

Random death / random grace

‘Elijah the Tishbite in Gilead said to Ahab’ – who was the King of Israel - ‘I swear by the life of the Lord the God of Israel, whose servant I am, that there will be neither dew nor rain these coming years unless I give the word.’ Thus begins chapter 17 of the 1st Book of Kings from which we read this morning and it puts into context the verses that we read further on. A drought has been declared by Elijah, speaking on behalf of the God of Israel, and that seems a very destructive and harmful thing to do and we wonder why on earth Elijah felt authorised by God to do it. Why inflict a drought? Well the reason is straightforward. King Ahab is one of the worst kings under whom God’s people ever had the misfortune to suffer, indeed in the previous chapter we have been told that King Ahab “did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him” . In other words in the evil stakes King Ahab was a high achiever and one of the evil things he did was to marry an evil woman called Jezebel who was a foreigner who imported into Israel the worship of her foreign god Baal. Now we of course today are politically correct about these things, and we’re open-minded and tolerant, and we would no doubt welcome Jezebel’s god as a fascinating cross-cultural opportunity. But not so Elijah. As far as Elijah is concerned the god Baal represents all kinds of despicable and cruel practices, and one of Baal’s particularly offensive claims is to be lord of the weather – to control the rains and therefore the crops and the harvest. Well, that claim does not wash well with Elijah. He knows only too well which God really is in control of the weather and the crops and the harvest and there’s only one way to prove it and that is to summon a drought. If Baal is the big rain god then let him send some. Let Baal make the rain fall – or else let Ahab and Jezebel change their ways and change their allegiance to the one true and living God, and the one true and living God will end the drought. Simple as that.

So Elijah declares the drought and he leaves the king’s presence and he of course is as vulnerable as anyone. How is he going to survive the drought? How is he going eat and drink? And in

the verses immediately preceding ours we have the beautiful story of Elijah living by the Brook of Cherith and being fed by the ravens. We're told: 'the ravens brought him bread and meat morning and evening, and he drank from the stream.' And while that is wonderful it is also pretty odd, being fed by ravens. Ravens after all are scavengers. They search endlessly for food and they fight over it. They're not givers of food – they're snatchers.

So that is the background to the drought, and where you have a drought there is one thing that is all-pervasive, something that is always either present or threatening and that is death. When the rain ceases to fall and the rivers fail death gets everywhere, and if death has a smell then this whole chapter in the Book of Kings reeks of it, for we encounter death at every turn.

To begin with the stream where Elijah has been sheltering and from which he has been drinking dries up and suddenly the spectre of death looms. How long can you live without water – three days, maybe less in that heat? And so God directs him to this woman in Zarephath and again we immediately catch a whiff of death. She after all is a widow. Death has been and left its calling card at her door and without a man in her life she is destitute and deeply threatened. All she needs on top of her vulnerability as a widow is a drought and now it has come. And is there not something utterly pitiful and heartbreaking about that description of her gathering sticks for one last meal for her and her son before she and he lie down and die? Death is stalking her and her son and he must be wondering which one will it get first. Can she cope with seeing her son die? Yet is that not better than for him to be left bereft? And I wonder how she must have felt about some ragged, wild-eyed crazy suddenly coming into view and asking for water and food – and demanding that she provide for him before cooking this last pathetic meal. Is this stranger not death in one more guise coming to corner her and hasten her end?

Well, leaving the outcome of that story for now, we come to the last part of this chapter. Suffice to say for now that the woman and her son and Elijah are still alive. They're surviving the drought and keeping fed and watered and they seem to be keeping death at bay and now, suddenly, her son is taken ill and dies. At last the jaws of death that have been hovering over them perilously snap shut. All

the hopes that have been raised by surviving the drought thus far are dashed, and her son, her last hope of security, her last hope for the future, has gone. And you can understand this woman's anger at Elijah: 'What made you interfere, you man of God? You came here to bring my sins to light and cause my son's death!' And you can understand Elijah's anger at God: 'Lord my God, is this your care for the widow with whom I lodge, that you have been so cruel to her son?' That's daring, isn't it? Accusing God of cruelty! But do we not side with Elijah?

You see the march of death in this story is relentless. From drought, to famine, to the death of a son, it never seems to let up and one disaster follows another. And just when you think you've escaped it, it gets you.

