

Bennochy church: 29th May 2016

It was for the very soul of the nation. At the heart of Israel there was a crisis of identity. The question in hearts and minds was this, who was the true God of Israel?

As a nation, who are we? What is the identity of Scotland after an independence referendum, in the midst of a campaign about our membership of the EU. How Scottish are we, how British? How nationalistic, how patriotic? How European? How Christian? For the church seeking to witness and worship in the midst of a secular society, what is its identity, in post Christian Scotland?

The church meets in General Assembly, but who pays any attention, the slightest attention, to what the church says, except of course, for debates and decisions on human sexuality. As the church meets, the world is not listening in.

At the heart of our nation is a crisis of identity. Who are we? At the heart of our church, is a crisis of faith. What do we really believe?

It was not so very different in Elijah's day. Let's set the story in some historical context. It is the middle of 9th century BC. It is after the divided monarchy, where Israel split into two kingdoms, Samaria to the north and Judah to the south, and

before the destruction of the northern kingdom by Assyria in 722BC.

On the throne of the northern kingdom, is king Ahab. His nation in the midst of a drought. He had married Jezebel, a priestess of Baal and the daughter of the king of Sidon in Phoenicia. She brought with her a large entourage of priests and prophets of Baal and Asherah into the country. So by 1st Kings 18 the worship of God has changed in the northern kingdom of Samaria. The royal family has moved away from worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to worshipping Baal, the Canaanite god, responsible for rain, thunder, lightning, and dew. That is the historical context for the great challenge of the God's on Mount Carmel, a coastal mountain range found in northern Israel.

I believe as a church today, we are also in the midst of the challenge of the gods. The difference is, today's God's are not religious. For a moment, let's focus on this man Elijah. One of the great mysterious figures of the Old Testament, but one we actually know quite a lot about. In this story, we see a man who has a firm belief, not just in the reality of the presence and power of the God of Israel, but also that the god's of Baal are not real. He is a mono theist. There is only one God.

He mocks the gods of Baal, come on guys, are they sleeping? Ah, they must be out on a journey. I know what it is, they must have gone to the toilet. In spite of overwhelming odds, there were

many prophets of Baal, and, making the task more difficult than it needed to be by adding water, he had no doubt who was going to win this fight.

Why else would he expose himself to such danger. This was a fight he has organized and in it he was challenging the king who held ultimate power. If this went wrong, he was in big trouble. Listen to the irony of his challenge. He lays down the gauntlet to the god of lightening, to enflame the sacrifice. Surely that is not too much to ask a god of lightening! The odds were not on Elijah's side. But he came to the mountain, trusting God.

In the midst of our nations search for identity. In a society that seems to have rejected organized religion. In the midst of our challenge of the gods, where is the place of the church? What is our role? What is our purpose? Do we come to the challenge trusting God, and putting in hope and confidence in Christ? Where is the faith of Elijah in us, and where is the fire that demonstrates the power and the presence of God?

On Mount Carmel, lightening preceded the rains that ended the drought. Maybe it was part of the lightening storm that set the sacrifice alight. Whatever happened, The God of Israel won, hands down. A mortal blow is delivered to pagan worship as the prophets of Baal were seized and killed, and the worship of the God of Israel was restored. Victory, to the God who demonstrated his power. In the midst of a national crisis, here on Mount Carmel, it was the alter of God restored that was the

foundation of Elijah's victory. A victory that the ordinary man of Israel would have understood. In the Old Testament, that is how God acted and showed that he was boss.

We probably, at least out with Old Testament stories, don't think of God like that. We are conditioned by the New Testament to think of God as love. Can I say, love did not win the battle of Carmel. And the story of Pentecost, just passed, is the New Testament version of the flames of Mount Carmel. The Holy spirit, does not just give love, but came in power.

If we have a crisis of identity and purpose, where do we go to seek the spirits inspiration? Can we see in Elijah's victory, the same power of Pentecost? Can we ask ourselves, as the church, how do we begin to rebuild the alter of God in the midst of our nation?

I wonder if we wait with any expectation that God will act? Maybe we do too much waiting. The pilgrim journey is about traveling to unknown places. Will we follow in the paths of Abraham who left home for God. Will we travel to the mountain, like Elijah, trusting God and offer his challenge? This is who we are, and this is what we believe. Will we be 'people of the way', seeking the love, and the power and the guidance, of the spirit of God. Amen.