

You could easily read this story of Elisha and the Arameans as a bit of a wild west film. You know one of those John Wayne Westerns where the goody is surrounded by Native Americans on horses all ready to take the town and the people in it. And the goody says, 'Don't be frightened there's more of us, than them!' Which is actually the opposite for Curates when they first preach a sermon! Any way, King Aram finds a camping site to be able to strike Israel from, but Elisha knows where it is and warns the King of Israel. Now this happens so often that the King of Aram suspects there is a mole in his own officers, who swiftly identify Elisha as the person who knows what the King says, even in his own bedroom. The Arameans surround Elisha but God creates an illusion of a heavenly army around him; and as if that was not enough, Elisha asks God to blind the Arameans which enables him to lead them out of the way, into the city of Samaria. Elisha then asks God to open their eyes, and they realise they are in Samaria. When the King of Israel sees this he asks Elisha if they should kill the Arameans, wanting to take advantage of his good fortune having them all as captives. But Elisha says No! did you capture them with your sword and bow? A bit harsh of Elisha, but you know what he is trying to say, instead, says Elisha, be a good host and offer them tea and a piece of cake; All's well that ends well, right? Well, not quite!

You see the story shows us the power of God but also something very important as well, that we should not take personal advantage of a situation we have not created; it was, after all God who brought this situation about and so it is up to Him what He does with this situation, to save or to punish.

And in a sense, this is what Paul is trying to say to the Athenians, from a slightly different angle. That God does not follow human ways and is radically separate from them; Whereas the Old Testament portrays this often personal relationship between God and a highly selective group of people, such as Elisha,

Paul can bear witness to the personal relationship of God, through Christ, with all of his followers. The Greeks, who, Luke points out, spent all their time discussing the latest ideas, found this difficult to take in but it was not long before they did catch on and managed to weave the Jesus into their own philosophy of Gnosticism.

I am not going to give a mini lecture on Gnosticism – but, what I will say is that every culture is tempted to make their gods or God for that matter reflect their own image: western cultures have portrayed Jesus and Mary as blue eyed, fair skinned people when they were actually Palestinian and no doubt would have looked like that. But over the centuries its not just been what Jesus looks like its been what is important, its also been the nature of that community that has determined the god they worship, military communities have gods of war; farmers have gods of fertility; philosophers have gods of wisdom; and our society we, what do we worship? The overriding nature of our community is one of consumer choice and consumer power. Which to an extent is ok, when things are going well, but when things aren't going well or when opportunities arise we see the uglier side of consumerism like greed, stealing, looting, violence

Of course when we see such behaviour on the news, we like to think that we are above that, we would never sink so low; but, then, if we are honest, we would have to admit to ourselves that we, living in villages and small towns, are much more bound into our cultures, with much more self and peer restraint. How we would behave if we knew we could get away with something is a much more interesting point.

So we are conveniently safe in our semi rural fastness: we are not wicked bankers or stock market speculators, we are not MPs fiddling our expenses and we are not journalists hacking into phones; but, on the other hand, many of us have profited from cheap credit in the value of our houses and the purchasing power of our

credit cards, many of us have pension pots which have benefited from speculation, many of us are more concerned with the letter of the law than the spirit when it comes to claiming expenses, and many of us consume the news that was generated by underhand means. It is not that we are wicked people but in our lifestyles and our attitudes we are running a grave risk.

And the grave risk is this; that we keep ourselves within the limits of what is permitted, if only just, by measuring our conduct against a set of ethical rules; and the problem with this is that such rules are dangerously akin to a philosophy of religion. What we are in danger of doing is turning away from being Christians to being people who follow the supposed moral tenets of Christianity. And the difference between the two is that as Christians we worship our God in the power of the Spirit through a personal and ever deepening relationship with Jesus Christ. This will not keep us entirely safe from going astray but, at the very least, we will have a much better chance of knowing when we are in danger of going astray or have gone astray and need to repent and return to our Good Shepherd. Our temptations are not usually going to be a burning desire for a flat screen television or a new pair of trainers but there is danger in the relative comfort of our lives which requires that our relationship with God is close up and personal. Like the Israelites, we may turn to God in times of trouble; and like the Greeks we may formulate all kinds of clever ideas to explain our world; but we must be like Paul, absolutely set on our commitment to our personal life with a personal God.

And, if I may finish with another reference to events last week, telling people what to do, what is ethical, what is legal and what punishments await them, as set out in the criminal law or the Bible is not going to change anything fundamental; indeed, the problem with the people we call fundamentalists is that they aren't fundamental at all; they get all worked up about abortion,

homosexuality, obedience, conformity, judgment and the like but they don't get to the real fundamental of Christian fundamentalism which is Christ himself and our relationship with him. It is often made fun of as a bit of a trite question; but if I was in danger of stealing a computer or even of fiddling my expenses and asked the question: "What would Jesus do?" I know what answer I would arrive at pretty quickly; but if we are really close to Jesus we should not need to ask the question.

But, above all, we need to remember that our Jesus is not a warrior, nor a moralist, nor a judge, nor a philosopher; Jesus is our shepherd who loves us, our brother who values us, our saviour who will never abandon us; however could we resist wanting to get to know him better?