

Daily Devotions  
*from the United Reformed Church*

Elijah and Elisha 1



The Rev'd Dr Janet Tollington

## Table of Contents

<b><i>Introduction.....</i></b>	<b><i>3</i></b>
<b><i>Sunday 17th November Psalm 123.....</i></b>	<b><i>4</i></b>
<b><i>Monday 18th November 1 Kings 17:1-7.....</i></b>	<b><i>5</i></b>
<b><i>Tuesday 19th November 1 Kings 17:8-16.....</i></b>	<b><i>7</i></b>
<b><i>Wednesday 20th November 1 Kings 17:17-24.....</i></b>	<b><i>9</i></b>
<b><i>Thursday 21st November 1 Kings 18:1-19.....</i></b>	<b><i>11</i></b>
<b><i>Friday 22nd November 1 Kings 18:20-35 .....</i></b>	<b><i>14</i></b>
<b><i>Saturday 23rd November 1 Kings 18:36-46.....</i></b>	<b><i>16</i></b>
<b><i>Sunday 24th November Psalm 124.....</i></b>	<b><i>19</i></b>
<b><i>Monday 25th November 1 Kings 19:1-9a.....</i></b>	<b><i>21</i></b>
<b><i>Tuesday 26th November 1 Kings 19:9b-18.....</i></b>	<b><i>23</i></b>
<b><i>Wednesday 27th November 1 Kings 19:19-21 .....</i></b>	<b><i>25</i></b>
<b><i>Thursday 28th November 1 Kings 21:15-29 .....</i></b>	<b><i>27</i></b>
<b><i>Friday 29th November 2 Kings 1:1-8.....</i></b>	<b><i>29</i></b>
<b><i>Saturday 30th November 2 Kings 1:9-17.....</i></b>	<b><i>31</i></b>

## Prayer

Sovereign God, in Jesus you have revealed yourself as a God of love and mercy who desires that all your children might have life in all its fullness. Help me to believe your promises and to entrust all my days into your hands, without fear, ready to embrace all the uncertainties that may confront me.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever.  
Amen.

## Introduction

Over the next four weeks we will be focusing on Elijah and Elisha. Unlike the classical prophets whose messages are contained in books bearing their names, the stories about these two prophets are contained in the narratives recorded in the books of Kings. There are many parallels in their stories and some incidents that are recorded prefigure similar ones recounted about Jesus' ministry in the gospels.

Elijah and Elisha are set against the background of a turbulent period in the history of Israel and Judah, a time when the worship of many gods was commonplace and some of the kings turned away from Israel's God, Yahweh. Both prophets represent what might be called the 'Yahweh alone' movement and their ministries proclaim the absolute sovereignty and all-sufficiency of Israel's God for the future security of God's chosen people and the nation.

Although both prophets utter some oracles they are more associated with actions than words. They often perform miraculous deeds that demonstrate the power of God in action. This is set in contrast with the false beliefs about the powers of the Canaanite gods to control the weather, agricultural seasons, etc. God's unique power over matters of life and death is often to the foreground; and it will be important to remember the polytheistic context in which these stories originated when we read some of the judgmental passages.

Both Jewish and Christian tradition has accorded Elijah great significance in the development of messianic expectations, so it is perhaps appropriate that this series of Daily Devotions will take us half way through the season of Advent.

May we look forward in hope.

*Janet Tollington*

The Rev'd Ruth Browning, retired minister, member at Thornbury URC.

1 To you, O LORD, I lift my eyes,  
The God enthroned above the skies.  
2 As servants watch their master's hand  
Or maids before their mistress stand,  
So to the LORD our eyes we raise  
Until his mercy he displays.

3 O LORD our God, your mercy show;  
Take pity, LORD, on us below.  
For scorn your people all have known;  
4 Our foes' contempt has made us groan.  
The proud have covered us with shame;  
With insolence they mock our name.

### Reflection

This short Psalm has always had me turning the page, looking for another stanza; as a hymn I wonder where the final verse is. Commentaries make statements such as: "despite the title and its position within the Psalter, this is probably not a pilgrim psalm". (OBC accessed 1st August 2019.) Meaning the rhythm and sentiments do not lend themselves to marching triumphantly to the Temple Mount. Yet the change from first person singular to first person plural suggest a person singing out at the head of a line, with the following group response. Unfortunately, the response is a lament, with eyes rolling upward, asking for mercy and reflecting on the attitude of onlookers.

