

## **Successful or Faithful?**

13 August 2023  
Trinity 10  
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1 Kings 19.9-18  
Romans 10.5-15  
Matthew 14.22-33

### **Failure**

In our Old Testament and Gospel readings we have two towering figures from the Bible each of whom is shown to fail.

In our Gospel reading there is Peter who seeks to walk on the water with Jesus. But he sinks and Jesus says 'you of little faith'.

In our Old Testament reading there is Elijah who's on the run and hiding from the vindictive Queen Jezebel who wants him dead.

I've always found it wonderful that the Bible gives accounts of its people warts and all. So many stories in wider society are about mighty heroes who achieve great victories and are celebrated. But the life most people lead is far less clear cut. Struggle and failure make our lot.

And so I find Biblical heroes to be so much more easy to relate to. This is not least because they are wrestling with the purposes of God. It is through their lives we see the character of God more clearly.

In wider society God so often gets portrayed in ways that are more about the reader's own interests. The long experience of God's people and reflection on who he is which is found in the Bible, is very important. The Bible's accounts free us from our own imagination and expectations. Psychologists point out how often people's view of God comes from their personal experiences of people in authority not least their parents. As much as Jesus said, when you pray say 'Our Father...' he was talking about the Divine Father whom he knew that we are invited to know. It is very damaging to try to fit God into our own understanding, especially if the authority figures we have known have fallen short.

### **Elijah's success**

I would particularly like to look at the character of Elijah this morning. In the chapters before the one we heard Elijah has had a long run in with King Ahab and especially his Queen Jezebel.

Once in the promised land the Hebrews were continually tempted away from the God who delivered them from Egypt. They were attracted to the fertility gods of the Canaanites. In particular Queen Jezebel was fanatical in calling people to worship Baal. Elijah had been speaking against this and was calling his people to faithfulness in the one true God.

In the immediate chapter before our reading Elijah had a standoff with Jezebel's priests of Baal. He had set up a sacrifice and given the opportunity for the priests of Baal to show his power. Nothing had happened and when Elijah called on the true God fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice. Elijah won, and his preaching of the true God was vindicated.

But he is still just one man and with Queen Jezebel seeking vengeance for her priests of Baal being defeated, Elijah flees into the wilderness.

### **Elijah's honesty**

the reading we had picks up from here and God asks Elijah who is hiding in the wilderness what he is doing. Elijah replies:

*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.*

*1 Kings 19.10*

Rather than being the noble hero and mighty victor, Elijah sounds defeated, forsaken and expecting the worst.

Now I find this very encouraging. Elijah can speak of the way he has found his life. He is not boasting about victory, or complaining about the persecution he is now facing. He speaks plainly to God because he trusts God to deal with him honourably.

Surely this is a mark of great faith. Elijah is not appealing to God because he has been successful. He is appealing to God to be with him in the reality of the life as it is. If it looks like failure then God is with him there.

I have heard people say it looks like Elijah has had a breakdown of some sort. It may be exhaustion. It may be a loss of vision. It might be psychological. But Elijah does not expect this to be the end of God dealing with him.

### **God appears**

God then replies to Elijah in two ways. The first is dramatic:

*God said 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.'*

*Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind;*

*and after the wind an earthquake,  
but the Lord was not in the earthquake;  
and after the earthquake a fire,  
but the Lord was not in the fire;  
and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.  
1 Kings 19.11, 12*

This is a fascinating way that God presents himself. Elijah had a great battle with the priests of Baal and fire fell from the heavens to prove who the true God was. When God wants to reveal himself he shows a variety of dramatic acts. A great wind, an earthquake then fire. But the reflection is God wasn't in them, even the fire. There is then the silence. That is left hanging we are not told God is in the silence but it does become the place for God to reveal himself.

God won't be tied down. Yes he had acted to defeat the priests of Baal. But God is not just about great wonders. God is beyond what we consider triumph. God has plans beyond our knowledge and imagination.

Elijah is drawn to encounter God more deeply. His flight from Jezebel shows him how weak he is. God's presence shows that it is about God coming alongside us. The way that the drama of wind, earthquake and fire are put to one side takes us out of cravings for power and sensation.

Now there is the sound of sheer silence. In this Elijah can be truly attentive, and God speaks.

God says he has plans for Hazael to be king over Aram, Jehu to be king over Israel, for Elisha to succeed Elijah as prophet and there seven thousand in Israel who have remained faithful.

When Elijah began his encounter with God in our reading he explained that he was defeated and alone. God explains that there are fresh ways to move forward and many people who are as loyal as Elijah. It is not Elijah's actions or confidence or understanding that bring new life it is the sovereign character, intentions and actions of God.

### **Successful or Faithful**

It is with this understanding of Elijah that we see the heroes of the Bible. Elijah is mighty not because he stands tall carrying great achievements but that he has been faithful to God. It is in his faithfulness that we see the character of God more clearly.

The people of God continued to hold Elijah in very high regard. When we get to the New Testament Elijah is a person to measure God's actions by.

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asks his disciples 'who do people say I am? They reply

*'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'* Mathew 16.14

At the Transfiguration it is Moses and Elijah that Jesus meets on the mountain. When they are descending the disciples ask about the expectation that Elijah would have to return to usher in the Kingdom of God. Jesus says for him John the Baptist was the Elijah figure who had already arrived. Very high praise for John's ministry. This is not least because John had been put to death and at the end was not even sure if Jesus was the person he should have paved the way for. Jesus sees John the Baptist as faithful even though John has his doubts.

I spoke earlier about Peter as being one who is shown to fail when he cannot walk upon the water. Jesus might rebuke him but Peter remains his principal disciple and later on Jesus says Peter is the rock on whom the church will be built. (Matthew 16.18).

### **Jesus**

This brings us to Jesus who is the one figure in the Bible who is not presented with having failings. He consistently has the measure of the situation and a clear understanding of the people which whom he deals with. He is faithful to God's call even to the dangers of Jerusalem and the prospect of death.

At the end nobody really understand what Jesus was truly about and immediately following the crucifixion Jesus' death is taken by everyone as a disaster and a defeat.

But the resurrection changes everything. Yes it is the power to defeat death. But it is also the vindication of Jesus. He is shown to have been completely faithful and God honours that by death having no hold on him.

This is not just that he is alive but his life has always been what it means to be truly alive. So we may find Jesus saying strange things and his priorities may look odd. If this is the case we need to question what we see as common sense and see his uncommon sense which the resurrection has declared to be the truth.

## ***Faithful***

A long time ago someone said to me the Bible reads us. This is seemingly to put things upside down. We think we read the Bible and we form an opinion about it. But quite often when we read the Bible we find it giving us fresh points of view and questions about own lives. We read the Bible not just to understand it but for it to enable us to have a fresh understanding of ourselves And the way that the world works.

At the time of the Reformation Martin Luther was asked about his central view of the Bible. He was asked to defend the Bible. He replied but he would rather defend a lion. Let us be people read the Bible for all it's worth. When it presents puzzles and mysteries let is pray for understanding and not be put off. After all we might be that we might be wrestling with a lion but he is on our side.