

Family Worship – Sunday 13th September 2020

Hello everyone and thanks for joining us for another week of Family Worship.

If you have access to Facebook, please go to our Facebook page where you'll find today's Family Worship on video: www.facebook.com/muckamorepc

If you don't have access to Facebook, here's some of the contents for you to read.

We're continuing our series on the life and times of Elijah recorded for us in 1st Kings. Last Sunday we saw how the Lord identified three people who would all be used to bring home to Israel the error of their ways in worshipping Baal despite the powerful message the Lord delivered to them on Mt Carmel that Baal is, in fact, no god at all. Today we join Elijah as he finds the first of the three men working on his family farm and recruits him as his personal assistant and future successor.

Unlike the people of Israel at that time, we want to give praise and worship to the Lord for being the God who saves us; the God who makes broken lives new; the God in whom we find the strength to face each day; the God in whose presence our fears are washed away.

He is worthy of all our praises so let's bring them to him by praying together, thanking him for being the God who saves us and is worthy of all our praises. Ask him to forgive us for straying from him and allowing other things to take his place and to help us return to him again and again throughout the course of our lives.

Then read the Bible passage we'll be looking at together for yourselves – it's 1st Kings 19:19-21 – just three verses this week so if there are several of you, perhaps one could read all three!

Sermon: "Elijah: Born Mucky – life *off* the farm!"

How anybody can put themselves into the middle of a herd of animals that are way bigger than them, I'll never know – I watch Rodney out in the fields around the manse and think to myself, no way, José! Especially those bulls – not me. I'm definitely no farmer; but I do enjoy watching programmes about farming from the safety and comfort of my sofa in front of the TV – have you seen "Born Mucky: Life on the Farm"? One of the farmers in it is Ian Steele who, actually, had no interest in following his father into agriculture – that always makes me sad – to think that a farming family has worked hard to build up the farm and hand it on to the next generation in better shape from when they first took over only to see it all come to an end either because there's actually no children to hand it on to or those who could carry it on don't want to – they want to do something entirely different – like Ian Steele. *"I was determined not to go into farming and so I did an engineering degree and went into the petro-chemical industry"*, he said. He would've been the fourth generation of his family to run the farm but his father's life had been a struggle and he wanted something different. Funny how things can change, isn't it? He came back home to help when his father took ill, and guess what? *"I was so pleased to be back in Shropshire I decided to have a complete career change. We sold the dairy herd and as we had always kept a few pigs I went down that route"*. Today, in addition to the farming side of things, Treflach Farm, which started back in 1904, has a butchery and bakery business; camping and glamping; and therapeutic projects for children and young adults. Would any of that have been there without Ian? Probably not. His family may well have sold up and walked away.

1 Kgs 19:19-21 takes us to a family farm where one of the sons, perhaps the only son, Elisha, was ploughing alongside 11 other yoke of oxen – the equivalent, perhaps, of Born Mucky's Tom Martin with his brand new combine harvester costing a quarter of a million pounds alongside the latest tractors and other machinery. Whether Elisha had taken over the farm from his father, Shaphat, or was simply getting his hands dirty alongside the other farm workers, I'm sure he had no idea when he got out of bed that morning and headed into the fields for a hard day's work how things would be so different by the time he went to bed that night.

When we left Elijah last week at Mt Horeb, he'd successfully brought an indictment against God's people, pressing home the charge of being in breach of the covenant that had been made on that very same mountain through Moses – a breach that saw them worshipping other gods instead of the one true God. And the judge of all the earth, the Lord himself, had handed down his verdict – guilty, as charged. How do we know that? It's implied in his response to Elijah's summing up. In due course, there'd be a changing of the guard in the shape of a new political and religious order in Israel with three figures playing important roles in this change - Hazael, Jehu and Elisha. The Lord would use Hazael to punish Israel for its failure to turn away from Baal-worship and restore his covenant with them. The Lord would use Jehu to punish Ahab and Jezebel for leading Israel astray in failing to bring about change following the clear and unequivocal display of power on Mt Carmel that declared Baal to be no god and the Lord to be the one, true God. And the Lord would use Elisha as a Samuel-like figure providing guidance and direction from the Lord to those who turned to him for help over some 40-50 years. And that day on Shaphat's farm was like the very first stalks of new growth pushing their way up through the soil, just enough to give you the sense that they're there and a sign of things to come; the promise of a harvest.

