Sermon for 9th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: 1 Kings 18:20-21, 30-39; Galatians 1:1-12; Luke 7:1-10

i

Elijah facing the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel is about as bad as the OT gets for 21st century tastes.

It reminds us uncomfortably of parts of our Christian history we would rather forget and brings disturbing parallels with today’s antics in Islamic State to mind.

Elijah is confrontational – not in the sense of intellectual debate, but in crude physical terms involving blood and death, defeat and victory. Elijah even mocks his opponents in a way that would be illegal in some countries today – he would doubtlessly be accused of a “hate crime” by the guardians of liberal inclusiveness.

He suggests that Baal may be unable to hear because he’s just having a nap, or popped off to the loo, or gone away on business.

To make the story even more unpalatable to 21st century readers, the narrative turns on a miracle when God sets fire to Elijah’s offering. Many folk are not too keen on miracles either nowadays.

But that is the way it was in Elijah’s world. Gods battled gods as people battled people. Sometimes the gods quarrelled amongst themselves, sometimes they stood behind their human armies in the field and were either victorious or were vanquished.

It’s not pretty, but that is the world as they knew it.

ii

Between the story of Mt Carmel in 1 Kings 18 and our NT readings in Galatians and St Luke, there is a cultural chasm; a new world is dawning, a new understanding that would eventually lead to today’s 21st century discomfort with Elijah’s heroics.

We can witness the dawning of this new age in the passage from Luke 7:1-10.

Luke, a gentile, is eager to show how a gentile centurion displays an even greater faith in Jesus than had hitherto been found among the Jewish population.

The centurion might have been a Roman soldier, although no Roman army units were stationed in Galilee before AD44. It could be that he was a retired Roman centurion, or even one of Herod Antipas’ soldiers who also used the same rank structure as the Roman army. At any rate he was not a Jew.

St. John Chrysostom, a Father of the Eastern Church, says that the centurion’s faith that Jesus could cure his servant from afar surpasses the faith of those Jews who lowered their crippled friend down through the roof.

Secondly, he has greater faith than Martha who believed Jesus couldn’t raise her brother Lazarus from the dead until the Day of Judgement.

He is also more humble than Jairus who comes directly to plead with Jesus for his daughter, whilst the centurion sends intermediaries because he considers himself unworthy to meet Jesus face to face.

The centurion also breaks the stereotype of a soldier in that he is caring and compassionate for a mere servant.

He has also been very generous in supporting the building of a synagogue in Capernaum. According to Luke, the centurion sends a second group of intermediaries to ask Jesus to refrain from entering his house, but to merely give the word and the servant would be healed.

Jesus commends the centurion for a faith that surpasses anything he has yet found in Israel.

Luke is naturally keen to show how Jesus openly interacted with gentiles and accepted their faith and respect and responded to their needs because Luke is a gentile companion to St Paul on his gentile mission and wishes to make the point that the gentile mission was set in train by Jesus himself – it is not some aberration on Paul’s part to take the faith to the gentiles.

iii

Yet when we read Paul in Galatians 2:1-12, it would be easy to think that he had always had such openness to gentiles. He may have allowed Titus, a Greek, to be his companion without insisting on circumcision, but before his Damascus Road experience, Paul would have been closer to Elijah’s position.

Other gentile faiths simply had to be tolerated - it was a case of *force majeure*, but dissident Jews such as the Christians could be and should be opposed, and if necessary, destroyed. That is what Paul would have thought before his conversion.

Paul evidently supported the stoning of Stephen and even volunteered to hunt down the Christians taking refuge in Damascus.

Why did Paul make such a radical change? How could he later say: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28)?*

Paul’s transformation was possible because Mt. Carmel had been displaced by Mt. Calvary.

The blood of the prophets of Baal had done no good; but the blood of Christ has brought salvation for all.

From now on any blood to be shed was to be that of the followers of Jesus, not the victims of Christian aggression.

We may shudder with horror at some parts of our own Christian history at how frequently we have returned to the pattern of Elijah and forsaken the path of Christ – the Inquisition, the Crusades, the burning of heretics being the most obvious examples.

This is not fuzzy emotionalism or the creed of secular liberalism where all religions are equal because all religions are equally false.

Paul contends as vigorously as any man with others who oppose him – but he uses words rather than the sword.

What Paul has been able to do through his Christian conversion, and the example of Jesus’ dealings with gentiles would have been crucial to his new approach, is open his eyes to see God at work beyond his old boundaries of ethnicity and the Law.

Paul sees the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of gentiles who choose to follow Christ and therefore, like Peter at Cornelius’ house (Acts 10:24-48), Paul acknowledges that God has already accepted them, and so the Church must simply follow suit.

The way of Mt Carmel may shock us as 21st century Christians, but we must not fool ourselves into thinking that the way of Mt Calvary is an easy escape route. We have a Gospel to proclaim – and no amount of respecting the other, or seeking to live in peace with all people whatever their faith will take away that obligation laid upon all Christians to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

Fortunately for me, at least in my part of the world, it involves a lot less blood than it once did.

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