

Let's start this morning by looking at this passage. It is a great and dramatic story that would make a powerful film.

Elijah the prophet of God has, at God's word, proclaimed that there will be no rain for the next years. That had come true and had undermined the worship of the false Baals, who claimed to be the gods of fertility only without rain there was nothing growing. These god's had been part of the culture of those living in the land of Israel for centuries and had been revived by the unholy royals of Ahab and his wife Jezebel.

Now Ahab confronts Elijah who offers the challenge come to Mount Carmel and let's see who is really God. There on the mountain 850 prophets of Baal arrived built an altar and sacrificed a bull on it. But despite their best and increasingly frantic efforts no fire came on the altar to destroy the bull.

Then Elijah built an altar. You can picture him taking 12 stones for the twelve tribes building the altar, arranging the wood on it and putting the pieces of the bull on top. To add to the drama he had the whole lot soaked with water. Then for Elijah no rushing round, no great activity just a quiet prayer, "Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God and that you are turning their hearts back again." The film maker would have a dramatic pause before the flash of fire from heaven crashes down on the altar and the sacrifice is consumed.

Slowly the camera would pan round the crowd as a murmur begins, "The Lord he is God" and slowly builds to a crescendo of noise.

It is great drama great theatre but at the heart is a great and vital truth.

As we continue thinking about the prophets we think today about the opposition they faced. We know of Daniel and the lions' den, of Jeremiah being put down a pit, but in terms of clear opposition we see it here on Mount Carmel in this contest between God and the Baals.

#### **So firstly let's understand the opposition.**

The first point of opposition is not mentioned in the passage but it is Jezebel. She had married King Ahab. Jezebel came from Phoenicia and it was she who was the real opposition. Jezebel had come into Israel with the religion of her fathers and rather than just practice it quietly she was an avid propagandist determined to see her faith sweep away the worship of Yahweh – see 1 Kings 18:4. For Jezebel and her weak husband no opposition could be accepted. It was her religion alone and any other had to be removed.

Elijah was the public face of the religion that Jezebel wanted removed. Later on after the contest she wanted it even more and in 19:2 it is as if she sent out a death warrant on Elijah.

But here is the first point of opposition. It is blatant, clear and seeks to remove all traces of the true worship of God.

The second is a bit more insidious and in a sense is represented by Ahab. He was King of Israel, the people of God. He was God's King standing in the line of David. However he was weak and had seemingly easily been turned away from God to worship Baal by his wife.

The great irony is there in v17 when he confronted Elijah and called him the trouble of Israel. The word trouble means a polluter of water something that infects or poisons. Sitting at our point in history we stand amazed that Ahab could have the gall to make such a claim but that is how it so often is that the lie has the audacity to call the truth lies. This takes us back to a fundamental flaw in humanity the ability to twist the truth and listen to those who do it. Way back in the garden of Eden the serpent raised the doubt "Did God really say you must not eat from any tree." God's word was twisted and presented as a lie – you won't die if you eat from the tree.

So Ahab had been brought onto the side of the Baals and Ahab was not the only one for many of not most in the nation had followed his lead. But why had the people as we saw last week forsaken God in favour of this Baal worship?

Well there were many reasons. Here are a few:

a. because it was state sponsored religion and if you want to get on and be accepted then to align yourself with the religious preferences of those in power is a good idea. This is one of the issues that face the Church of England as the established church of the land. While the Church has a large say in the appointment of Bishops still they go through 10 Downing Street and while it can be a positive that we have Bishops in the House of Lords who can speak for the Christian faith still because they are there it is also possible that they can be pressured to fit the pattern of thinking of the government of the day.

b. relevance. The Baals were proclaimed as fertility gods who "bestowed upon man and soil the blessings of fruitfulness." Here was a faith that was relevant to the people of the land. Now relevance is a great thing, our faith should affect our daily lives, but the danger is that it can, as it did here, lead us away from God. In so fitting in with the world around the reality of God had been lost. This was why Elijah was called by God to stand as he did. This was what Paul warned Timothy about in 2 Tim 4:3, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." This is what we see in the revisionist churches of our day which in seeking to be inclusive and making sure people are accepted no matter what gender, sexual orientation and the like are effectively saying that it doesn't matter how you live God loves you and of course that's a message that always goes down well for we want God's approval but we'd rather not live holy lives.

This kind of opposition was more insidious it was from inside rather than outside. It was plausible but it was false and led people away from God. This was the opposition Elijah faced. He saw that very clearly in his land and amongst the people of God there were two different religions. There was the faith in Yahweh, the traditional faith of the people of God going back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and this opposite religion of Baal which had attracted many into its cause including the King. So we got

#### **Secondly the battle**

What took place on Mount Carmel was a vital battle which destroyed for that time the myth of these false gods. In one sense God having stopped the rain he could have simply restarted it but then those following Baal would have claimed it for Baal. Baal had to be clearly shown as having no power. So we get this contest.

As you cast your eye down it note the contrast.

Firstly, v22 there are loads of prophets of Baal there but only Elijah against them. Elijah spoke for God and found himself in a minority. That was not unusual for prophet after prophet found it so. Jesus in his day found it so and warned his disciples of the same, "small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Secondly v27 there's a great deal of shouting and a lot of activity as first they danced around and then in v28 cut themselves. Whereas with Elijah v36 he offered a simple prayer. A prayer which God chose to answer in the positive way sending fire to consume the sacrifice.

