

1 Kings 19:1 to 15 – 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen.

This morning we are going to continue the story of Elijah, and the theme of our reading today is about the human side of Elijah, when Elijah is shown running away from Jezebel.

From the accounts we've already heard of Elijah, it is clear that he was larger than life, he was faithful to God, confident and authoritative.

He was able to bring about miracles through prayer and even raising a child, who had died, back to full health.

In chapter 18, the subject of our sermon two weeks ago, we heard how he 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, and how the Baal prophets were all killed.

Yet in today's reading we find the prophet Elijah intimidated, suicidal, and self-doubting, who's on the run from Ahab and Ahab's wife Jezebel.

For me this is very encouraging, because even Elijah, a man with exceptional faith, could have periods of doubt.

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 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 400 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 all 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, remember what she did to Naboth, so Elijah had better look out.

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.

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 probably 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 beach.

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 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 then told that he again got up, ate and drank, then, in the strength of that food, he went to Mt. Horeb which took forty days and forty nights.

Mt. Horeb was approximately 150 miles due south of where he had his last meal. The terrain is essentially 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.

I have to say that I'm not surprised it took him forty days and forty night to get there, what does surprise me is that he actually did get there, remembering that he hadn't eaten or had any water since he left his original hiding place under the broom tree.

God of course was with him, there is no way he would have made it on his own, any way, when he got there he spent the night in a cave, I imagine very 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 we are told in the previous chapter, saved 100 prophets by hiding them in two caves, so he was by far not the only one left, in fact in verse 18 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 mantel around his face as he stood in the entrance of the cave, so that he wouldn't 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 everyday, and which are quite often not even seen or recognised, and is probably where God does most of his work.

Just after the second world war a submarine captain was demobbed, and became the vicar of my church.

He told us that one day while trying to get away from an attacking German destroyer he was forced to go deep in the ocean, he told us that they settled on the bottom where they stayed for some hours 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 some 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, almost 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 incidently was about 300 miles north, more or less in the same direction that he had come, and we are not told 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 probably 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.

It's when our faith is challenged that it grows.

Amen