

Readings: 1 Kings 18:20-39

Luke 7:1-10

## Power to Amaze

So...Elijah wins the day - literally in a blaze of triumph! I did consider trying to run a more accurate re-enactment of today's story with the young people earlier - our Ruth has pyromaniac tendencies and is always keen to be let loose with the matches, but wearing my property hat, knowing about the effectiveness of our wonderful new Fire Alarm, and only too aware of the sort of Health and Safety risk assessment that Martin would require, I thought we'd better play it safe. We don't want Simon coming back to find his church burned down....

Still, even without the live fireworks, it's a dramatic and amazing story about the might and majesty of Jehovah... Yahweh... the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel that we've just sung about. As we discovered last week, the rule of King Ahab was a difficult time for the Israelites. Ahab's evil wife Jezebel has become legend - so much so that her name is synonymous with 'prostitute' and is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a shameless or wicked woman'. Rod told us last week how Jezebel was a foreigner and a worshipper of the Canaanite deity, Baal; how the human sacrifices and sexual rituals of the Prophets of Baal were being adopted by Ahab and were undermining the key commandments of the Israelites; leading them astray. We heard from chapter 17 about how the drought came (the implication is that it was a punishment on the people) and how God singled out Elijah, protected him and helped him to perform miracles in the home of the Widow of Zaraphath, in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel.

In the first part of chapter 18, just before our story today, we learn that Ahab and Jezebel began killing off the prophets of the Lord. So desperate was the situation that a hundred of them escaped and went into exile, hiding in caves and being fed in secret by loyal supporters. It is in this context that Elijah - a prophet of the Lord - steps up and demands an audience with King Ahab. When Ahab accuses him of bringing trouble on Israel, Elijah spits right back that it is Ahab himself who has brought trouble on Israel by forsaking the commandments of the Lord and following the Prophets of Baal. Let's just think about that for a minute. It would be the equivalent of you or me walking into Mosul in Iraq last summer - against the tide of fleeing Christians and over the bodies of the slain - knocking on the door of the ISIL headquarters, demanding an audience with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and telling him he ought to see the light

and become a Christian. I don't know about you, but personally I wouldn't fancy my chances no matter how hard I'd been praying the night before!

In today's story we see what is basically a challenge to a duel. Like a medieval knight throwing down the gauntlet, Elijah invites a contest to prove whose God is stronger - and against all the odds, in the face of certain failure, if not death, - he wins. There is only one of him; there are 450 prophets of Baal. He soaks his sacrifice in enough water to paddle in; theirs is bone dry. He doesn't even use matches. His sacrifice is consumed by divine fire, the prophets of Baal's doesn't even get warm. As I said to the children earlier, it's impressive. It reminds us that we should never be afraid to confront injustice or ignorance, that with faith we can achieve the impossible; we can do really scary things that are totally beyond our skill set, we can change the world. As members of the congregation that has just turned a decrepit crumbling old house into a shiny new Youth Centre, you know it's true! With faith, we can achieve the impossible. Our God really is a "Great Big God".

However, you probably discerned just a hint of irony in my tone as I described the events here? Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to knock this story, or say that it's too incredible for words, or that we shouldn't stand up for what's right, but actually I have to confess that it sticks in my throat a bit.

You see, there's a bit that our Old Testament reading today rather conveniently leaves out, presumably because Scripture Union who select the readings for their worship material don't really want us to dwell on it. The section doesn't end at verse 39 with the words, "The Lord indeed is God." There's one more verse. Verse 40 tells us, 'Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.'

Think about that for a minute and you may realise why I chose two squabbling siblings to lead the drama! Yes - this story is a "Nah nah na nah nah, I'm better than you are," story. I'm not a Hebrew scholar, but apparently the part of the story where Elijah taunts the prophets is considerably ruder than our translation suggests and might even make me blush. Elijah - the great Old Testament prophet - may have an excellent cause, he may be sure that he's right, but he behaves here like a petty sibling in a childish competition, glorying in the failure of his enemies. At worst, if we add in verse 40, we might argue that he's behaving like Jihadi John, and what we are celebrating here is every

bit as terrible as the triumphant posting of execution videos on the internet in which victims are taunted and then beheaded.

It's just too easy to cut out the nasty bits and gloss over this story as a wonderful example of the power of our God - the almighty, the omnipotent, the one true God. I struggle with that, because if we start to go down that line we risk ending up on the slippery slope toward religious extremism and fanaticism... joining ranks with Jihadi John and all the other desperately sad people who are currently running off to Syria to fight a Holy war... but what's the alternative? Should we all dwindle away in a trickle of wishy-washy liberalism, apologise for our faith and fade into a fudge of mindless multicultural monotony? Of course not.

Often today people try to gloss over the tricky bits of the Old Testament and say simply that things have changed; we don't do things like that any more. That's not terribly helpful either because it encourages us to just pick and choose the bits we like! If we really want to get to grips with the bible and what it's saying to us we have to be prepared to think a bit more carefully about the context of the text we're looking at and the purpose for which it was written.

