

Sermon, Evensong, 15th February 2015

1 Kings 19:1-16

Before the children arrived, Jessica and I very much enjoyed of an evening watching TV drama series together. Since the children's arrival opportunity for such viewing has been somewhat diminished. One of our favourites was *The West Wing*. We watched this on DVD so the temptation of watching 'just one more episode' before bed was always there. I can't imagine how those who watched this on the initial television broadcast coped with actually having to wait a whole week between instalments. A first world problem if ever there was one.

At the beginning of each *West Wing* episode one of the cast provides a voiceover; words that never fail to fill me with excitement, 'Previously on the West Wing' whereupon a number of clips from past weeks are shown just to remind you what's going on and where the story has got to.

And the episode from the First Book of Kings which we have heard tonight similarly would benefit from a 'Previously in the Book of Kings' just to recap where we've got to in the story and why Elijah is now fleeing for his life.

Jezebel, wife of King Ahab has persecuted and killed the prophets of the Lord and acted as patron for prophets of rival gods, Baal and Asherah. Elijah, dismayed that large numbers of the people of Israel have forsaken the Lord and worshiped the rival gods, has challenged the Prophets of Baal to a competition. Both he and the prophets of Baal prepared pyres for a burnt offering and slaughtered a bull to put on top. Both then exhorted their god to set light to their pyre. Just to make life more difficult for himself Elijah doused his pyre in water. The Prophets of Baal put great effort into invoking Baal, whilst being mocked by Elijah all the while, but to no avail. Their offering remains unsinged. When Elijah takes his turn and invokes the name of the Lord fire descends from heaven and his rather damp offering is entirely immolated. The people of Israel are greatly impressed and seize all 450 of the prophets of Baal who Elijah then kills with the sword.

Which brings us to today's reading. Jezebel is none too happy with Elijah killing off her prophets and promises to kill him. From the high of being a righteous prophet of the Lord doing the Lord's bidding Elijah descends to a low as he realises that in consequence he is now a wanted man. He responds by running away.

The part of this reading that I want to focus on this evening is the conversation between God and Elijah at the cave Elijah comes to. Consider the tone of voice of both God and Elijah. God we are told is not in the earthquake or wind or fire. God is in the silence, in the calm. God calmly asks Elijah the probing question; *'What are you doing here, Elijah.'*

The tone of Elijah's response is far more self-righteous; *'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'* The implication of Elijah's words are 'everything gone wrong Lord, the Israelites have been foolish and killed all your prophets except me and worshiped other gods and I've done the right thing like you commanded and because of that I'm now stuck in a cave in the wilderness in fear of my life and it's not fair!!' Or, to (mis)quote Laurel and Hardy, 'Well here's another fine mess you've got me into.'

Elijah is angry with his predicament and with God and so is in a bit of a sulk. God's response is to calmly remind Elijah who's in charge and tells him to stop moping, pick himself up and get on with his job; appointing God's chosen Kings and passing on his responsibilities as prophet to the next generation.

I think this passage has much to speak to the church today. We too can at times mope around feeling sorry for ourselves. 'Nobody comes to church any more. Church used to be great, we did all these wonderful things and everybody came and if we just got things back to how we did things in the (pick your decade) then everything would be just fine.'

Well no. Imagining that there ever was a golden age of church and that doing things just like we did then will effectively share the Gospel with this generation is foolishness. This is not to say that what we did then was not in part good. It is not to say that we cannot learn valuable lessons for our corporate ministry today from how we have previously been the church together. But the focus of the church should be on the present while trusting in the bright future that God promises. Getting stuck permanently revelling in, sometimes imagined, past glories turns us away from what God is calling us to do here and now.

This passage reminds us that fearfulness acts a brake on the action to which the church is called; seeing what the needs are of the community we serve and responding. Nagging voices play on our fears 'What if it doesn't work, what if we look silly, what if people don't like it; we wouldn't want to offend.' But sometimes, prayerfully, we will be called to take risks as a church. To embark on courses of action which will have both good and less good results which we cannot predict at the outset. Our actions together might not turn out as we thought or might want it. Action, however it turns out, will change us as individuals and as a community in ways that we don't yet know. We take responsibility as Christians bound together in the Body of Christ for the outcome of our actions, both the successes and the failures. We expect that the outcome of our actions will be mixed and, trusting in God's guidance and forgiveness, we accept that.

God called the church in the past to act. God calls the church today to act. Until his Kingdom comes God will call the church in the future to act. What we have done in the past does not excuse us from serving God through others today and there will still be work to do tomorrow. Wherever our shared ministry takes us and whatever the outcome there is to be no moping about in caves. God calls us to be his Church and take the light of Christ to the world. Like Elijah we are called to get up and get on with it. Amen.