

“The Lord God, Before Whom I Stand”

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Carmel is both Marian and Elian: so wrote Fr Kilian Healy in his letter to the Carmelite Order on the prophet Elijah in 1967 when he was Prior General. This double inspiration is seen in the closeness of the two feasts: our Lady of Mount Carmel on 16th July and that of the Prophet four days later on the 20th July. It is perhaps inevitable that the closeness of the two feasts can mean that the feast of the Prophet is overshadowed by the celebrations for Mary Mother of Carmel. With the great development of our understanding of the influence of the prophet Elijah on Carmelite spirituality and way of life, it is perhaps time to see the two feasts so close together as one celebration of who we are as members of the Carmelite Family and through them both to thank God for the many graces and blessings we have received over the centuries.

At the Origins

It is now accepted that right from the very beginning the prophet Elijah as well as the Blessed Virgin Mary had a great influence on the Carmelites, first in the Holy Land and later when they moved to Europe. Even though we know the chapel on Mount Carmel was built in honour of Mary and, of course, the Carmelites dedicated themselves to her as the Lady of the Holy Land, it is the spring on Mount Carmel which is mentioned in the *Rule of St Albert* as being close to the hermits' cells, a spring a contemporary writer called the Spring of Elijah. We can take this reference to a spring as having a deeper meaning than simply a source of water. The hermits were inspired by Elijah and lived under his influence.

Something similar is for example happening when Jesus meets the women at Jacob's well in chapter 4 of the Gospel of John. When the Carmelites returned to Europe they had to explain to the world around them who exactly they were and so they began their Constitutions with an approved answer known as the *Rubrica Prima*. This paragraph outlined the origins of the Carmelites and claimed that holy men had lived on Mount Carmel with uninterrupted succession since the time of the Prophet Elijah. The influence of the Prophet Elijah was of the greatest importance for our forebears; for them it was expressed by this uninterrupted succession even though there can be no historical proof of such succession.

Carmel and the Scriptures

It is this lack of a clear founder like St Francis or St Dominic which allowed the Carmelites to take two Biblical people, Mary the Mother of Jesus and the Prophet Elijah, for their inspiration. Carmel is so deeply rooted in Scripture that it is appropriate that Mary from the New Testament and Elijah from the Old should be so influential that in effect they take the place of founders for the Family of Carmel.

Carmelite spirituality is a biblical spirituality. Today we hear a great deal about *Lectio divina* and it is as well to bear in mind that *lectio* means reading. The key to good prayer is good reading and that means reading and re-reading the text until the whole Bible is familiar to us. A good reading of a passage in the Bible is helped by an ability to spot links to other parts of the Bible. The Jerusalem Bible helps with its references in the margins but best of all are the cross-references we

discover for ourselves. Many regard my approach to the Bible as being intellectual, but all I want to do is to help people read the text for themselves. That does require hard work over many years but there will lie the fruits of *Lectio divina* even if we can only provide minutes every day whereas monks have hours.

Reading the Bible depends on how we approach the Bible. Each age has read the Bible according to its own needs. As a result we can say we have two Elijahs: the Carmelite Elijah who is the result of reading and reflecting upon Elijah in a medieval way and what I call the Biblical Elijah - Elijah as seen in a modern reading and reflection upon the Scriptures. Both are important for our spirituality and are closely connected.

The Christian reading of the Old Testament

Much more than would be accepted today, the medieval reading of Scripture allowed the Bible to be read with an agenda, with certain ideas already in mind. What certainly needs to be kept in mind today from the older reading is that we read the Old Testament with Christ in mind, the long conviction of the Church that the pre-existent Christ is already present and acting in the Old Testament. This is in accord with the opening statement of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word..." Modern readings of the Old Testament are keen to read the Old Testament on its own terms, as valid for itself. These readings are of great value but we must not neglect this place of Christ. This seeing Christ already acting in the Old Testament began with the writers of the New Testament when they tried to understand Jesus in light of persons in the Old Testament. Thus the tradition of Elijah appearing before the last days found in the prophet Malachi was picked up by the Gospel of Matthew as referring to John the Baptist while the Gospel of Luke links Jesus himself with Elijah who is to return (Lk 4,24).

The "Carmelite" Elijah

The medieval reading which is still important for us Carmelites today is the scene at the end of the drought where after seven times the servant sees the cloud bringing rain (1Kings 18, 44). This is the first reading for the feast of our Lady of Mount Carmel because of the long tradition that sees the cloud as pre-figuring the Blessed Virgin Mary. The *Institution of the First Monks* tells that "When the servant of Elijah saw a small cloud rise from the sea, God revealed to Elijah that a certain child, Blessed Mary, symbolised by that cloud would be born of sinful human nature, symbolised by the sea."

