

3rd Sunday of Lent. 1 Kings 19:1-10. 24.02.2008

Sustained by God's Strength

¹ When Ahab got home, he told Jezebel what Elijah had done and that he had slaughtered the prophets of Baal. ² So Jezebel sent this message to Elijah: "May the gods also kill me if by this time tomorrow I have failed to take your life like those whom you killed."

³ Elijah was afraid and fled for his life. He went to Beersheba, a town in Judah, and he left his servant there. ⁴ Then he went on alone into the desert, travelling all day. He sat down under a solitary broom tree and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

⁵ Then he lay down and slept under the broom tree. But as he was sleeping, an angel touched him and told him, "Get up and eat!" ⁶ He looked around and saw some bread baked on hot stones and a jar of water! So he ate and drank and lay down again.

⁷ Then the angel of the LORD came again and touched him and said, "Get up and eat some more, for there is a long journey ahead of you."

⁸ So he got up and ate and drank, and the food gave him enough strength to travel forty days and forty nights to Mount Sinai, the mountain of God. ⁹ There he came to a cave, where he spent the night.

But the LORD said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

¹⁰ Elijah replied, "I have zealously served the LORD God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I alone am left, and now they are trying to kill me, too." ...

¹⁸ Yet I will preserve seven thousand others in Israel who have never bowed to Baal or kissed him!" [NLT]

It's a strange phenomenon that a word of criticism seems to far outweigh many words of positive support. Why else would we allow ourselves to become despondent simply because one person - or one group - has criticised what we do.

Such criticism seems to catch us unawares and unprepared - we may have been basking in the feeling of having done something right, when - almost out of the blue - somebody comes and tears apart what we have done or said. All the positive feelings are blown away - and we feel quite despondent.

This story about the prophet Elijah is one which has been repeated many times over.

Certainly the 'criticism' levelled at him had more power behind it, than the kind you and I may have to face. Queen Jezebel was not somebody to be taken lightly - as other reports from this book of 1st Kings show. Yet, the question is - not only for Elijah but for you and me: are we not sometimes inclined to look at what we have done. And then we forget that for us as church it is always a case of being

Sustained by God's Strength

You see, it is not a case of the church being built by 'powerful', heroic figures. It is not human exertion which will guarantee the future existence of the church in our society. [*That may be used as an excuse now to do nothing; to simply withdraw from any responsibility in the congregation and the church. But this is not said to support our laziness!*]

Elijah seemingly had had enough. In spite of the success on Mt Carmel, where God had answered his prayer with the bolt of lightning, which had devoured the sacrifice, the opposition by the queen was just too much for him. Possibly he had hoped that he had at last silenced this heathen woman - but she would not go away without a major fight.

Possibly some of us feel like that: we've had enough. Everything they have done seems to have been in vain. There are those who spend much time and energy for the church and congregation - only to be criticised for how they have things. In a way we can totally understand the reaction, 'That's it - nothing I ever do here is ever appreciated. It's just not worth the trouble - from now I'm not going to do anything any more!

As it seems to have happened to Elijah - there is a real danger of feeling very sorry for yourself. Yet, should we not ask ourselves: what purpose did our involvement in the church, in society, at work have. If we have been disappointed by the response of the people around us, was it not because we were too concerned with ourselves? Where was God in all we did? Sometimes the criticism might even have been justified - even if the way it took place was not right.

One of the difficult lessons for each one of us is the fact that we may never become the focus of attention. Our input in the church may not take place so that we are praised for what we have accomplished. When we look to what we have done, and look for praise, we should not be surprised if we are suddenly brought to an abrupt halt.

This was something Paul had to learn also. He says, *“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”* This happened so that Paul should learn: *“‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”* (2 Cor. 12:7,9)

God does not build His church through ‘strong’ people - through those who by their own thinking or by what they have, or are able to do, want to build and maintain the church. The danger with that kind of setup is that we ‘hi-jack’ the church for our own purposes - that we draw up our recipes for success of how to build a congregation.

There is a very good reason for that. Whenever the church was full of itself and built on its own strength, it started drifting away from the purpose God had for it. Where it is about us - about our ideals and hopes - God’s purposes seem to be lost.

Once we have realised that it is not our planning, that it is not our effort, that it is not our strength which builds the church - we may become useful for our Lord. God builds His church through normal, fallible people - through people who are just like you and me.

So the excuse just does not hold: What can I do? I don’t have any special talents? I can’t do this or that. God knows what you can do - and when you are willing to submit to His will, when you are ready to do everything for His glory - He will use you. There is a problem in the way we so often read the Bible-stories - we make out the people of the Bible to be heroes - something like the heroes from Greek legends. There is the feeling that these people did not know doubts, that they were able to believe and trust God - just like that.

Yet, the people of the Bible - and all who have followed throughout the history of the church - are not heroes. All they are, are people who had learnt to be carried by God’s Strength. Making them out to be more - to be ‘super saints’ - does us a disservice, because we mostly realise that we fall short of such infallible ‘sainthood’. We are not saints because of what we have done, but because of what our Lord has done for us.

We are to know that God is never closer to us than at those moments when we have realised our lack of power. God’s church is not built by victories such as the one on Mt Carmel where Elijah seemingly stood alone against the prophets of Baal. God

builds His church when we no longer look to ourselves - when it is not a case of making a name for ourselves, but when we point to Him and His love for all who are lost.

When Elijah had reached the end of his road, when he had given up and was ready to throw in the towel, he was told, “Get up and eat!” For us that may mean something like, Get up and receive what you were given by your Baptism. Get up, and hear what God’s Word says to you. Get up and receive what is given by the bread and the cup. That may not seem like much - but God meets with us precisely in these things which seem so insignificant. His way is not to overpower us, but to come to us - in this hidden way - where we allow His presence in our lives, and then His dynamic power sets to work in our lives.

Subjecting ourselves to criticism - we need to do that (as difficult as it may sometimes be). Only when it is no longer about us, can we become useful for God. Then you will experience the miracle that God uses you, because when you have run out of options, God’s options will ‘kick in’. He will bless what you do in His service.