Then I remember how, during Christian Aid week in the 1960s, our youth group would do a sponsored overnight walk from Bristol to Street, Somerset. The first year the Lord Mayor received us then sent us off with his good wishes; breakfast and the press were waiting when we arrived home. The final year that I was involved lacked any outside interest and I

This story reminds us of the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18 with divine fire coming down from heaven; but there are some significant differences. Here, the issue of authority is to the forefront: should Elijah obey the king, or be answerable only to God?

The first two emissaries from the king assume the former and discover, to their cost, that they are wrong. The third adopts a different approach and goes up the hill to Elijah, in humility, appealing on behalf of himself and his attendants. He doesn't actually ask the prophet to accompany him but the text suggests that all the parties understood this as his mission.

Elijah receives assurance from the 'angel of the Lord' that he need not fear; God has authority over life and death issues. In response to God's word, he goes to deliver his uncompromising message of judgment on the king again, this time personally. The prophecy is fulfilled; Ahaziah doesn't recover from his accident.

Stories like this do not imply that God goes around killing people who set themselves above divine authority. Rather, they serve as warnings against treating God as a power to be evoked at our behest; all authority is God's. They also remind us that no-one is immune from accidents; and a misplaced sense of our own importance may simply add to the negativity of a situation when our expectation of favourable treatment is not met.

God is able to take a longer view, of a bigger picture, in which we play a tiny part. We are called to trust God's eternal purposes and like Jesus in Gethsemane to say to God, 'not what I want, but what you want'.

But Elijah answered the captain of fifty, 'If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.'

Then fire came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty. Again the king sent to him another captain of fifty with his fifty. He went up and said to him, 'O man of God, this is the king's order: Come down quickly!'

But Elijah answered them, 'If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.'

Then the fire of God came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty. Again the king sent the captain of a third fifty with his fifty. So the third captain of fifty went up, and came and fell on his knees before Elijah, and entreated him, 'O man of God, please let my life, and the life of these fifty servants of yours, be precious in your sight. Look, fire came down from heaven and consumed the two former captains of fifty men with their fifties; but now let my life be precious in your sight.'

Then the angel of the LORD said to Elijah, 'Go down with him; do not be afraid of him.'

So he set out and went down with him to the king, and said to him, 'Thus says the LORD: Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron,—is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of his word?—therefore you shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but you shall surely die.'

So he died according to the word of the LORD that Elijah had spoken. His brother Jehoram succeeded him as king in the second year of King Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat of Judah, because Ahaziah had no son.

#### Reflection

The king wasn't satisfied and instructed the prophet to be summoned.

have a memory of one of the leaders plodding the last mile or so, singing, all on one note and lament-like, Blessed Assurance.

Oh yes, this Psalm of lament could well be a "song of ascents", starting with God enthroned to whom we, his people, lift our eyes. We keep going, even when our foes treat us with scorn and contempt. We have faith to keep going, plodding on, even when our name as God's people is insolently mocked. Please see the second paragraph of the Rev'd Lindsey Sanderson's reflection on Ps 108, here

<https://devotions.urc.org.uk/devotions/2019/08/04/urc-daily-devotion-4th-august-2019/>.

#### Prayer

Sometimes, God,  
we wonder if keeping on keeping on is worthwhile.  
We lift our eyes for help  
and are met with scorn for calling ourselves Christian.  
Looking back, we have faith -  
when we raise our eyes to you  
there is your assurance that you are with us  
and that keeps us walking forward. Amen

[Monday 18th November](#) [1 Kings 17:1-7](#)

Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.'

The word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'Go from here and turn eastwards, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.'

So he went and did according to the word of the LORD; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

### Reflection

The sudden introduction of Elijah, proclaiming a drought, into the story of Israel's kings comes as a surprise to everyone, not just King Ahab. He has just finished erecting an altar to Baal, the Canaanite god of rain and fertility, in honour of his new wife, Jezebel.

Elijah's name, meaning 'My God is Yahweh', declares his exclusive worship of the God of Israel; and in the name of Israel's covenant God he pronounces, on oath, the ineffectiveness of Baal. This uninvited prophet challenges the political alliances and religious syncretism of Ahab and all that his regime represents. Then, in obedience to God's command, Elijah departs to hide away in the wild, being fed according to God's promise, until the consequences of the drought come into effect across the whole land.

