

Family Worship – Sunday 6th September 2020

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

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.

While you're worshipping with us at home, others are with us in the church itself for the first time since March. Things are a bit different from then in terms of limits on the number of people we can accommodate, not to mention sanitisers, one-way systems and so on, but we hope that all of us, whether at home or in the church, will know God's presence and blessing as we worship him together.

If you'd like to join us in the church on Sundays, we'd be grateful if you could let us know of your intention do so on the Wednesday beforehand either by email or telephone (9446 2157). That's so that we can make sure we can accommodate everyone who wants to come. Sometimes it mean that we have to come back to you and say *"Sorry, we're full; but we'll put your name down for next Sunday, if that's okay, and start the list off with your names at the top of it"*. We hope you'll understand if we have to do that, and if we continually find that we're under pressure for more seating, then the Session will have to consider how we're going to meet that need and change things so that we can get more people in.

As we turn to worship, please pray together, giving thanks to God for being the amazing God he is; a God who is with us in a personal way and not just 'way up there somewhere'. Ask him to forgive us for not always honouring him the way we should and to work within us to mould us and shape us into the kind of people he wants us to be.

Then read the Bible passage we'll be looking at together for yourselves – it's 1st Kings 19:9b-18 – as usual, if there's more than one of you, perhaps you could take it in turn to read...

Sermon: "Elijah: attorney at law"

Lots of us have places that are special to us, don't we? Places that hold great memories for us – places where something significant happened; places, perhaps, from our childhood or where we met someone important to us – our best friend or our other half; places we like to go back to when things are tough or to remind us of happier times. The Lord has special places, too; places where he met with his people at important and significant moments in their lives. Mt Carmel was one of those places for Elijah. Surely as long as he was able to remember things, the amazing events that took place that day would remain with him? Every time he heard Carmel mentioned or thought about that day it would bring a smile to his face. The Lord had answered his prayer in such an explosive fashion that day that people like us still talk it about thousands of years later! But there was another place that was particularly special to the Lord – another mountain; Mt Horeb, also known as Mt Sinai, also known as the mountain of the Lord. Like so many mountains in Israel, it may well have been more of a mountain range than a single peak with different peaks being given different names with the Bible writers using whichever one was closest to the events that were taking place. Maybe or maybe not. Maybe local people had their own name for it which differed from how others knew it – maybe or maybe not. What matters are the events that took place here. This was the place where people met God in person; where God came down to meet people. It was at its foothills that he met with Moses through a bush that was burning but flourished, sending him on his way back to Egypt to set God's people free. It was on its higher slopes that the Lord met again with Moses, giving him the Ten Commandments that formed the covenant agreement between the Lord and his people. Now it was where Elijah would meet with the Lord in a personal way. Remember last week we talked about how Elijah had left Jezreel frustrated and broken because he realised that nothing was about to change in Israel? He'd risked everything to show that Baal was no god at all, yet Jezebel refused to budge from her unrepentant paganism, and her henpecked, led by the nose husband-excuse-of-a-King, Ahab, allowed her to

wield such power that any change was blocked and rendered impossible. Elijah had had enough; he saw that nothing was going to change and he got offside, quickly – broken, frustrated - but not just to any old place: to a place that was special in the history of his people; a place where he could identify with how they felt, albeit for different reasons. And yet, under the symbol of renewal, a broom bush, an exhausted Elijah received food and water provided for him once again by the Lord himself – and with it a message: “get up and eat, you’ve a long journey ahead of you”. And then we’re told “Strengthened by that food, he travelled for forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night” 1 Kgs 19:8. Was this where Elijah had always intended to go when he set off into the Negev desert but was so exhausted physically, mentally and spiritually that he collapsed under a broom bush never expecting to waken up again? Only for the Lord he mightn’t have! His mind was clearly occupied with thoughts about his ancestors roaming in this region for 40 years because they’d become tired to the point of giving up, also. They’d been punished by the Lord and so Elijah felt he deserved the same treatment – “let me die like they did”. Maybe that’s what this journey was going to be for - the end. But the Lord wasn’t about to let that happen because he knew Elijah’s mind-set was very different from his ancestors. They’d given up on God; Elijah had given up on God’s people! And so the Lord renewed his strength so he could continue his journey; nudging him on, as it were, towards Horeb, a journey of some 40 days & 40 nights - there’s that number again – finding a cave to lie down for a sleep.

