**Sunday 11th July 2021**

1 Kings 21

Ahab

This chapter shows how Mosaic law was being diluted with laws of the surrounding nations. As more people were marrying women foreign to Israel, and their customs and idols were being tolerated, more and more of the Israelites were accepting their practices, not just tolerating them. A bit like the sayings that we have looked at, where the language has become accepted and understood.

We begin at Naboth’s vineyard. What does that piece of his land signify to you? If it was your house, your garden, your land? A place of security? Memories? A source of livelihood in the case of this vineyard? Is your land an inheritance that has been passed down from previous generations – and to continue to future generations?

There can be conflicting views on the values placed on land and individual rights compared to community concerns. Perhaps for us today HS2 reflects some of the attitudes of the present day. I am not promoting whether it is right or wrong, but the different values that people place on land is highlighted.

In our passage, Naboth saw his land as an inheritance given by God – reflecting His generosity and faithfulness. Naboth was relying on God’s laws given in relationship to land – again provided to protect people from those more powerful, as in this instance.

In contrast, Ahab saw the land and wanted it, as it was close to his second palace. He did not NEED the land, simply wanted it for convenience. We can see that he already had vineyards and such like as he would have swapped the land. In his defence here, he was not trying to cheat Naboth, but provide like for like. But due to the laws that God had given, Naboth would not accept the offer.

When Ahab didn’t get his own way – he sulked. He wasn’t happy about the situation, which meant that he was not happy with God or Naboth. Rather than accepting the decision, changing his attitude in the knowledge that he was not getting something that he wanted, but did not need – he continued to sulk. He was not planning any other actions, but the fact that he was sullen and angry was a reflection of not agreeing with what had occurred and a reflection of hatred?!

Ahab’s wife, Jezebel cannot believe how Ahab is acting. Her view of monarchy is revealed in her sarcastic remark “Is this how you act as king over Israel”. Her view is that to be king means to have your own way, to show power over the subjects, the people like Naboth, for your own sake, to show that you are more powerful. God and His power did not come into the equation at all.

She decides to flex her power to deal with it. The word I would use to describe Jezebel is sly. She used the Israelite legal system – and corrupted it. Jezebel puts into action the plan, and the leaders decide to go along with it.

She manipulated the elders, the very people who were there to protect Naboth. People who he lived with in community, who he would have relied upon to show justice. Do not forget that they were not strangers to Naboth. Did they do as Jezebel wanted out of fear? Did they not warn Naboth because they thought they would then become subject to her schemes? Did they think that the outcome would be inevitable, because of her position and power, another case of “we’re doomed”, so better to sacrifice one man rather than the possibility of more, including themselves?

Take a moment – do we ever stay quiet because of fear? Is our silence wisdom or is it allowing injustice to happen?

The truth was that it would not have just been Naboth that was stoned. He was being accused of a capital offence and therefore his sons would have been stoned to death also – so there would be no-one left to inherit the land.

Ahab, as far as we are aware knew nothing about the scheme. Jezebel acted on her own volition, so he was innocent, wasn’t he?

In verse 15 we hear Jezebel report “Naboth is no longer alive, but dead”. This needs to be expanded a little to fully understand Ahab’s part. If a person was found guilty of a capital offence, stoning was a legal punishment and they were regarded in the law as dead. However, a pardon could be given by the king which would in effect bring them to life again. If that were the case then the land would pass to another member of the clan of the Israelites that Naboth belonged to.

The fact that Ahab took possession of the land without looking any further into what had happened, the false witnesses and corrupt sentencing, meant that he was just as guilty. Turning a blind eye does NOT mean that you are innocent of the act and consequences.

All people in power have a choice with how to use that power. It can be used to protect the disadvantaged and build community; Or it can be used to cause division, used to disrupt and corrupt in order to gain self-interests.

Still today the legal system can be manipulated for personal power and freedom. People who have most power and wealth can employ the best legal team, who can themselves succumb to the promise of wealth promised to them. Not all legal professionals are in this category – but we would be naïve to believe that none are!

Power can likewise be used for national politics too. Individuals used as pawns in a larger power game.

But Ahab and Jezebel are immediately brought into God’s justice system. God speaks through a prophet, Elijah, to deliver His personal message and sentencing for Ahab, even when Ahab was in the act of taking possession of the land. Any pretence of innocence is shattered when God speaks. Ahab is held completely responsible. Is this harsh?

