

# **The Prophet Elijah**

*Anon*

Our knowledge of Elijah comes mainly from the biblical stories in the First Book of the Kings. He lived around 850 BC when the king of Israel was Ahab. The king married a foreign princess, Jezebel, who was a worshipper of the god Baal. She set out to supplant the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel, with the worship of this idol. The reign of Ahab was a time of prosperity for Israel but riches were for the few while poverty and oppression were the lot of many.

Elijah is an enigmatic figure - he arrives on the scene very suddenly without any introduction and makes a dramatic exit in a fiery chariot. Elijah is portrayed as a man of God and a man for the people. The central experience of Elijah as a man of God was his journey to Mount Horeb. Elijah had just won a stunning victory over the prophets of Baal when his sacrifice was accepted rather than theirs. Yet despite this demonstration of Yahweh as the God of Israel, fear of Jezebel left Elijah downhearted and depressed. God provided Elijah with the food that gave him strength to journey to Horeb. There God spoke to Elijah not in the mighty crashing of thunder or earthquakes but in the sheer sound of silence. Strengthened by his encounter with God, Elijah is given his commission to return to his ministry. This scene is clearly a highpoint for Elijah and reflection on this scene caused him to be chosen as patron of hermits in Christian times. Yet it is throughout his ministry that we see Elijah portrayed as a man totally at God's disposal. The Word of God dominated the life of Elijah. He is the servant of God before whom he stands. The Word of God pointed Elijah toward service of people.

Elijah was a model of the man of prayer, of one who listened for the voice of God in silence and solitude. The Carmelites changed from being hermits to being mendicant friars when they came to Europe. Then Elijah became for them also a model of their availability for the service of people. Elijah, and the Carmelites after him, became a man for people because he was a man of God. He proclaimed the justice of God in a world full of injustice. Elijah showed his solidarity with the poor and oppressed, with the marginalised of society. This too is an important part of the life of Carmelites.

Elijah and his ministry therefore speak to the two sides of the Carmelite vocation - contemplative and active. We seek to be people of God like him. God gave Elijah the strength to preach His word in difficult circumstances. Our world is very different from that of Elijah but we too are called to proclaim the word of God in and to a society, which is often far from ideal. We are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ whose whole life was dominated by the desire to do the will of God. He proclaimed that God's Reign was close at hand. By our prayer and service of others, we seek to help people become aware of the presence of God in their lives. By being faithful to both aspects of the Carmelite vocation, we will be faithful to our motto taken from the words of Elijah: "I have been full of zeal for the Lord God of hosts."