

## Bible Study 6: Living in Isolation

*1 Kings 16:29-18:1 tells the story of Elijah when he follows God's command to withdraw into isolation to keep himself safe. Later, Elijah joins the household of a widow and her son. Together they live in isolation, overcoming challenges of poverty and illness.*

*This Bible study has been divided into four sections, reflecting on different aspects of living in isolation. You may wish to spread out the Bible studies over a number of sessions.*

### Read 1 Kings 16: 29 – 18:1

No one in Biblical times would have understood the concept of a virus. The idea that viruses even exist only began to emerge at the end of the nineteenth century. Viruses were only seen after the development of the electron microscope in the 1930s. It is certainly true that scripture contains the idea of isolating those with symptoms of disease. Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 contain detailed directions for the isolation of cases of what scripture describes as 'leprosy'. An important part of these directions is discernment of whether the disease is 'spreading' or not. But even then, there is no account of *how* disease might be spreading. The words of the Biblical account contain no idea that it might be due to the activity of a microscopic infectious agent such as a virus.

The Levitical image of isolation is harsh. At best it describes necessary steps required to isolate those experiencing disease. At worst it implies enforcement and potentially the stigmatisation of those isolated. But there are other examples of isolation in scripture. Best known among these is Jesus's isolation for forty days in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11). Here isolation describes courage and endurance. It is an action associated with an obedience that overcomes that which is harmful and destructive.

Hence images of isolation that are contained in scripture are ambivalent – just as we are ambivalent about self-isolating during this period too. We isolate for our own good and the good of others. Yet we do so in regret and sadness at being cut off from the lives of others through touch, contact and presence. How are we to react to the kind of self-isolation that we are called to practise if the current coronavirus pandemic is to be brought under control? To resource ourselves for what we need to do now, we have to work by looking at similar situations: there is no place in the Biblical witness simply to 'read off' what we need to be doing now. One potential place of understanding comes from the story of the self-isolation of the prophet Elijah contained in the first Book of Kings. How might this story help us today?

Israel in the days of Elijah is not presented with a challenge such as the Coronavirus outbreak. Its challenge is oppression by a ruling dynasty with a particular ideological outlook. The kingdom is ruled by Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Their policy is to lead the people from worshipping the living God to worship the false god Baal. Such a direction did not merely affect what people thought, it affected directly what people *did*. In Israel's case this meant turning away from living according to the law that was central to the covenant that had been made between God and his people under Moses. Instead it meant living according to the practices of the pagan world. A graphic example of this is given in 1 Kings 16:34. Hiel of Bethel, sacrifices two of his own children to bless the laying of foundations for his building work in Jericho. This practice was common among religions such as the worship of Baal but abhorrent in the eye of the living Lord.

## Part 1: From Loneliness to Solitude

Read 1 Kings 16: 29 – 17:6



In the face of this situation, Elijah speaks God's judgement upon Ahab's rule (1 Kings 17:1). As a result of that action God commands Elijah to withdraw from life in Israel. 'Hide yourself by the [valley] Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan.' The Lord continues 'You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.' (1 Kings 17:3-4). It could be said that Elijah isolates himself in order to save his life.

### Questions for discussion

- What is this story about?
- Why do you think God commands Elijah to withdraw?
- What were the reasons for Elijah's withdrawal to the remote valley? Was it just about avoiding the threat presented by Ahab – or were there other reasons?
- What do you think Elijah learnt about God's provision during his isolation? What are you learning about this during your isolation during this time of COVID-19?
- Do you think Elijah was 'alone' during his time at the valley? Are there differences between 'loneliness' and 'solitude'? What do you think these might be?
- What are the opportunities God is offering to us through our isolation now?

## Part 2: Living in the same household together

Read 1 Kings 17: 7-16

After a period at the Wadi Cherith, Elijah is commanded by God to move again, this time to Zarephath. Once more he is commanded to remain in isolation, but this time not alone, but as part of a household. He will stay with a widow and her son. When Elijah meets her, the widow is without hope and overwhelmed by the situation in which she finds herself. She expects that both she and her son will die (v12). Elijah calls her out of her despair, inviting her to live instead in courage, generosity (v13) and trust in the Lord (v14). Through holding to these, Elijah, the widow and her son are sustained through the days in which they are to live in the same household (v15-16).



## Questions for Discussion

- What happens in this story?
- Why is the widow at first in despair?
- What helps her to find courage, hope and generosity?
- Elijah meets the widow and her son as they face crisis and starvation. What are the challenges that you are currently facing?
- Elijah calls the widow not to give in to despair but to find a different way. What helps you to have courage?
- Elijah speaks out of his confidence in God. What does it mean for you to trust God at this time of COVID-19?



