

1 Kings 21 v1-21

Luke 7 v36 - 8v3

Psalm 5 v 1-8

Naboth's vineyard

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be always acceptable in your sight O Lord. Amen

This is the 3rd in our series of sermons on Elijah, God's Prophet. In the first John White talked about Elijah's faith and trust in God as by listening and following God's instructions he was fed in a time of famine. In the second, John Castle talked about Elijah's conviction as he followed God because he believed and was not just doing as everyone else did. If you have come to hear about Elijah "bottling out", as John Castle mentioned last week, I'm afraid you are a week too early, it is next week!

I would like to start by looking at the different characters in the today's passage from 1Kings.

Let's start with Ahab. He is the king of Israel and chapter 16 ends by saying 'that he did more wrong in the eyes of the Lord than all of his predecessors'. He had followed sinful ways, married the daughter of a foreign king and then worshipped her god, Baal, and had a temple built to Baal in his capital Samaria when he was supposed to be following Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews. He has clashed with Elijah on more than one occasion and accuses Elijah of causing trouble! The trouble that Elijah brings is from God as a result of Ahab's behaviour. The King of Israel is God's chosen leader of His people. He is the ruler of the people but he is still subject to God's law.

Ahab is a rich man as King, but he is not content with what he has. He is determined to take possession of another man's property. He would like Naboth's family vineyard to be his garden as it is near his palace. He offers to exchange it for another piece of land or to buy it. However, Naboth says that he is not going to part with it as he says the Lord forbids it.

Ahab goes home in a sulk at this. He is angry. He shuts himself in his room and refuses to eat. He is behaving like a spoilt child. This behaviour suggests that, in his heart, he knew that Naboth was right and that, even though he was king he had no legal way of forcing Naboth to part with the land. Jealousy is an all consuming, negative emotion and by wanting Naboth's vineyard so badly Ahab is wrongly feeling that God is taking better care of Naboth than of himself which shows his lack of faith and understanding. He is suspicious that God has given someone else something better than he has.

Was Naboth right to refuse him? Yes. It was wrong in Old Testament times to sell land that you had inherited (Leviticus 25 v23) and Naboth has inherited this land which had been in his family for many years. So when he said that the Lord forbids the sale he was right. He was also a brave man to stand up to the king and speak out for God's way. He walked with the Lord and stood by his convictions. This was to prove costly, as standing by God can be even today.

Jezebel then enters the story. She is Ahab's foreign wife who is a Baal worshipper. She doesn't like to see her husband so upset (does any wife?) but her solution is not standard behaviour. She sarcastically reminds Ahab that he is the King and as King he has authority, but then says she will make him a gift of the vineyard. Her scheme involves usurping her power; forgery and deceit in sending the letter in Ahab's name; the proclamation of the fast is hypocrisy and then she causes others to lie, resulting in the murder of Naboth, an innocent follower of God. Once she hears of Naboth's death she tells Ahab to take possession of the vineyard and being greedy he does. Will they get away with this?

No. As soon as her scheme has resulted in Naboth's death, the word of the Lord comes to Elijah, God's prophet. Elijah has not had an easy task as God's prophet and going once again to speak with the king will not be pleasant as the message he has to deliver is particularly harsh. He has to tell Ahab that he will die an ignominious death for doing wrong in the eyes of the Lord; that his sons will also die and that Jezebel will have a similar fate without a proper burial. For the Hebrews a decent burial was considered very important, but the fate of Ahab and Jezebel is worse, as dogs were considered unclean animals.

God always has the last word. Ahab and Jezebel had acted without God and gone against God in so many ways, but God does not let them get away with it. God is holy and just; He hates sin and, as he sees all, he will deliver judgement over sin. It is Elijah's role to challenge Ahab about the injustice that he has committed. How do we challenge injustice in today's world?

One organisation doing this is our chosen charity this month, Retrak. The stated mission of Retrak is, and here I am quoting from their website.' Retrak, part of the Hope for Justice family, works to transform highly vulnerable children's lives, preserve families, empower communities and give each of them a voice. We put children at the very heart of everything we do and will be fearless and tenacious in defending and promoting their rights. Our mission is to bring an end to modern slavery by preventing exploitation, rescuing victims, restoring lives and reforming society'. In other words standing up to and preventing injustice.

What do they actually do? They work with children who are living on the streets in Uganda, Ethiopia, Malawi and Kenya. The work begins with outreach on the streets, and is supported by pioneering foster care, independent living and self-help groups. It is a beginning-to-end approach and has helped children to return home to their immediate or biological families and is hugely successful with 80% of children who have been helped staying off the street for at least 2 years. Poverty and family break ups, often because of the death of a parent, are the main causes for young people ending up on the streets. On the streets scavenging and begging are the accepted way of life and the children are particularly vulnerable to becoming trafficking victims or modern slaves. Whilst on the streets the young people have no access to education. Retrak are fighting this injustice and opening doors onto a safer and fairer life for these young people. They work in the community as well, to try and deter young people from venturing to the city streets. Their programmes build resilience in the community; they run 'well being' clubs attached to the schools to educate young people about the dangers of dropping out. They also help with income generating projects so that the communities are economically empowered and this helps to overcome the poverty that drives young people to the streets. This enables children to stay in safer environments and complete their education.

Here is the story of one young person that Retrak have helped

Five years ago, when he was just ten years old, Zerihun lost his father. During these uncertain childhood years, Zerihun regularly helped his mum out with chores and diligently attended school. The happy times made out of a tragic situation eventually ended when spiralling financial struggles led Zerihun to leave home.

The streets seemed like a solution to his problems, or so he thought.

Arriving on the streets of Addis Ababa, Zerihun encountered dangers all too common for children new to the street. A lack of food and nowhere to rest or wash; physical abuse; cold weather...they all took their toll. After two distressing weeks, Zerihun was approached by Retrak outreach workers, who invited him to a drop-in centre.

He was able to eat, sleep, and wash in a safe place, as well as receive counselling and education. After three months, Zerihun was ready to return home and rejoin school

On reuniting Zerihun with his loved ones, Retrak provided small business training for the family to become financially stable. Family counselling was essential to deal with the bereavement of the father in maintaining a normal life.

Retrak also provided enough money for the family to buy a calf in order to generate income.

Zerihun has enjoyed caring for the calf and has been able to continue with school since returning home.

Finishing school is necessary for children to learn skills and find employment later in life.

Retrak has also trained partner organisations in Mozambique, DRC and Zimbabwe. Retrak is also involved in groundbreaking research working with organisations across the globe from Mexico to Cambodia.

Returning to this morning's reading on Elijah. Who are we like?

Ahab who has little faith and sees it as a slight from God when he cannot have what he desires?

Naboth who knows what is right and is prepared to stand up for it whatever the cost?

Jezebel who cares nothing for anything or anyone except getting her own way at the expense of others?

Elijah who shows faith in God, He is filled with God's spirit. He walks God's walk and literally talks for God. He delivers God's message against injustice. Today, with the support of the Trinity, we are in a position to support this work in a variety of ways...we can be actively involved; we can speak out; we can support financially and we can pray.

Ahab said that Elijah was the cause of his problems. The cause of Ahab's problems was not Elijah but the choices that Ahab made in life, choices he made without God. We all have choices to make. Let us pray that we make the choices that lead us in God's way.