

‘NO GOD IN ISRAEL?’ 2 KINGS 1

[St Mark’s Northbridge, January 5, 2020 – All Services]

1. Where Are We?

- in the Biblical story

Some of you may remember that over the past couple of years at St Mark’s we’ve read and preached our way through all of 1 Kings. And over the next few months we’re going to continue to engage with this narrative of Israel’s history as we read the first half of 2 Kings. Originally 1 and 2 Kings were one long book. So, our ambition, God-willing, is to complete the whole book by reading and preaching through the second half of 2 Kings in 2021!

But since we’re coming back into the story of the kings at the half-way point you may well ask: ‘where are we?’ So let me remind you where we find ourselves in the Biblical story at this point.

As we start 2 Kings the year is probably 852BC. God’s people the Israelites have been a divided kingdom now for about 70 years. So there is Israel in the north and Judah in the south. As 2 Kings opens, the king in Israel is Ahaziah, the son of Ahab. The king in Judah is Jehoshaphat. And the LORD’s prophet at this time is a man named Elijah. Hopefully you remember him from 1 Kings, and especially from 1 Kings 18 where God used him in a spectacular way on Mount Carmel. That chapter told the story of the famous contest between the prophets of the idol Baal, and Elijah the prophet of the LORD. They all had to pray for fire to come down from heaven to consume an animal sacrifice. The prophets whose God sent fire would win. And they would prove the validity of their worship. Of course, the prophets of Baal did everything they could, but nothing happened. And then Elijah prayed a simple prayer to Yahweh the God of Israel and fire burst from the skies and swallowed up not only the animal sacrifice but the stone altar as well, leaving a burnt crater in the ground and a memorable impression on the minds and hearts of all who saw it and heard about it. And I point you back to that important story from 1 Kings because it’s relevant to 2 Kings 1, but also because it reminds us of the key issue in Israel at this point. Who deserves to be worshipped? Who is the true God? And what does it mean to honour him and live for him? I guess that’s the key issue at every point in history really. But this is where we’re up to in the Biblical story at this point.

- in the story of our lives

But there’s another important context question for us to consider as we come to 2 Kings 1 this morning/evening too. Where are we up to in the story of our lives? Because texts like 2 Kings 1 are not just of historical interest to people like us. They’re also important because we believe God speaks to us through them. So here we are at the start of a new year, full of possibilities and opportunities. That’s true for us personally, but also corporately as a church. This is where we are, today, now, as we listen to God’s word. So at this point in the story of our lives, at the beginning of 2020, what does God want to say to us through 2 Kings 1? Well, let’s dive in and take a closer look.

2. The Story of Ahaziah's Death.

One of the really striking things about 2 Kings 1 is that it's not so much the story of King Ahaziah's life as it's the story of King Ahaziah's death. And this is because the circumstances surrounding his death say a lot about who he was and what he stood for.

- the king's messengers and the King's messenger

And it starts with Ahaziah falling and injuring himself. Clearly his injuries were quite severe and Ahaziah wasn't sure whether he would survive. So his first instinct is to send messengers to a place called Ekron to consult the deity there known as Baal-Zebub! Ekron was in Philistine territory, and Ahaziah wants to ask this so-called Philistine "god" to tell him whether he's going to recover from his injuries or not. And the fact that this was his first instinct tells you a lot about his spiritual loyalties. And this wasn't just a moment of religious eccentricity on his part. Like his father Ahab before him, this was Ahaziah's settled pattern- ignoring the one true God and giving his devotion to the idols of the nations around him. Listen again to the last two verses of 1 Kings which summarise his life. 1 Kings 22:52.

[Read 1 Kings 22:52-53]

So Ahaziah's messengers set off for Ekron. But they are interrupted in their journey by the prophet Elijah. And Elijah comes to them with a message from the LORD. But it's not a message he's made up. It's a message he himself received- from the LORD's angel. And my first point on your outlines under heading number 2 is deliberately expressed to capture the contrast that 2 Kings 1 offers us here. King Ahaziah has sent his messengers, but there's another king in this story too. The King of Heaven- God himself. And he has messengers as well- his angels. And king Ahaziah may send his messengers on an errand, but if the capital "K" king sends his messenger to Elijah, then the king's lackeys may find their journey doesn't go the way they expected. And that's what happens here. Elijah stops them in their tracks with the LORD's verdict. God has an answer to the king's question about his survival chances. They're zero. He won't survive. He'll never get up again from his bed. He'll die.