## Part 3: Living with Challenge

### Read 1 Kings 17: 17-24



It would be nice to report that Elijah, the widow and her son lived happily ever after. But their time together is marked by crisis and concern. The widow's son falls ill and shows all the signs of death. In ancient times such tragedy would not only be about the loss of the boy. It would also pitch his widowed mother into the most extreme vulnerability and likelihood of death too. Elijah, the widow and her son must make their way through this time as a household. They don't seem to have anyone else around to call on for help.

The widow responds to her son's seeming death in a number of ways including criticism of Elijah, self-reproach and grief (v18). Elijah cries out to God for the child's life and that is restored (v22). Such restoration stands in utter contrast to the report of the children's death mentioned at the beginning of Elijah's story (1 Kings 16:34). It enables the widow to acknowledge that it is in the living God that truth is to be found (v24).



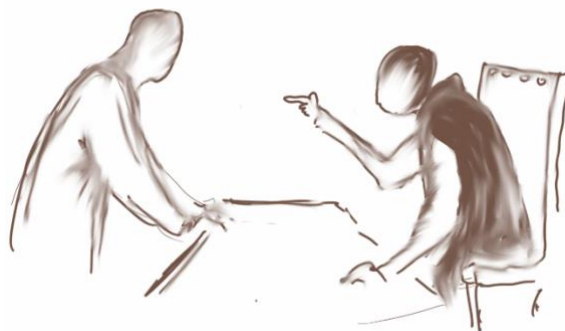
## Questions for Discussion

- What happens in this story?
- Why does the widow acknowledge Elijah as a man of God?
- Elijah, the widow and her son face together a most difficult experience. How are you experiencing your time in isolation? What are the challenges you are facing?
- As she faces such a difficult situation, the widow is angry against Elijah. When times are hard, how can you avoid recrimination and blame?
- Elijah's lament (v20) brings wholeness into a situation of brokenness. During isolation, how can you respond to tough times in faith and restore relationships when these are challenged?

## Part 4: Emerging Changed

### Read 1 Kings 18: 1

The situation does not go on forever. After a long time, God recalls Elijah back to life with others and tells him to return to Ahab and his court. Life from now on is going to be different. Elijah returns from isolation ready to challenge Ahab for the truth and for the way that Israel should live. Who will Israel follow? Baal or the Lord?



## Questions for Discussion

- How long do you think Elijah thought his situation would go on for?
- The isolation and lockdown with the COVID-19 pandemic will not last forever. What does it mean for you to go through this time of isolation? How has this time impacted on you?
- Elijah returned from isolation better equipped by God to face even bigger challenges. What will be different for you once this time of isolation comes to an end? How will what's happening now change your life into the future?
- How did God prepare you for this time? What have you learned from this time of isolation that will benefit your lives moving forward? Has God equipped you through this in some way for an unknown future?

## Prayer

Keep us, good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy  
in this time of uncertainty and distress.  
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,  
and lift up all who are brought low;  
that we may rejoice in your comfort  
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love  
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen

*(Bible study materials by Rt. Revd. Michael Beasley, with support from the Anglican Alliance group. Prayer from Church of England website. Illustrations by Bill Crooks.)*

## Bible Study 7: Turning Fear to Love

*An expert in the law asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to love God and to love his neighbour. When the man then asked 'who is my neighbour?', Jesus replied with the story of the 'Good Samaritan'.*

*"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'*

*"Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" Jesus asked. The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:30-37)*

### Go and do likewise!

Jesus told this story to illustrate how we should love our neighbours, even strangers. In Matthew 25: 35, 36 & 45, Jesus teaches how in serving a stranger we are actually serving him:

*"I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me... Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."*

There is a deeper layer in the parable, as the Samaritan, the model of loving service to another, is himself from another group,

despised and stigmatised by the Jewish people. The Samaritans also despised the Jews in return. Yet, this story is about love. It is also about overcoming fear, prejudice and discrimination to bring loving care to the 'other' who may be a stranger. The priest and the Levite walk past, perhaps fearing that they would become ritually impure from coming into contact with a dying body. But the Samaritan's loving compassion recognises no boundaries. The parable brings a vision of life, rejecting stigma and fear which leaves humanity dying on the roadside.



The outbreak of an epidemic can provoke stigma, discrimination and rejection of certain people and groups because of a perceived link with the disease. COVID-19 is causing stigma and discrimination because it has created a lot of fear, confusion and anxiety. It is a new disease with still much unknown about it and in this situation people all too easily fear and blame 'others'.



