

All Saints talk for Sunday 21 January 2024
Tom Peryer

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

1 KINGS 19

1 THESSALONIANS 5: 12 - 16

SLIDE: What are you doing here?

Over the past couple of days I have been subject to temptation. The temptation or dilemma was “*do I invest a number of hours in the preparation of the talk for Sunday or do I rely on one created for me by artificial intelligence?*” Well I said “*Get thee behind me AI*” and have gone with the one you are about to hear.

SLIDE: Artificial Inteligence

Of course if you should be curious enough to know what AI chat produces, all you have to do, as I did out of curiosity, is type into your AI google chat “*Write me a sermon on God’s question to Elijah ‘what are you doing here?’*” And a split second later, up will come a perfectly formed sermon with four or five points which makes complete sense. Try it out and compare it with what you are about to hear – my human intelligence version.

So we come to the third of our questions in our series “God questions”. Twice Chapter 19 of the first book of Kings God asks Elijah “What are you doing here, Elijah?” It’s a good question:

SLIDE: What are you doing here All Saints?

- What are you doing here Tom?
- What are you doing here NAME ?
- What are you doing here NAME?
- What are you doing here church?

I don’t know if you watched or are aware of the American TV series ‘Suits’ which was made in the 2010’s decade and had Meghan Markle, playing one of its lead characters. The script writers were very fond of the line ‘what are you doing here?’

Play video excerpt

There’s another 11 minutes of that! And another 400 times the question is asked!

I think quite a few people might have asked these workmen what exactly they thought they were doing here

SLIDE: Slow/WOLS

when they were told to put the word ‘SLOW’ in white paint on the road!

Before we ask that question more directly of ourselves and of our church

let’s turn to the specifics of this story and why God asked the question.

In Chapter 18 of 1 Kings we have the Highs of Elijah. In Chapter 19 we have the Lows of Elijah. Almost overnight he goes from

Hero to Zero. **SLIDE Hero to zero** From fearless prophet and miracle worker to an exhausted, shivering runaway.

In Chapter 18 at a time when the true prophets of God were being harassed and killed by Jezebel the wife of King Ahab, Elijah has walked into the lions' den of the royal court and challenged Ahab and 400 prophets of Baal to a duel, to a test.

SLIDE Elijah bringing down fire

It's a wonderful story with Elijah really hamming up his part and ridiculing the prophets as they attempt – unsuccessfully – to bring fire to the bull that is on the altar. But when Elijah prays a short prayer, the fire falls and the sacrifice is consumed. The prophets of Baal are routed. It is a wonderful triumph.

This is then followed by Elijah's prayer that the drought would end and after sending his servant seven times to look at the sky *'a little cloud no bigger than a man's hand'* appears and after three years of drought the rain falls. Another triumph. Another miracle.

This chapter or this episode ends with this little cameo:

*"Then Ahab rode in his chariot to Jezreel" - that's about 20 miles away " **SLIDE Elijah running before the chariot** And the power of the Lord came upon Elijah and tucking his cloak up into his belt he ran ahead of Ahab in his chariot all the way to Jezreel"*

Miracle worker. Powerful prayer. Marathon winner.

But then turn the page to Chapter 19 and we see a very different Elijah. The hero has gone and it's Mr Exhausted - A fearful zero.

That's because, back in the royal court at Jezreel, Jezebel is furious and sends a messenger threatening Elijah's life and telling him that she vows to make him as dead as her prophets of Baal are.

And what does this hitherto fearless man of God do, the one who has just run ahead of Ahab's chariot? Verse 3 tells us.

'Elijah was afraid and ran for his life' He ran for his life.

In fact he ran over 100 miles away. That's a lot of running and walking. Then he leaves his servant-companion behind and goes another day's journey – he is not making good decisions. In a depressed, fearful and lonely state he decides to walk off on his own. I knew someone who did that once, a teenager. She walked to a railway line. And you can guess what happened. Others here know someone who went on that lonely walk sometimes someone very close to them.

