

## Sermon for 26<sup>th</sup> June 2016

The disciples said “Lord do you want us to command fire to come down from Heaven and consume them?” But He turned around and rebuked them.

The thing that I love most about the bible is that it is not a rule-book, or a book of theological answers to all our questions about God and Faith and our world. It is a series of stories and psalms about very flawed people and peoples finding their true identity in what felt to them, and feels to us, to be a very dangerous and complicated world of conflicting needs and expectations. Like our world today, where millions of people flee from war, hunger or persecution, but whose needs or way of life clash with those of the countries to which they want to come. There are no real theological or sociological arguments that will persuade everyone, because the best answers are always the ones that suit us.

But above all, the bible is a story of love, of love lavished and love rejected. It reveals an awesome mystery. One we don't really like to face, because we like our Gods strong and remote. It reveals a God, who because he loves us and reaches out to us, becomes vulnerable, like us, because we can and do often reject his love. We don't like that, because we find it threatening like the disciples in today's Gospel. They are infuriated that the Samaritans should refuse to welcome Jesus that they want to punish them, all of them, with fire from Heaven. But God in Jesus doesn't think that way, as Jesus expressed in the Sermon on the Mount. So he rebuked them. He is embodying the gifts of the spirit which we have just heard in the letter to the Galatians; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This is what God offers us and wins us over, not destructive fire from Heaven.

That is what the Bible tries to convey to us in stories; that God established his kingdom with the help of flawed vulnerable people and very often despite them. That is what the story of Elijah and Elisha reveals. Elijah is a wonderful, fiery deeply flawed hero, who slaughtered the prophets of Baal out of zeal for the Lord of Hosts. He has a problem handing over his prophetic mission to Elisha and keeps putting it off until God eventually removes him from the situation.

Our God is a god of infinite love and mercy who beseeches his children to love him because in that is the fulfilment of their being, and God is a god who understands our fears and doubts, because in Jesus he experienced them. God deliberately uses flawed, imperfect people to achieve his purposes, like Peter or Thomas or James or John, and so many others throughout church history. God tolerates our blindness, or prejudices or fears or mistakes, like slavery, the inquisition, Witch hunts, and leads us home despite ourselves.

So let us be silent in the presence of our God to thank him for his patience, and pray for light and strength to be his witnesses in this poor, suffering world.