

1 KINGS 18:20-39
WAVERING BETWEEN THIS AND THAT?

Choices: have so many choices today. Custom Foot in the US makes boots: the salesperson will measure your foot using a digital foot imager and then you will be shown a whole variety of styles for ski boots or hiking boots; what kind of toe would you like, or heel? You make your choices and these are dispatched to Italy where the shoes are custom-made for you. In some hotels: does the customer choose the classical radio station, and eat chocolate chip cookies? When you come back to stay the next time, they tailor their service to you based on your previous choices. Internet marketing is the same: based on choices you make, websites are offered to you. We discovered at the Heriot Watt lecture in February that there are websites in the United States that will allow you to choose your child, and a scan that will tell you that your unborn child is likely to contract certain diseases in the future and do you want to continue with the pregnancy? There are choices all over the place!

There are also more religious choices than ever before. We live in a world where people can pick and choose their religious experience and what to believe. In Scotland 50 years ago, probably the only choice was to do with which branch of the Christian church you would choose to be part of and even then, parts of it were closed off to you because of your upbringing and certainly in the West of Scotland, which school you went to. Now, there are all kinds of religious experience out in the market place: you can live your life and make decisions by tarot cards, or by horoscopes; you can embrace Eastern philosophies of life, some of which are religious and some are not; you can embrace any number of branches of the Christian Church – there are between 15 and 20 different kinds of Christian groups in Edinburgh before we start to count national churches that cater for people from their native country. There is a struggle for the soul of the nation – will we have faith, or none? These choices abound and they have consequences, many of which are unforeseen.

Confronted with so many choices, it is hard to make up your mind! People become confused; life was simple when there was one choice and you could choose “yes” or “no”. Alongside these choices, (and I’m not saying these are connected) we live in a culture now where people are reluctant to commit to anything. Political party membership is at the lowest it has been for decades; church membership is also at its lowest for a long time. Yet, people are still interested in political issues; campaign groups find that people will support their campaigns to save the environment or protect the green-space; people are still interested to talk about issues of faith and life and are concerned about their spirit and their deepest well-being. They simply are not able (or don’t want) to make a long-term, lifelong commitment to the Christian faith and to the church. How important is that commitment? What difference, long-term, will this lack of commitment make to the soul of the nation?

On the surface, the story about Elijah is a strange story about an old controversy, a million miles away from Scotland in 2013. But it is a story about a people, a nation, not exactly sure what they believe and not committed to one thing or another. Then you have Elijah, the prophet; it is the story of one man’s faith and his courage to stand up for that faith in the cauldron of opposition. It is a fascinating story that revolves around the question Elijah put to the people: *“How long...”* (1 Kings 18:21) The people’s silence speaks volumes: either they could not choose or were not prepared to choose one over another; they did not know which way to go? Elijah is a strange character who appears

out of nowhere during a drought in Israel and God calls him to speak the word of Lord to the king who had lost his way, who had given up on his faith and had led the people astray at the same time. There had been no rain for three years and Elijah brings God's word to the king, calling him to repent and turn back to God. But there's another choice!

Ba'al represented a fertility cult. There were lots of local gods in Canaan when Israel arrived and they came from the nations around about. Jezebel was queen and she had come from one of these surrounding nations and encouraged these other religious practices; there were hundreds of prophets of Baal whose job it was to bring offerings of food and such like to these statues made of wood and stone, made to represent these so-called gods. Ba'als were gods of fertility and weather and war and it was these prophets job to keep them appeased. But there's another choice. Israel had been brought up on the commands, in the first of which God had said "*you shall...*" (*Exodus 20:3*) Israel's first love and loyalty was to the Lord, the living God, the God of heaven and earth, the God who had rescued them from Egypt. Elijah saw that the people had to make a choice; they couldn't have it both ways. They wanted to keep a foot in both camps, but Elijah saw that the time had come to make a choice. "*How long...*" (*1 Kings 18:21*)

On top of Mount Carmel, near to the Mediterranean Sea, we have a contest – Elijah against the prophets of Ba'al. Each is given a bull; they are to sacrifice the bull, build an altar and each to call on their god to set the bull on fire. The God who does this will be the God in Israel. The prophets of Ba'al go first. They put their bull on the altar and call on their gods to set it on fire, but nothing happens. Twice we read: "*there was...*" (*1 Kings 18:29*) Elijah indulges in some old-fashioned sarcasm when nothing happens: "*surely...*" (*1 Kings 18:27*) Then it is Elijah's turn: he builds his altar and three times he douses it with gallons of water, just to make it harder to set it on fire. He prays: "*O Lord...*" (*1 Kings 18:36f*) and the story tells us that fire came from heaven and the Lord set the bull on fire, altar and all, even the water. We are left in no doubt about the winner in this contest; the Lord, the living God, he is the winner; the Lord has power, He is the One who is worthy of worship.

