

IS YOUR GOD GOD OR A GOD?

Today's Text: 1 Kings, Chapter 18; Matt. 27: 45-54

Extracts:

1. “And Elijah came unto all the people and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word. Then said Elijah unto the people, I even I only, remain a prophet of the Lord; but Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Let them therefore give us two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under; and I will dress the other bullock and lay it on wood, and put no fire under; and call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord; *and the God that answereth by fire, let Him be God.* And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken” [1 Kgs 18: 21-24]
2. “Now, from the sixth hour, there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. At about the ninth hour, Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lamasabachthani? That is to say, My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? ...Jesus, when He had cried again with a loud voice yielded up the ghost. And behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain..., and the earth did quake and the rocks rent... *Now, when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly, this was the Son of God*” [Matt. 27: 45-46, 50-51, 54]

There is the story of six blind men who set out to know an elephant. One of them touched the leg and proclaimed, “In deed, the elephant is like a tree trunk!” Another one felt the rough body and claimed that the elephant was like a wall. The others made similar but different claims, depending on which part of the huge animal that they had touched. Finally, they got back together to compare notes. They could not agree. So, each of them went away, holding on to his notion of an elephant!

In the numerous religions in the world today, the concept of God is very much like that. In Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, God is seen differently and, like the six blind men, all of them claim that they are right while every one else is wrong. Is that possible? In the name of ecumenism, there are moves for major world religions to find a common ground so that they can work together for world peace. Is that also possible? Even if the six blind men were to harmonize their concepts of the elephant, would adding “a tree trunk” to “a wall” to “a snake” and so on add up to an elephant? Of course not! Therefore, the truth of God is absolute and cannot be compromised. How then do we know that the God we worship is God, not just a god?

In today’s lesson, we shall study the contest between the prophet Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal to guide our understanding of this very important subject. In the words of Jesus, God is Spirit and those who worship Him must do so in spirit and in truth [Jn 4: 24].

1. Elijah's God answered by fire!

All through history, the faithfuls of any religion have always been prepared to die to defend their faith. In the Middle Ages, Christians from Europe took part in the *Crusades* that were aimed at reclaiming the Holy Land from the Moslems. Islam itself has been spread to Africa and Southern Europe through "holy wars" called the *Jihad*. In India, fundamentalist Hindus and Moslems are engaged in a mortal combat to "exterminate" each other. Even among the Moslems, there are occasional outbreaks of violence between different sects, notably, between the Sunnis and the Shiites. Underlying such conflicts is the belief that human beings should defend their gods or God. How can a god that cannot defend himself be called God? This was the question that agitated Elijah.

After a drought that lasted for three-and-a-half years, God told Elijah to come out of hiding and show himself to king Ahab. Elijah's knowledge of God had been sharpened by his wilderness experience during that period. God had sustained him on sandwiches delivered by ravens twice a day [1 Kgs 17: 1-7], and thereafter miraculously by a widow in Zarephath [vv. 8-16]. Out of the experience, Elijah came to know that we are sustained not only by food but much more by the word of God. Therefore, the God that He had come to know as he stepped out of hiding was the one that he was ready to introduce to the stiff-necked people of Israel.

The Challenge

The Northern kingdom of Israel had been corrupted by the idolatrous worship of Baal, the god introduced by Ahab's wife, Jezebel, the daughter of a Zidonian king [1 Kgs 16: 31-33]. It was this evil that provoked God to bring a long drought on the kingdom. How could Elijah demonstrate to the king and the people that Baal was an idol? God gave him an idea: let Baal and the Lord God defend themselves!

Elijah chided the people to make up their minds about which God to worship. Perhaps, out of fear of Ahab or ignorance of the difference between God and Baal, they could not answer him [1 Kgs 18:21]. Elijah then proposed that two altars be set up, one for the 450 prophets of Baal to offer animal sacrifice to their god without putting fire under it. Elijah would do the same on the other altar for the true God of Israel [vv. 22-24]. The people liked the idea.

The prophets of Baal began the contest. They "called on the name of Baal *from morning even until noon*, saying, O Baal, hear us. *But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made*" [v. 26]. Elijah teased them to cry louder because it was possible that their god was asleep or had travelled! They cried all the more and "cut themselves with knives and lancets till the blood gushed out upon them." From midday until the time for the evening worship, the 450 prophets "prophesied" but "there was neither voice, nor *any* to answer, nor any that regarded" [vv. 27-29].

