

**CW A Proper 15 (10th after Trinity) Evensong Holy Trinity Cuckfield 16.viii.20. 2
Kings 4.1-37 Acts 16.1-15**

Sermon 432 - A Surplus of Oil

Abstract: We need to make a conscious, radical separation between faith and human misfortune

8 2 Kings 4.1-37

8 Acts 16.1-13.

Our Reading from the Second Book of Kings describes three miracles performed by the Prophet Elisha in the name of The Lord in ascending order of impressiveness: first, a superfluity of oil is produced so a woman can pay off her debts; then, in a familiar Old Testament trope a barren woman is made pregnant; and, finally, the fruit of that pregnancy, a son, is brought back to life. Perhaps you may think it odd, but it is the first miracle that fascinates me precisely because it is mundane. We often pray for sick people to be cured but praying for a dead person to be brought back to life is surely quite unusual; and while we may pray for conception, I doubt that we pray for it when a couple are infertile. But when it comes to praying for a bit more oil in the jar, matters are not so clear-cut.

It seems to me that we have got ourselves into something of a mess when it comes to Intercessory prayer. WE are weak and imperfect and properly entitled to call upon God for help; but what sort of help?

Let me set down three principles:

* First, we should not ask God to fix what he gave us the wherewithal to fix. There really is no point asking God to feed the hungry when the world has a food surplus; that is our job. There isn't a food shortage, there is a money shortage, the poor not having enough to buy food. We might ask God to give us the resolve to solve the problem but that is the limit.

* Secondly, we should start from the assumption that God does not usually intervene in human affairs even though he has unlimited capacity to do so. When we pray for such intervention we need to face the fact that we are, really, praying for ourselves.

* Thirdly, if we are in the habit of assigning good outcomes to divine intervention, how do we handle bad outcomes? Being brought up a Roman Catholic I experienced countless number of times when the nuns attributed a good outcome, like finding a parking space, to divine intervention; but there was always silence when a parking place did not present itself. No doubt I have told you the story before but it bears re-telling: I was on a flight from Accra to Northern Ghana when the man behind me said to his colleague: "The Lord has told me that we need to reform our accountancy system" which elicited my immediate, silent reaction, that the Lord must have been having a rather dull time of it; but my more considered response was that this kind of talk is seriously dangerous. Why?

If we fall into the habit of aligning earthly outcomes with divine intervention we soon all into three traps:

- * First, as I have already noted, we have to deal with the problem of bad outcomes;
- * Secondly, if we are not careful the bad outcomes begin to corrode our faith; I have heard so many stories of people who have lost their faith because of a bad or sad human outcome, such as premature death or arbitrary misfortune; and
- * Thirdly, relating human outcomes to faith reduces God to our human rules and expectations; he can't be God if he doesn't do what we ask!

In summary, we need to take a conscious, radical decision to separate faith and human misfortune.

I may be taking it too far personally but I don't pray for anything material, only for the strength to do the right thing, to say the right thing and, most of all, not to say the wrong thing, the greatest of my faults which occurs depressingly regularly in the nightly examination of conscience. This may be going too far, as I have said, but my underlying principle is that faith in God, the Lord Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit have nothing to do with earthly fortune but, rather, they should prompt us to work for God's Kingdom on Earth as it is in Heaven; we, not God, are the Kingdom Builders; he, through Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit, has done his bit; now it's up to us.

The other principle to which I try to adhere is that which recognises our Kingdom Building as a collective enterprise carried out in the context of the Church, the means Christ left us to carry out his mission. In the ancient world people were judged not as individual personalities but as examples of certain virtues; they were valued for their communal role not their individual behaviours, preferences or character traits; as most celebrities today are only known for being celebrities they would not have passed the test of the ancients; but we, too, need to think of how well we perform in the context of collective Kingdom Building, less worried about our individualism.

Lydia, the star of our Second Reading, from Acts, displays both a communal and a faithful aspect: she is down by the river with her colleagues for a spot of collective prayer and she demonstrates her unconditional faith by offering Paul and his companions unfussy hospitality; and I use that adjective advisedly. If you ask anybody whether they are the Pharisee or the Publican in the Temple in Luke's Gospel most people think they are the Publican but a quick glance at our religion will show us up to be a very fussy Pharisaical Church. The Western Christian Church has got too much of everything - history, prejudice, ritual, rules, money, moralising, exclusions, hierarchy, power, privilege and self-regard - too much of everything except simple, straightforward, uncluttered, unfussy faith in the power of God, the love of Jesus and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the pandemic will teach us - I hope it does - that selfishness is profoundly counter-productive, that collective action is our only hope and that, even then, there is a serious limit to our capacity, even collectively, to control our fate. This earth is our means to love and build towards the Kingdom. That's all. Nothing more, nothing less!