

Which God?

Chapter 17 of the 1st Book of Kings begins with a prophet by the name of Elijah proclaiming to the king by the name of Ahab, that, ‘as the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.’ Thus begins a drought, a deadly failure of the rains which then – as now – had immense potential for death and the destruction of land and of wildlife and of people. The cause of the drought is evidently that the God of Israel is unhappy. And the God of Israel is unhappy because the people of Israel are being led astray by King Ahab, and worshipping another god. He is the God of a people called the Caananites who lived in the land before the people of Israel arrived there, and he is known as Baal, and he is yesterday’s god.

So to today’s passage and now there is to be a confrontation between Elijah, the prophet of Israel, and the prophets of Baal. And what is quite evident from this passage is that the people of Israel have to make a choice. Suddenly there is another god in the frame, and they have to make a deliberate, intentional decision as to which God they are going to serve. ‘How long are you going to go limping with two different opinions?’ says Elijah. It seems that the people of Israel are in danger of trying to have it both ways. Maybe they are trying to combine the two faiths and have a little bit of Baal religion and a little bit of Israelite religion. Maybe that was considered be the enlightened thing to do. But the true, living God will have none of it. There is a clear either / or – and the people must decide which God they will serve.

What we have to understand here is that the religion of Baal was what is called a fertility religion. And that means that this contest between the gods is not just a dispute over who can fling down fire and ignite a mega-Bar-B-Q. There is much more at stake than that. The real issue is who controls the rain. The real issue is who has power to send life-giving rain to make the earth fertile so that it brings forth life and food and produce. The calling down of fire from heaven to light the bull is a calling down of lightning to kick-start the rain. And it is interesting to see here the lengths that the prophets of Baal had to go to try to make this happen. We read in verse 28, ‘Then (the prophets of Baal) cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances

until the blood gushed all over them'. Now, what is that all about? Well, in a religion like theirs that's what it took to make Baal act. That's what it took to move Baal to action. And what the contest reveals is that no such leverage is necessary for the God of Israel to act. This God does not have to be manipulated into sending rain. This God needs no coercion. This God hears the prayers of his people, and so Elijah prays and the fire falls and our passage ends with Elijah's words to king Ahab, 'Go up, eat and drink: for there is the sound of rushing rain.'

So that is the choice that has to be made. Baal or Israel's God? A fertility God or the sovereign God? And Israel is discovering here that it must always make a conscious and deliberate choice to worship the true and living God, and that is something it has always known. Go right back in Israel's history to the beginning, when they were liberated from Egypt. God frees them from slavery and takes them to a mountain where God gives them commandments. And the first commandment is, 'you shall have no other gods before me.' And the point here is that Israel is tempted to take with them the gods of the Egyptians, the gods of Pharaoh who had made their lives so miserable. And as they wander in the desert they are continually tempted to return to those gods and they must constantly and repeatedly choose the living, liberating God who set them free. And as we follow the story of this people through the wilderness they come to the Jordan River where they are poised to enter this Promised Land of Canaan. And before they do so their leader Joshua gathers them together and gives a rousing speech in which he challenges them: 'choose this day who you will serve!' As you stand here on the verge of a new life in a new land you must make a choice, and it's a choice that faces two directions. You must look back and renounce the gods of Egypt - and you must look forward and renounce the gods of Canaan. And we are told that the people declared, 'far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods.' And that choice, that conscious, deliberate choice had to be made repeated, regularly after they had entered that land. And here they are being challenged to make it again on this mountain, with the prophets of Baal.

Now, why all this matters is that here we get to the heart of what real faith is about. It's about choosing your god, and let me explain. Something that I find intriguing is the use of the word 'religious'. Especially today in our very secular culture where belief in God is highly contested, you often hear people say, 'I'm not religious'. And it suggests that being religious is a sort of quality

have either have or do not have. It's a bit like saying, 'I'm superstitious' or 'I'm musical'. It suggests that this is something that we just are or are not. Maybe it's something to do with our genes. Maybe it's something to do with the way we were brought up. I'm musical / I'm tone deaf'; 'I'm graceful' / I'm clumsy'; 'I'm religious' / 'I'm not.' It's just the way we are. Well the trouble with this is that it masks the fact that real faith, real faith in the living God is always a deliberate, conscious choice – and in our secular, unbelieving age – always a contested choice, a disputed choice. And when you choose the god of Baal you end up living in a very different world from the one you inhabit when you choose the God of Israel. And when we choose to worship today's gods of money and materialism and consumerism and violence we end up living in a very different world from the one we inhabit when we worship the living God of Jesus Christ. Faith is primarily a question of which god will you choose – and therefore whose world will you live in?

One thing I love in this church is something we do every month when we celebrate Holy Communion. As we prepare to share bread and wine we say together what we call the Apostle's Creed, an ancient statement of faith that spells out what we as Christians believe; 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in his only Son Jesus Christ Our Lord...' and so on. And every time we say that we are making a choice. We are saying this is the God I choose to worship. This is the world I choose to live in. This is the story I choose to live by. And however I may be feeling on any particular day and however near or distant God may seem I still choose the life that unfolds when we sign up to these core beliefs.

Again, last Sunday was Trinity Sunday when as Christian we are reminded that we worship a God who is known in this threefold way: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And one of my all-time favourite hymns is the ancient Celtic one attributed to St Columba that begins, 'I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity...' Now, that reflects a Celtic emphasis that each day creation, the world around us, the world of nature summons us to consciously and intentionally choose God over against every distraction, every competing god and lord. And come what may this day and however low the flame of my faith flickers and however uneven the road that runs through today – indeed precisely because of all this – I bind unto myself the strong name of the triune God. And that is a choice for life over death.

It's not a question of being religious or not. It's a question of choice. Which God do we choose? The God of Jesus and Elijah – or some other? Will it be the sovereign God who hears our prayers and who invites us into his world and his story - or some other? You can't go limping after two opinions. Choose this day who you will serve! Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Dear Lord, In Heaven and here with us today.

We thank you for this opportunity to hear your word.
To contemplate your presence in our lives.

We pray that you bless our church, strengthen Pastor Lance, his family and the members of our consistory.

We thank you for the work that has been done this last week at the General Assembly in Scotland.

May all the things that are done for your church seen and unseen, be done with sincerity.
And to your glory.

Father, we pray for our world, the leaders of countries and local councils alike, great thinkers, industrialists, writers, artists, kings and queens may their words and deeds be right and just.

Lord Bless those who are facing difficult times, refugees, the homeless, people who are unemployed or face unemployment, the bereaved wrap them in your love, Lord and let them not feel alone.

Lord we pray for those who are unable to be here today due to infirmity or illness
We pray especially for Joke and Herman, David Steedman,

And in a moment of silence we bring before you the people who we know
who need your special blessing today

Grant them and those close to them your strength and courage.

We thank You that we can call on You for comfort when we are in need, Lord.

And especially today we thank you for the children and the young people in our
midst.

Bless them with the fire of your love.

Ignite their imagination

fuel their talents

Guide their lives

Bless their parents, families, friends and all who come into contact with them.

We thank you for your Blessing on all who pass through these doors.

In your Holy name we pray,

Amen