When he wakened, the Lord spoke to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” “I’m here for a pity party” – that’s how so many people see it: “I’ve been working my heart out for the Lord God Almighty. The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed your places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I’m the only one left, and now they’re trying to kill me” 1 Kgs 19:10. Poor little old me! Is that what it sounds like to you? If your opinion of Elijah at this point is of a quivering, fearful wreck, then yes; welcome to the pity party at Horeb. Except, I don’t think it is. This is something much more serious. This is a court room with Elijah making an indictment against God’s people. This is a court scene with the counsel for the prosecution setting out the terms of the accusation against the defendant. Elijah’s summarising the tell-tale evidence that Israel has failed to put right what the Lord’s representative has shown to be so very wrong within the nation – the worship of Baal. And Elijah is taking his case to the highest judge not just in the land but in the cosmos. Without any comment on what Elijah has just said, the Lord replies: “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by”. It looks as if Elijah never made it out of the cave before a powerful wind tore across the mountain, flinging boulders like pebbles all over the place. Then there was an earthquake that shook the mountain to its very core – was the cave going to come in round him? And then a fire swept across the mountain scorching the trees and bushes and everything in its path. But, we’re told, the Lord was not in any of these things – not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire. And then most translations tell us, came a gentle whisper – or to use the title of one of Simon and Garfunkel’s famous songs: the sound of silence. Or was it a crushing wail like those you so often hear from people in the Middle East who’ve just suffered the loss of a loved one? The Hebrew could possibly mean either. Either way, it brought Elijah, finally, to the mouth of the cave, covering his face and standing there – why? Because he knew the Lord was right there with him; he was standing in his very presence; the Lord had come down to meet him just as he’d done with Moses on that same mountain long ago. And the Lord repeats the question he’d asked Elijah earlier: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And Elijah gives the very same reply as before: “I’ve been working my heart out for the Lord God Almighty. The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed your places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I’m the only one left, and now they’re trying to kill me” 1 Kgs 19:14. This is no pity party. After such a display of power and authority who in their right mind could wallow in self-pity before such an awesome God? Elijah wasn’t upset for his own sake; he was upset for God’s sake! These people have rejected you, after all you’ve shown them on Carmel! They’re in breach of the covenant that was made on this very mountain through Moses - worshipping other gods instead of the one true God, asserts

the counsel for the prosecution. And the extent of their abandonment is so bad that they even want to silence the only person left that's willing to speak out publicly and tell things the way they are – me! And the Judge agrees. He doesn't come out and say that verbally – it's implied here in the text. It's as if he says to Elijah, "You're absolutely right, Elijah; I couldn't agree more with your assessment of the way things are. So, here's what I'm going to do. I want you to go back and commission the people I've chosen to bring judgement on those who are guilty of the charges you've laid against them. I will, of course, spare those who are faithful to me". He's not putting a proverbial arm round Elijah with a "there, there; it'll be okay. I'll get you some help and anyway, you're not the only one left; so don't fret. You'll be alright". God's not doing that because he's not dealing with a whinging, wimp of a prophet who feels like he's got the raw end of the deal. He's hearing the legitimate concerns of a man with a holy passion for God and a desire to see his will done on earth as it is in heaven. This was a God-follower with a passion for what mattered; what really mattered – not theological niceties or religious rite & ritual but a heart and soul for God in everything.

Tell me, when was the last time any of us got upset for God's sake? Upset that so many of his people appear to be indifferent about worshipping him? Upset that so many seem to be apathetic in their walk with him and their witness for him? Ambivalent towards the sin that so easily entangles and draws people away from him? Now remember – when we point a finger at others, there are three pointing back at ourselves. When was the last time we brought all this before the Lord on our knees in a way that gives him space to decide what's going to happen about it instead of us? When was the last time we appealed to him as the prophets did – prophets like Elijah, yes; but prophets, too, like Habakkuk: "Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy". Of course, the greatest act the Lord has ever done wasn't on Carmel or Horeb but Calvary. There in his anger he remembered mercy and it was his final word on the matter; judgement for those who refuse to believe; salvation for those who do believe. And so we dare not stand in our own strength or righteousness; only in Christ - secure in the knowledge – as Elijah was - that no scheme of human beings like Jezebel can ever pluck us from his hand. And so for us, on this side of Calvary, we can say: "till he returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I stand". Make sure of it, won't you?

Please pray for others as you finish:

1. Please pray for several folks in the congregation who have been in hospital over the past couple of weeks due to illness, a fall, surgery or receiving treatment for cancer.
2. Continue to pray for progress in developing treatments and a vaccine for Covid-19 that will help to ensure better outcomes for people who fall ill to the virus and greatly reduce the spread, frequency and severity of infection.
3. Give thanks for the work that has been done by staff in PCI over the past six months in providing guidance for congregations in getting back to worship and other activities as well as a range of devotions, prayer points, blogs and stories to encourage and equip churches and their members under the "These Three Remain" initiative - <https://www.presbyterianireland.org/theseethreeremain>

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