Finally, Elijah collapses under a shrub

SLIDE Elijah under the broom tree

a broom tree, a scruffy shrub, barely able to give any shade from the heat of the day. And there in self-pity he prays a prayer. Not the prayer *'God help me'* but *"Lord I have had enough. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors"*.

Ever prayed or thought the same? *"I've had enough. I feel like crawling away into a corner and never coming out again?"* If so, you would be in company with a great many heroes of the faith in scripture and in history. So it was with Elijah. And having prayed that prayer, he fell asleep possibly hoping that he would never wake up again.

Elijah did not know about the Peanuts cartoon strip and about the insecure, anxious character Charlie Brown who confided to his friend one day: **Slide Charlie Brown** *'Sometimes I lie awake at night and ask 'Where have I gone wrong', then a voice says to me 'This is going to take more than one night'.'*

That is how Elijah felt. He felt alone, abandoned, worthless. None of that was true of course but that is how he felt. My favourite biblical commentator Matthew Henry said of this episode:

SLIDE: Elijah and Matthew Henry quote

God's children may lose themselves in the wilderness but he has not lost them'

But that is not what Elijah felt at that moment or had felt for many a day. Somehow the answers to prayer he had had in the past, the victories and triumphs, were all forgotten. He was a beaten man.

Now, here's an interesting thing about us and our prayer requests. Elijah is known to be a man of prayer. He has seen wonderful answers to his prayer. The apostle James in his

letter urges his readers to be faithful prayers like Elijah who, James says

'... was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.'

Elijah was used to having his prayers answered. Why, he had even brought the widow's son back to life through his prayers. But then in his desperate, near suicidal state he prays a prayer: *'Take away my life'*.

Is that prayer answered? Does God give Elijah what Elijah thinks he needs at that moment? No! Far from it. This particular prayer *'take away my life'* is not answered – or at least not answered with a 'yes'. Sometimes it is a good thing that our prayers and desires are not answered – although we may not feel that at the time.

I don't know if there are any here today who are feeling exactly like or a bit like Elijah and you maybe you forced yourself to come here today. If so perhaps you can take comfort from this story, from seeing that Elijah was not alone, that God was present in his distress and that there was a way out and a way forward. Someone once said *"where I am does not define who I am"* Don't let your circumstances or your feelings at any one time define and constrain who you are and most importantly who you are in Christ and in God's sight.

Now I'm going to quickly through skip the next bit. An angel comes and refreshes him for the next stage of a journey. He is fed and watered and then sets off even farther south and

away from Jezebel on a 40 day journey to Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai as it is better known. Mt Sinai is where Moses first encountered God in the burning bush and where God asked him the question *'what is that in your hand?'* It is where Moses communed with God when he was given the 10 commandments and his face shone with the glory of God. It is a special holy place and when Elijah gets there he went into a cave and spent the night there. In the morning we are told in verse 9:

And the word of the Lord came to him "what are you doing here Elijah?"

This is where I leave Elijah and apply the question, out of context to us.

SLIDE: What are you doing here

Firstly what are we as the people of All Saints personally doing here in this place, in this village and city in this world at this time in history.

It's a tough question. Nearly all of the questions that we are studying this term are tough questions. If we sat down and thought about it and discussed -which would be a good thing to do – we could probably all come up with quite a long list of activities and things that happen. But we might struggle to say what are the effects and results of all those activities and events. Of course it's a difficult question to answer.

To some extent the PCC will have to partially ask that question over the next month or two because it is legally responsible for

the annual report. In the annual account not only do we have to given an account of all the money that has come in (a lot and much of it in the form of your generous giving – thank you) and what we have done with that money.

But as well as the money side of it – which can look like the Greek alphabet to many people, there is the account of what we have done, what things we have accomplished, which goals and aims have been met, what challenges we have faced, how many people are attending and so on. What we plan to do in 2024 and beyond.