First of all, it's helpful to know that this passage wasn't actually written at the time of Elijah; most scholars argue that it was written by the prophet Jeremiah who was writing around the time of the Babylonian exile. Elijah, as we know, was around during the reign of King Ahab who was the King of Israel from 875 to 854BC - so this text was written about 300 years after the events it describes. That's the equivalent of one of us writing about King James III and the Jacobite rebellions (except that Jeremiah - although he might have had a hotline to some divine inspiration - couldn't check his facts on Google!).

Here's a little history lesson that I learned in the first piece of TLS homework I ever had to do. By the time of King Ahab, Israel had already broken apart. Around 55 years before his reign, after the death of Solomon, the Israelite Kingdom was divided into the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah). At the time that Ahab was the King of Israel, there was a second King in Judah - called Jehoshaphat. The chosen people were divided. By the time Jeremiah was actually writing about this, the North Kingdom had already fallen to the Assyrian Empire and the South Kingdom to the Babylonians. By 586BC the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed.

In other words, Jeremiah was writing about Elijah and Ahab with hindsight. He was writing at a time when the people of Israel were divided, scattered and oppressed by foreign rule. He was looking back to the time when the seeds of that division and falling away from the faith were already being sown, and looking for answers to the questions about what had gone wrong for God's people. He was writing to shock, to frighten and to warn the people, to remind them of their priorities. In this context it's much easier to appreciate the rather stereotypical 'goodies versus baddies' account that we have just read. In the same way that we might simplify an account of the Jacobite rebellions and use it to feed in to a discussion about Scottish independence today, Jeremiah was using lessons from the time of Ahab and Elijah to try to help the Israelites in their response to the Babylonian invasion which they were living through. Of course, which side gets presented as the goodies and which side as the baddies might depend on which side of the border you live and where your personal loyalties lie.

Knowing this should help us to view the Mount Carmel story a little differently. We can see it as a valuable story to encourage us in our faith, to remind us that if we are true to God he will be faithful to us, to reassure us that he is a Great Big God and we must continue to put our trust in him. But we can also appreciate that some of the more xenophobic elements of the story - about bashing the baddies - arise because of the context and should not necessarily be taken literally as a model for our own behaviour today. We're not picking and choosing what we like from the bible and watering down our commitment here, we're using our brains as well as our faith to help us to discern truth.

We then need to consider that this story was written for the Israelites, but we are Christians. Having applied one historical lens to the story, we need to apply another one and ask ourselves, "What Would Jesus Do?"

Maybe I was a bit harsh on Scripture Union about them cutting out the 40th verse of the story because, very intelligently, they've coupled it for us with a passage from Luke's gospel which helps us to answer that very question. The healing of the Centurion's servant is one of the many healing miracles in Luke's gospel. Jeffrey John, argues the following about them :

The Gospels seem to show Jesus deliberately healing at least one in all the main categories of the excluded - lepers, cripples, menstruating women, others who were handicapped in various ways, Samaritans, Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes, the demon-possessed, the dead... The theological point of the healing miracles is therefore to show Jesus not only healing the sick but including in his kingdom all these categories of people who under the law were supposed to be excluded...

Jeffrey John and several other people actually go on to argue that the healing of the Centurion's servant is especially significant in other ways. Apparently the Greek word 'pais' which is used by both Matthew and Luke here, does not just mean 'servant.' It can be read as 'lover' and it is argued by some that it was common practice for Roman soldiers to have servant/lovers, as many of the Greeks did. There are people who have used this story as part of the gay marriage debate to argue that it is an example of Christ affirming the love between a homosexual couple.

Interesting though this is, I don't want us to get side-tracked into that question today. It's surely sufficient to argue that the Centurion is a Roman - one of the occupying army - and thus seen as an enemy by many of the Jews in Jesus' day. Now it's true that in verses four and five of Luke 7 the Jewish leaders tell Jesus that this particular Centurion is a good one, sympathetic to the Jewish cause. Nevertheless he is a foreigner from an alien culture with different beliefs and values. Not only does Jesus show mercy and love to this man, but the passage concludes with him saying to the crowd of his followers: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." Christ is highlighting here that we can learn from, and be influenced positively by, those who are outside of our faith.

How different from Jeremiah's account of Elijah's triumphant mockery of the Caananite Prophets of Baal. There's no sense of rivalry or one-upmanship or persecution here. There's no sense that, in order to maintain our own faith and our own identity we should spurn or ridicule or even kill those who don't share it. Christ's miracle here is, in its own way, just as spectacular as Elijah's - and he too is speaking in the context of oppression and injustice, but instead of calling down fire and punishment, he calls down love and healing. He shows us another way.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that any of us here are about to join a religious crusade or set out to expel the Muslims or the immigrants from our midst in a blaze of xenophobic hatred. I would hope that we are all well beyond such things. I do think though, that we should all stop and think every now and again about our attitudes to those who are different from us, and be very cautious about using the Mount Carmel story - and others like it - to justify our own cultural judgements and prejudices in a blaze of defensiveness or self-righteous triumphalism.

If we call down fire, let it be the fire of the Holy Spirit, let it be summoned in Love and may we be prepared to accept that it may burn and purify us as much as it does our enemies, those we dislike or disagree with and those with different beliefs and practices from ours.

Amen.