Elijah's faithfulness to God brings him into direct confrontation with the leaders of his society; but then also requires him to step completely out of the limelight to wait until God calls again to set him on his mission.

Knowing when to speak out and when to take a back seat is never easy. Having the courage to challenge the 'powers that be' in any organisation or society is always daunting. Acting or speaking publicly in the name of Christ may be regarded as nothing more than delusion in a world where many put their trust in false gods of their own making. Living in accordance with what we proclaim as God's truth is demanding; and like Elijah we may have to wait to see the fulfilment of our words.

exactly to Ahaziah what the prophet had said to them. The king demands to know who it was and a description is given, whereby the king knows it was Elijah.

'A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist' isn't much of a description. This is the only time it occurs and it is surprising that no mention is made of Elijah's hallmark mantle. However it is the picture of Elijah that tradition has remembered and it is used in the Gospels to establish the prophetic credentials of John the Baptist (Matt.3:4; 11:13-14; Mk.1:6).

What kind of figure does it evoke? I imagine someone of stature, who is resilient, who sits lightly to possessions of all kinds. Someone who embodies faith in God; and dependence on God for daily needs. Someone who is unencumbered by everyday responsibilities and ready to go in the service of God, whenever and wherever.

I wish I was more like this as a disciple of Christ!

### Prayer

Almighty God, you call us to trust in you and to serve you alone. Human status and achievement has no bearing on your love for us. We rejoice in this truth and offer you our worship and our praise as we seek to model our daily living on the pattern of your son, Jesus Christ. Sustain us as your servants and use us as your messengers to the world. Amen.

Saturday 30th November      2 Kings 1:9-17

Then the king sent to him a captain of fifty with his fifty men. He went up to Elijah, who was sitting on the top of a hill, and said to him, 'O man of God, the king says, "Come down."'

god of Ekron?” Now therefore, thus says the LORD, “You shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but you shall surely die.””

So Elijah went. The messengers returned to the king, who said to them, ‘Why have you returned?’

They answered him, ‘There came a man to meet us, who said to us, “Go back to the king who sent you, and say to him: Thus says the LORD: Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but shall surely die.”’

He said to them, ‘What sort of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?’

They answered him, ‘A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.’

He said, ‘It is Elijah the Tishbite.’

### Reflection

Ahab has died and been succeeded by his son Ahaziah who apparently puts his trust in the gods of his mother. Having suffered serious injury in a fall, Ahaziah seeks an oracle from Baal-zebub, the patron god of Ekron (a Philistine city), about his chance of recovery.

So Elijah is summoned into action once more, to go and intercept the king’s messengers. The text implies that no sooner was Elijah summoned than he instantly appears before the messengers. He suggests that their mission indicates that the God of Israel has been rejected by the king; and then declares in the name of Israel’s God that Ahaziah will not recover but will die. Exit Elijah.

The messengers go home and are questioned about their unexpectedly rapid return by the king. They report having met a man and convey

Christian discipleship is a prophetic calling that may lead us into unexpected encounters and unknown territory; but we are never left reliant on our own resources if we put our trust, as did Elijah, in the one true, living, God.

### Prayer

Living God, may my trust in you fill me with the confidence to go wherever you send me. May my faith shine through all that I say or do in my daily living. May I have the patience to wait in quiet rest as your purposes unfold in the world around me. May my obedience bring glory to your holy name. Amen.

[Tuesday 19th November](#) [1 Kings 17:8-16](#)

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ‘Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.’

So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.’

As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.’

But she said, ‘As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.’

Elijah said to her, ‘Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of

Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.'

She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

### Reflection

Elijah has to live through the drought that he prophesied, like everyone else. God instructs him to journey from east of the Jordan, across Israel, to the western coastal area of Sidon, the home of Jezebel. There, needing water, he asks a widow to provide some for him and she complies. He also asks for food and her desperate poverty is revealed through her reply; but Elijah insists that he is fed first, with promises that if she obeys, then Israel's God will provide for her until the drought ends.

In the context of the narrative this story demonstrates the truth of Elijah's prophecy and the power of Israel's God over all things, including the natural world, since everything happens as predicted. Elijah, the widow, and all her household are able to eat for many days.

