it, when he says - give me a morsel of bread please  
And she says I have nothing baked, and all I have left is a tiny bit of meal, and a tiny bit of oil - you can see that this woman has been eking out everything - because people who are poor have to manage supplies in a way that wealthy people do not.

And she says - As the Lord your God lives, I am now gathering two sticks, and we are going to cook this and after that we are going to die. Now notice at this point in the story she is reconciled with the fact that her son is going to die, and she dies with him.

And Elijah says - First of all give it to me - give me that - give me the risk with the very last thing that you have, risk it all, and then afterwards go and make the meal for yourself  
And you might be thinking - how is she going to do that,  
But he says - the meal will not run out, and the oil will not run out.

You are being asked for everything so that God will give you even more  
It is a story about what happens when God lives.

What would you do in her situation.... She does it.  
She accepts this strange, unsettling gift.

More than the Elijah lives with her - there is a whole story by the novelist Paulo Coelho about the way that Elijah and the widow fall in love but can never reveal their true feelings for one another - there is definite affection that develops.

But he lives there, and they have life  
From the God who lives.

Until the son becomes very ill, and the text does not say that he dies, but says that there is no breath left in him.

And at this point she turns on Elijah, what have you done, coming here, bringing my sin to remembrance - the word is iniquity - which makes me think that she has something in mind, and killing my son.

Before she was okay with the son dying, but now hope has been raised, and now it has been taken, and whatsmore she has done some calculus - this is my fault, this is what always happens.

So there has been a sense that God has visited, and then God brings the thing that works to dryness for a second time, as if God gives the story that he lives, and then he brings them to the place where everything is brought into question, and the question is not denied or attacked, it is recorded in scripture.

And Elijah does this great risky thing, he takes the body of the boy,  
He takes it up to his room from the bosom of the widow,

She is grasping this body, holding him for as long as she can, as she did when he was small,

And she has lost her husband

And she has lost her son

And she has lost her faith in the prophet

And she has fallen from a faith in grace to an acceptance of blame.

And Elijah takes the body,

And he takes it upstairs and he lays him on the bed

And he cries out, he takes the complaint of the widow - and this is the most passionate that Elijah is about anyone

And he says "O Lord my God, why have you brought even more calamity on this widow woman with whom I am staying, by killing her son."

This living God is not doubted, but his purpose his, it is contested and striven against.

And then there is a thing that happens,

He stretches out over the boy

Three times

As if he is the very possessor of the life that is to come into the boy

And he says a thing "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again"

And the Lord restores the soul to the boy

And Elijah brings him down the stairs,

And gives him to the mother and she says

"Now I know that you are a man of God,

And that the word of the Lord which is in your mouth is truth" the word there is Amen

It is the very rock.

I love this story a whole lot more than the preaching of the American evangelist.

I love it because it points to story of people becoming invested in each other, and giving up, and losing, and shouting to God, and in the losing becoming something more

I love it because of the commitment of Elijah to the widow, and siding with her against God

I love it because it says that God does do something - God brings the ravens, God brings the drought, God brings the way of life to the very edge, God restores life to the son.

God lives.

And I do believe in that God, present and moving, and pulsing through life.

This week I was in a conversation with people from another Church of Scotland, and they were each talking about moments in their life when something had happened, that they could only explain by the presence of God - one of them spoke about her unwell daughter meeting angels, the other spoke about being woken in the middle of the night by a voice from God and coming to the conclusion that God was saying he had become too big for his boots. This was the story of the living God, but what was striking they said, is that in the reserved Church of Scotland we never tell these stories.

We all have these.

I think this is a story about the God who asks us to give up  
To make the request of the widow, take the risk of trusting in this,  
Of giving up, and then discovering that God gives even more.

I think it is story of gift which comes after loss and through loss.  
And the way that God lives. According to God's own story which is mystery and beautiful  
and leads to life. A living God wants people to live.

And I think on Trinity Sunday when we celebrate that God is in relation, the Father, Son  
and Spirit together in friendship and love, which invites us in, that relation is the very basis  
of all being, and that this story of relationship between Elijah, Widow and Son,  
Echoes the deep relation at the heart of everything  
Which exists within God,  
And that God works through Elijah because God believes in relationship.

So a story about trust  
And a story about gift  
And a story about relation

And those things are there, in miracles, and God will do them  
Just wait and see  
The Lord lives

AMEN