The phrase which marks the difference between the Carmelite Elijah and the Biblical Elijah comes right at the beginning of the presentation of Elijah. Classic translations (including the New RSV) have Elijah saying to Ahab: "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand". Many modern translations such as the Jerusalem Bible read this instead as "the God of Israel whom I serve". Elijah as the servant of God opens up an Elijah who is a prophet active among the people of Israel.

We begin with the traditional reading, "the Lord God before whom I stand", understood as meaning that Elijah had stood in the presence of God. Tradition going back to the days of the Desert Fathers saw Elijah as the father of the monastic life. In the *Institution of the First Monks* (around 1280) this is followed by his withdrawal to the Wadi Kerith after the proclamation of the drought. The whole emphasis is thus on withdrawal and on the contemplative life and the

Institution of the First Monks lays the foundations of Carmelite spirituality which has developed through many writers over the centuries.

The “Biblical” Elijah

The modern Biblical reading, “the Lord God whom I serve”, sees the prophets as more involved in the affairs of this world. This is to point the traditional reading in an outward rather than inward direction. Undoubtedly the prophets had a profound experience of God and the presence of God in their lives; the most graphic description of this is found in chapter 6 of the prophet Isaiah. The prophets though became very much involved with the people and Elijah was no exception.

It has been noted that modern Carmelite reflections on Elijah depend more on reflecting on the biblical readings than on the traditional understanding. This tunes into modern concerns about justice and peace and the option for the poor. Thus the 1995 Constitutions (para 26) describe Elijah as a mystic who learned to read the signs of God’s presence and also the prophet who was in solidarity with the poor and forgotten. Both aspects though have been at the heart of Carmel from the beginning. The hermits lived a contemplative life but soon served the poor in the towns. We can therefore reflect upon Elijah in different ways but it always comes back to reflecting upon the stories in the Bible.

Reading the Stories

We may have read the Elijah stories many times but always there are new depths to be found. For example, whereas the Elijah and Elisha stories have been seen as separate “cycles” in the past, it may be better to regard them as one long drama about prophecy running from 1st Kings 16,29 through to 2nd Kings 13,25. A simple way of deepening our reading is to write down in what ways Elijah and Elisha are similar (many events in the lives of the two prophets are similar) and in what ways they differ (for example, one goes up to heaven in a fiery chariot whereas the other dies in the usual way). Trying to understand the relationship between the two prophets will help to celebrate not only the prophet Elijah (20th July) but also the prophet Elisha (14th June). Traditionally, Carmelites have identified themselves with Elisha as sons of the prophet (Elijah). Although Elisha has now been restored to our liturgical calendar, he has not had much place in recent Carmelite reflection.

Elijah: obedient to the Word of God

Concentrating though on the prophet Elijah, it is generally agreed that 1st Kings chapters 17, 18 and 19 form the core of the traditions handed down to us about the prophet Elijah. Historically, the setting is the reign of the evil king Ahab of Israel (1Kings 16,29-34) but it is important to read the stories as stories complete in themselves. Chapter 19 is somewhat on its own as it describes the flight of Elijah to Mount Horeb. Chapters 17 and 18 are about the drought proclaimed by Elijah (1Kings 17,1), a contest between the God of Israel and the fertility god Baal. It is a matter of who is the true life-giver. The Baal is clearly unable to overcome the drought while the Elijah the servant of the God of Israel pours quantities of water over the sacrifice on Mount Carmel even after three years of drought (1Kings 18,35). What drives this whole story is Elijah as a man of the Word of God. This is a theme which could be followed into chapter 19 when Elijah

has a mysterious experience of the Word of God on Mount Horeb, hears a silent word from God (1Kings 19,12).

Looking more closely at chapter 17, we find a skilfully composed chapter which after the introduction in the first verse reflects upon the theme of life and death in three episodes of increasing seriousness: God's gift of life to Elijah as he hides in the Wadi Kerith (17,2-6); God's gift of life to Elijah, the widow and her son (17,7-16); God's gift of life to the widow's dead son (17,17-24). While at the beginning of chapter 17 it is Elijah as the servant of the God of Israel who proclaims the drought (1Kings 17,1), from the second verse onward it is the Word of God which directs Elijah and which Elijah obeys as he survives the consequences of the drought he has proclaimed. The Word of God sends Elijah to hide in the Wadi Kerith (17,2); the Word of God sends him to Zarephath and the widow (17,8); the Word of the Lord was fulfilled when the meal and the oil did not run out(17,16). At the end of the chapter, verse 24, we see verse 1 echoed with another reference to the Word of God expressed through Elijah. It is obedience to the Word of God in the person of Elijah which is the key: obedience to the Word of God is life-giving.

Reflection

As we of the Carmelite Family celebrate the prophet Elijah, we must return again and again to the fundamental importance of the Word of God in our following of Jesus. This is inevitable because we chose biblical persons to inspire us and especially true because of the importance of the Word of God to both those persons, to both Mary and to Elijah.