However, as I read this passage, I am challenged less to reflect on what I believe about prophecy or miracles and more by the idea of asking the poor to meet the needs of others out of their meagre resources, before satisfying their own. Surely God's prophet should demonstrate divine compassion, rather than putting this woman's generosity and obedience to the test?

Sadly our capitalist society frequently expects those who are economically poor to grow and sell produce to satisfy our palates, while they barely subsist. It is also a reality that those in our world with little are frequently more sensitive to the needs of others with even less; and they also show generous hospitality to guests.

the whole. The severity of the punishment reflects the need to remove all the corrupting forces and make a fresh start.

Ahab's repentance brings a stay of execution until the next generation; but he makes no attempt to eradicate the insidious evil or restore justice. He is presented as dejected and powerless while Israel drifts further from the ways of God.

As Christians we believe that God is able to redeem the worst imaginable situation and forgives anyone who is truly repentant; but this story challenges us to realise that societal corruption and acts of blatant injustice are an affront to God. We become complicit if we fail to name as evil oppressive structures and corrupt practices that undermine a just society.

### Prayer

Gracious God, you demand high standards of righteousness and justice and we confess that often we fail to live up to your expectations. We are sorry for trying to lay the blame elsewhere for societal sin. Draw us back to the example of Jesus, who has shown us how to live as your children, that with renewed zeal we might work with Christ for the coming of your kingdom. Amen.

Friday 29th November 2 Kings 1:1-8

After the death of Ahab, Moab rebelled against Israel. Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria, and lay injured; so he sent messengers, telling them, 'Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this injury.'

But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, 'Get up, go to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say to them, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the

Jezreel.” Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat.’ (Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the LORD, urged on by his wife Jezebel. He acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the LORD drove out before the Israelites.)”

When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: ‘Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son’s days I will bring the disaster on his house.’

#### Reflection

This passage concludes the story of how Jezebel brought about the death of Naboth, a righteous Israelite, in order to satisfy Ahab’s desire for a new vegetable garden beside the palace. Ahab had reluctantly accepted Naboth’s right to retain his family’s inheritance – the king had no authority to insist on compulsory purchase – but Jezebel thought this made Ahab look weak. She displayed a total abuse of power, persuaded others to carry out her corrupt scheming and Ahab’s true weakness is demonstrated as he goes to take possession of the vineyard with no questions asked.

Elijah is commissioned again as the conveyor of God’s judgment on Ahab, making clear that he is equally guilty of killing Naboth by association, and because he has done nothing as king to prevent such corrupt practices.

Ahab describes Elijah as an enemy. In response Elijah prophesies the downfall of Ahab, his dynasty and a particularly gruesome end for Jezebel, because Ahab has sinned and caused Israel to sin. Ethics have been cast aside and evil at the top level of Israel’s society has poisoned

I am reminded of words attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: ‘Live simply so that others may simply live’ and pray that I may be inspired by the selfless behaviour of the widow in this story to ‘give and not to count the cost’ (St Ignatius of Loyola).

#### Prayer

Bountiful God, we praise you for the fruitfulness of the earth and the abundance of water, sufficient for the needs of all. We confess our misuse of these resources, gifts of your grace; and seek your forgiveness for the times when we have acted as though they are ours by right. Grant that we may be thankful and generous as we tread lightly on this earth. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

[Wednesday 20th November](#) [1 Kings 17:17-24](#)

After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, ‘What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!’

But he said to her, ‘Give me your son.’

He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the Lord, ‘O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?’

Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, ‘O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.’

The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the

upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, 'See, your son is alive.'

So the woman said to Elijah, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.'

### Reflection

Many ancient oriental societies regarded death as a deity to be feared; but the Hebrew scriptures proclaim a belief that all matters relating to life and death are determined by the will and power of God. This passage makes the traditional link between sin and death; and Elijah's words acknowledge God as the bringer of death. As God's representative Elijah accepts the legitimacy of the widow's challenge and his need to mediate God's response.

He withdraws to a private place to pray and perform a ritual over the dead child; and only returns to the mother when the child has revived and can be restored to her. It is clear that what Elijah said or did is immaterial to the story. What matters is the outcome, which demonstrates that Elijah is a man of God, a prophet, and that he speaks the truth. The boy's revival also affirms that God's ultimate purposes are to bring life and hope into a situation of guilt and despair.

