

Sermon: 1 Kings 18:22-40: 20161127 (St Mary Oatlands)

We have some unfinished business. It's not popular business - and it's certainly not fashionable - but it's absolutely critical to the Christian faith and every single one of us. It's the business of judgement.

It's not the done thing, it seems, to talk or preach about God's judgement. The last time I did, the feedback I got was "the bishop wouldn't like it, Brian, all this about judgement..." That wasn't Bishop Andrew, by the way! Even some bishops, it seems, as well as many clergy, don't like preaching on judgement.

But looking at our first reading today about Elijah on Mount Carmel, we can't avoid it! It would help me if you could have the pew bibles open on page 345 - at our Old Testament lesson, 1 Kings 18 verses 22-40. That's page 345 or 637 in the large print bibles.

You might remember we looked at this passage earlier this year. The four hundred and fifty priests of Baal, who should have been teaching the people about the God of the bible, had instead led them astray into a false, pseudo-religion of Baal worship. But their false religion was all show: their hearts were set on themselves, not on God.

We saw their futile ritual, worshipping and dancing and shouting and crying and even cutting themselves. But the whole song and dance routine drew a blank, as we saw in verse 29: "there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention."

Then Elijah prayed to God - the true God, the God of the bible - and God answered by fire - as we saw in verse 38.

And so God answered, Elijah was vindicated, and the people recognised the one true God. And if we stop at verse 39, we might think that was that. And we did stop at verse 39, because that's where our text for the day ended.

But afterwards, one or two people said to me, "But Brian, what about verse 40?" Because when we look at verse 40, that wasn't quite that. Please look with me at verse 40, "Then Elijah commanded them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!' They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there." Elijah has 450 prophets of Baal slaughtered.

As Dale Ralph Davis says in his commentary, "We've had a perfectly marvellous day on Mount Carmel, and now Elijah goes and spoils it all. Here we go, wading into the gore of another 'moral problem' in the savage Old Testament. Is that what we have here?..."

Well of course it isn't. What we have here is God's judgement on the wicked prophets.

(By the way, if you want a good, highly readable paperback on Old Testament history, Dale Ralph Davis is your man!).

So I'd like us to think today about this verse 40, and about God's judgement.

Firstly, let's note that God's judgement is scary.

It must have been quite a surprise for the prophets of Baal. They wake up one morning as usual, everything's fine. After all, they are at the centre of their country's establishment. Queen Jezebel protects them, they are her power base and her shock troops. They control the state religion and the media - they have access to everyone's facebook and twitter account. They are powerful.

Yet along comes Elijah - and before the day is over they're all slaughtered. Pretty scary, isn't it? God's judgement can be sudden - as we saw in our gospel reading this morning - and it's scary.

Is Elijah out of order here? Has he completely lost it - gone berserk, gone overboard? Absolutely not! He's obeying God. Specifically, he's obeying the law in Deuteronomy chapter 13 verses which says in summary, "If a prophet appears among you and says 'Let us follow other gods (gods you have not known) and let us worship them, that prophet must be put to death for inciting rebellion against the LORD your God'..."

Elijah is carrying out God's law.

Does that mean God's law was unjustly bloody and violent, then? You know the sort of thing you often hear - the God of the OT is bloody and warlike and vindictive, but the God of the NT is a God of love and peace. Hasn't Jesus' teaching superseded all that OT violence and judgement?

Absolutely not! If you think that, read your bible! When we look at judgement in the NT **it gets worse!**

Jesus says in Luke's gospel "do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear. Fear him who, after you body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes I tell you, fear him."

Fear God, says Jesus, who has authority to throw you into hell - that's far worse than death!

And again in Mark's gospel, Jesus says, "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched."

In the NT, God's judgement leads to hell, which Jesus clearly regards as a terrifying place.

Jesus warned more vividly and terribly about hell and God's judgement than anyone else in the bible. It is really scary - and the worst comes after you die. Compared with God's judgement and hell, the death suffered by the priests of Baal at the hand of Elijah was a slap on the wrist - a fleabite.

The final tragedy is not death: the final tragedy is to die without reconciliation with God and go to hell. God's judgement is really scary.

But the second thing about God's judgement is that it is just. Too often we look at verse 40, at Elijah's treatment of the prophets of Baal, and rather than finding it just, we find it embarrassing. That's because we don't get it. We just don't see how awful rebellion against God is.

Dale Ralph Davis again - "the problem is not with Elijah or the OT but with us. We react the way we do because in our view apostasy is not that big a deal. We simply don't understand God's violence against rebellion in his people. He uses surgery, not breath mints, on cancer... If our thinking were holy, we would understand such texts. The nasty episode at the Kishon testifies that we have little horror of sin and calls Christians to repentance."

We see this horror in Jesus' words to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who like the prophets of Baal have led their people astray. They've led them away from the God of the bible into a pseudo-religion that gives themselves the honour and glory and denies it to God.

Jesus says to them, "You hypocrites! You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

That question hangs in the air, doesn't it? "How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

God's judgement is just, and in fact it's the flip side of salvation. Judgement and salvation are two sides of the same coin. The book of Exodus gives an account of the Passover and the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. God brought judgement on the Egyptians, and by doing so saved his people from Egypt. Without judgement on Egypt, there would have been no salvation for Israel.

