

*In transition*

Whenever you are studying a passage of scripture or preparing a sermon, you should always make sure you do one thing. Always look at the context of the passage – what comes before and what comes after – because that often sheds important light upon it. And in the case of our passage from the second chapter of 2 Kings this morning it is especially significant. If you were to look at the end of chapter one of the second book of Kings you would read there of the death of the king of Israel, King Ahaziah. And if you were to look at the start of chapter 3 that follows our reading you would see that the rule of a new king is just beginning, King Jehoram. So chapter 2 is set between the death of an old king and the crowning of a new one. In other words it is an in-between time, a time of transition, a time when change is in process in the life of Israel, and if that provides the wider context of our passage we find that when we turn to our verses in chapter 2 itself, it's all about change too. While all around them one king's rule is giving way to another, here in this chapter we have the passing of one great prophet and the handover to another one. Elijah's life is coming to an end and he is handing on the mantle to Elisha and taking his leave of him and suddenly it's all change!

And that makes this potentially a very powerful passage for us gathered here this Sunday morning for if there is one thing that unites us all it is the experience of change. It is one of the great constants of human life – everything changes. I forget which great Greek philosopher it was who observed that you can never step in the same river twice but it's true and what is so scary is the pace at which change is accelerating. 'The times they are a-changing' sang some American singer nearly 50 years ago and the times most certainly are changing, but even quicker now than they were then. And we could think about some of the great cultural transitions that are taking place around us: the fantastic developments in technology which are completely transforming our world, the rapid decline of organised religion which is unsettling to some, and other great social upheavals in this part of the world that are leaving us punch-drunk with change. And its significant that this church works fruitfully with

an organisation called ‘Cambridge Transition’ which helps people come to terms with changes we are going to have to make to our lifestyle if we are going survive as a species. We are indeed a people in transition. However, I am more interested in the personal transitions that are affecting our lives here at the moment. I am aware that this is the time of year in Cambridge when the academic year is coming to a close and some folk are graduating and leaving and the future lies . And I am conscious that we have here this morning people who are still coming to terms with the loss of loved ones, or the loss of faculties they once took for granted. I am aware that we have people here who have either been recently married or are about to be. I’m aware that we have people here this morning who are part of a church that has changed dramatically from what it once was, and for whom a whole chapter in their church’s story is coming to a close as it now faces redevelopment, and that is a difficult place to be.

So we turn to our passage and first of all there is Elijah who knows that his life is about to come to an end and is making preparations for that, and with him is poor Elisha who is struggling. It seems he cannot bear the thought of being parted from his beloved master. And the two of them head off on this strange journey – from Gilgal, to Bethel and to Jericho and then across the Jordan. And there is something almost comical about the proceedings here. It seems that Elijah wants to be alone. His life is ending. He has been told he is about to be taken up into heaven. He’s after a bit of reflective solitude, but Elisha is just not taking the hint. Three times Elijah tells him to stay behind. Three times he basically tells him to buzz off, but three times Elisha insists on coming along. Elisha is following Elijah like a little puppy dog and of course we see here Elisha’s attachment to his master, his fear of losing him, the ache of Elisha’s bereavement. And then of course there are these infuriating prophets who seem to be following them everywhere. They’re certainly making sure that Elisha knows the score. No possibility of denial here: ‘Do you know that the Lord is going to take your Lord and master from you today?’ they enquire tactfully. ‘I do know’, replies Elisha; ‘say nothing’. In other words ‘put a sock in it!’ And then they go to Jericho and the prophets pop up again and same thing happens, and then one more time for luck at the Jordan, ‘Do you know that the

Lord is going to take your Lord and master from you today?’ These guys’ pastoral skills are amazing! They are a nuisance to Elisha and a nuisance to Elijah who sees to be seeking solitude and maybe that is one reason why he parts the Jordan with his mantle and crosses over – to get a way from these wretched prophets!