Similar stories of apparently dead children being restored to life and returned to a distraught parent are also recorded in the New Testament (Mark 5; Luke 8; and Acts 20). In these Jesus and Paul, like Elijah here, enact God's life giving word in a dramatic form rather than speaking it. In today's world God's restorative power is often enacted through the work of medical practitioners and the application of scientific advances; and we should remember to give thanks for these modern day prophets.

As Christians, though, let us never shirk our personal responsibility to engage with God in prayer about the life and death issues that challenge

### Prayer

Loving God, help me to know when it's time to hand over my responsibilities to someone else; and give me the grace to realise that such a person needs to be quite different from me. Help me, if called to undertake a new venture, to ensure that I conclude current work properly before changing direction. Help me to be fully committed in my discipleship, ready to go wherever Christ leads. Amen.

Thursday 28th November 1 Kings 21:15-29

As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, 'Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.'

As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: "Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. You shall say to him, 'Thus says the LORD: Have you killed, and also taken possession?' You shall say to him, 'Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood.'"

Ahab said to Elijah, 'Have you found me, O my enemy?'

He answered, 'I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel; and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin. Also concerning Jezebel the LORD said, "The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of

## Reflection

Here we find Elijah fulfilling the instruction to identify his successor; but why Elisha is chosen is unclear. Elisha is presented as a wealthy farmer with family responsibilities, quite unlike Elijah, an itinerant man of God. Interestingly there is no mention of God at all in this passage; and we are left to surmise about the significance of Elijah's mantle. In 2 Kings 2 we will discover that it is the hallmark of Elijah's power and here it seems to be interpreted by Elisha as an invitation to join Elijah on his mission.

The dialogue between the two may prompt us to recall Jesus chastising the disciple called to follow who wanted to attend to family matters first (Matt.8:18-22). Scholars differ as to whether Elijah's words are a rejection of Elisha because he wanted to delay, or should be interpreted as a warning to him – do you realise what you will be letting yourself in for, if you follow me?

Either way, Elisha is determined that his future will be in Elijah's service. He closes down his farming enterprise in a spectacular way and uses the 'proceeds' to provide a farewell feast for the community; there can be no going back.

Bringing one venture to a proper conclusion, and celebrating this with others, before embarking on another, is a good model to follow. Too often loose ends from the past get in the way of new endeavours; and we do well to heed Elisha's decisiveness.

This story is symbolic of absolute commitment. It is symbolic of a willingness to follow a man of God without knowing all the implications that will follow, or where the journey will lead. It is symbolic of what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

us, trusting that God will make clear to us how we should respond in prophetic word and action to those who are seeking answers.

## Prayer

Lord Jesus, you came into our world to show us the meaning of life in all its fullness and to open up the way to eternal life. Grant that my life may proclaim your truth; and that all I say or do this day may be life affirming for this world and all peoples, offering hope wherever it is needed.

Amen

[Thursday 21st November 1 Kings 18:1-19](#)

After many days the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year of the drought, saying, 'Go, present yourself to Ahab; I will send rain on the earth.'

So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. The famine was severe in Samaria. Ahab summoned Obadiah, who was in charge of the palace. (Now Obadiah revered the LORD greatly; when Jezebel was killing off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets, hid them fifty to a cave, and provided them with bread and water.) Then Ahab said to Obadiah, 'Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the wadis; perhaps we may find grass to keep the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals.'

So they divided the land between them to pass through it; Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself.

As Obadiah was on the way, Elijah met him; Obadiah recognized him, fell on his face, and said, 'Is it you, my lord Elijah?'

He answered him, 'It is I. Go, tell your lord that Elijah is here.'

And he said, 'How have I sinned, that you would hand your servant over to Ahab, to kill me? As the LORD your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom to which my lord has not sent to seek you; and when they would say, "He is not here", he would require an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you. But now you say, "Go, tell your lord that Elijah is here." As soon as I have gone from you, the spirit of the LORD will carry you I know not where; so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have revered the LORD from my youth. Has it not been told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the LORD, how I hid a hundred of the LORD's prophets fifty to a cave, and provided them with bread and water? Yet now you say, "Go, tell your lord that Elijah is here"; he will surely kill me.'

Elijah said, 'As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today.'

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah. When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, 'Is it you, you troubler of Israel?'

He answered, 'I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. Now therefore have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel, with the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.'

