

Address by Howard Friend for 26th June 2022

Readings: 1 Kings 19: 15-16 & 19 -end; Luke 9: 51 - end

Remind me please what Kirsty and Phil say are the three most important considerations when buying or selling a house?

Location, Location, Location

That's right.

Location.

Location – or more accurately, geographical context, is what came to my mind as I re-read 1 Kings and this interesting tale of Elijah - post Mount Carmel.

Because it's impossible to understand the meaning here and in particular the central question asked by God of Elijah,

What are you doing here?

unless you grasp the sense of where it all happened – and to a certain extent – in what sequence.

Where then does it all start? Well – our reading started with Elijah feeling v sorry for himself, under a Broom Bush, a days journey south Beersheba, the southern most city of Judah.

But that's not the beginning location of this story.

A bit like the proverbial Devon farmer, you know the story I'm sure - the one where a tourist gets lost (this was pre- Google maps) - comes across an old farmer leaning over a gate admiring his cows. You got the picture? And the tourist says, 'I say – can you tell me the way to London. The farmer has a long think - then answers, Well maister, if I was gwain to Lundun I wouldn't be starting yer.

Which is a rather long winded way of saying - If we want to understand why we find Elijah feeling v sorry for himself - under a Bush - south of Beersheba – we have to go back a bit.

Truth is - he was running for his life. He was being pursued by Queen Jezabel's henchmen. She was not at all pleased that he / Elijah had slaughtered 400 or so of her prophets of Baal up on Mount Carmel, in northern Israel.

Our lectionary wallahs tactfully omit this bit of 1 Kings, possibly because it might offend our modern sensibilities.

Anyway - my point is - Elijah had done a pretty good job of fleeing his enemy. Beersheba is about 200km south of Mount Carmel, a good week's journey on foot in that heat.

There - under that bush – God provides for him in a miraculous way. Food for his journey.

BUT – and it's a big BUT. Elijah doesn't go on the journey God had intended for him - back up again to northern Israel where he was due to Crown a couple of Kings and annoint his successor, Elisha. We found this important detail at the end of our reading.

On the contrary- he / Elijah continued to flee south to Mount Horeb, another 400km due south - a couple of weeks walking at least – away from his responsibilities.

And that's where we find him hiding in a cave.

And that's where we get to the nub of this sermon.

Twice (twice) God asks Elijah:

What are you doing here?

Now – here's a little aside – that question takes me back to my school days – and an unfortunate incident when my friend and I were caught smoking behind the bike sheds.

What are you doing here Friend – rings very clearly in my ears (across the years).

In retrospect I shouldn't have answered -

Isn't that pretty obvious Sir?

Then I wouldn't have incurred a double detention.

One learns from one's mistakes.

However - my point is - Elijah was almost as challenging in his answer.

What are you doing here Elijah? God asks.

His answer was akin to those garbled, impossibly fast, Terms and Conditions for the adverts for washing machines or whatever that plague Classic FM and the Telly:

'I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.'

And so uptight is he, thinking he's the only person doing God's work around here, that when God asks again:-

What are you doing here Elijah? – he spews the whole lot out again.

Now I'm not going to enlarge on the Earthquake, Fire and Wind bit of this chapter – you may or may not be pleased to hear – keeping appropriately silent on those manifestations of God's power to Elijah - and instead stick to my Location theme.

God tells him after the silence – that there are at least 7000 others who haven't bowed the knee to Baal – and would he please go north again and do what he had originally been asked to do.

Of course the more truthful answer to the big question God asked Elijah was:

I was afraid to do what you wanted me to do Lord. So I did a runner.

One has a lot of sympathy for Elijah, God had asked him to stay in the north of Israel where he was at risk of capture by Jezebel's troops.

However:-

I wonder how you or I would answer that same question?

What are you doing here?

If we believe - as we do - that the Spirit of God indwells every believer - and prompts every seeker – each of us should ponder that question and look for an answer.

And if you're tempted - like Elijah - to roll off a litany of achievements and woes such as:-

Oh Lord you know I've sat on the PCC for ever, single handedly organised the church fête this year, sing in the choir, bake cakes for the cafe, am on the welcome team, I even sit on Deanery synod – Lord. Nobody else will do it!

Remember - God has heard it all before.

BTW – there's nothing wrong with serving God by sitting on the PCC or Deanery Synod. Let me get that in - before I get a yellow card.

But perhaps we should ask ourselves again:-

What does God want me to do – and where.

There is a place for sitting in silence and asking :-

What am I doing here?