

What we really need

Readings: 1 Kings 19:9b – 13, Mark 5:21 – 43

Recently ISIS (the radical group of Sunni Arabs) has terrorised the North of Syria and Iraq. One could argue that this invasion is a direct result of the US interference. On the 20th March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq. The justification for the invasion was the stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction (which were never found). The invasion led to an occupation and the eventual capture of Sadaam Hussein, who was later tried in an Iraqi court of law and executed by the new Iraqi government. The cynic in me can't help but wonder why the US involvement focuses on oil producing countries.

The current government is dominated by Shia Muslims. Sunni religious and political leaders don't believe they get a fair go so ISIS has stepped up attacks targeting the country's majority Shia population in Iraq and Syria. Iraq's government has lost control of large areas of the country's north and again the US is talking of getting involved.

The Middle East is very complex; it's not just about Sunni and Shia Muslims. However the United States wanted rid of Sadaam Hussein. Well they got their wish and now what? The rest of the world prays and waits.

Perhaps that is a controversial example to use. Still, very often we human beings think we know what we need and we don't at all. Our tunnel vision limits what we can see and reduces our options massively. We limit what God wants for us. We try to prescribe when and how God will work. Foolish humans.

"I don't think the way you think.
The way you work isn't the way I work" says the Lord.
"For as the sky soars high above earth,
so the way I work surpasses the way you work..." Isaiah 55:8 & 9

Our challenge is to work with and to allow him to open our controlling, prescriptive, limited minds and spirits what the Lord is doing. In a word; to trust him; especially when everything seems like crap. Let's look at some stories where the challenge was to do just that.

We'll start with Elijah; God's mighty prophet who had recently won a major battle against the 450 prophets of the Canaanite god Baal. (He thought he was God's solitary remaining prophet.) As a result the people worshipped the Lord, killed the evil prophets and the Lord caused rain to fall on the drought-stricken land. A mighty victory for Elijah.

But Queen Jezebel wants revenge. Elijah flees from her. He finds himself out in the wops, terrified, hungry and exhausted. That's not what he expected after such great exploits. He probably expected God to give him some kind of reward. He probably expected to hear God speak in might ways. But God's voice was not in the gale force winds, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire.

We don't know how Elijah was in the cave waiting for God. We do know that eventually Elijah was ready to listen to God when he spoke in a quiet voice. Notice how when Elijah heard the first signs of that quiet voice he pulled his cloak over his face as he went to the mouth of the cave. Elijah had expectations of who God was, how he would act and speak. He realises his misconceptions and in humility goes to greet his Lord.

Elijah desperately needed God to come to him in the midst of his depression. The Lord came. But he came when he knew Elijah could really hear him, when some of Elijah's preconceptions and misconceptions had disappeared. The Lord came when he knew Elijah was ready for genuine dialogue.

The second story is also a dramatic tale of the Lord at work in his own time. Here comes this religious leader, esteemed in the synagogue to see Jesus. Yet Jairus is not just a leader but a desperate Father who isn't ashamed to kneel at Jesus feet. This desperate Dad needs Jesus to save the life of his daughter who is almost dead from a fever. He pleads urgently and fervently for her life. Imagine the relief Jairus feels when Jesus says 'yes'.

"No time to waste. We must make haste," Jairus thinks as he leads Jesus and the large crowd who must follow towards his house. "I wish they'd clear off. But what the?" All of a sudden Jesus calls out "Who touched me?" Imagine Jairus thoughts now "We haven't got time for this, we need to get on to my daughter. Let's not stuff around now." But stuff around they do.

Jesus has felt power go out of him and he wants to know who has been healed. "Why? What does it matter? Let's go Jesus!" Jairus is thinking. "Now look some woman is coming forward. Don't bother about her. We've got to go!"

But Jesus won't be hurried. He knows that the woman needs more than physical healing. She really needs the confidence to speak up about her situation and to express her bold faith in Jesus. She digs deep and tells the whole truth and Jesus declares her faith before everyone there. This ritually unclean woman is commended before the crowd – a life transforming moment for her!

Back to Jairus; imagine the depths of his grief as the messengers come to bring the tragic news of his daughter's death. Did he wail like we sometimes see Arabian people doing on the news? Was he angry? "See Jesus, we should have gone quickly. You could have prevented this!" But Jesus hasn't finished. Jesus knows what Jairus really needs and it is more than his precious daughter's life.