In this we see thirdly that the god of the prophets of Baal was no god at all. He didn't show up because he didn't exist. Whereas the God of Israel did show up in power and in majesty.

Friends let's be under no illusion here if we are following Christ then we are in a battle. As the Baptism service puts it, "fight manfully under the banner of Christ against sin the world and the devil." Each day we are engaged in that battle each day as soldiers of Christ we are called to put on the armour of God so that we can stand and we put on each piece with prayer for prayer is key as it brings the power and majesty of God into the battles we face.

### Thirdly the lessons

Just as we close four things I think this says to us centuries after Elijah.

1. the first is obvious the passage called the people then and calls us now to follow God in everything. We see this in v21, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." Elijah's point is that God is God so who else are you going to follow. Our own church motto here is to follow Jesus in every way. They couldn't serve both God and Baal any more than you and I can serve God and money or God and .... well you can fill in the blank. Basically the message Elijah gave was that God demands our full allegiance. To put it in the words of Peter and John in Acts 4:19, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God". We are called to walk the way of God in obedience to his will and his word. It is a recognition that this world is not the sum total of reality. However in so doing we recognise that we often will find ourselves going against the flow. That is what Elijah found, it is also what Jesus found. So are we following Christ or are we guilty of trying to have a foot in two camps? Are we guilty of trying to serve God and something or someone else?

2. we should expect opposition to the gospel and to the Christian faith. Many years back there was a report in the Times that said this: "Evidence that the ongoing battle between the devil and the American evangelist Billy Graham may have moved to the hitherto tranquil rural district of Nailsea came mysteriously last week with a thunderbolt from the sky. It partially destroyed the home of Anthony Bush a farmer and lay preacher who is regional head of an evangelical group called Mission England. Bush has blamed the incident on the devil. "It is standard theology," he says, "there are the forces of good and forces of evil and there is no doubt that this is enemy action. It was as good a job as an exocet at a quarter of a mile." The police said they were not investigating the incident but were maintaining their normal vigilance for anybody in the area dressed in red tights with horns and carrying a pitchfork". It may not be quite like that but let us be clear that the world is not neutral it is anti-God. That was why Jesus came and why he was put to death. "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (Heb 12:3)

This is what is happening in many parts of the world. Just this week in Northern Nigeria 12 Christians including three Pastors have been killed in rioting ignited by an Islamic sect. In Turkey a Christian Turk was held hostage by a young Moslem nationalist who threatened to kill him. It is not just in the rest of the world but in our own country today persecution happens. Christians are being removed from their jobs, prevented from sharing the gospel, under suspicion and so on. It is happening and I am afraid it will only get worse. In recent months, though you may not be aware of it the Coroners and Justice Bill has been making its way through Parliament. One clause reads: "for the avoidance of doubt, the discussion or criticism of sexual conduct or practices or the urging of persons to refrain from or modify such conduct or practices shall not be taken of itself to be threatening or intended to stir up hatred". The government has been trying to remove this clause. But already in practice even the possibility of mentioning that homosexual practice is a sin is seen as sufficient grounds for action against the person. Taken further being an evangelical Christian and witnessing on the streets can be sufficient reason for people to take offence because of the link between evangelical Christians and the idea that homosexual practice is a sin. So in Greater Manchester in 2007 a Pastor was first questioned by two mounted police and then three more police arrived in a van and all he was doing was handing out invitations to an Easter service. There is opposition and it is increasing. So be aware there will be opposition to your faith and your church and we must not flinch from that for following Christ will lead us into conflict with the world.

3. we must be prepared to stand up and speak the truth. Now I realise that you and I are not Elijah but here he stands example to us that the true man or woman of God will hold firmly to God and encourage others to do the same because that is what Elijah was doing here. He was calling the lie to the Baals but at the same time calling the people of God back to faithfulness to God.

I have been very grateful in recent days to the Bishop of Rochester, who soon will stand down, for being willing to stand and speak for the truth. Most recently the bishop decried the captivity to culture. "British Christians are not aware of the seductive power of culture and they daily capitulate to mass media." He also identified compromise as a great danger. "This will not be a sudden demise but death by a 1000 cuts. We are seeing a gradual erosion of gospel faith and Christian values even in the churches."

We must be willing to do the same. I remember some years back at a meeting of clergy talking about Evangelism and one of the clergy said something like, "I can't see the point of Evangelism myself after all aren't we all going to heaven?" I knew I should say something but didn't quite know what and was so relieved when a colleague spoke up and said that as he didn't believe we would all go to heaven then there was every need for the gospel and for us to call people to faith. In so doing he both rejected the lie and also encouraged others to hold to God.

4. Prayer is the key for us as it was for Elijah. This is what Elijah was known for in the NT, "Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years" (James 5:17). There on the mountain his weapon in the battle was prayer and so it must be for us. I have a feeling that for many of us instead of prayer being something we do everyday, like breathing, eating and walking, it seems to have become something like that little glass covered box on the wall that says "break in case of emergency". Prayer should not be the last resort but the first and most used weapon in our armoury. We as Christians cannot stand against the opposition we face and we will not be able to speak the truth without prayer. We as a church will not be able to face the opposition without prayer. So pray – take the Prayer guide and use it regularly soak each group, its leaders and goals in prayer and see if God will not bless his work here.

Elijah was a man just like us but God used him to confront falsehood and draw people back to him and at the heart of it was prayer. May we learn from Elijah and may God help us to stand for him and his truth.