

## Theme: Elijah runs away

Today we are continuing the story of Elijah, about his human side, when Elijah is shown running away from Jezebel. From the accounts we've already heard of Elijah, it is clear that he was faithful to God, confident and authoritative. He was also able through prayer to bring about miracles, even raising a child who had died, back to full health, chapter 17:22.

We heard in the first sermon about Elijah, that Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Tyre and Sidon, and that she was a devoted worshipper of Baal, the god of rain and fertility, and how Jezebel devoted her life to bringing the worship of Baal and his consort Asherah to Israel, and to make him their God. She employed 450 prophets of Baal and four hundred prophetesses of Asherah; she also persecuted the prophets of the Lord, including Elijah, although Elijah seems to have given as good as he got.

Our reading today starts with a threat from Jezebel that she's going to have Elijah's life, as she says, "By this time tomorrow," because he had just killed hundreds of the prophets of Baal, and she was extremely angry and craved revenge. Now of course Jezebel dominated her husband Ahab, who gave her everything she wanted, so she had huge resources at her disposal in order to bring about that threat, which was by no means an idle one. Look in 1 Kings 21, and see how Jezebel had Naboth stoned to death for not selling his vineyard to Ahab; so Elijah had better look out.

In chapter 18, the subject of the sermon last week, we heard how Elijah challenged a large gathering of Baal prophets to a contest to see who was the greater God, the Baal god, or the God of Abraham, and we heard how the God of Abraham defeated Baal. Yet in today's reading we find the prophet Elijah intimidated, suicidal, and self-doubting, who's on the run from Ahab and Jezebel.

It is here that we see another side to Elijah's character, altogether more human, frail, and fallible, who, in terror of Jezebel, fled for his life and went to Beer-Sheba, which was right at the bottom edge of Judah. For me this is very encouraging, because even Elijah, a man with exceptional faith, could have periods of doubt about the protection that God will give to those who love him.

Once at Beer-Sheba he made arrangements for his servant to stay there, but he went on a day's journey into the wilderness south of Beersheba, no longer in Judah, and eventually sat down beneath a solitary Broom Tree. This confident self-assured person is now praying, 'please Lord end it all, I've had enough,' Elijah was mentally, physically, and spiritually exhausted, he'd spent all his resources.

Elijah had also realised that in running, as he did, that he had shown a complete lack of faith in God to look after him, and he was mortified with what he had done. So, he says the following interesting prayer, Elijah prays, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." In saying that prayer, that he was

no better than his ancestors, he may well have been thinking of his Jewish ancestors when they left Egypt in jubilant faith, but when the journey through the desert got tough they lost their faith and deserted God and made for themselves pagan images and worshipped them. Then in utter dismay he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.

It was then that an angel, or God's messenger, touched him and then spoke to him and told Elijah to eat and drink, and he looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jug of water. Clearly God hadn't given up on him, and that too is very encouraging, because it means that when we make mistakes God will not give up on us either, in fact God hasn't given up on me so many times it may now resemble the grains of sand on Worthing beech. That's why I love God so much, because the only sacrifice he wants me to make in return for my sin, is my faith in him and my repentance.

Having eaten his cake and drunk his water he laid down and went back to sleep. Then the angel of the Lord came again, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." We are told that he again got up, ate, and drank, then, in the strength of that food, he went to Mt. Horeb which took him forty days and forty nights journey.

Mt. Horeb was approximately 150 miles due south of where he had his last meal. The terrain is the Sinai desert through an area known as the wilderness of Paran, then into the wilderness of sin. Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai, was the place where God gave the Israelites, through Moses, the Ten Commandments. When he got there he spent the night in a cave, I imagine pleased to get in some sort of shelter.

Then another extraordinary thing happened to him. In the morning God asked him what he was doing right down there at Mt. Horeb? In asking that question God was of course, in a subtle way, rebuking him, because all this was the result of him initially running away when he should have had more faith and stayed where he was. Elijah must have realised that, but nevertheless he could well have been thinking to himself, in trying to defend himself, that after all Lord, it was you who brought me down here.

In fact, in trying to justify himself, Elijah told the Lord that he was working hard for him, that the Israelites under King Ahab had abandoned his covenant, thrown down his altars, killed all his prophets with the sword and that I alone Lord am the only one left, and they are now trying to find me to kill me. In saying that he completely devalued what had happened on Mt. Carmel when God humiliated Baal and killed all his prophets. He ignored Obadiah, who in the previous chapter, saved one hundred prophets by hiding them in two caves, so he was by far not the only one left, in fact in verse eighteen after our reading we read that there were 7,000 of God's prophets in Israel.

I don't think God's messenger was impressed with Elijah's explanation because he ignored it and told him to stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord was

about to go by. So as Elijah stood at the entrance to the cave, a severe wind went by, followed in quick succession by an earthquake and fire, but the Lord was not in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire. And after the fire a sound of sheer silence in which God did go by because it was only then, that Elijah wrapped his mantle around his face as he stood in the entrance of the cave, so that he would not see God and die.

God is undoubtedly in the big dramatic events which at times are very visible to those who want to see, but he is also in the quiet silent events which occur every day, and which may not be seen or recognised and is probably where God does most of his work.

Just after the second world war a submarine captain left the navy and became the vicar of my church. He told us that one day while trying to get away from an attacking German destroyer he took the submarine deep down in the ocean, he told us that they settled on the bottom where they stayed for some time until the destroyer gave up and went away. He then gave the order to go up to periscope level, but the submarine wouldn't move, they tried full throttle both forward and backwards as I remember the story he told. The submarine would not move, it was clearly stuck to the bottom for an unknown reason. He told us that as they were getting near to the end of their air supply he brought the whole crew to his deck so that they would be altogether at the end, and they all prayed.

While quietly praying the submarine, imperceptibly, began to rise. God was not in the force of the engines, or in the panic of the crew trying desperately to move a huge submarine stuck to the bottom of the ocean, but in the quiet prayer time which saved their lives.

And in our story of Elijah, it was in the sheer silence that God again asked him what he was doing there, and Elijah gave the same answer as before. Then God told him to return to the wilderness of Damascus which incidentally was about three hundred miles north, more, or less in the same direction that he had come, but we do not know how long it took or the hardships he had to endure on the way.

But if anyone were to have asked Elijah about it years later I'm sure that he would have admitted that the experience was life changing, and that his faith in God was very much stronger, because that was certainly true of my vicar and probably true for his crew as well.

It is when our faith is challenged that it grows, so if you want to grow in faith, never duck the challenges.

Revd. John White