There is however of course another power at work in this story, and that is life – or perhaps better, grace. In the midst of death there is grace. It comes in the form of the ravens who feed Elijah by the brook, scavengers become waiters bearing food. It comes when the widow finds, amazingly, that with Elijah under her roof her flour does not give out and the flask of oil does not fail and by some miracle there is always enough. And we find the same power of grace at work in Elijah as he takes the woman's lifeless son and breathes upon him and the child is revived. It is as if throughout the narrative these two forces are locked in conflict, locked in combat, death and life, evil and grace, each striving to over-ride the other. What is so difficult however, what is so distressing is that each of them seem to operate so randomly. What is so hard to swallow is that they both seem so haphazard and indiscriminate in the way they work.

Think of the power of death. We know why drought has come – it's all because of the king and his Baal-fearing wife, but why should the whole country suffer because of them? Why should this poor widow be scraping around gathering sticks for her last meal with her child just because the queen is encouraging people to worship the wrong God? Why should innocent people suffer because of the folly and wickedness of others? Why should people be losing their livelihoods in Louisiana and whole swathes of the Gulf of Mexico be devastated because of the greed and folly of oil companies? Why should innocent people suffer because of one

disturbed man with a grudge and a gun? And why does this widow's son fall ill and die? What's she done to deserve that? It's the old, old story. Why do good people suffer and tyrants thrive? Where's the justice? It's all random, indiscriminate, and there is no rhyme or reason.

When I heard the appalling news of the events in West Cumbria last week, the gunning down of so many innocent people, my thoughts immediately returned to the last time something like this happened here in this country, in 1996 in Dunblane. And I recall the comment of the grief-stricken head teacher of the school where the massacre took place. He said, 'evil visited us today, and I don't know why.' You could hardly sum it up better – 'evil visited us and we don't know why'. There is articulated the sheer bewilderment, the utter indiscriminate randomness of it all, the sense of our vulnerability and how hopelessly exposed when evil chooses to strike. And that's how it is. Incidents like that seem particularly haphazard but actually, as we all know, the power of death always works that way – 'death visited us and we don't know why.'

But what is so troubling is that not only is that how death operates, but it's the same with grace. Yes it is wonderful, beautiful that Elijah is fed by the ravens, but all the ravens in the sky could not feed all those affected by the drought. And yes, the widow was greatly blessed by the miracle of the oil and meal that did not run out, but how many other people were not saved that way? And how many widows, and families did indeed go out and collect branches to cook one last meal – and then died miserable deaths? And in our reading from Luke's Gospel, Jesus just happened that day to pass through Nain and just happened to pass a funeral and at once the deceased is alive and well – but what of all the funerals taking place that day that Jesus didn't happen to bump into and whose deceased went to their graves? And it's hard, isn't it, when someone tells you that they feel their prayers have been answered and they have been touched by grace and your heart is hurt and heavy with prayers that didn't seem to get heard.

It's all so random – death and grace, equally indiscriminate, equally out of any control - and it's what makes faith difficult for us sometimes. Yes, we realise that God cannot be programmed, God cannot be conditioned to our expectations, but we still feel somehow,

sometimes, that a God of justice ought to be a little less inscrutable. And if we're honest we sometimes feel a little of Elijah's anger at God.

Well, there is no answer to all that. Except this. Let's look again at the widow. And let us look at that extraordinary moment when she is gathering branches to cook her last meal and she hears the voice of this stranger, asking her to feed him – now! Every maternal instinct in her is to feed her child first. Every human instinct is to prioritise her own needs. All she has is a vague and frankly unbelievable promise that if she feeds him first her oil and meal will not run out until the rains come. But she does as he asks and just think about that. Sure – this widow has no power over her circumstances. Sure - she has no power over the drought. She has no power or control over her food supply. But she does have the power to say yes or no to Elijah, and to do this trusting, selfless thing. She does have control over whether to respond or not. Widows in these times, tended to be like the ravens, receivers rather than givers, scavengers rather than providers. But she has the power to behave like these ravens, so that she too becomes a channel of grace.

And we are that widow: vulnerable in an often cruel and capricious world, and sometimes it feels as if grace is disturbingly random – sometimes maybe even rationed. But we do have choices - for life or for death, to respond or not to respond, to give or to withhold. We may not have the power to control grace, but we do have the power to be channels for it. Amen.