Jesus came to earth to rescue us from God's judgement and hell. He did this by dying in our place, by taking God's judgement on the cross, so that those who believe in Jesus would not have to face it. God's judgement on Jesus is the flip side of our salvation.

If there were no judgement, Jesus would have been wasting his time.

What can we say about this, then?

We can note that God's judgement on the prophets of Baal at the hands of Elijah, and Jesus' judgement on the Jewish authorities of his time, are judgements on the religious establishment. The religious powers of their day, who no longer lead their people in honouring the God of the bible, but have led them astray, into a false, pseudo-religion that ignores the true God.

Their false religions look like the real thing from the outside. They have all the ceremony and ritual and tradition and singing and sacrifices and celebrations and festivals and energy and incense and elaborate services. But they don't honour God in their hearts. As Isaiah said, "these people honour me with their mouth and draw near with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

They look very religious, but they don't teach the bible - they pervert it for their own ends. "You don't know the scriptures," Jesus says to the Sadducees - what an indictment! They don't know the scriptures - and just don't believe Jesus' warnings about judgement. And they oppress and persecute others who do.

And so it has been down through the ages. The religious establishment of 16th century England burnt Ridley, Latimer and Cranmer to death. Why? For teaching the bible faithfully and encouraging people read it for themselves in their own language. This honoured God but denied the religious establishment some of its power. And so many others have been martyred. But God will judge - justly - we should be grateful for that - and vindicate his people - even if we don't see it in this life.

Today this issue is coming closer to home. In Scotland, some church ministers have already had to leave the Church of Scotland (and their homes, and livelihoods) because that church has departed from the bible and two millennia of historic Christianity. The danger of churches going astray from faithful bible teaching is always with us.

So we must watch the religious establishment of our day to see if it honours God and teaches the bible faithfully. Don't just assume they do! Check it! Be like the people of Berea in Acts, who examined the scriptures to see if what Paul taught them was true.

When you hear a sermon on the tv or wireless, does it mention Jesus Christ and his gospel for all people? Listen to what preachers preach and teachers teach and check your bible to see if it's true. Do they turn your heart to God and our Lord Jesus Christ? You might get some surprises.

This is why our PCC has taken such care over our Parish Profile and Statement of Needs in the search for a new vicar. Our first requirement is that our new vicar accepts the authority of scripture, is passionate about the bible and its relevance in today's world, and will preach and teach it faithfully and clearly. Not all preachers do.

But in looking at judgement, we also note that we each are accountable as individuals. If we rebel against God and go our own way, we cannot just blame the religious authorities. The problem is we **have** all rebelled against God. So we all deserve God's judgement.

We are destined to die once, and after that we deserve to face God's judgement and be condemned to hell. For Jesus will return. In this season of Advent, we remember his coming to earth two millennia ago - but we also look forward to his second coming, when he will judge all the earth - as we heard again in our gospel reading this morning. How are we to escape? Back to Jesus' question we left hanging in the air a few minutes ago, "**How will you escape being condemned to hell?**"

Only through Jesus - by accepting Jesus in our hearts. (By the way, if you would not call yourself a Christian, please know that the only escape possible is by believing in Jesus Christ and his death for us. Please grab the salvation Jesus offers while it's there and while you can!)

But for those of us who would call ourselves Christians, this passage should lead us to examine our own worship.

What drives our worship? Is it a chance to come humbly, repenting, as miserable sinners before God, and to honour him faithfully? Or is our worship driven by empty religious activity which is just a sort of showing off, serves ourselves and makes us feel better?

Do we hunger to know more of God's truth by discovering it like buried treasure as we hear his word, or do we hunger to get home and have lunch?

Are we concerned about the genuineness of our worship services, the truth of the teaching and faithfulness of the preaching - or do we not care much as long as it's over quite soon and the church activities are running smoothly?

Is our heart set on walking with God through Jesus and his Spirit - or is our heart somewhere else?

Is our joy in the knowledge that we are friends of Jesus for all time and our names are written in heaven - or are we just thinking of this life and this world and this afternoon?

And let me be the first to confess that all these things are true of me at times...

Let's try to avoid the showy, pseudo-religion that might look good, might make us feel good, but does not honour God, does not come from the heart, does not teach the bible, does not know the Lord Jesus, but leads to judgement.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, in this age so careless about the truth of Jesus, and so tolerant of lies and error, please help us and our church to take Jesus' teaching with great seriousness.

Give us discernment, to tell truth from lie, to avoid false, pseudo-religion that does not honour you: give us a horror of sin and give us a hunger for the truth of your word.

Keep us and our church humble and on our knees, as it were, before our Lord Jesus Christ who saves us from the judgement. Give us the courage to say and do what is right - and protect those who suffer for doing so.

And please give us a vicar - a true shepherd, a man of God and a minister of Christ, as we pray each week - who will lead us faithfully and truly.

And, Heavenly Father, thank you so much that we can come to you, just as we are, without show, with all our doubts and worries, and be accepted through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' name, Amen.