But that's not all the LORD wants to say. He also wants to ask Ahaziah's messengers why on earth they were travelling all the way to Ekron with the king's question when the God of Israel is right here, and, in fact, he's the only one who can actually answer it. Listen to the forceful way this rhetorical question is given to Elijah in verse 3.

[Read 1:3]

Well, Ahaziah's messengers figure they've now got the answer to the king's question, even if it came from unexpected quarters. So, they go back to the king with the message Elijah gave them. Verse 5.

[Read 1:5-6]

Ahaziah is well aware of Elijah's reputation as a rabble-rouser in Israel so he asks a few questions to work out who it was that stopped his messengers in their tracks. And he

establishes that it was indeed the Elijah the Tishbite. And again, it doesn't take him long to work out what he wants to do next.

- the king's display of "power" and the King's display of power

Basically he decides to find Elijah and threaten him. It's hard to know what he hoped the outcome of this would be. Did he expect Elijah to change his prophecy? Did he just want to kill Elijah and get him out of his hair once and for all? We can't be sure, but what's absolutely clear is that he wanted to flex his muscles. From his sick-bed mind you, he wanted to display his "power".

So, he sends fifty soldiers and their captain to Elijah who was sitting on the top of a hill- perhaps anticipating this very reaction. Clearly the king wasn't just looking for some further advice from Elijah and he clearly wasn't just inviting him over for a cup of coffee. When you send fifty armed soldiers to look for one guy, I think you're making it pretty clear your intentions are a little less than peaceable. And when they get there they simply tell Elijah that the king wants him to come down. Elijah replies in verse 10 in the way God had no doubt told him to.

[Read 1:10a]

Elijah points out, of course, the irony of the captain addressing him as a 'man of God'. If the king really thought he was a man of God than presumably he wouldn't have sent his messengers to Ekron in search of Baal-Zebub. So the LORD sees here another opportunity to demonstrate that Elijah really is a man of God, a true prophet, and that the God he serves is real and true. The end of verse 10 simply says this: 'Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men'.

Well, King Ahaziah simply repeats the dose in verse 11 and sends another captain with his team of fifty soldiers. And exactly the same thing happens. The end of verse 12 is almost identical to the end of verse 10 but it also underlines where the fire comes from. Verse 12: 'Then the fire of God fell from heaven and consumed him and his fifty men'.

Does that ring any bells for you? Fire coming down from heaven? Fire coming from the God who has been ignored and rejected and who wants to prove himself so people can see that he's real and true? Of course. Mount Carmel. The similarities are impossible to miss. King Ahaziah would have heard the stories of what had happened on Mount Carmel just a few years previously. It's not impossible he was even there to see it. But he has despised the lesson that event contained. He has not recognised or honoured the LORD who alone was powerful to send fire. Which is why God has to repeat himself here. King Ahaziah looks to display his so-called power through his soldiers. And God, the capital K king responds by displaying his power with fire- his real and true power.

- the captain who seeks mercy

But, of course, arrogant and stubborn men like Ahaziah are notoriously slow to learn. So he sends a third captain and a third group of soldiers. But by this stage it's no secret what happened to the first two units of soldiers. The barracks are awash with the news. So the third captain who goes out refuses to obey King Ahaziah's orders. Instead, he recognises that there

is a king ruling these events whose power outstrips Ahaziah's by a long, long way. He doesn't come to the foot of Elijah's mountain and repeat the king's threat. Instead, he pleads for mercy for himself and for his men.

And verse 15 tells us that once again the angel of the LORD speaks to Elijah and tells him how he must respond. Once again we're being shown the source here. Just as the fire fell from heaven, so does this mercy. The captain and his men are saved. And not because Elijah is kind, but by divine intervention- literally.