Ahab knew that Naboth was wrongly accused and sentenced and so the capital punishment that was inflicted was nothing short of murder. A murder that was borne from the hatred that Ahab was harbouring in his heart when he was sullen, sulky and angry.

God did not hold back in his punishment for Ahab – and he will not hold back his punishment for us if we are harbouring anything that is not of God in our hearts. Just because we have not killed someone, or committed adultery or stolen, if we hold any hatred in our heart, any stubborn unforgiveness, any lust or coveting something our neighbour owns – we are not far from committing an act of violence or evil – or allowing someone else to believe that those emotions are OK to let run wild. We need to recognise these wrong emotions and attitudes, so that our hearts reflect the compassion, justice and love of Christ.

When Christ came, the OT laws on community were not over-ridden. In Matt 5: 21-22 Jesus said “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment”. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be subject to judgment”.

When Elijah delivered God’s message, Ahab reacted by showing deep grief and repentance – he was humble. Do we believe him to be genuine? It is no matter what we believe, or judge to be true, God sees it as genuine, God judges his righteousness just as he had judged his wickedness. And God’s reaction – is to show mercy.

There is irony in the act of Ahab humbling himself. When Jezebel put her plan into action, she began by declaring a day of fasting – an act used to create an impression that a disaster threatened the people that could only be averted if they humbled themselves before God. Another instance of a prophetic instance being put into place by someone not expected to bring a prophetic word.

God says, through Elijah that Ahab humbled himself. The other king that we saw humble themselves before God was Josiah, last week. The only two kings who are reported as humbling themselves before God, allowing His sovereignty to be above them, above their own power and their own status.

God’s judgement over Ahab is once again deferred because he was humble. It is not rescinded, but it is deferred to the next generation.

This in itself brings another question to mind for me; is it simply a case of the sons are punished for the sins of the fathers? And ladies, this does not take us off the hook – replace sons with children and fathers with parents!

It is the truth that very often children do take on the views, ethics and morality from their parents. This is hard to step away from – but we have seen through the kings that it is not impossible. Each generation has to make their own choices and are accountable for their decisions.

That is why it is so important for us to read the bible for ourselves, to come to our own relationship with God, to seek His will not simply through what other people tell us, but weighing it all up whilst reading the word of God and praying.

We each have to take responsibility for our Spiritual well-being. All of us will have fallen short of God’s expectations – I believe that we are all human, so can never measure up fully to the perfection that God desires for each of His children, for their own good and protection as well as every one else’s good and protection. But if we are honest before our Lord, He will always show mercy.

There is no record of Elijah taking the news of God’s mercy to Ahab. Perhaps he preferred to give the judgement rather than the grace, because he had judged Ahab’s wickedness as being too much and reluctant to accept the mercy given to him by God. We have no way of telling if that statement is true – but if it is not true of Elijah I do believe it is true for many of us.

Do we often judge people as too evil to be able to receive God’s mercy? Do we often judge ourselves as being too far in the darkness of shadows to be able to receive God’s mercy for ourselves?

Either outlook is not the truth. God’s mercy is beyond our comprehension. In the passage we see that Ahab is forgiven, but that did not bring Naboth and his children back to life. It is unfair – in our earthly perception. But we MUST hold on to the heavenly desires and promises. In Act 3 Peter speaks about the power of healing that was taking place in the name of Jesus, and speaking of His death declares:

“I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent them, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that He may send Christ, who has been appointed for you - even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets”.

Let us not be led astray by anyone speaking words that sound lovely, that sound as though they may be true. We must each look to God’s word– we hold our own accountability. Things in this life will appear to be unfair, the bible is a book filled with hurt, trauma and injustice – but we must read it and look to the future that God has promised through the lens of His Fatherly love. Each day the promises made by the prophets in the bible become further in the past – but the heart of God remains the same. His heart is for His children to know Him, to be in His presence, to humble themselves under His reign, trusting that He will use His power to bring about justice, fairness and a true community of belonging for everyone.

Is there any way that you are able to bring that in a small measure to someone you know now? Let us bring the heavenly realm to earth if we are ever provided with the opportunity. Let us be good neighbours now – and not wait until heaven.