### Reflection

A confrontation between Elijah and Ahab, between Yahweh's faithful prophets and the prophets of Baal, is being set up, to determine where power ultimately resides. Yahweh has decided to act and will send rain; but only when the false gods have been revealed as powerless.

In this passage we learn that Ahab has been searching high and low for Elijah, while Jezebel has been killing as many faithful prophets as she

to travel through the whole territory of Judah and Israel into the land of Aram (Syria). He is to anoint the next generation of kings in Aram and Israel and identify his own successor. God is looking to the future and Elijah is called to prepare people for what lies ahead, not to worry about the present.

Regime change is coming – and, by the way, God will preserve thousands of faithful people in Israel when this takes place; Elijah is not alone!

### Prayer

Eternal God, there are times when we fail to see the bigger picture and even allow our anxieties to distort our understanding of the present. Forgive us, we pray. Still our hearts and minds. Grant that we might rediscover your gift of silence; and in the silence be expectant that your call might come. Give us a glimpse of your future and of our role in preparing for it. Amen.

### Wednesday 27th November 1 Kings 19:19-21

So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was ploughing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, 'Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.'

Then Elijah said to him, 'Go back again; for what have I done to you?'

He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

Then the LORD said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.'

### Reflection

Elijah's encounter with God begins with a question. Why has Elijah travelled to Horeb, the mountain of God? What does he want? The prophet declares his faith in Yahweh and, almost petulantly, tells God about Israel's sins, how he's the only faithful prophet left and that his life is in danger. The irony is that the last time Elijah spoke to God he wanted to die; and the rest of what he says is somewhat out of kilter with the previous narratives. What about the prophets of Yahweh protected by Obadiah; Israel's recommitment to Yahweh at Carmel; and that Jezebel (not Israel) is seeking his life?

Elijah is told to stand on the mountain because Yahweh is about to pass by – just as happened on Sinai when Moses asked to see God's glory (Exod.33:19-23). Before Elijah leaves the cave there is a violent storm (symbolic of weather gods such as Baal), an earthquake followed by fire, all the natural phenomena associated with the theophany at Sinai (Exod.19:16ff) but Yahweh doesn't appear in any of these. Then a sound of silence.

It is the silence that prompts Elijah to venture outside where he hears the initial question to him repeated. He makes exactly the same reply. Then Yahweh speaks to him (there is no 'appearance') and commissions Elijah

could lay her hands on. Instead of focusing on the needs of their suffering people in a time of drought, they have been trying to secure their own power base.

Meanwhile God has been keeping Elijah safe – and on the move – and another 'servant of Yahweh' (the meaning of Obadiah) has been thwarting Jezebel's efforts alongside the fulfilment of his responsibilities to Ahab.

Obadiah's faith has already led him to take many risks but when Elijah suddenly appears and tells him to go and announce his presence to Ahab, Obadiah's courage fails. He fears that Ahab will kill him as a scapegoat if Elijah again eludes capture; but Elijah reassures him, on oath, that he won't flee and that he intends to meet with Ahab.

Obadiah does what is asked; and we hear no more about him. He has played his part in God's purposes. When they meet Ahab accuses Elijah of being the cause of Israel's suffering (remember it was Elijah who proclaimed the drought). Elijah rebuts the accusation; and instead lays the blame on Ahab and the faithless policies of his royal dynasty.

The presenting problems may be drought, poor harvests and famine; but Elijah proclaims God's judgment on corrupt leaders and false religion. A failure to discern the underlying cause of a problem renders any human solution inadequate. God's wisdom and God's ways lead to lasting resolutions.

### Prayer

Living God, we praise you for people like Obadiah who live and work in hostile environments yet serve you faithfully in courageous ways.

Deepen our faith and grant us wisdom to discern the real issues that challenge your authority in the world today. May we have the courage

and grace to speak your truth to those who offer simplistic solutions and false hopes in response to human need. Amen.

Friday 22nd November 1 Kings 18:20-35

So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.'

The people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, 'I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets number four hundred and fifty. Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.'

All the people answered, 'Well spoken!'

Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, 'Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.'

So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, 'O Baal, answer us!' But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made.

At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.'

Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday

Prayer

Gracious God, we recognise that our faith in you ebbs and flows as we go through the journey of life.

Forgive us when we forget the constancy of your faithfulness and love; and restore us by your Spirit for the work that lies ahead.

Remind us, even as we falter, of your call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the saviour of the world, who leads us into life. Amen.