It is, as I say, easier to describe what we have done rather than to assess what impact we have had. But from time to time, church leaders and I include in that the PCC but the whole church family as a whole need to ask the question *'what exactly are we doing here?'*

Another way of asking the question is to say *"what would be lost if we were not here?"* 'I don't just mean lost to Christians, but lost to the 8,000 people of Weston. Would they miss us if we weren't here? In the future it seems practically inevitable that many churches will cease to exist as churches. Will that matter? Will they be missed? Will society be the poorer for it? I think the answer is 'yes' to those questions, I hope the answer is 'yes' but I have my doubts.

We are all familiar with the idea of the church as human body with many different parts and we often refer to that when we talk about the contribution that each of us can make. But sometimes I find it helpful to ask:

'If the church were a ship what kind of a ship would it be?'

You probably know that the nave of a church that we all sit comes from the Latin word for ship, navis – hence navy and naval.

SLIDE

Here are five ships:

- An aircraft carrier
- A fishing boat
- A hospital ship
- A cruise liner
- A lifeboat

Which one or two do you think would best fit All Saints?

Maybe none of them. All of those ships have a clear purpose such as:

- To rescue people
- To defend and if necessary go to war against an enemy
- To give people a good time
- To catch fish
- To bring medical and emergency help to those suffering

To which of those can we say “yes we do that?” I’ll leave you to answer the question and come up with other ships.

Now as we come to the end *‘let’s get personal’* as they say.

Our last question.

What are you doing here?

Let’s stick with the ship idea. All five ships have a crew and on three of those ships up there, everyone on board is a member of the crew, is supposed to be active in keeping the ship afloat, on course and fulfilling its main purpose. For three of the ships there are people on board ship who are not part of the crew. These are:

- Anyone who has been rescued by the lifeboat crew
- Anyone who is receiving medical help from the mercy hospital ship
- Anyone who is passenger enjoying the swimming pools, restaurants, talks (for talks read sermons), evening entertainment (like Burns suppers) and the comfortable beds.

Let me ask you are you a member of the crew of the good ship All Saints. Or are you a fee-paying passenger?

SLIDE: Crews of ships

As with the body so with the crew of a ship, especially a large there are scores of roles and positions for people. Some are way below decks – out of sight of most of the crew and passengers. Some are very much up on deck, on the bridge, in the restaurants. Some are looking after the plant and machinery; some are looking after the needs of the rest of the

crew or the passengers. Some are very much people oriented: some are not. Some are in positions of leadership and driving the ship forward and to its destination; others are content to stay out of the limelight. The point is every one of the crew has a job to do. So every one who is a part of the church should be a contributor as well as a receiver.

Now of course there are exceptions. All of the crew are entitled to time when they are off duty or when they have shore leave. As we were reminded in our series last term, there is a time for rest, sabbath time. It is also the case that the ships I mentioned carry people who are not well enough to do anything and who have to be cared for by the crew. That's true of some of the people in churches and I don't just mean physically well enough; some people have been bruised and battered or are in a tough situation. They need time out. This is when others step in and up. But the default position for Christians should be that we are an active member of the crew, a working part of the body, a useful member who is not idle. There should not be lazy, idle passengers.

SLIDE: Passengers in deck chairs

I hope that does not come across as too bossy, too demanding. In fact being part of the crew is as good for us as it is for others. We have all experienced the truth that being part of the crew rather than just being a passenger brings all sorts of benefits to us as well as to others around us. It is good for us to be on team, part of the body, a member of the crew.

SLIDE: Crews

Sanctuary Finish

I haven't touched on the passage in 1 Thessalonians that we head and you'll be pleased to know that I am not going to expand on it. But I will end by quoting again the passage and seeing it as part of the answer to the questions 'what are you doing here' or 'what could you be doing here?'

SLIDE: What are you doing here?

'Encourage one another and build each other up ... Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle not to be idle,, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ... but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

May the Lord help us all to know how best to do good for each other and for everyone else right where we are.

Prayer