

# WEEKLY SERMON

communicate@blackburn.anglican.org



## Be More Elijah!

*1 Kings 17.1-7*

In this passage Elijah the prophet bursts into the story and we learn that he is a Tishbite from Gilead. A few weeks ago my wife Gill and I were in Gilead, a remarkably green and fertile area in northern Jordan. As we saw the lush and well-watered farmland on Gilead we remembered Jeremiah asking 'is there no balm in Gilead?' which was one of those rhetorical questions expecting a resounding 'yes!' And yet God leads Elijah away from the lush pastures of Gilead, to minister in the desert. Why?

In the Bible the place of spiritual growth is the desert, not the oasis. I have slightly gone through life hoping that I could make great spiritual growth in the oasis. I never really identified with the hymnwriter's wish, 'not for ever by still waters would I idly rest and play!' However I have discovered that when God wants to stretch us and help us to grow he takes us away from the oasis into the harsh place of the desert.

Is God calling you to be more Elijah? Does he want to move you out of your place of comfort to the place of growth?

Yet even in the desert God provides water and sustenance. And so God leads Elijah through the desert to the Wadi Cherith. A few weeks ago I was actually standing in the Wadi Cherith, on the east side of the Jordan, a fertile little stream whose banks were thick with reeds rustling in the gentle breeze, on an otherwise sweltering day in the desert, down near the baptismal site of Jesus at Bethany beyond the Jordan.

The Wadi Cherith runs below Elijah's Hill, from where Elijah ascended into heaven in a chariot of fire, watched by his awestruck successor Elisha. And only a short walk from the very well attested baptismal site, where John the Baptist baptised Jesus.

It was only really on this visit to Jordan that I realised how three such great figures from Bible history, Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus, are all strongly linked with the same spot, and how significant it was that John the Baptist chose to locate himself in one of the great centres of Elijah's ministry, and from where he had ascended into heaven. No wonder the crowds were keenly asking whether John was Elijah returned to earth.

As I stood in the Wadi Cherith, listening to the wind rustling in the reeds by the stream, I also thought of Jesus' words about John the Baptist in Matthew 11, 'What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?.. A man dressed in fine clothes? No... then what did you go out to see? A prophet, yes and more than a prophet...And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah, who was to come.'

In 1 Kings 17 Elijah speaks truth to power, to wicked King Ahab, challenging the authority of Baal, the pagan god of storm and rain. Elijah warns Ahab of an impending drought, designed by God to bring him to repentance and to recognise that God alone can give rain. And then he is sent to hide

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himself on the far side of the Jordan, where he gets his very own Deliveroo service of bread and meat by airmail morning and evening – until the Wadi dries up, as a consequence of the drought Elijah had predicted. Then God sends him on a very long journey to Zarephath, where he has prepared a widow to take care of him, until the time comes for the showdown with the prophets of Baal in the third year of the drought.

Is God calling you to be more Elijah? To be willing to speak truth to power? To name evil and confront spiritual darkness?

If so, may you know his supernatural care, hiding you from danger and feeding you with nice things from ravens and widows, resting you and building your strength until the time comes for the battle which he has called you to fight for him.

**Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn**