**Family Service Talk 21st November 2021**

**1 Kings 17:7-24**

***Elijah and the Widow at Zarephath***

***7****Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.****8****Then the word of the Lord came to him:****9****“Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.”****10****So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?”****11****As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”*

***12****“As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”*

***13****Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.****14****For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.’”*

***15****She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family.****16****For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.*

***17****Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing.****18****She said to Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”*

***19****“Give me your son,” Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed.****20****Then he cried out to the Lord, “Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?”****21****Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, “Lord my God, let this boy’s life return to him!”*

***22****The Lord heard Elijah’s cry, and the boy’s life returned to him, and he lived.****23****Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, “Look, your son is alive!”*

***24****Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.”*

The title of today’s talk was originally ‘A Widow’s despair’ as it was part of the Storms of life series but a more upbeat title should perhaps be … ‘A widow’s despair turns to joy and then to faith’!!

The reading this morning starts with some pretty bad news … “the brook had dried up and there had been no rain in the land”. However, things improve significantly with the next sentence … “Then, the word of the Lord came …” Things were definitely looking up! And as we read on, they clearly go better and better with two amazing miracles and, wonderfully, the widow coming to faith in God – a great outcome!! But, as always with God’s word in the Bible, there is more to it then initially meets the eye….

We first need to have some background to the situation. What questions could we ask?

* Where is the brook / land?
* Why is there no rain?
* Why was this person near the brook?

All good questions … and whilst the verses just before the passage help with some answers, the previous chapter fills in more of the detail.

At this point in history, the Kingdom of Israel is being ruled by yet another king in a long line who … “did evil in the eyes of the Lord” …. King Ahab. In fact, he was described as doing … “more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him” which does not sound good. Ahab had married Jezebel who was from Sidon where they didn’t worship the one true God, Yahwah, but worshipped Baal -a pagan god whose followers thought he brought rain and a good harvest. Once married to Jezebel, Ahab also began to worship Baal and indeed built a temple and altar to Baal and a pole to worship the goddess, Asherah. The Bible says Ahab … “did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him”.

Into this evil situation, God called Elijah, a faithful Israelite, to be his prophet to tell the evil king, Ahab, about the one true God and indeed prove with his actions how powerful God really was. It was not an easy task …. Elijah had to tell Ahab that there would be no rain or dew in the years ahead unless God, via Elijah, said so.

Having given Ahab this message, God sent Elijah away to hide so that he was safe when the rain did indeed dry up and Ahab, as anticipated, was furious. Leaving nothing to chance, God told Elijah the precise place he was to hide, knowing he would be safe there. And so, Elijah, probably feeling pretty frightened and vulnerable after his meeting with Ahab, set off for the Kerith Ravine which was near his home town of Tishbe, in Israel, just east of the Jordan River. It had a brook flowing through it to provide water and God promised Elijah that ravens would come night and morning to bring meat and bread. And that is indeed what happened, keeping Elijah safe and well as the drought took hold in the land.

But, as today’s reading describes, the situation did not last …” the brook dried up – there had been no rain in the land” and Elijah was now very vulnerable. But, as we saw earlier, God knew what was happening and told Elijah what he should do next. I imagine this next instruction would have seemed very strange to Elijah as God sent him to Zarephath near the city of Sidon in Phoenicia. Not only was this a long way to go but it wasn’t even in Israel and was near the home town of Ahab’s wife Jezebel where everyone worshipped Baal – what an unlikely place for God to send him!

But again, God was looking after Elijah – he had already commanded a widow in Zarephath to supply him with food!! And that, as we read, is what happened. Obeying God’s instructions, Elijah asked a widow at the town gate for food and water … and the rest, as they say, is history. The famine by now was widespread and the widow, understandably, was reluctant to use her last oil and flour to feed someone she did not even know when she and her son were starving. However, rather than thinking God must have got it wrong and slinking off to hide, Elijah continued to trust and obey God and reassured the widow saying, “don’t be afraid,” … God won’t let you run out, there will be enough for us all.’

Wonderfully, the widow trusted Elijah’s God and obeyed him – she went away, made the food and brought it to Elijah. And miraculously, the flour and oil did not run out so the widow, her son and Elijah continued to have enough to eat – God’s gracious provision kept them alive when all around them people were suffering as the drought continued and the famine deepened.

But there was more heartache ahead when the widow’s son died. What a nightmare and such sadness. And in that dark moment, she, like so many, asked searching questions which were all very normal and human responses to such a tragedy. And even Elijah blamed God for causing the son to die … but he didn’t stop at blaming God. No, he took the lifeless boy and cried out to God to let life return – maybe one of the most heartfelt prayers he had ever prayed. And, as we read … “The Lord heard Elijah’s cry … the boy’s life returned to him … he lived.” Truly a miracle, an amazing answer to prayer.

And what a wonderful moment it must have been when Elijah took the child back to his mother!! Elation, relief, joy, incredulity – so many emotions – and amongst them all, the widow’s response was one of pure faith in God … “now I know … the word of the Lord … is the truth.”

In this Baal worshipping, pagan city, God, through Elijah, had now performed two amazing miracles and indeed would go on to perform many more elsewhere as he proved the power of the one true God in contrast to the gods worshipped by those around. Ahab, the king of Israel may have turned away from God but, through Elijah, God was still reaching out to people and drawing them in faith to himself.

So how does this quite amazing story speak to us today? You don’t hear of people worshipping Baal today; we, in England, are not in the middle of a drought or famine (although many in the world are and we pray for them today); we might also wonder why there don’t seem to be many, if any, miracles happening. Even so, this passage speaks **very** clearly to us as we live our lives in the world in 2021

Firstly, we are, like Elijah, living in a world where there are many leaders, and indeed nations, who may not worship Baal but they do not believe and trust in the one true God. **We** must therefore be ready to listen to God and obediently do what he asks of us, like Elijah, so that he can work through us to show his supreme power, love, compassion and grace to those around us.

Secondly, we may not be living in a drought or famine but the Covid situation has not gone away and there are many ways in which our daily lives can be pretty tough. Like Elijah, **we** should cry out to God in prayer – in anger, frustration, despair – God is waiting for us with all our words and emotions to come honestly to him, trusting in his power, love and mercy to answer our prayer in a way that he knows is best for us. And in a way that we pray will bring others to know him and trust in him like the widow in Zarephath.

Finally, we may not see our food cupboards staying miraculously full meaning that the Tesco shop is a thing of the past … and we are devastated when, despite our fervent prayer, a loved one dies … but neither thing means that God does not bless us with miracles today. Maybe we simply don’t see things that happen as the clear blessing from God that they are, maybe **we** should look at things differently … the moment of joy when prayer is answered against the odds; people coming to faith after a lifetime spent denying Jesus; our individual relationship with the one true God – the list of miraculous blessing from God is endless.

The one true God is still here with us, guiding us through his Spirit and working in power and might to grow his kingdom and bring those who are ready to listen, trust and obey, to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, his Son, our Lord. Amen