

DARING COMPASSION: THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE

Elijah is not like the *written* prophets of books such as Amos, Hosea or Micah. For this early prophet we have a collection of tales including some *miracle* stories and encounters with people both great and small. We are not so much hearing a message from the prophet himself as understanding the significance in the telling of his prophetic stories.

In the message of these prophetic stories the emphasis is always that the *Word of the Lord* – which the prophets utter – controls the events to come. This word has its own power, beyond any power or influence belonging to the prophet. The prophets participate in a mystery that lies behind and under the events of their lives. The stress is on *God's Word* that is embodied in what they say and which sustains all who proclaim it. As we read and reflect on these prophetic messages we need to ask how the *Word of God* sustains and supports those who faithfully proclaim it in their lives today.

The Hebrew Bible passage that Phillip read is part of the prophet Elijah's dramatic conflict with the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. It introduces a series of stories in which the prophet Elijah appears as God's spokesperson in very difficult times during the 9th century BCE. Elijah's announcement of a terrible drought which casts its mantle of death over the land is the underlying crisis in the series. Frequent references to Elijah in the Gospels indicate how important this cycle of stories was in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Elijah announces that God will send a three year drought to punish idolatry and injustice under Ahab and Jezebel, and that rain or dew will henceforth fall only on his command. He then takes the sensible course of action and gets out of town fast. Following God's instructions, Elijah takes up residence near the Wadi Cherith east of the Jordan – a natural watercourse which fills only in the rainy season. There God sends ravens to help out – an interesting choice that points out God's humour and boldness – I mean, you know how ravens are, they prey on others and ordinarily wouldn't bring you anything. But morning and night they come to sustain Elijah with bread and meat until the water dries up, and this is where our story begins.

God could continue to hand out individualized miracles by giving Elijah the power to call for rain and refill the wadi. Instead, the Spirit directs Elijah to ask for help from another person – a gentile – a widow – and give her and her household help in return. He travels to Zarephath, a town near Sidon on the Mediterranean coast, where he meets the woman at the city gate, and requests a drink from her precious and dwindling water supply. She immediately and generously agrees to share with this foreigner.

Then Elijah ups the ante and demands bread as well, and the widow reaches her limit. Her despair pours forth as she protests that she has just enough oil and meal to make a scrap of food. After eating this paltry last supper she and her son expect to die from hunger. Elijah responds with the standard reassurance of God's salvation: "Fear not". He promises in the name of God that as she shares this last bit of food with him, her oil and meal will last as long as she needs.

Elijah's approach might sound a little heartless – remember the widow is gathering sticks to prepare a final meager meal. The one whom the Lord has sent to provide for Elijah does not have sufficient for her needs let alone enough to share. The story points out the utter dependence of the characters on the *Word of the Lord*.

In an unspectacular, but unmistakable fashion the widow herself is portrayed as a woman of steadfast faith. She does not hesitate to respond to Elijah's needs and to share what she has, although it is everything she has. Her faith and cooperation help make this miracle occur – they all eat until the rain falls again and normal life can resume.

Presumably God could have sent the ravens to visit again, or enabled Elijah to multiply the woman's supplies regardless of her participation. But when she does find the inner strength to share from her poverty and become an active part of the miracle the widow gains not just food, but dignity – the memory that God worked through her and not just the prophet. And for his part, Elijah is kept connected to the human community and warned against the temptation to take pride in his dramatic powers by dependence on the gift of a poor widow, one of the most marginalized and vulnerable members of his society.

In this story we learn about divine faithfulness, trusting obedience, and daring compassion. Elijah shows boldness and kindness as he ministers to one condemned by many to be on the fringes of society. Yet one could also ask, isn't it the widow who shows courageous compassion? She is the one harboring the enemy and risking an even sooner certain death. As we encounter such faithful witnesses to God's love, we continue to learn what it means to hear and to follow God. As Elijah fulfills his calling as God's prophet, he relies on others to provide the basic necessities of life. Like the widow of Zarephath, we are called to a generous hospitality. Our gifts, even when they may seem small, give life to others. We are all called to a daring compassion.

Whatever the circumstance, God will provide – we don't know how and may not understand why but God is with us in every moment – transforming and renewing our experience. This is called the doctrine of providence – a sense of ultimate protection against overwhelming or unseen odds as we seek to transform ourselves and our world. It is an intuitive, sometimes mysterious confirmation of our belief that the world is good despite the continuing ravages of evil. It is our expectant conviction that our sin has not destroyed the integrity of nature – that the divine image remains in us. Providence gives us hope and power to do something – to show God's love in action in our daily lives. We are not so broken that we can only bewail our cruel fate and passively wait for death or deliverance (as the widow might have done apart from Elijah's intervention). Providence liberates us from fate, because God acts through our limited, vulnerable selves in a world that God created and called good.

We witness God's providence toward Elijah and the widow and her son. Elijah meets the needs of his host family, and they, in turn, provide for him. God's providence is expressed as each person participates in the life of another and responds to the needs they perceive. The prophetic message is that our trust must not be in power but in compassion.

God can be trusted to care, even for the least among us – that is the understanding of God from the people of ancient Israel: Creator of all there is – one who keeps faith and executes justice for all. The wonder to be celebrated is not the jar strangely kept from being empty but the generosity of those filled with the love of God. It is the abundant blessing of a God who cares for even the least of people, especially those in great need. **Amen**