Elijah set off as the Lord had said towards Damascus, away up in the north, hundreds of miles from Mt Horeb and beyond Israel itself, in Aram/Syria. It's a journey that takes him through familiar territory – close to the Wadi Kerith and just across the River Jordan from his hometown of Tishbe in Gilead – arriving at a town called Abel-Meholah where Shaphat's farm was situated. Imagine how surprised the 11 men working their yoke of oxen must've been when Elijah walked across the field, threw his cloak over Elisha as he, too, worked his yoke of oxen, and then started to walk away again! Elisha, and everyone with him, knew exactly what was going on here. They knew who the man was: Elijah, the man of God. And they knew what he was doing: summoning Elisha as his personal assistant. Leaving his animals, he ran after Elijah and said to him: *"Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye and then I'll come with you"*. Does that remind you of anything? Luke 9, perhaps, where Jesus said to a man, "Follow me" only for the man to reply, *"I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family"*. Is this what Elisha was saying to Elijah? From what Jesus says to the man in Luke 9 the answer is no: "Jesus replied, *"No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back [continually] is fit for service in the kingdom"*. Jesus was talking about someone who was in two minds about what he was doing. He wasn't focused; wasn't concentrating on the job – you could just imagine what the field would look like after someone like that had ploughed it – there wouldn't be nice, straight furrows; they'd zig-zag all over the place as he spent more time looking behind him than in front of him. But Elisha clearly wasn't in two minds. He was genuinely going back to say goodbye to his family and then go with Elijah. And Elijah understood that and, in fact, encouraged him to do so. *"Go; go back"*, he says, *"What have I done to you?"* We could be forgiven for reading that wrongly – as if Elijah has just realised the full impact of what he's asking of Elisha – *"Awh; What have I done to you? Taking you away from your family..."*. But that's not what's happening. There's a preposition between the 'go back' and the 'what' in the Hebrew that gives his comment the sense of *"By all means, go back; but what have I done to you"*; in other words, *"Go, but remember what I've just done to you"* – called you to follow me. He needn't have worried because Elisha had no intention of turning down Elijah's call to him. He goes and tells his family he's leaving, and as he leaves he has an impromptu barbecue for everyone – roasting the two oxen on a fire made up of the ploughing equipment he'd been using. Talk about burning your bridges? Elisha was making it clear to everyone there was no going back for him. He was going with Elijah and that was that. That was a costly thing for him to do, wasn't it? Walking away from a successful family farm to an uncertain, even dangerous future to become what? Elijah's attendant – his valet might be a good way of putting it; attending to his personal needs and dealing with any other tasks that Elijah required. A number of years later, 2 Kgs 3 tells us how the kings of Israel, Judah and Edom formed a coalition against the king of Moab but from the outset they encountered problems. The king of

Israel, Ahab's son, was exasperated, but the king of Judah asked: *"Is there no prophet of the Lord here that we may enquire of the Lord through him?"* An officer of the King of Israel answered, *"Elisha, son of Shaphat, is here. He used to pour water on the hands of Elijah"* – used to pour water on Elijah's hands! Not exactly the most high-powered of positions, then, was it? Elijah's personal valet? Is that what Elisha left the family farm for – to enter service as Elijah's servant? Yes. You see, like many a personal servant, even in Royal families like our own today, Elisha recognised it was a privilege to serve Elijah in this way; after all, it wasn't just Elijah he would be serving, but the Lord. It might've seemed pretty mundane and unremarkable at that particular stage in his life, but the Lord was preparing him for when Elijah would no longer be with him and he would succeed him as the Lord's prophet in Israel. Elijah has all but had his day - the time when it was established that "the Lord is God", which is what the name "Elijah" means. The new era of salvation belongs to Elisha, whose name means "God saves".

I suppose we might be tempted to think that the events in the field at Abel-Meholah have little or nothing to do with us – this was a unique situation in which Elisha is called to be Elijah's successor – a very special, only-one-of-its-kind, never-to-be-repeated role. But that would be to miss the point of the story being recorded for us in the first place – which is why I felt we needed to look at it today. You see, it highlights a couple of important things that apply to every single Christian man, woman and young person - what God is entitled to do and what we are obligated to do. God is entitled to command our obedience – he is the Lord, the one true God - and we are obligated, to obey him. We need to remember who we are as God's people – servants who are ready to do his will. Isn't that the example Jesus has set for us, who, as Paul describes in Ph 2, *"being in very nature God, set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a servant... and died a selfless, obedient death..."*. That's how we should see ourselves – servants obedient to the day we die. What a privilege it is to serve the living God! It might not be the most glamorous of lives to live; but what else matters so long as God's plans and purposes are being worked out in us and through us? It's the only life worth living at the end of the day for it's the only life that will save us from the judgement to come when Jesus returns to wrap up this broken, dying world and establish the new world in which God's faithful, obedient people will live forever. Many people think it's *too* costly to allow God to have his rightful place in their life – whereas, actually, the truth is, it's too costly not to!

Please pray for others as you finish:

1. Give thanks for the research being done in many areas of medicine, such as cancer. Pray that the drugs developed will be more targeted and have fewer side effects so that patients feel more well during treatment and have a better chance of recovery.
2. Pray for people you know – family, friends, colleagues – who, because of the Covid-19 situation, find themselves in work situations that leave them feeling nervous and uncomfortable; or who face financial worries through reduced hours or redundancy.
3. Pray that Christians will be good examples in our society, especially in regard to the current regulations intended to reduce the spread of the virus, seeing them as opportunities to show our concern for others and to avoid the selfishness of many.

Thanks for joining with us today. And may the blessing of the Lord God be upon you and all whom you love. Amen