Those who suffer may be groups who are wrongly blamed for bringing the virus into their country, perhaps those who are different from the majority, perhaps of different ethnic or religious backgrounds such as migrants and refugees. People who have had COVID-19, as well as those thought to have been in contact with the virus, such as health workers, may also face stigma.

This stigma is both cruel and foolish. It leads to discrimination and hateful speech and actions against others, causing great mental suffering.

Those who are stigmatised may avoid talking about the virus or be afraid to get screened, tested or treated, hiding the illness or their need to isolate. This then also puts the wider population at greater risk of being infected themselves.

When other ethnic groups and foreigners are blamed and stigmatised, the distress is very great, with people living in fear. The vulnerability of migrants and refugees is also increased, as they are sometimes confined to overcrowded and risky camp conditions. It is also appalling that health workers, who are risking their lives to care for the sick, should be subjected to stigma and abuse. Christ's teaching is to love and protect the neighbour and stranger and to challenge and educate those who discriminate. The challenge of our days is how to do this in action, including in the media and on social media, transforming fear and hate into loving concern and care for the 'other'.

## Read Luke 10: 30-37

### Questions for discussion

1. What does this text say to us?
2. Why do you think Jesus chose the Samaritan as his example of a good neighbour? What about the behaviour of the priest and the Levite?
3. What was Jesus teaching his listeners about caring for others in society?
4. Who might be suffering from stigma and discrimination in our society at this time of COVID-19?
5. What is the impact on them and the community as a whole?
6. How can we challenge stigma, discrimination and hateful speech and actions? How can we educate our community to care for others and unite at this time of great challenge?
7. What is Jesus calling us to do during this pandemic through the story of the Good Samaritan?

### Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,

You called us to love our neighbour and care for the stranger;

Forgive us when we have, in fear or thoughtlessness, caused suffering to others;

Give us courage to challenge those who stigmatise and mistreat others;

And fill us with your Holy Spirit to work for a world transformed,

Where we live together with neighbour and stranger in loving mutual care;

For in serving the other we are blessed to serve you, our saviour and friend. Amen.

## Bible Study 8: What is God showing us about his Kingdom?

### The Beatitudes

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.*

*Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5: 1-12)*

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives his followers a powerful and radical image of the world transformed into the Kingdom of God. Jesus proclaims the blessings of God’s Kingdom and offers us a vision of our world redeemed by love. The Beatitudes also describe the qualities of discipleship, how the transformation of each one of us helps to bring about God’s Kingdom.



These words have inspired, comforted and challenged Christians over the centuries, speaking afresh into each time. What do they say to us today in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? For example, Jesus said ‘blessed are those who mourn’. This is a blessing for those who have been bereaved, but it is also a blessing on those who grieve in anguish about the injustices of the world, where the most vulnerable and marginalised are those who suffer most from the impact of the pandemic.

The best way to understand the Beatitudes is to look at the life and ministry of Jesus himself. This gives us an inspiring and challenging set of standards and attitudes to live by as followers of Christ. While we may relate more to particular sayings, we need to take the Beatitudes together as a whole as a guide to a Christ-like life.

This extraordinary period is a time of great challenge and distress, but it is also a time for reimagining our world. The temptation is to accept, tolerate and justify a retreat into self-interest, privilege and prejudice as individual countries or communities. Rather, this is a time for re-imagining a world of justice, mercy and peace as one human family. What does it mean for us to live together, in harmony with all peoples and all creation, as children of God? What is God saying to us about the coming of the Kingdom here on earth at this time of pandemic and as we emerge into a changed world?

## Read Matthew 5: 1-12

### Questions for discussion

1. What does this text – called the Beatitudes - say to us?
2. Think of examples from Jesus' life and ministry which illustrate the blessings.
3. Read each blessing – and discuss how it relates to our lives in this time of COVID-19. Give yourselves time to explore each blessing in depth and then move on to the next one.
4. In the Lord's Prayer we pray – *'Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'* In the Beatitudes, what is Jesus telling us about God's Kingdom here and now *on earth*?
5. What and/or who speaks and acts authentically in the language of the Beatitudes? Give examples of where you have seen this and where you have not seen this.
6. How can we together help build God's Kingdom on earth in this time?

### Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,

we thank you for this beautiful gift of the Beatitudes;

Help us to hold these blessings in our hearts and to follow your example in our lives;

Fill us with the fire of your Holy Spirit to transform us into your likeness

so that we may live our lives together to help build God's Kingdom on earth.

This we pray, trusting in your eternal love and care. Amen.