

Proper 17 pm
Place: St Mary's
end

3rd Sept 17
2.Ki 6.24-25, 7.3-

Theme: Change Acts 7.1-16

- ◆ The situation of the city of Samaria in our first reading is alien to us. What can the besieging of a city in the Iron Age tell us about faith now? It is an interesting story, but seems as strange as the idea that one might be forced by circumstances to eat doves dung or a donkey's head.
- ◆ Yet while several hundred years have passed since any cities were besieged here in Great Britain: as individuals we still find ourselves from time to time in situations of desperation and despair. A fruitful way of reading such stories is to see the city as a metaphor for ourselves and the different characters in the stories as representing the different voices within ourselves that shape our actions and how they relate to God.
- ◆ We have not heard the whole of the story this evening. We have missed out the harrowing details of a woman who cries out to the king of Samaria. He tells her that he cannot help her, as there is no food left anywhere in the city. He then asks the woman what she wants. The woman tells him a horrific story. Her neighbour has tricked her into killing her son so that they can eat him, on the understanding that she too

will kill her son. The neighbour has now gone back on the terrible deal and won't kill her son. The woman has come to the king for justice, but what justice can there be in such a situation.

- ◆ It is a powerful vignette that demonstrates how corrupting and demoralising desperate want can be. When things go wrong for us and all hope is lost we can do the most awful, hateful things. Anyone who has suffered from addiction, or has a family member who have, knows this. When faced with such sin and horror the king is powerless, there is nothing that had can do and he tears his clothes. He has been praying it turns out. When he tears his clothes, the people see the sackcloth underneath. He has been praying, but God has not answered his prayers and now he knows that things are utterly desperate and he is at the end of his resources.
- ◆ He becomes angry with God. He is no longer penitent, but furious and sends his men to kill Elisha, the Man of God. It is the nearest he can get to taking out his frustration and humiliation on God.
- ◆ God warns Elisha that the king's men are coming and he bars the door and won't let them in. Elisha knows the king will not be far behind his men. Interestingly, once the King is there, Elisha unbars the door and lets him in.
- ◆ What does this tell us about prayer and how we should pray in desperate circumstance. One of

the things I think it tells us is that it is alright to be angry with God when things are very difficult. In deed being angry with God is a kind of faith. We only get angry with God because we believe and think that God could do something. More than that, it is the king's anger that brings him to Elisha, to the person who is able to give him God's word. He has been trying to pray, possibly for months. He has been wearing sackcloth and repenting for his sins and the sins of the city; yet God has not come close. Now he is face to face with the man of God.

- ◆ Elisha tells him that within 24 hours food will be plentiful and cheap within the city. God is going to save the people. When the Captain of the Guard hears this he scoffs and says that's never going to happen, even if the sky opened and food rained down out of it.
- ◆ We often think atheism and cynicism are modern ways of thinking. The captain reminds us that they are as old as humanity itself. The captain of the guard represents a lesser, inadequate version of the king. He is powerful. He knows the world, he gets things done. He is the part of us that knows that money doesn't grow on trees and that food doesn't fall from heaven, but is practical and resourceful and gets things done. He rejects the word of God. This is much worse than what the king does when he sends his men to kill Elisha. The king is not punished for that, but the

Captain of the guard is cursed because he rejects God's word and does not take seriously.

- ◆ The people who first discover God's power and grace to save in this situation are neither the king, not the captain of the guard nor the decent, upright citizens. The first people to know that they are saved are the lepers. Those who are despised and rejected by everyone else and have nothing. Not only do they have no possessions, but they have also lost their place in society and are still cast out, even during the siege.
- ◆ These lepers are not particularly good or admirable people. Rather the opposite. They decide their best bet is to desert to the enemy. Yet when they get to the camp to turn themselves over, they discover the truth; they also discover great wealth and so the first thing they do is have a party, followed by a bit of looting.
- ◆ Like the shepherds in the nativity they are the first to discover God's saving action. As they rejoice in their change of fortune and God's abundant grace they are humanised by it. They realise that they need to tell the rest of the city the good news and they go and tell the king. In doing this they are brought back into society and are no longer ostracised.
- ◆ When the king hears, despite what Elisha has told him, he thinks it is a trap. So he sends out a few men and horses to see. It is all true. As the

word spreads through the city the people rush the gates, desperate for food and for freedom. The captain of the guard is crushed.

- ◆ We may feel sorry for the captain, but what he represents is that worldly wise, cynical part of us and what the story tells us is that we don't have to have complete faith – the king certainly didn't, but we do need some. Once we dismiss the possibility of God and God acting in our lives the only future for us is death. That part of ourselves is not helpful in our relationship with God, even if it has other uses. By contrast, the lepers, the parts of ourselves we despise and reject, are the parts that are most likely to lead us to the place where we see the grace of God at work.