

Elijah on Carmel

1 Kings 18

I would love this story to be one that we could recreate every time I was in disagreement with someone.

Every time that it was unclear what was right or what was wrong...

Let's take an issue that isn't the least bit controversial - Scottish Independence.

And let's just imagine, we could say, "Right, we are going to settle this once and for all"

And we could go up Schiehallion, and we could build two piles of wood,
And everyone who agreed with Scottish Independence
They would build a wooden fire, but they wouldn't light it
And everyone who didn't believe in Independence
They would build a wooden fire, but they wouldn't light it.

And then each side would take a turn
And they would call out to heaven
And whichever fire was lit, set alight,
That one would be the right answer.

And you might be thinking Neil, did you really have to begin with a story about Scottish Independence, did you really have to go there, on such a divisive topic, when we would much rather talk about the things that we agree on.

But this issue of God, was the issue of the day in Elijah's Israel,
It was way bigger issue than Scottish Independence
This was the source of religious war, and persecution,
And a source of power.

Which God was the real God?

Was it the God that the Israelites used to talk about, the God who had made the whole world, who chose strange friends, and who had rescued the people from Egypt.

This kind of God was more than a God, there were ideas about who he was, an adventure that he went on, he was frustrating this God at times, he did things that you didn't always like or agree with.

And then from some of the other countries, particularly countries that appeared to be quite successful, there was another God, Baal. Baal just means owner originally and the Baal God was good at two things - weather, and fertility.

If you had the Baal god on your side, then your crops would be nourished with rain and sun, and your family would flourish with children at the right time, and in good health.

Baal is the kind of God that you say- could you look after a few things that really matter to be me here, and I'll kind of get on with the rest of life.

And he was also the God of quite a few successful nations, nations that were coming to power - the Babylonians, the Phoenicians,

And the thing about Baal, is that he could be bought. If you offered the right sacrifices, and made the right gestures, even if those gestures harmed you in the short term, he would give you success. This is a God who liked to see you suffer a wee bit on his behalf, and once he was convinced of your allegiance, he would help out with the weather and the fertility.

This was not a god whom you loved, this was a god whom you appeased.

This was a god that you gave of yourself to, and then in certain spheres of life, he would sort you out.

And this God also felt quite new, and powerful.

And the King and the Queen, particularly the Queen have come on board with Baal, they have persecuted the prophets of the old religion, of Yahweh, the God who had taken the people out of Egypt and out of Slavery.

And the question that everyone was asking was "Which God is it? Baal or Yhwh".

Elijah has a deep sense of Yhwh. He speaks of Yhwh as the God before whom I stand. And through God he has proclaimed that there is to be no rain in the land.

He knows this God, and he has learnt to trust him by the brook with the ravens bringing meat and bread, and then with the widow and her son.

Now in this Elijah has not become perfect, he has also become slightly egotistical and he is not good recognising that others are also blessed and used by God.

In particular he has a particular issue with a man called Obadiah who serves the king and has rescued many prophets, but Elijah doesn't seem to have much respect for all that Obadiah has done.

So Elijah has a deep faith in God, but he is also flawed - this two things can go together.

And now he calls a contest, and we are going to bring rain back to the land, but first of all we are going to find out which God is it that brings the rain.

Remember their two claims - there is Baal, the buy off God, the success God, the weather God, the fertility God, the sacrifice God, the God of the contractual arrangement

And then there is Yahweh, the God of all things, the God of all the nations, who summons us not just to sacrifice but to relationship, and who is known in the great command to love him with all your heart, and all your soul and all your strength, and also the God who stands beside the poor and less seduced by the powerful, and the God of covenant not of contract.

So Elijah calls the people together, he says
How long are you going to go on **limping** between two gods.

You have gone for both - you have Yahweh, in your old religion, who demands everything from you, and gives you everything - it is all in with Yahweh, he is everywhere and seeks out all of us.

Or you can have Baal, who apparently will enter into a deal with you to give you things that you most want - good weather, good crops, good fertility - and you can strike a deal with that God.