Tuesday 26th November 1 Kings 19:9b-18

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

He answered, '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.'

He 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. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars,

He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Reflection

Step forward Jezebel, Israel's legendary villainous queen, who makes an oath in the name of her native gods threatening Elijah's life. He runs away in fear. Despite the tremendous faith Elijah had demonstrated at Carmel he flees to Beer-sheba, the most southerly town in Judah and goes into the wilderness, alone. Bizarrely he calls on Yahweh to end his life – what Jezebel was threatening – in words that imply a sense of failure and lies down to sleep.

How often is a sense of euphoria arising from a great 'success' followed quickly by a sense of despair? Most of us encounter something of this emotional rollercoaster in the spiritual and mundane aspects of our lives. God's prophet is only human!

In a scene reminiscent of God's appearance to Hagar in the same location, as she anticipated death, pointing her to life-renewing water (Gen.21), Elijah is prompted by a divine messenger to wake up and eat and drink. Food and water, the essentials for life, are provided for him. It appears that God's answer to Elijah's prayer is 'No'; there is yet more work for him to do and Yahweh can still be trusted to sustain his life.

Elijah needs to be nudged, and fed, a second time before he is refreshed sufficiently to realise that God is calling him to move on from the wilderness; but note the direction of travel. Elijah doesn't go straight back into the fray. Instead he goes further south, forty days and nights to Horeb, an alternative name for Sinai. We are reminded of another great biblical narrative, for this is where Moses met Yahweh face to face and the covenant with Israel was established (Exod.24:18; 34:27-35). At the lowest point in his life Elijah is called to follow in the footsteps of Israel's great saviour.

passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

Then Elijah said to all the people, 'Come closer to me';

and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down; Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, 'Israel shall be your name'; with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, 'Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt-offering and on the wood.'

Then he said, 'Do it a second time';

and they did it a second time. Again he said, 'Do it a third time';

and they did it a third time, so that the water ran all round the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

Reflection

It is decision time for Israel, gathered at Mount Carmel. Will they trust Yahweh, or follow Baal? These narratives are set at a time before monotheism had developed and the gods of the nations were understood to exercise real, if limited, power; but Israel's identity was based on the idea that they have no other god than Yahweh. So they cannot sit on the fence, nor can they trust in different gods to exercise power in different spheres of human life.

Elijah calls for a competition to demonstrate whether Yahweh or Baal truly has power in and over Israel; and sets himself against 450 prophets of Baal as divine agents. He lets his opponents choose their sacrificial offering; but he proposes the rules. The people agree and the prophets

of Baal accept the challenge. The narrative presents Elijah mocking their invocation of Baal to send down fire and consume the offering; and also mocking Baal when there is no response.

Then it is Elijah's turn. He begins by repairing an altar to Yahweh which had been torn down. The 12 stones symbolise the tribes of Israel: this altar is to the God who brought Israel into being in the land. Elijah prepares an offering in the same manner as his opponents but then asks for water to be poured over the offering and the wood, three times. Only a supernatural power could set fire to such a soggy pile – but that's tomorrow's reading.

How can we convince people about God's truth? Do large numbers supporting any particular claims add credibility? Can complex rituals influence decisions, or do they seem like magic tricks to onlookers? Should we ever put God to the test? Does this encourage the fallacy that faith requires evidential proof?

Thankfully, our Christian calling is to point to Jesus and trust that God's self-revelation in Christ is all sufficient.

Prayer

Eternal God, your truth is revealed in Jesus Christ and I trust in you. Help me in my unbelief when other options dazzle. Forgive me when I foolishly behave as though my words or deeds have power to convince others that you are the true God. May my life point towards Jesus so that in Christ, through the activity of the Spirit, others come to trust you for themselves. Amen.

[Saturday 23rd November 1 Kings 18:36-46](#)

At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, 'O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have

Prayer

Our help is in the Lord's great name  
who heaven and earth by his great power did frame.

Therefore God,

when we assume that you are automatically on our side: forgive us.

When we pollute the earth by what we do  
and by what we have: forgive us.

When we assume that we have the right to destroy  
that which you have created: forgive us.

When we delight you by creating justice and joy: embrace us.

Amen

[Monday 25th November 1 Kings 19:1-9a](#)

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.'

Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.'

Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.'

He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.'

