

I Kings 21

The lectionary has done it again – the readings chosen for today stop in the most bizarre place. There is the infamous story of Naboth's vineyard – which seems to show, above all, that gardeners are violent. Naboth's next door neighbour is King Ahab – and King Ahab tries to enforce a purchase of Naboth's vineyard, because the king wants it as a vegetable garden. Ahab doesn't get his own way, so he stamps his feet, slams the door and goes to his room to have a tantrum in his bed.

Enter the infamous Jezebel! "You can't behave like this – you're a king. Off with his head." Everything goes swimmingly well, job done, Jezebel gets her blood and Ahab gets his vegetable garden. But then Elijah appears. And the appearance of Elijah in this story is simple to say – ah, God knows about this, so you are in trouble.

And then... just as it's about to get interesting – the lectionary reading stops! Why? Probably because we don't want to ruin a good story with God pronouncing judgement on innocent people – which of course, is precisely what happens if you read on... Maybe, I thought, we will get the rest of the story next week? No ... next week the lectionary reading is taken from two chapters earlier in the same book. The chapter in question ends with God promising to consume the descendants of Ahab. It ends with the divine promise that his own children will be eaten by dogs!

Poor king Ahab is so unnerved by this judgement – it ruins his gardening experience, because we read that he repents in sack cloth and ashes. So the chapter ends with the Word of the Lord coming again to Elijah. "Have you noticed, how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster ... in his day, but I will bring it on his house ... in the days of his son!"

So ... Ahab's son is going to get this awful punishment for something his father did!

Now, when I look at the commentaries and the notes from the Roots magazine we follow, the subject is to do with Elijah condemning greed – and there he is, good old Elijah, the great prophet for social justice... pronouncing judgement on innocent people!

Instead of taking stories out of context and giving them the same old tired, predictable, morals – instead of making a business out of regurgitating the received wisdom of shallow-minded half baked ethical stupidity dressed up as biblical wisdom – why not take the story seriously?

Why not take the story seriously? Why not draw us into the moral confusion and ambiguity that forces us to ask hard questions of ourselves and of God, seeking God's character in the mess of this story as we seek it in the messiness of our lives.

Of course, it's hard to do that. We tend to build our lives on blocks of unquestionable moral truth – regardless of whether we are aware of it. And the last thing we want the bible to do is to go and demolish the moral belief system we have set up for ourselves. So that, in the end, regardless of what noise we might want to make about the Bible as God's word – we end up making an idol of it, disempowering Scripture by taking it out of context and turning into a harmless piece of fluffy truth that just happens to coincide with the comfortable way we have long since decided to live our lives.

But let's be clear... in this passage, social justice – according to the word of the Lord, requires the punishment of innocent people. Innocent human beings, become collateral damage, regrettable casualties – sacrifices necessary for God to keep his good name as a god of justice. That, is how the story reads – and where does that leave our modern belief that God is a god of justice?

We could just skate over it... Yesterday I listened to my mother reading from a bible story book to my two youngest kids. We heard about Noah, about David, about Elijah. And in all these instances, the story explains in the kindest terms with the sweetest voice, about why God had to kill all those nasty evil people, but the heroes of the story were – of course – the ones who were blessed by God. We have an astonishing capacity to gloss over the awkward parts of the bible, and ignore them.

But what if we don't? What if we hear the whole story, in context. Hearing the story of Naboth's vineyard without hearing the full judgment that follows, is like watching one of these Hollywood court dramas, where you see the crime unfold before you – and yet, just as the real drama begins in the court room – there's a power cut. And you miss the rest of the film.

If we hear this whole story – Elijah is doing a little bit more than pronouncing timeless moral aphorisms about the evils of greed. For the people of Israel, the promised land was not just an inheritance like we might imagine today. This is the promised land – and the people who really were blessed by God, were those who had their own, privileged share in this promised land. Those who did not have any land were known specifically as “the meek”, the meek! Which is why, in the sermon on the mount – Jesus says, “blessed are the meek – because they will inherit what? Not the earth – as though they were inheriting the planet. But the land – blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land. Jesus' claim was so counter to popular belief that it sounded ridiculous.

Because in ancient Israel, the promised land was given by God. If you had a share in that land, That land did not simply mean you were secure, or wealthy, or lucky. That land meant that God had chosen to bless you and your family. That land meant that your people were under God's blessing – the identity of your family is rooted in the soil. That is why Naboth doesn't simply say – “no you can't have my land – it's mine.” He says, “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers!”

Naboth's identity is bound up in that field – and that is why Jezebel knows that Naboth's identity has to be destroyed before his land can be taken! So what does she plan – she plans to destroy his name! His identity is taken before his life his taken and his land is taken.

