



Quiet Day - Parish of Brighton Saturday 28 February 2009

Wilderness Talk 1 – From Carmel to broom bush

Elijah lived in the second half of the 8th century. Apparently he was born in what we would now call Jordan. It was wild country and the people were semi-nomadic, which probably explains why the town or region he came from, Tishbe, is unknown.

For the most part, Elijah, was a solitary prophet, although there were bands of prophets at the time. He was accompanied by a single servant. He was of fierce appearance, clothed in animal skins and with wild hair. Most of his prophecy related to the Northern Kingdom of Samaria and he is associated with Mount Carmel, where it is said, he lived in a cave.

In terms of the biblical literature, he is the first prophet into whom we get some biographical insight. This would be developed with figures like Ezekiel and Jeremiah, but until Elijah we get little insight into the heart and spirit of these servants of Yahweh. In Elijah we encounter not just the oracle from God, but a man, a person called and struggling with that call.

The context between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel is one of the great stories of the Old Testament. It has all the choreography of the best screen play...on the one hand we have the solitary servant of Jehovah, with his wild shaggy hair, his rough garb, and sheep-skin cloak, but with calm dignity of demeanour and attention to the minutest regularity of procedure, repairing the ruined altar of Yahweh with twelve stones, according to the number of the twelve founders of the tribes, and recalling in his prayer the heritage of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.

On the other hand there are the 850 prophets of Baal and Ashtaroth, doubtless in all the splendour of their vestments (2 Kings 10:22), with the wild din of their fertility rites and the maddened fury of their disappointed hopes, while Elijah taunts them, suggesting that Baal might have been detained because he needed to go to the toilet.

Then at the time of the Evening Sacrifice, Elijah prays and the fire of Yahweh consumes both sacrifice and altar. The prophets of Baal are put to the sword, while the King apathetically eats and drinks.

The rain clouds begin to gather and in the face of the drought breaking storm the prophet runs before the king's chariot across the plain to Jezreel – about 25 kilometres.

So far the triumph had been complete; but the spirit of Jezebel was not to be so easily overcome, and her first act is a vow of vengeance against the author of this destruction:

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.”³ Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah (IKings 19, 3, 4).

Elijah flees across the border, out of Jezebel’s political reach and collapses under a broom bush in the Beersheba desert.

Having stood fearlessly for years, having won a titanic battle, he is finally undone. He comes to the wilderness as an exhausted self. He questions all his efforts. He questions his own worth. He sits under a broom bush and he wants to die.

The wilderness is a harsh place. A little more than a fortnight ago I travelled through the Jordanian wilderness. It’s a hard baked place; about 300 metres below sea level, barren, rocky, baked. This is the wilderness Jesus entered after his baptism.

Where Elijah ended up was somewhat more to the South. The geography is different, but theologically it is the same place.

In scripture the wilderness is the place of desolation and of revelation. It is the place of questioning, but it is also the place of encounter.

Elijah comes there out of exhaustion, disappointment and fear. There’s always a temptation to psychologise this narrative. John Sanford approaches this narrative with a Jungian take. He talks about the exhausted ego¹.

In our younger years, says Sanford, we live our lives out of our dominant strengths, our superior talents. They give us meaning and energy. They sustain us and enable us to achieve. We put aside other parts of ourselves as we develop these dominant functions and make our way in the world.

But sometime between the ages of 35 and 55 the energy of these superior functions can tend to run down. We’ve lived the life of a teacher, parent, priest, scientist but these no longer give us all the meaning we need. We are in a dangerous place. A crisis can tip us into a wilderness place.

Of course such psychologising of the Elijah narrative is at best informed speculation. What we do know, however, is that this narrative is about a man at the peak of his crisis who comes to the wilderness in crisis. He is questioning his life’s endeavours. He is spent and questioning whether life is worth living.

The wilderness is where these profound and often painful questions come to us. Sometimes we come to the wilderness by crisis. Moses and Elijah found themselves in the wilderness after life shattering crisis.

According to the biblical narrative Jesus was led after his baptism, or even as Mark suggests, compelled into the wilderness by the Spirit of God. And we know that throughout his ministry he would withdraw at times to desolate places.

But for Elijah and for Jesus, wilderness was more than harshness of desert, rock and sky. The theologian/writer Harry Williams suggests that most people’s wilderness is inside them, not outside.

And the wilderness belongs to us. It is always lurking some where as part of our experience, and there are times when it seems pretty near the whole of itⁱⁱ

Lent is the call to intentionally visit the desert, the wilderness within; to ask and to hear those penetrating questions of meaning; to look at ourselves and those questions of life and purpose, that in the busyness of life we can easily avoid.

Robert Frost wrote:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces between the starts – I have it in me; much nearer home; to scare myself with my own desert places.ⁱⁱⁱ

But the desert is there and so are its questions. You have but one life and it is short. What are you filling your life with? Is it true, is it worth it, is it authentically you? Or have you lost something of yourself in the traffic of living?

These are the questions that Lent bids us ask of ourselves, not to make us glum and repressed as some Christians appear, but so that we can journey towards our true self, and live the gift that is our own life.

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ⁱ Sanford J, *Ministry Burnout*, Paullist Press, New York, 1982, pp 86 -102

ⁱⁱ Williams H, *The True Wilderness*, Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1979. p. 28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frost R, *Desert Places*, 1936.