Sunday 19th June 2022

1 Kings 19: 1-15

Before we can look too closely at the passage that has been read, it is helpful to have a bit of background.

Israel was being reigned by king Ahab, who had married Jezebel, a Baal worshiper. She had orchestrated the killing of many of God’s prophets.

During this time there had also been a severe drought.

In the third year of the drought, Elijah had word from God telling him to present himself to Ahab and that He would send rain. Elijah went to speak to Obadiah; Obadiah was in charge of Ahab’s palace in Samaria but was a known ally for the prophets, he had indeed hid one hundred of them from Jezebel so they were not killed.

Elijah requested Ahab to come to Mount Carmel and meet him. He invited all the people of Israel, together with 450 prophets of Baal. An altar was made and a bull prepared for sacrifice. Elijah challenged that the bull be burnt on the altar, but no flame could be used to light a fire. All the prophets danced, sung, shouted, implored and hurt themselves for hours – but no flame appeared from their god.

Elijah stepped forward, rebuilt the demolished altar of God, and then demanded that it be doused with water – three times. It was completely drenched – water flowing from it.

Elijah then prayed to God to show His power – and the sacrifice caught light. Elijah then slaughtered all the false prophets. Then, rain began to fall.

It is after that spectacle that we pick up the reading in 1 Kings.

READING 1 KINGS 19:1-15

After witnessing the power of God, Ahab returns to Jezebel and reports the events that he has witnessed. What reaction do you imagine Elijah would be expecting? What reaction would you expect?

For me, when I have seen God at work it is difficult to comprehend that other people will not see His power and want to know more about Him. But Jezebel was unmoved – instead she sent a threat to Elijah; more a promise of death than a threat in honesty.

I can understand the reaction of Elijah – scared for his life he runs. He must have been extremely confused. And how would he be feeling about God? He had done all that God had asked of him, God had fulfilled His promise regarding the end of the drought, but the situation had not changed. Jezebel was unmoved, still wanted to kill God’s prophets, and Ahab still had kingship so she was able to continue. Disappointed is an understatement.

But in the passage I think that we can see that Elijah’s distress was more than deep disappointment. Yes, he ran from Jezebel, a sensible reaction. But we see that he then took leave of his servant to find somewhere on his own. He then pleads that God takes his life. Isn’t that a clear sign of depression?

I know that depression is a difficult state to understand. In honesty, I think that the word is overused today. If someone is feeling sad or down about something, I often hear them say that they are feeling depressed.

But depression is not simply being unhappy, or something that you can snap out of by looking on the bright side. And it does not mean that someone is suicidal. Elijah was not actively trying to take his own life, but asking God that he would not wake up in the morning.

God sends and angel to Elijah, not to impart deep theology, not to try and cheer him up. Simply to give him food and drink to sustain him. He also acknowledges that he will need strength for his journey.

Elijah then goes to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. Nowhere in the passage are we told that God asked him to go there – it was Eljah’s decision.

When he gets there, to the place where it was considered God was present, what did he do? What would you have done? Would you have tried to climb closer to God, to seek Him, to ask for guidance?

Elijah chooses to hide in a cave. Again, seeking solitude and not having any regard for the future.

God gives him space, he allows him a night alone. In time, God gently speaks to Elijah, asking what he was doing there. Another reflection that it was Elijah’s decision and that God had not called him to be there.

Let us examine Elijah’s answer piece by piece: “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty”. Well, I believe that is the truth. Elijah was a well known and respected prophet. All that God had called him to do, he had done.

“The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword”: Well, this does have some truth, but he had spoken to Obadiah, who was a worshiper of God. There would have been other Israelites that still worshiped God. So this was only partly true.

“I am the only (prophet) left and now they are trying to kill me too”: Again, Obadiah had hidden 100 prophets who had survived. So this again was only partly the truth.

But when you are looking from the outside it is easy to spot the untruth in statements. When you are in depression, or actually in any situation, your perception becomes the truth.

Elijah was feeling alone and frightened, and this perception that he had, became his truth.

What did God do? Did he automatically set him straight, correct him with what the truth actually was? Did he begin to say “Look on the bright side” or try to make Elijah laugh?

No, God asked him to go out of the cave onto the mountain, into the presence of God, and promised that He would pass by.

Then there is a powerful wind that tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks, followed by an earthquake and eventually fire. But we are told that God was not in any of these.

What was the point of these acts then? It was probably to show Elijah, and us, that although we may expect God’s actions to be as powerful as wind, earthquake and fire, and He had proved that they can be – it was fire that He sent at Mount Carmel, that it is not always in those actions that He is present.

After those acts of power, which are also acts that would cause terror and fear – literally putting the fear of God into those present – God then whispers to Elijah.

Have you noted that it was not until Elijah heard that whisper that he left the cave? God had asked him to go out before, but it was not until that whisper that Elijah did as God had asked.

God shows here that His love and presence with us is not dependent on whether we always do as He asks. To do so is for our benefit, and it does not mean that we should ignore Him, but be assured that He is constantly speaking to us, even though we may not be listening or in a position to obey. God’s love is constant and persistent.

The whisper also shows that God is at work in quiet acts of obedience. Isn’t that assurance for any of us who do not like to be center of attention? The act of Obadiah quietly hiding the 100 prophets was just as valuable to God as Elijah publicly praying for God’s power to ignite the sacrificial altar.

God then asks Elijah again why he is there. Despite all the actions that he had witnessed, he still stated the same plea – there had been no change.

Isn’t that a reflection of Jezebel too? Despite seeing the powerful acts of God, there is not always a change in attitude.

But God did not give up on Elijah. His reaction – “go back the way that you came and go and anoint Hazael as king over Aram”. Walking out of depression is a journey. God gave Elijah another act to perform, but He did not magically transfer him to another place. He showed Elijah that he still had value and a part to play. God showed Elijah patience and allowed him time as he would have travelled back to his servant. Despite the fact that Elijah was still believing his own version of the truth, God continued to ask him to follow Him, obey Him and that there was still a plan in action.

Whether we have struggled with depression, or disappointment, or rejection, often our perception can become our truth. God will remain patient with us too. We all still have a part to play on behalf of God bringing His plan to fruition.

God’s power can be seen in the quiet acts of obedience just as much as in the wind, earthquake and fire. Are we listening for His whisper?

Do we trust that He is calling to each of us? Can we hear that whisper?