And so the story unfolds – Elijah the prophet gets wind of it. And what is the outcome? In ancient Israel, there was one thing more important than the land beneath your feet. It was the blood in your veins, Abraham's blood. Your offspring were a crucial part of who you were. And one of the greatest curses imaginable, was the cutting off of your descendents. No one to ensure you identity echoed through the generations.

So – the judgement pronounced by God, is not simply judgement on the innocent descendents of Ahab. It remains, fundamentally, a punishment for Ahab, even if he has spared the life of Ahab. And, what is more, it is not a straightforward condemnation of these descendents. Because God had pronounced judgment upon Ahab for the wrongs he'd committed. The

implication of the story is that, if Ahab's descendents repent in the same way as their father, they will receive the same mercy that their father received.

The real point here, is not that greed is naughty so don't be envious or God will punish you. There is a deep subversion here to the cultural assumptions of Israel: that your identity is not rooted in the land. Nor is it that your identity is rooted in your family. Your identity is based on the question of how you relate to God, here and now, today! Ahab had family and land – and the only thing that worked for him, in God's eyes, was his act of repentance.

Naboth had family and land, and he lost it! And yet, God speaks out on his behalf. Your identity is not rooted in land or family – but on how you relate to God, here and now. That is what makes this a prophetic story – and that prefigures precisely what Jesus was to say many centuries later!

Blessed are the meek! And think of how many times, over and over again, gentiles and foreigners are welcomed into the kingdom ahead of the descendants of Abraham. Having your share in the land, and having Abraham's blood in your vein are no guarantee of anything. That, it seems to me, is also the point of the reading from Galatians!

Your identity is rooted in you relate to God here and now. And the question is whether we can allow the concrete moral building blocks of our nice, Christian belief system to be demolished by the word of God itself? Or are we as selective as a lectionary when it comes to hearing Scripture, hearing others and hearing God?

Of course it would be easy to find the worthy moral application of today's lectionary reading. Of course, we could talk about how land is stolen by corporations or governments. We could talk about stealing third world lives and livelihoods to fuel our modern comforts. And we can shake our heads and tut and promise to work harder for justice. But it is pointless. It is pointless while our morally concrete belief system remains untouchable, unquestionable, beyond the genuine reach of God's word.

In our culture, we may no longer believe that our identity is rooted in the land we own or the family from which we hail. Even at a time when the world cup reminds us how patriotic we really are. Maybe English people stick flags everywhere for a few weeks every few years – but where now is our identity rooted? Where is your identity rooted?

Probably not in our land. But maybe for some of us, yes – actually! Property is a major, major part of our identity in modern Britain at least – and if your property is under threat – what does it do to you as a person? (I can say this, as a person who has lost property – and apart from all the pain that goes with losing your property – it does reach into your identity and touch who you are.) Blessed are the meek.

Probably not our family – at least, our tribe. We all, of course, worship the nuclear family. In the modern west, all manner of ridiculous and atrocious behaviour takes place because parents want the best for their children! And the received wisdom is that you can't criticise a parent for fighting to get their children into the best school, for spending silly amounts of money on them, all because "I want the very best for my children". It's another way of saying, "I am programming my children to become as self centred as their parents." It shapes the way our children grow, shapes – even distorts, their identity – all in the name of unquestionable moral goodness. "we just want the best for our children"! It is a socially acceptable evil.

Where else is our identity? What about our career. More and more we pour the best energy of our lives into our career – too often selling our soul in the name of some great good. Regardless of whether we work for a multi national corporation or a charity – what we give ourselves over to our career will shape our identity. If you have spent thirty years pouring 60 hours of enthusiasm every week into being an estate agent, a management consultant, a beautician, an investment banker – you will not be able to turn those things off when you come to worship! They shape our identity, the building blocks of our belief system, and shape the selective way we unwittingly hear Scripture speak.

If we see Elijah as the hero – and fail to identify ourselves with Ahab at the deepest level – then our position is more hopeless than that of Ahab. The naughty king had the capacity to repent – and if you hear the Gospels – this capacity to repent is what makes us disciples of Jesus Christ.

Not repenting every day in sack cloth and ashes. Not repenting once at your baptism, and then spending the rest of your life building a belief system you assume to be true. But repentance as a way of life, as the capacity to allow your identity – the root of your being, the heart of who you are – to be exposed in worship to the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Anything less is not worship!

The challenge this story leaves with us, is not “are you greedy”. It is this: Do you come here on a Sunday morning, to hear what you already know, to be comforted with the kind of challenge that you’re comfortable with, to be confirmed and strengthened in your belief system? If so, best not to come.

Or do you come here expecting the God of heaven and earth to speak, to shake the foundations of all you hold dear, to reshape your belief system, to reach into the depths of who you are and touch your identity? That will make coming to church hard! It will also mean that we begin to taste something of what the kingdom of God really is – and right there – is how true justice starts to break into our world.