

One of the features of our system of reading lessons is that over the summer and autumn months that make up the season of Trinity, we follow some of the big stories of the Old Testament. These are stories that have shaped, that bear witness to, the people of Israel, their sense of who they were before God, before other nations, before themselves. For the next few Sundays we will be following the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Today we have the encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. It is a clash of two identities, of two cultures. It comes to a climax with a flash of fire from heaven as Elijah's sacrifice is consumed by the heavenly fire.

We have a picture of the might, the majesty, the power of God. This is a God who acts, who gets things done.

As I read and reflected on that passage, a memory kept coming back to me. It was of a visit to a lady in her home one afternoon. She had waged a long battle with cancer and the latest news had not been good. We sat and chatted about what lay ahead and she looked across at me and said, 'Rector, I'm not sure what I believe any more.' She was, as so many of us do, trying to find purpose, find meaning, find God in what was happening. And God, certainly the God who sent down fire and consumed sacrifices, did not seem to be there.

Of course this is not the total picture of God we find in the Elijah stories. Over the next few weeks we will read of Elijah sheltering in a desert cave, himself hurt, confused, frightened, feeling utterly alone, complaining bitterly to God. He finds God that day, not in the wind or in the earthquake, but in a gentle whisper, a profound presence.

With this in mind, let us turn to our Gospel reading for today. As I have often remarked, the Greek in which our New Testament is written is often more nuanced than the English translation in which we read it. The words ‘heal’ and ‘healthy’ occur three times in this passage, each time translating a different Greek word.

Our story concerns the healing of the centurion’s servant. The story focuses not so much on the servant who is healed, but rather on the centurion himself. He is presented to us as essentially a good man, enjoying the respect of the Jewish community among whom he finds himself stationed, contributing to the welfare of that community. As a soldier, he is a man who knows how power works, with people to whom he is accountable and people who are accountable to him. But in the face of the illness of his beloved slave none of this works; he feels utterly powerless, vulnerable.

We begin with the message he sends via the Jewish elders, as on his behalf they ask Jesus to come and heal his slave. There is something tentative in the language used here, the word *διασωση*. This word of healing has connotations of ‘bring safely through’. Please just come and be with my servant and bring him through this.

Then, with Jesus already on his way, the centurion sends a message. Reflecting on his own position in the power structure in which he feels at home, he acknowledges Jesus’ authority in his own sphere. ‘Just say the word that my servant may be healed, *ιαθητω*. This is more specific. Jesus commends the faith of the gentile centurion and the messengers return to find

the slave in good health, ‘υγιαινωντα. This word has connotations of being safe.

Taking all this together, I have a picture of a journey, beginning with that tentative, come and heal, come and bring my servant safely through this; then culminating in the messengers returning home to find the servant in good health, the servant safely through his illness.

I have always found the concept of journey to be a very fruitful one as I contemplate life. You may have noticed a blessing I would use quite regularly that picks up this theme of journey, of pilgrimage, a journey we undertake in the presence of God:

Go, and know that the Lord goes with you:
let him lead you each day into the quiet place
of your heart, where he will speak with you;
know that he watches over you –
that he listens to you in gentle understanding,
that he is with you always,
wherever you are and however you may feel:
and the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
be upon you and remain with you always.

Amen.

God is present even in his apparent absence. Present in times of darkness, of despair; he is present even when we seek to evade his presence in selfishness, self righteousness, in disobedience. God is always there.

In prayer I reach out. Sometimes the only prayer I can offer is that tentative prayer in the initial approach to Jesus in the Gospel. ‘Lord, please just get me safely through this; inviting God into our life, our journey, our darkness, our

pain. Lord, travel this journey with me. Until, like the disciples on the Emmaus Road, I discover that he was there all along, as I travel this journey that is life, a journey from darkness into light, from doubt into faith, a journey into Christ.