

Sunday School notes: 4 September 2022: Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18)

Last week we heard how God was using a terrible drought to show that there was only one true God. Many of God's people had forgotten this. Instead they were choosing to worship the gods that their neighbours worshipped. But after nearly three long years without even any dew, it was clear that these gods couldn't answer their prayers.

The king thought that the drought had come because Elijah (God's messenger) had cursed the land. He described Elijah as "The troubler of Israel." However, actually the king and his wife Jezebel had encouraged God's people to worship other gods so they had "troubled" Israel. Then Elijah set up a challenge so everyone could see which God was the most real and powerful! (We know the answer, but the people then didn't.)

Elijah asked the king to bring the 450 priests who worshipped the other god (known as Baal) to Mount Carmel. When they arrived, Elijah suggested a competition to prove which god was greater. He suggested that he and Baal's prophets would each build an altar with a sacrifice. Then they would take turns to ask their god to set fire to the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal liked the idea, and Elijah let them go first.

I imagine Baal's prophets gathered a huge pile of dry sticks round their altar. Then those 450 prophets danced around the altar pleading with Baal to light the fire under their sacrifice. But nothing happened. Eventually they were exhausted and bruised and limping. Elijah was not surprised. (see 1 Kgs 18:26-29) He had known this would happen.

Eventually they gave up and it was Elijah's turn. He built an altar according to God's instructions. Then he did something to prove that he was not using trickery: he ordered people to throw some of their precious water over his altar, soaking the wood and the sacrifice and the stones. He even dug a trench for the water to gather round the altar. Then very quietly he prayed to God to show his power and ...Woosh! The altar, the sacrifice, the water and everything went up in flames immediately. Elijah's God was powerful. The people Knew at once that they had been praying to a useless god.

Having proved that God could answer prayer, Elijah then prayed for rain. While he was praying, his servant checked the sky. Eventually the servant saw a tiny cloud on the horizon – no bigger than a person's hand, But that was enough! Elijah warned the king to ride home as fast as possible because the rain was coming! And it did,

We believe that the people were foolish to think that an idol could help them. But perhaps we are the same. For instance: we hear all kinds of people talking about climate change these days, but do they ever ask God for help! So perhaps we are just as bad as the people then? We forget that this is God's world! We forget that he cares about us. He will show us how to live and look after his creation. He might tell us to change our habits (eg with regard to water and electricity and recycling).. Who knows? But at least we should listen to the voice of the Creator of the universe – or we are just like the people who forgot about God..