

**Sermon for evensong at St Giles**  
**Celebrity**  
**Mark 6. 30 -34; 1 Kings 19. 9 -15; Psalm 113**



It is always a pleasure to come to evensong at St Giles. One of the attractions is being able to choose your own topic to preach on; I can be happily occupied with this decision for hours. But this time, when I received the e mail from Bob I just thought "celebrity" - that's my topic. It was really because I was fed up with a certain story about blood diamonds, a war lord and a top model. That week Naomi Campbell had been giving evidence in the war crimes trial of Charles Taylor at the Hague. I was so annoyed that this story should be so captivating. I disliked everything about it but had to admit that I had not thought about Liberia or Sierra Leone at all in the days before this episode seemed to take over our lives. It got me thinking about celebrity.....

What is a celebrity? It's someone that everyone knows - within a culture, within a locality or within an area of interest. In this age of mass communication a celebrity can be known across the world and have some relevance for many cultures. Everyone seems to know the name and most people want to know more - so google is kept busy, magazines are brought, television is watched late into the night, and U Tube is searched for any new to be discovered nuggets. In our time the adoration of celebrities can lead to their persecution as they are never left alone. Surrounded always by prying eyes and ears they are none the less isolated and alone having to pay a heavy price for a sense of security.

Are celebrities new? What about Biblical celebrities?

I think Elijah was a celebrity. The "troubler of Israel" he was a great prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures who championed the Jewish religion against all its rivals, The main rival to the Jewish faith was the worship of Baal - the god of Jezebel, the lady who was in a disastrous marriage with Ahab, king of Israel. On Mount Carmel Elijah presented a challenge; to the people or to the gods I am not sure but the challenge was that fire should be ignited through the power of prayer. Baal and his followers didn't manage it but the God of Israel did. With the sacrificial bull on a pyre sodden with water the flames of the Lord leapt forth as Elijah prayed; the God of Israel triumphed and the prophets of Baal were slaughtered in the valley below. The other celebrity in this story, Jezebel, was furious with Elijah, who she felt had humiliated Baal and his worshippers, and so this formidable woman said she would not rest until she had killed Elijah. Elijah was not pursued by the paparazzi but by Jezebel and like anyone else he ran - for his life. At one point he lies down in exhaustion beneath a tree, just wanting to die. He had had enough of this celebrity business. But he is fed and encouraged by a messenger of God and goes on one of those epic forty days and forty nights journeys until he is on the top of Mount Horob. Biblical celebrities seem to need mountains! That is where he is when our reading began tonight.

Oh, but Elijah has the celebrity whine. With Naomi it was an "inconvenience". With Elijah it was "I've done everything; I have done my best; The Israelites have broken the covenant, broken your altars- I'm the only one left and now they are trying to kill me."

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" is the question God asks.

And Elijah is asked to watch for the Lord passing by. As you know God was not in the storm and not in the earthquake and fire. He was in a whisper and when the whisper was heard it said

"What are you doing here, Elijah?"

"I've done everything. I've done my best; the Israelites have broken the covenant; broken your altars - I'm the only one left and now they are trying to kill me."

Not a lot changed.

God didn't ask him again what he was doing there. He sent him back. Go back and do what you are called to do - anoint Hazael, Nimshi and Elisha to succeed you as prophet. Elijah had to stop whining and look to the future; and he was not alone- there were seven thousand faithful ones to God

waiting for him. I think God wanted him to get out of his "I'm a celebrity " mode, his self justifying words and his "I, I, I" and get on with the job.

It would be interesting to ask the "general public", the non celebrities, which name meant the most- Elijah or Jezebel. Celebrity can really last through millennia. But whose name is the most familiar, do you think, from those ancient Biblical times? Jesus. Jesus name is so familiar he must be called upon millions of times a day, often by people who have no idea they are doing so. His name is there, spoken, heard, and I think believer and none believer alike has an image in their head of this great celebrity - Jesus.

Celebrity came soon to Jesus.