"*When all...*" (*1 Kings 18:39*) The people saw what God had done and reacted with faith. They responded to this great display of power from God and reacted in the way that God and Elijah had hoped; they pledged their allegiance to the Lord, the living God, the God who had loved them and saved them and who was with them always and everywhere. They have seen and have experienced the power of God and have reacted with faith. Elijah's faith is rewarded, and his courage, as he sees God answer his prayers in the most powerful way. This battle for the soul and spirit of Israel is won by the prophet prepared to stand up for his faith and with the courage of his convictions. This showed in the most powerful way that God can be trusted.

The same kind of battle going on in Paul's mind when he writes his letter to the Galatian Christians. There is some rather strong language, intemperate perhaps; words like 'anathema' don't sit quite so easily in our modern, tolerant culture. They represent Paul's passion, however; here is a man passionate for the gospel, passionate that people should believe in Jesus and having embraced the Christian faith should not give it up for something that he considers lesser. "*I'm astonished...*" (*Galatians 1:6*) As far as Paul is concerned there is no other gospel; as soon as you add something to Jesus, you take something away from Jesus. Paul's passion is to show the world that Jesus is Lord and that Jesus is worthy of trust and faith and obedience.

The church in 2013 Scotland lives in this religious market place. All kinds of faiths are on offer and indeed the loudest lobby in Scotland today is from atheism and secular Scotland who would persuade us to remove all kinds of religion from the public square altogether. Why listen to the Christian church? Why embrace Jesus? My answer is to look at what God has done for the world in Jesus; see what that represents; see what that means and what is on offer; you can't beat it! I'm not talking about religion now, about all the trappings that come with churches and their history or traditions; I'm talking about the things that stand at the heart of the Christian faith. There is a battle going on out there for the soul and spirit of Scotland and it matters more than we know; if we sweep away all of the spiritual things from public and private life, we will lose so much more than we know.

The Christian gospel centres on Jesus and on His death and resurrection. These are the two events that are basic to Christian faith; understand these two events and you understand Christianity. First of all, Jesus died on a cross outside the city of Jerusalem; we can place it on the calendar, we can tell you when it happened; it is a historical event. The heart of the cross is the love that God has for the world. God loved the world enough to give His Son; Jesus loved the world enough to sacrifice Himself for the sake of others, for our sake. God has shown His love to the world in the death of Jesus and in His love He has promised to save us completely and forgive us our sins. There is more to it than that, but that is heart of it; the love of God is revealed in the world by the cross. Here is God who shares in our suffering; who knows how it feels when we suffer, who suffers with us. Secondly, the resurrection reveals the power of God. It had never been done before. Jesus died on the cross and on Sunday morning the tomb is empty. Where is His body? People saw Him alive, they spoke with Him, they had breakfast with Him, they experienced the risen Christ first-hand and it changed their lives; it changed their world forever. The same power is still at work in us.

Why believe? Look, see what God has done in our world. He has loved us and Jesus has died; His power has raised Jesus and He is Lord. Our faith is a response to what God has done; we experience the love and power of God for ourselves in the cross and the resurrection. If want to know God, there is no finer way to discover what God is like than in Jesus; if you want to discover what life is all about, there is no more profound connection between God and our world than the cross and resurrection. If you want to discover life at its fullest, there is no better way than in the blessings God has provided for us in the gospel. This is what God has done for us; it does not get any better than this. Forget 'religion'; forget the baggage that every Church carries with it from its past. Focus on Jesus and on what God has done for us in Him and see the blessings of God for us and for the world. It doesn't get any better.

Choice and commitment – 2 hard words for people in our culture. We don't want to make choices and it is not easy to make commitments. Yet there are times when we need to make both choices and commitments. Christian faith is about making choice and commitment as response to the love and power of God in Jesus. See what God has done – choose faith. See the love that God has for us – love Him back; see the power of God at work – trust Him, He is worthy of that trust! There is no better choice that we can make than to follow Jesus; there is no better commitment that we can make than to follow Jesus; it is a life-enhancing, life-shaping, life-changing choice and all the blessing of God is ours!