How long are you going to limp between those two gods?
How long... there is total silence.

And then Elijah says we are going to have a contest.

And which is to be says Elijah.

Here's what we are going to do,
We are going to build an altar
We are going to take a bull
We are going to prepare the bull
And lay it on the altar,
But we are not going to put fire on that altar.

And the people were silent before, but now they say "Good word".

And it starts off the the priests of Baal, and they have the numbers,
And they have the early part of the day, and they keep going to midday
And all the time there is no fire,
And it tells us that they call out in a loud voice
And there is no fire.

Elijah laughs at them, perhaps your God is asleep, or he is gone away on a journey, he is unreliable your God, he isn't really that committed to you, something else might have come up.

So the prophets call out all the louder, and they start slashing themselves with swords and lances, because this god if you hurt enough then he might listen enough

But then it is devastating
No voice
No answer
No inclination - no moving of the part
Nothing.

And then Elijah says to the people
Come close to me
Because this is not about performance, this is about intimacy.

He takes twelve stones, to remember the story of Israel, a wandering tribe whom God blessed

And he gets the wood
And they cut the bull in pieces
And then he asks for water over the wood
There is hardly any water left
And then he says
Do it a second time
And then do it a third time

The water is meant to go on after the fire,
Not before it

And then he says to God
God let it be known that you are God
And that I am your servant - that line is a bit of a dig against Obadiah.

So he calls Answer me, so that these people may know that you are God
And that you have turned your hearts back

And then the fire of the Lord fell
And consumed the the offering, the wood, the stones
The dust and the water
And they fell on their faces proclaiming
The Lord indeed is God
The Lord indeed is God

Our age is an age not of Baal
But of secularism
Secularism is about the moving out of God
And the turning to the self, but in a way which removes connection from God
Secularism has disenchanted

Baalism is like a part secularism, it is about keeping God in part of life
Secularism moves God all out
But the great dreams of the Baals are still there
The weather, the power to grow and be successful
And fertility, family.

And those two things demand so much of us

So much power, so much sacrifice
And even this, by itself family can be scary and empty
And no voice, no answer, no response
We are not known
Because we are not heard
Because this is God who makes demands but does not give us what we need.

Yahweh, gives all,
Asks for all
All in
Not limping.

I think of the story that was told of David Livingstone as a boy, when the offering came round,
He got the whole of himself into that offering plate,
All of me
And he went to Africa, fought against the slave trade, discovered new lands, made mistakes, like Elijah was egotistical, but also introduced the gospel to an African man who probably did more than any other to spread the gospel.

And you might say
Where is the fire
When Elijah prayed, there was fire
And you are right, the fire has not come in such visible ways
But has come in a sense of accompaniment, in prayers answered, in presence, people I have met, and yes there have been some big answers to prayer.

And I have discovered that when I have strayed away from God, that has always been empty and limping.

But there is something else,
There is a disturbing detail in the story,
When Elijah asks for all the prophets to be killed.
I struggle with that part - some people say it was a different time
But I don't think that slaughtering prophets is ever a good idea.

There is a time when Jesus is walking with his disciples in a land called Samaria
And there is a village which refuses entry and the disciples are really angry

And they know a story about God turning on false prophets

And he says

Do you want fire to come down from heaven and consume them - and some texts say
"like Elijah"

And this is a reference to that kind of time, a later incident where some soldiers came
against Elijah, or possibly this story in Carmel

And Jesus rebukes the disciples

He is going to do things a different way.

With grace,

He is going to take all the falseness, all the limping, all the half heartedness into himself

And he is going to forgive

And this is what we come to in Baptism today

That God demands all

But to those who are far off, who thought they were condemned,

God does not summon down fire,

But offers grace through Jesus Christ

No more fire says Jesus

We are going to do things a different way.

We have all limped

We have all given up

But God forgives

In Jesus Christ

And offers a new start to all who trust in him

And the fire will come in new ways

In a life that is filled with a passion and a love

In a life that goes on great adventures

In a life that shines for him

Do you want to go all in with that God?

Do not hold back

Even now, give God your yes,

AMEN