Then it was Elijah's turn. He repaired God's broken-down altar, which Ahab had neglected, using 12 stones that represented the 12 tribes of Israel, the name that God had given to Jacob. To leave no room for any doubts, he dug a trench around the altar and got the people to pour water in it and on the sacrifice until the whole place was overflowing. At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah prayed to God, saying, "I have done all these things *at Thy word*. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, *that this people may know that Thou art the Lord God*, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again" [vv. 30-37]. Immediately, the fire of God fell and consumed "the burnt sacrifice and the wood and the stones and the dust and licked up the water that was in the trench." When the people saw what had happened, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord, He is the God; the Lord, He is the God" [vv. 38-39].

On Elijah's instruction, the people pounced on the 450 prophets of Baal and lynched them [v. 40]. The people had been had for too long and their reaction was quite predictable.

2. Analysis

Clearly, Baal failed the test of "Godhood." It was an idol. The word of God says, "The idols of the heathen are *silver and gold, the work of men's hands*. They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not. They have ears, but they hear not; neither is there any breath in their mouths. *They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them*" [Ps. 135: 15-18].

How is God seen in the leading world religions and how can He be approached? Here is a sample:

- In *Hinduism*, which has its roots in India, there is belief in a God who is infinite. Since the infinite cannot be measured arithmetically, He can be represented and does manifest in infinite ways. So, because human beings cannot visualize the infinite, God's infinite forms can be presented visually. Thus, temples, idols and the related practices and devotion are aimed at enabling worshippers to start with physical aids and to graduate over time into visualizing God without the aid of temples and idols.¹ There are today thousands and thousands of gods in Hindu worship. The only way that human beings can attain to the Absolute Truth [Moksha] is by an endless cycle of births and rebirths, hence the belief in reincarnation and the law of Karma [similar to natural law]. Clearly, self-effort is the road to salvation, which is meaningless where you have an endless cycle of births and rebirths. If the idol worship aspect remains the predominant practice in a religion that claims to be the oldest in human history, then, there are serious question marks about the God of the Hindus.

¹ "Hinduism, The World's Oldest Religion," www.geocities.com/Anthens/Forum/9410/hindu1.html

- In *Buddhism*, which is predominant in Asia, God is seen as an abstract void. As in Hinduism, such a God can never be personal. In fact, His existence [or the absence of it] is neither central nor important to the message of Buddhism, which is how to escape suffering. Human beings are to strive through their own effort, notably by meditation and self-denial, to attain the state of enlightenment called Nirvana, which is similar to the Hindu Moksha.² Therefore, Buddhism leads us nowhere in knowing God and how to reach Him.
- *Islam* came through Mohammed some 600 hundred years into Christ's era. Although its holy book, *The Koran*, deals extensively on Jesus [called Isah], His virgin birth and miracles and crucifixion, He is not regarded as the Son of God because God has no son. This God, called *Allah*, is unknowable and we are His servants through His benevolence. We are to surrender completely to His will. Nevertheless, we attain salvation by our own efforts. Our good and bad are put on a scale when we die and where the scale tilts determines whether we go to heaven or hell. I doubt if Moslems know this *Allah*. That is why they tend to see Islam through the lenses of their earthly *Ayatollahs* who do not entertain any challenge to their authority.
- *Judaism*, that is, the religion of the Jews as recorded in the Old Testament, believes in a monolithic God who made us in His image and likeness. He gave the Ten Commandments to Moses after delivering the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt. His triune nature [one-in-three] is demonstrated throughout the Old Testament [**Gen. 1: 2-3, 26-27; 2 Chron. 20: 14-15; Is. 7: 14; Is. 9: 6**]. This God knows that we cannot save ourselves in the light of the fall of Adam. So, He promised to send His Son as the Messiah [**Gen. 3: 15**]. However, practising Judaists are still waiting for Him. They do not believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Consequently, they still rely on rituals and cleansings for their salvation. However, their observances are a shadow of Christ [**Heb. 9: 1-11**]
- *Christianity* has accepted the concept of God as in Judaism. However, the promised Messiah has come as Jesus Christ [**Jn 3: 16**], and by His death on the cross, He has ransomed us from our sins. Beyond that, He has introduced God to us in very personal terms. He is "Father." We are not saved by works but by grace through His Son, Jesus Christ.