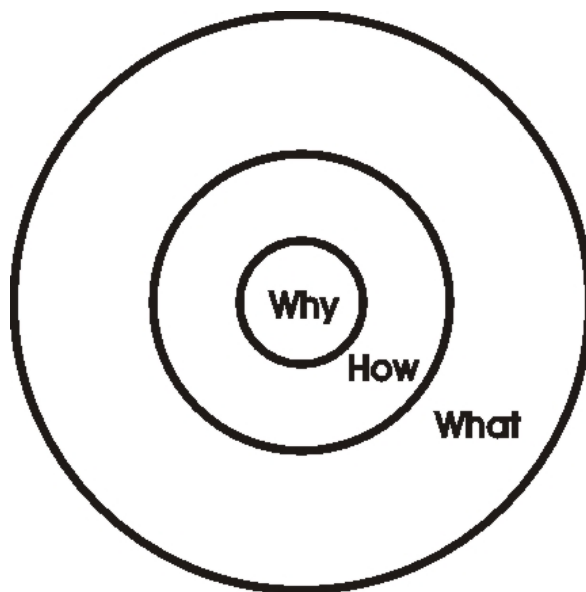
In the passage we heard from Mark the disciples are returning to their master to tell him all about their experiences "on the road." What had it been like for them, casting out evil spirits, healing the sick, risking rejection from the people they met. They were exhausted and had not even had a chance to eat so Jesus suggests they go off together for peace and rest. Jesus and his apostles found a solitary place but such was their celebrity status that they were soon surrounded by a crowd. I would so have understood if Jesus had run again, found another place, but no, he goes *towards the crowds*. He feels compassion for them; sees them as being like sheep without a shepherd and he begins to teach them. Jesus loves the crowd, but not because they make him a celebrity; he loves the crowd because that's what he does - love.

Celebrities get under your skin. Emulating celebrities can be dangerous. Girls and women develop eating disorders as they try to become as slim as the models they view with envy; some celebrities as known for drinking, for taking drugs and so this makes it ok with their followers. Aggressive attitudes on the football field are visibly picked up by children and by their parents on the sidelines. However, wanting to be like someone you admire can be good - my own boys would become obsessed with tennis, with athletics, football or cricket depending which sport was receiving the TV coverage. So good celebrities make you want to be like them, make you follow them. We are fond of saying that celebrities do nothing to earn their celebrity now. Maybe we are not appreciating the difference between a celebrity who is

just that and a celebrity who is a leader. Elijah was a leader; Jesus *is* a leader.

In the episode we read from Kings today Elijah felt crushed. He forgot his message, his purpose and became troubled by himself - he was on his own, he'd done his best, he'd been instrumental in enabling an unnatural miracle to take place for goodness sake and yet he was still a failure, still on his own and still a hunted man. "Get back," God says, "get back to what you believe in." By the time we get to the second book of Kings Elijah cannot even contrive to be alone. He is such a leader that his protégé can't leave him - Elisha is totally convince and loyal to him. Everywhere Elijah and Elisha travel Elijah says "Stay here, the Lord has sent me to ....."

Always Elisha replies " As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." The celebrity had rediscovered his leadership qualities.



A guy called Simon Sinek has recognised a pattern of leadership. His pattern is like a three sectioned doughnut- in the middle is "Why?", inbetween is "How?" and on the outside is "What?" Everyone knows what they do, some people know how they do it and just a few know why. The good leaders he says are those who begin with the "why?" question and move outwards. He sights Martin Luther King who one summers day got 250 000 people to turn up in the mall in Washington. He sent no invitations; there was no web site to check the date and the time. All Martin Luther King did was talk about what he believed. He didn't talk about what should happen in the United States -

he talked about what he believed. People listened and recognised his belief as theirs and so they turned up on the day in Washington not to see Martin Luther King but because of what they believed.

Jesus is like that. We follow Jesus not because of what he looked like, what he wore, even what he did. We follow him because of his "Why?" Jesus talks the whole time about what he believes. That must be why his teaching is so vague on the what or the how - do we forgive seven times or seventy seven times and so on. Jesus does not talk about a set of rules that must be followed - the what you do - and then moving on to how you do it. He begins with his core belief - love God, love God, love God. Then you will love your neighbour as yourself and everything else will follow. So he didn't run away from the crowd because he didn't feel that they wanted to own him and eat him up. He felt that they were like shepherdess sheep. He needed to teach them about the "why?" - the love God- then they would belong.

I began with Naomi Campbell - only a celebrity in 21st century tabloid terms. Not a real celebrity - a leader. A word of warning: Charles Taylor was a leader also; probably leading others into terror. So it must not be that celebrity is bad and leadership is good. It has to be that we are aware of which is which and aware of what the central message is that is being delivered. that central message from our leader by which all other messages can be measured.

For us, as Christians, the only celebrity is Jesus, and it will always be, We can measure all the messages we hear against the message of love, forgiveness and being gathered to God that Jesus has given us. And in our lives, maybe, *we* can start with the core message, letting it come through in all we say and all we do, and stop getting hung up about the how and the why. How about that format for the next Church Council meeting!  
Amen.