"Don't be afraid; just believe" is Jesus' requirement. Somehow those words give Jairus the courage he needs to prevent him from caving in to despair. He picks up tiny fragments of faith and carries on with the journey. And when they get there his faith is tested again.

And Jesus is still in no hurry. Nor is he anxious nor pressured in any way as he pronounces "The child is asleep." Now there definitely is wailing from all those present. Crazy Jesus. Yet his words to the girl are very gentle.

“Little girl” is actually an endearment. If we are in no hurry, we might say to our daughter or granddaughter in the morning, “Come on honey, time to get up.” That is the gentle sense in which Jesus is speaking to her. And of course that is what happened – she was resurrected.

Elijah wanted God to move in power. Instead God asked for humility from Elijah and spoke to him in a still, small voice.

The woman wanted a discreet miracle. Instead Jesus wanted public recognition of her faith. And as power went from him, he probably had the cross in mind. He lost power so she could gain power.

Jairus simply wanted his daughter to be well. Instead Jesus let her die – something no first aider would do. You deal with the emergency then the chronic condition. Jesus wanted Jairus to have a greater depth of faith than just for healing. Jairus got a resurrection rather than just a healing.

Not one of those people knew what they really needed. They, like us, didn’t have all the facts. Often when God seems to be delaying his grace in our lives, or even saying “No” this is not what you need, it’s because something else is going on that we don’t yet understand.

I asked God to take away my habit.
God said, No.
It is not for me to take away, But for you to give it up.

I asked God to make my disabled child whole.
God said, No..
His spirit is whole, his body is temporary.

I asked God to grant me patience.
God said, No.
Patience is a by-product of tribulations;
It isn't granted, it is learned.

I asked God to give me happiness.
God said, No.
I give you blessings; Happiness is up to you.

I asked God to spare me pain.
God said, No.
Suffering draws you apart from worldly cares
And brings you closer to me.

I asked God to make my spirit grow.
God said, No.
You must grow on your own, But I will prune you to make you fruitful.

I asked God for all things That I might enjoy life.
God said, No.
I will give you life, So that you may enjoy all things.

I asked God to help me trust him and love others, as much as He loves me.
God said... Ahhhh, finally you have the idea.

Not one of my children is involved in a regular worshipping community. They are great kids but this fact saddens me greatly. Each one was brought up knowing about Jesus and knowing him personally. I pray for them most days. I used to ask the Lord why he hadn't done anything about it.

When I worked in our wider Diocese, a clergy-person's spouse sidled up to me and quietly said "I am so glad you are here." I was surprised as I didn't know her very well, and I asked her why. She said "Because you don't have a perfect family; you don't have everything all together. That helps me." You see this woman had several children, one of whom was a bit of a mess at the time. She felt judged by other Christians. She felt like she had failed personally and that it reflected badly on her spouse. That she was made to feel that way angered me but it was good that my situation eased her pain somehow.

Over the years I have found that my far-from-perfect life seems to help other people. Perhaps that is partly why the Lord hasn't sorted out everything for me when I have asked him to – repeatedly!

Sometimes the Lord wants to intervene in our circumstances. Sometimes he chooses to heal. It's so cool when he does. Some of you will know that Sid McDouall¹ has been seriously ill recently. His kidneys were failing very rapidly indeed. Dialysis began and was probably going to be a permanent part of Sid's life. Meanwhile people were praying and God was at work. Sid no longer needs dialysis and is likely to make a full recovery over time. Praise God!

But others among us are very unlikely to recover from serious illness. Some we love are not well at all. All of us carry scars from some kind of childhood incident/s. All of us carry disappointments with things that should never have happened. Many of us carry frustrated dreams which may never come to fruition.

We can ask the "Why" question and we should work through that as best we can. We need to be honest with God. God can cope. After asking the "Why" question though, we need to ask God "Where were you then? Where are you now?" Most likely the Lord will show you that he was/is there with you, then and now. Perhaps he will show you the greater good that was achieved.

Perhaps he will simply say "Trust me."

¹ Sid's permission was sought and granted for the use of his story.