From the forgoing, we can see God in two different lights. In one case, because God is infinite or unknowable, then, we rely on earthly "wise" people to define who He is and how to approach Him. The gurus and sadhus, the sheiks and the Pharisees take centre stage to define and interpret who God is. To facilitate their operations, they restrict freedom of choice either by adopting state religions or persecuting dissent or winning converts by force. In the second case, what we know of God is what He has revealed to us through His prophets and, lately, through His Only Begotten Son, Jesus [**Heb. 1: 1-2**]. Salvation is free for those

² "Exploring Christianity and the World's Religions"- Buddhism, www.mninter.net/~nhchurch/11-10-02message.htm

who desire it and nobody is forced to accept God or Jesus. Which of those two views defines the God you serve?

3. Lessons

Here then is how to identify the true God:

a) *How did you know about Him?*

Among the works of men's hands are religious beliefs and practices, which God has not prescribed. But, we know that "no man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him" [**Jn 1:18**]. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments [**Ex. 20: 1-17**] but "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" [**Jn 1: 17**].

On several occasions, God confirmed to us on earth His relationship with Jesus. At His baptism, the onlookers heard a voice from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" [**Matt. 3: 17**]. As He was dying on the cross, the centurion who was not even a believer but had seen the manifestations of God around Calvary said, "Truly, this was the Son of God" [**Matt. 27: 54**]. In deed, as Jesus told Nicodemus, "no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven" [**Jn 3: 13**]. So, if your idea of God does not come from He who comes from God, your God is a god!

b) *Can your God defend Himself?*

Baal had been sustained by state policy and the persecution of dissent. He could not defend himself and the people came to realize that he was a false god. On the other hand, Elijah only prayed once and the true God sent fire from heaven to burn up the sacrifice and dry up the trench. The true God defends Himself!

When the Jews came to arrest Jesus, Peter took a sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest. Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Put up again thy sword into his place... Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father and He shall presently give Me more than twelve legions [72,000] of angels?" [**Matt. 26: 51-53; Jn 18: 1-11**]. When Herod put Peter in prison, he was not released through an invasion by the other disciples but by the angel of God [**Acts 12: 1-10**].

Christianity in Europe passed through the dark ages when it became a state religion, until it was rescued by Martin Luther's Reformation and printing of the Bible by Guttenberg. Today, less than 20% of Europeans practise their religion even when it is on paper a Christian continent. In Arab and

Moslem-dominated countries, it is a crime to practise any other religion other than Islam. Why can't Allah defend himself if in deed he is God?

c) *Does your God require that you earn salvation?*

The prophets of Baal spent almost twelve hours, chanting incantations and cutting up themselves to get Baal to answer their prayers. In the end, nothing happened. That was some effort! Any god that requires effort to earn salvation is a false god because he has no salvation to offer. Promises of heaven for Jihadists and suicide bombers, elaborate worship rituals and meditation are warning signals that the gods behind them have no salvation to offer to adherents. The thief that Jesus promised Paradise on the cross would have no salvation with such a god, "for by grace are ye saved through faith, and not of yourselves; *it is the gift of God*" [Eph. 2: 8].

4. Conclusion

When Thomas asked Jesus for the way to God, He replied, "I am the way, the truth and the life; *no man cometh unto the Father but by Me.*" Philip challenged Him to show them the Father and that would be sufficient. Jesus replied him, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father" [Jn 14: 5-6, 8-9]. At the Transfiguration, God brought Moses and Elijah from heaven to join Jesus, Peter, James and John on a high mountain. There, He made it clear to both the living and the dead that Jesus "is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him" [Matt. 18: 1-5]. That settles the matter.

The six blind men can be forgiven for not knowing the true nature of an elephant. What would you say of a clear-sighted person who holds the views of the elephant as propagated by the blind? The Lord God is that elephant and Jesus Christ His Son has opened our eyes to see Him as He is. He has given His Son the authority to judge the world [Jn 5: 22]. One of these days, Christ will split open the heavens to come for the final judgment of the world [Matt. 25: 31-46].

Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. No Jihad or persecution or liberal accommodation can change that truth. So, if people have known the truth but have preferred falsehood, they have only themselves to blame. They can *never* change the truth but they can mislead the innocent, the timid or the trusting.

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