

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> August 2018  
As for me and my house.

Texts 1Kings 18.16-24, 30-39. Joshua 24.11-15.

The history of Israel, and the history of the Church has been one of advance and backsliding. None of the Churches written to in the Book of Revelation still exist. Empires and Kingdoms rise and fall. Nations become great and then falter, churches and congregations rise and then wither, generation after generation. However, regardless of what happens in one era or in one nation, the Church continues to rise and grow, and then ebb, all around the world.

In this passage in 1 Kings, we find Israel in a low ebb. Ahab had come to the throne, one of a string of godless kings. He outdid them all in doing evil and going after wickedness. He continued on in the sins of those kings who had gone before, but he went further, and married Jezebel, a pagan princess, and thought nothing of adopting her Baal religion. It matters who we marry! It matters what influences we bring into our lives.

Elijah appears on the scene in a most dramatic way. Chapter 17 begins the account of Elijah. It is as if he strides full grown onto the stage of history, almost like the hero in a dramatic film! However this was no fantasy, it was fact, and it took a tough man like Elijah to face the day in which he lived!

The situation in those days was bleak. It is a fact of life that whatever the noble and notable in the land pronounce, soon becomes the accepted wisdom. People are like sheep because we follow the general drift of others. Jesus said the same. None of us want to stand out, go against the flow, risk being made fun of, rejected, or persecuted for our views or life. However the generality of people in Elijah's day were drifting towards a cliff and a great fall, and yet carried on because everyone else was going in the same way.

Many of our present life values are held, not because they are examined views, but because we have gone along with the person who speaks most loudly, or the person whose views are most applauded. This is because they promise us an easier run at life. There is nothing wrong with desiring a smooth life, as long as we do not go after it in the wrong way! An example of this is the popularity of this or that get rich scheme. Because someone made their fortunes from it, doesn't mean it will work for you. Some people have made a fortune out of Pyramid selling schemes, but most don't. Perhaps a better illustration of how gullible we are is the way we follow fad diets because some TV or film star swears by it. The fact that these people employ personal trainers and other staff does not seem to matter to us, or the fact that they have leisure to exercise hours a day.

The people, in Elijah's day, are plunging headlong into greater and greater sin. Paul talks about this process in the second half of Romans Chapter 1. He describes a downward spiral into greater and greater sin. Elijah steps onto the stage of history, at

this point of downward spiral in which God gave the people up to their own evil ways, and he thinks that he is the only one left who is faithful to God. He thinks that all others in the nation have forsaken God. That was not quite true, but that is how Elijah felt!

There was a downward spiral, because whenever people depart from faith and obedience to the Living God, they do not enter a neutral area, but a vacuum. A vacuum will act to be filled, and if God has been abandoned, then anything and everything floating about will get sucked into the empty space. Look at Jeremiah 2 and read about what they substituted for God!

We see this in our own day. There are people who take an interest in things out of a sense of entertainment and fun, and then there are others who do the same things, but are deadly serious about it all. It does not matter if we follow the Beltane Fire Festival, become Jedi Knights, a Hindu-Methodist, a Presbybaptyagnosticyflatearther (whatever they would look like) or any other combination of so called philosophies, when we depart from God, they will do us no good and will provoke the true and living God. Many in the western world are actually declaring themselves, by their living values, to be their own little gods. Self-made men?

The Israelites were following the gods of the surrounding nations, going with the flow, doing what was being promoted and practiced by the king and his court. They were doing this out of convenience and because it was the easier option. What they had forgotten was that their forefathers had taken an oath of allegiance to God, and had agreed to His stipulations, that He would be their God, he would provide and protect them, and in return, God required singular loyalty to Himself and obedience to His commands.

The people had forgotten all this. Sin blinds our minds and hearts and they did not realise that they were skating on ice that was getting thinner each and every day. They thought that because the time bomb had been misplaced and forgotten about that it was defused! Wrong. A disease is most severe when we have learned to live with the symptoms, and forget that it is in fact taking our lives! Silent killers!

There is a bit of a strangeness in the way the Bible speaks about false gods. On one hand they are mocked by Isaiah as being just lumps of wood. Half the tree is made into an idol, the other half is used for a fire to cook food. (Isaiah 44) The half that is made for cooking does more good than the bit that has to be carried about as an idol! However, there is something more sinister that happens. Idols are also referred to as being means of demonic control. For example, the space under a garden shed may become filled with garden rubbish blown in by the wind and be a useless space. However that same space, may become infested with a rat. False religion is always offensive to God. False religion as regards ourselves may be utterly useless as the least effect, or it may become empowered by a Satanic presence, the presence of a demonic spirit. There is no such thing as a harmless system which excludes God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1Cor. 10v 18-22) This is why any deviation from Biblical faith and practice is so dangerous.

The people had turned to the religion of Baal as promoted by Jezebel, a most serious practitioner. Baal was a series of fertility cults. The god was served in the hope of buttering him or her up so that the land would be fertile and give good returns of crops. A lot of nasty stuff was done to pleasure these gods, human blood sacrifices and other things, stuff that was totally contrary to the commands of God.

It is tragic that so many people have a view of God and of Christ which is totally contrary to the revelation of the Scriptures. We claim to be knowledgeable, but more often than not people have little or no knowledge of the Bible, yet express their opinions as sure fact. In recent years, Christianity has been invaded by business models, psychology, sociology, make believe and fiction, and people have felt free to pick and mix as they wish. It does not often, if ever, make for a wholesome dish, but only curdles after many elements have been added and our lives are far spent!

