

**Sunday 3 September 2023, Trinity 13 Matins**

**2 Kings 6.24–25; 7.3–20**

**The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

The captain on whose hand the king leaned said to the man of God, *'Even if the Lord were to make windows in the sky, could such a thing happen?'*

We find ourselves this morning in the midst of disaster. The army of the King of Aram has besieged Samaria. Looking from the walls, as far as the eye can see, stretch trenches and tents. The neighing of horses and the cries of sheep slaughtered to feed thousands fills the air, along with smoke from cookfires and smiths' forges. Food in the city is becoming expensive. Eighty shekels of silver might buy a donkey's head. A kab, or about a pint, of dove's dung— which is either food or fuel, depending on which scholar one asks—costs five shekels. But even the wealthiest struggle to find food to buy. In a rather gruesome passage missed out by our reading, one woman makes a deal with another that if they eat her son today, they will eat the other woman's son the day following. The king himself can do nothing but pace the walls and watch and wait. But wait for what? All is hopeless. There is nothing anyone can do but wait. Wait and starve.

Into this tragedy sounds the word of Elisha the prophet: *'Hear the word of the Lord: thus says the Lord, Tomorrow about this time a measure of choice meal shall be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, at the gate of Samaria.'* What? Cheap meal and abundant barley tomorrow? Elisha, we are all starving. What nonsense is this 'word of the Lord'? We know you prophets sometimes give hope, but let's be realistic about things. The army is at the gate. Can't you see them? Or, as the Captain of the King's guard says, *'Even if the Lord were to make windows in the sky, could such a thing happen?'* If God himself were to look down from heaven, glaring at our enemies, burning them up with his wrathful gaze, could we eat and drink merrily so soon?

Most of the time as we go about our lives we believe what our eyes can see. For good or ill, in times of prosperity and in times of disaster, our senses tell us what is true and our most common experience defines our response. It is not reasonable in the middle of a famine to talk of cheap food. The army is at the gate. I do not hold the King's Captain to be a stupid man. An experienced soldier, he knows the poor are already starting to eat each other. It will get worse before the end. And the city will fall. Yet to this capable, experienced man the prophet says, the food will be cheap, the grain plentiful. But you who doubt will not see the benefit of it. Though you will feast your eyes on wonders, your stomach will remain unfilled.

And so it happens. One day the army surrounds Samaria. The next morning, it is gone. The lepers discover the truth first, at night. Outcasts, skulking about the trash pits and dung-heaps beneath the walls, they know that if they're lucky enough to be let into the city before the next attack they're likely to die of famine. So they risk death on the other side; they desert to the enemy camp. And there is no one there at all. Imagine their confusion, their startled faces, their surprised whispers, as tent after tent is found to be empty. Porridge bubbling on fires just starting to die out. Bewildered horses wandering riderless.

Having satisfied their curiosity- and their bellies- the lepers take their news to the city. The army has fled. And it checks out. Riders report that for miles and miles, all the way to the Jordan river, the detritus of a frightened fleeing army lies strewn along the road. *'Then the people went out, and plundered the camp of the Arameans. So a measure of choice meal was sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the Lord.'* But the Captain of the King's Guard... in their rush to get to the food and war booty *'the people trampled him to death in the gate, just as the man of God had said.'* *'You shall see it with your own eyes, but you shall not eat from it.'*

This is not a tale of glorious conquest by experienced military leaders. And though it begins in the midst of disaster, it does not end in celebration. But instead the passage closes with yet more death. Why? What are we to learn from such a morbid tale? Most of the time as we go about our lives we believe what our eyes can see. The Captain of the Guard believed his eyes. He trusted his experience. And both were confounded. No army to be seen. The all-powerful enemy fled. Their helmets and swords litter the verge like so many glittering pieces of rubbish. And like the enemy's weapons, his blood fell at the wayside, so many glittering rubies in the dust of the gate.

We are not, I hope, destined to be trampled at the gate of fulfilled prophecy. But we are reminded here that the word of the Lord is a serious thing. Elisha's prophecy was not dashed off in a moment of fancy. He spoke with knowledge by the Holy Spirit, and what he spoke came to pass. Samaria's fortunes were reversed in a day. Famine ended in plenty. Poverty in wealth. Hopelessness in overwhelming relief.

When we hear the word of the Lord, the solemn promise from God, that the future will not be what our eyes see, do we believe it? When we are offered the impossible, life instead of death, do we accept it? When the good news that God has redeemed the world, and your soul, through Jesus Christ sounds forth from the mouth of his priests, do you rejoice in it? Or do you deny that word and put yourself in the place of the King's Captain? : *'Even if the Lord were to make windows in the sky, could such a thing happen?'* When offered salvation do you accept it gladly? Or do you question what the Lord can do? Perhaps the words of the Psalmist are best: *'Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was beset as a city under siege.'* Amen.