- the final word

So, no fire falls this time. Instead, Elijah comes down the mountain and goes with the captain of the soldiers to see the king. This time, Elijah will deliver his message personally. And we now hear this message for the third time in the chapter. The emphasis on this in 2 Kings 1 is hard to miss. Verse 16.

[Read 1:16]

But that wasn't actually the last word. The last word of this story is in verse 17. And it's written in an unnervingly matter-of-fact way.

[Read 1:17]

The LORD has the final word here. But not by speaking. He has the final word by bringing what he has spoken to pass. As he always does.

3. A Story for People Who Ignore God.

Well, how does God speak to us today through this story? What I want to suggest to you this morning/evening is that there is in this chapter both a word for the world and a word for the church. This is both a story for people who ignore God, and a story for those who know God. So let me take a few minutes to explain what I mean. Firstly, three ways in which this is a story for people who ignore God.

- ignorance is foolish

And to begin with I hope you haven't missed that this is a story about the foolishness of ignoring God. This kind of deliberate ignorance is just dumb. Certainly it was in Ahaziah's case. He's sending messengers to far-off Ekron to get advice from a so-called "god" whose purported powers are so limited that you do have to travel to where he is to engage with him. But if Ahaziah had taken the time to get to know the God of his ancestors he would've known that he's a God who can be consulted wherever you are because he's not confined by space or time; he would've also known that he's not only a God who can tell the future but who can change it. The God of Ahaziah's people was, in fact, a God of such great power that, had he called out to him for help, he could've actually been healed of his injuries.

Ahaziah reminds us that it's always foolish to bank on a falsehood. But it's even more foolish when the obvious alternative is so much better! So 2 Kings 1 speaks to our world today and it

reminds us that banking on false paths is dumb. Perhaps especially in the face of mortality and death. And it's ultimately foolish because the obvious alternative is so much better. Jesus is the resurrection and the life! Many in our world today are putting their hope in other so-called "gods" or in false paths to God. Many in our world today, even in the face of mortality and death, are running in all sorts of directions for guidance, help, and comfort. When Jesus, who conquered death, is right here.

And I can't help but think that God would look on the people of Sydney today and say something like what he said to Ahaziah. Is it because there's no God in Sydney that you're consulting fortune tellers and reading your star sign? Is it because there's no God in Sydney that you've decided science is the repository of all truth? Is it because there's no God in Sydney that you find Buddhism so attractive? Is it because there's no God in Sydney that you're trusting the medical profession to know how to prolong your life and keep you well? Is it because there's no God in Sydney that you're running your own race, and building your own security, and banking on the fact that the decent life you're leading will get you into heaven?

This rhetorical question, which rings out three times in this chapter, echoes down through history to this day, and it makes a compelling point. It's a point about the foolishness of ignoring the God who is there, the God who is real and true, the God who is powerful, and the God who has made a way for people to enter heaven and live forever.

- ignorance will end

But secondly, of course, this chapter is also a reminder to us and to our world that ignorance of God never lasts. It always comes to an end. God brings it to an end. People can only ignore God for so long. Ultimately he will impress his reality and truth on everyone. That was Ahaziah's experience here. God had the last word. He showed up to reveal himself to Ahaziah unmistakably. And to judge him.

This is a chapter about how God is intolerant of idolatry and will ultimately prove that intolerance. This is certainly not a popular message in our world today, is it? As one writer on these verses puts it: 'The suave, self-appointed connoisseurs of religious taste in our time will be aghast if they ever happen on this story'¹. But it's true. One day, the Christ who died but who rose again will be seen and acknowledged by all. One day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord. On that day there will be no ignorance of God anywhere to be found.

- there is mercy for those who seek it

But the third thing this chapter says to our world today is that there is mercy for those who seek it. The third captain of the soldiers in this chapter is a very important character in the story. He models for us the very best way to approach God. He chooses not to ignore God's reality and God's truth, he chooses to acknowledge that Elijah really is a man of God, and asks God to be kind to him. And God is. His wrath is turned away. His life is spared.