Elijah arises to confront the people with a simple question, which becomes perfectly sensible when voiced. The competition arises to prove who is the true God, Jehovah, or Baal. The whole scenario is to turn the people's attention back to God. That is the first step, because their attention must be got before their heart condition can be confronted. Sadly, it was more attention grabbing than heart grabbing, but this has always been the way. In Jesus day, many followed Him for the food and the miracles, but turned away when He began to say harder things.

The contest was simple but high risk. Two offerings were to be set up, and the god who answered by fire would prove to be the true one. We know the story. The prophets of Baal danced about all day, they cut themselves, and did all the sorts of things we would be horrified if our kids did, but all to no effect!

Elijah, standing alone gets water poured on the sacrifice and alter. He calls on God. God responds to show that all this was His idea and to show His power, and the fire falls. The offering, the wood, the water, the stones are all burned up, showing Jehovah to be God, the true God, and the only God. The Israelites God had made a move towards them to save them from themselves! This is grace. All this was God's plan, not Elijah's. If this had been Elijah's idea, he would have been guilty of tempting God, or dishonouring God, as Moses had done, when he struck the rock a second time to get water for the people.

The core of this whole passage is found in verse 21. Elijah confronts the people by asking how long they will hover between two opinions. How long would they take the path of least resistance, how long would they play both ends against the middle, cover the bases, sit on the fence?

How long? As long as we do! It is in our nature to try and protect ourselves from all eventualities, agree with everyone, don't take a stand, and don't put all our eggs into one basket. This is not how the Bible and God sees things. Both the Ten Commandments and the great Commandment given by Christ says, 'you shall love the

Lord your God with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your mind and all of your strength.' This is all the eggs in one basket. We are not to turn up at the church with several grooms and want to marry each of them a bit! John for his money, Bill, for his looks, Fred, for the summer house in Florida, Jim because he is a doctor, Jeff because he is a dentist, Albert because he can cook, and so on, whoever because he does everything we ask! What bride would do that? But this is what we do to God, we want His blessing but not His commands, we want His compassion and protection, but not the duties required of Him. We want Him to be ever mindful of us, even though we visit Him every other Sunday. Even then, if we turn up on Sunday and don't think He is in, do we just leave a message to let Him know that we called!

Jesus says things like this – we cannot love the world and God. Psalm 1 is all about the path of the Christian and the path of the followers of Baal or whatever else they follow.

To put it simply, the Bible expresses devotion to God as putting all our eggs into one basket. It talks of us being so far out on the limb that there is no possibility of getting back, it tells us the way to true happiness is to launch all our hopes on Christ and Him alone. We are to jump off the high diving board. Once we jump, there is to be no un-jumping, this only happens in Tom and Jerry cartoons! It is so easy to put our hopes on everything else other than Christ, but that is how the Israelites were in Elijah's day, and it did not please God! That is a very dangerous place to be in. We should fear to have God as a jilted lover, he will have no rivals.

So Elijah challenges the people – don't sit on the fence. Fence sitters get nowhere, neither back to where they came from, nor on to where they are want to be. Fence sitting may seem to offer happiness, but it will never produce the real thing. Fence sitters read the travel magazines, but never go. Fence sitters lick their lips while looking at the cakes on the Bake Off, but never get out the mixing bowl. Fence sitters would like to have God as a friend, but never call on Him or invite Him in. Keeping Him on the doorstep seems more comfortable, as we know our homes are in a mess, and we don't want Him to see! In Song of Songs, the beloved kept the lover knocking, and when she did get up to open the door, he had gone. This was written in the Bible to warn us to respond at once to the Lords knock on the door.

The result of this showdown was that the people saw the outcome and were persuaded, at least in their heads, that loyalty to God was the real deal. However, the rest of their history shows that this was, for most, a passing phase. Their minds may have been arrested and their attention got, but it did not go deeply enough with most. The following history of the people was that they shrank back and slipped into their old evil ways again, and again.

Our hearts must be changed. Some people debate whether heart change was possible in the Old Testament, but it was promised to come in the Old Testament, hearts of stone would be turned to hearts of flesh. However the New Testament not only speaks about heart change, but tells us that this is the promise of the New Covenant, that a new heart would be given to us, and that this new heart would beat in rhythm with the

heart of Christ! Christ would give us this new heart which would be like His, and all this was accomplished by what He did on the Cross.

Our new heart, if we have one by faith in Christ, will not just sit there and beat on without attention. It requires us to grow and be fed spiritually for our heart health to be kept and to increase. We are to exercise our spiritual faculties in the Christian duties to keep healthy.

Joshua 24 verse 15 has something to say of this.

The context of this passage is the last days of Joshua, the successor to Moses who led the people into the Promised Land.

Towards the end of his life, he gathered the leaders and people together, and reminded the people of the Covenant which they had entered into with God. The terms were these, God would be the peoples God, provider and protector, and they would be a people who were to live as directed, loving and serving God alone and only. The people say they will do this, and Joshua in effect says that they will only be able to do this if their hearts are engaged and not only their heads.

Joshua finishes with this, 'as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.' This is a resolve and decision made with an awareness of what it means. This is a resolve and decision that must be kept before us day by day or else we will compromise and slip away. This is how Joshua had lived his life. Read the OT history of Joshua, and we will see that his life was one of saying yes to God when others were saying no. His life was one of lingering in God's presence whenever he could, when others had left to go about business, even God's business. This is what getting off the fence looks like, this is what choosing the path of God looks like.

So the question remains for us today. Who are we serving, false gods, like ourselves, or the True and Living God? Who have we decided to serve, God or something else? No one can do this or answer this question for us. We have to answer it on our own, and then one day, and for many of us it is quite soon, we will give answer to God Himself. Will that be a dreadful day or a wonderful day for us? The sort of day it will be is determined by what we decide and how we respond now, today, this moment. So, choose this day whom we will serve,