## Reflection

As a young person (some time ago!) brought up in the Church of Scotland, I recall attending Remembrance Sunday Parades with the Boys' Brigade. Invariably the metrical version of Psalm 124 was sung –

“Now Israel may say, and that truly,  
“If that the Lord had not our cause maintained ....”

Memories of world wars were alive and often raw. For some, there was real comfort and thankfulness in their knowledge that their God had been alongside them. For others, God had been nowhere to be seen, seemingly absent.

Troops on each side had been assured by their religious powers-that-be that God was on their side. Combatants were commended and blessed, and, just to make sure, God's blessing was enjoined on weapons of war from guns to battleships. From there, it could be but a small step to assume that God was not present with the enemy, so their defeat was sure and certain.

Yet on all sides, ordinary soldiers, sailors or air-forces prayed and in many ways, prayer was answered.

We have just moved from centenaries of the first World War to the 80th anniversaries of the second, so we will, no doubt, see more archive newsreels including ceremonial blessing of weaponry. In an era where God may go unrecognised in everyday life, such practices will no doubt seem quaint, from another age, not worth worrying about. Christians believe that God is present in the everyday, calling us to work for justice and for peace, so such images are worth worrying about. Blessing the individual and honouring sacrifice is right and proper: weaponry is a necessary evil, to be kept to a minimum. Hence when a national church holds a service in which weapons of mass destruction are a focus, we are right to ask if God has set us free from the fowler's net.

done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.'

Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.'

Elijah said to them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.'

Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there. Elijah said to Ahab, 'Go up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of rushing rain.'

So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; there he bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees. He said to his servant, 'Go up now, look towards the sea.'

He went up and looked, and said, 'There is nothing.'

Then he said, 'Go again seven times.'

At the seventh time he said, 'Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person's hand is rising out of the sea.'

Then he said, 'Go and say to Ahab, "Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you."'

In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was heavy rain. Ahab rode off and went to Jezreel. But the hand of the LORD was on Elijah; he girded up his loins and ran in front of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

## Reflection

Elijah prays to Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel. He prays for a revelation of God's power to Israel, to affirm Elijah as a true prophet and to draw the people back to undivided commitment and faith in Yahweh; but notice that Elijah doesn't tell God how this power should be demonstrated. He trusts God to determine the mode of revelation; and fire descends to consume the saturated offering and the surrounding water. Instantaneous, supernatural power is displayed by Israel's God and the offering is accepted. Israel's immediate response is to confess Elijah's faith in Yahweh as their own.

The assassination of the prophets of Baal that follows offends our Christian sensibilities but in the context of the narrative it represents a complete rejection of the Baal cult. Israel – including Ahab? – has turned towards Yahweh.

So Elijah proclaims the end of the drought. The sequence of verses 41-45 seems strange; the sound of pouring rain is announced (v.41) and the adverse effect it will have on transport (v.44), before the clouds gather and the rains fall (v.45). Once again we are reminded of the truth and the efficacy of the prophetic word that originates from Yahweh. Whatever the true God declares will come to pass; but God remains in control of when it happens, not the prophet.

Further evidence of Yahweh's supreme power is expressed through God's 'hand' on Elijah enabling him to outrun Ahab's chariot all the way to Jezreel.

Ancient stories remind us that God isn't limited by our human understanding of how things work; but they should not encourage us to pray for specific signs and wonders. God's power over evil and injustice was revealed, not through the exercise of might, but through love, forgiveness and the cross of Christ. God's power confounds our expectations.

## Prayer

Almighty God, nothing is beyond your capability and I marvel at the diverse ways in which you reveal yourself in human experience.

Be to each of us today according to our need, so that we may know your presence and recognize again that we can always trust you whatever befalls.

In the name of Christ, Amen.

### [Sunday 24th November Psalm 124](#)

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1 If God the LORD had not been on our side—  
2 Let Isr'el say—had not the LORD been near  
3 When foes attacked us, filling us with fear,  
And when their wrath against us reached its height,  
Alive we had been swallowed in their spite.

4 We would have been enveloped by the flood;  
Over our heads the torrent would have gone;  
5 The waters would have carried us along.  
6 But praise the LORD, for he has set us free  
And has not left us to their cruelty.

7 We have escaped—just as a captured bird  
Out of the fowler's net has been set free;  
The snare is cut, we are at liberty.  
8 Our help is in the name of God the LORD  
Who made the earth and heavens by his word.