¹ Dale Ralph Davis commentary- p.16

And so it is today. Those who choose to stop ignoring God's reality, God's truth, God's son, and those who start listening to God's messengers, and those who ask God to be kind to them, they find that he is. His wrath is turned away. In its place God's grace flows. His grace through Jesus Christ. There is an alternative to ignoring God. And it's full of wisdom. And if you're here today/tonight and you know you've been ignoring God, then allow this chapter to assure you of how good it will be if you change course. There is mercy for those who seek it.

This is God's message for our world. It's not a message unique to 2 Kings 1 in any way. But it's a message which this chapter brings into sharp focus.

4. A Story for People Who Know God.

But what about the church? What does God say to us through this chapter? Well, let me finish with two implications of 2 Kings 1 for those who do know God.

- don't give in to fear

And the first implication of this chapter for us is that we mustn't give in to fear. Surely this is what Elijah teaches us here. Having sent God's message through to king Ahaziah, Elijah then heads to the top of his hill awaiting a hostile reaction. And as we've seen, Ahaziah did not disappoint. And when a delegation of 50 armed soldiers comes to find you, it'd be reasonable to be pretty scared wouldn't it? And maybe Elijah was fearful. But we know he didn't give in to fear. We know he trusted in God. And we also know that that trust was well placed. Because God defended him. His judgement upon those first two groups of soldiers was simultaneously his protection of his prophet. He vindicates his servant. And the Scriptures promise us that, in the end, God will always do that. He will vindicate those who are faithful to him and who speak up for him. And as we begin this new year, filled with opportunities for us to speak up for Jesus, filled with the prospect of us declaring God's message to a world that may or may not want to hear it, Elijah's example invites us to be brave. He encourages us not to give in to fear, but to be unashamed of the gospel. As we read in 1 Peter 3: "Do not fear their threats; no not be frightened." But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have.' And if you're looking for a good new year's resolution there's one right there. Throughout 2020- fearless testimony to the Lord Jesus and the hope we have in him.

- count your blessings

But secondly and finally today/tonight, count your blessings. Because the nagging rhetorical question of 2 Kings 1 is the message God had for Ahaziah. Is it because there's no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub? And we've been reminded this morning/evening that God may well have the same sharp question for the people of Sydney. Is it because there's no God in Sydney that you're chasing after so many foolish alternatives? And what God was saying to Ahaziah is that he was looking in his neighbour's backyard when something much better was already in his. And what this chapter is saying to the people of Sydney is that they're looking in all the wrong places when something far better than what they seek is right in front of their noses.

But one of the implications of this is that when you do have the God of Israel on your side, you've got it made. And when you do have Jesus Christ in your corner, you really do have everything you need. So if on this first Sunday of the new year you find yourself knowing the God who is real and true, if you find yourself in a relationship with Jesus Christ, then you've got a lot to be thankful for. In fact, listen to how the apostle Paul says it. Ephesians 1:3: 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ'. That's a lot of blessings!

I've had two conversations again recently with other Christians where we've reflected on how on earth people in the world face trials without knowing God. The first conversation was with a friend who was grieving the death of someone they really cared about. The second conversation was with a friend who's just had her third miscarriage in a row. Both these sisters talked with me about how they couldn't imagine facing these trials without the comforting and strengthening presence of Jesus. I feel the same. When life is hard, where would we be without Christ? We'd be in Ahaziah's tragic shoes wouldn't we? We'd be in the shoes of so many Sydney-siders who are trying to negotiate life without the hope that's in the gospel, wouldn't we? But we're not. It's because there was a God in Israel and there is a God in Sydney that are lives are littered with divine provision, a father's comfort, the Spirit's strength, the Christian hope.

And even when life is going well and we're not in the midst of any great trial, the same is true. All the good things we enjoy come from him. And we ought to be people for whom thanksgiving seeps out of every pore. It's because there was a God in Israel and there is a God in Sydney that are lives are filled to overflowing with divine gifts, a father's care, the Spirit's fruit, and Christian joy. So, brothers and sisters, as this new year begins, filled with whatever may come our way, count your blessings. Count your blessings.

'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ'. Amen.