But what is Elijah doing here? Why this round trip from Gilgal, to Bethel, to Jericho? The simple fact is, we don’t know. We have no idea what Elijah is up to, except that it was a last journey that he took before being taken up into heaven. What we can say perhaps is that these names – Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho – have an ambiguity about them. They are two-edged. They were places associated with encounters with God. They were holy places, sacred spaces, but as with many holy sites in the Bible there were associations too with other gods, false gods. Bethel in particular had been a meeting place with God for both Abram and Jacob, but it had also lately become a shrine to a golden calf. The same places where God was encountered also became shrines to false gods, destructive gods. And before his translation into heaven, before moving on, Elijah must revisit them. And I guess that for each of us the past is a very ambiguous place, a place where God has been encountered, but other false and destructive powers too. And part of the process of moving on is to take stock of the past, to recognise what has been of God and what has not, to acknowledge where there has been faithfulness and where there has been failure, what must be left behind and what must be taken carried with us.

That bring us to Elijah’s cloak, his mantle – left behind by Elijah, carried on by Elisha, and I think this bears pondering because it seems to me to be such a powerful object in this story. I’ve always been very impressed that when Mahatma Gandhi died, the only things he left behind were his spectacles, his spinning wheel and his linen garment. That was all he left. Here was a life of simplicity, a lean life, one stripped down to essentials. I sometimes wonder what we as a civilisation will leave behind and what future generations, thousands of years from now - if they exist - will excavate and find of our 21<sup>st</sup> century world: vast dumps of un-biodegradable plastic, massive landfills of buried garbage, great deposits of discarded detritus, endless evidence of a cluttered civilisation. Elijah left even less than Ghandi – just a cloak, rather like the Son of Man who, as

we read in our reading from Luke, had nowhere even to lay his head. And of course as Elijah is taken up into heaven even his cloak is left behind and he enters the presence of God naked, stripped down, just himself, for everything else is now excess baggage.

And surely in times of change and transition, when all around us is in flux and life is being reconfigured, it is a time for recognising that which is essential and enduring, that which abides and is not disposable and cannot be discarded. So Jesus in our reading tells would-be disciples to leave the dead to bury the dead. Those who have heard the call of the Kingdom cannot even return to their family to say goodbye – they have set their hand to the plough and are yoked to heaven. They must renounce the fleeting, the passing and reach for the eternal. That's why we have that vow in the wedding ceremony with the words, 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health...'. That vow recognises that in the midst of the transient and the unpredictable and the unforeseeable there is that which is constant and remains and changes not. And this is where Elijah's mantle is significant again. After their little trip round the ancient sites Elijah strikes the river Jordan and it parts – just as it had long before for Joshua, and just as Moses had made the waters of the Red Sea part with his staff. And so this cloak becomes a reminder of a God who was with Moses and parted the waters, and who was with Joshua and parted the waters, and who was with Elijah and parted the waters. And so this mantle becomes a symbol of this God, the eternal God who remains and endures, the same yesterday and today and forever. And Elijah takes it with him. And the mantle becomes a reminder too of these ancient traditions, ancient stories about a God who freed a people and who led them into a new land and it's these ancient stories and traditions that we carry with us through all the changing scenes of life. That's why I love reading from the Bible at weddings and funerals and baptisms and all these other rites of passage where in the midst of change and transition we hear again these ancient texts, enduring, abiding, archaic, and yet always alive and addressing us anew.

So in times of transition we revisit the past and embrace the eternal. One last point, however. There is something fascinating about this figure of Elijah because of course although he was taken up into heaven here, this is by no means the last we hear of him. The

Jews were forever waiting for Elijah to come back, presumably because they felt he never really died. Our Old Testament, as it is arranged in our Bibles, ends with a promise of Elijah, and some people thought John the Baptist was Elijah returned. And some people evidently thought Jesus was Elijah. Then suddenly one day on a mountain top in the midst of Jesus' ministry – there he is, along with Moses. And some people thought Jesus called for him when he was on the cross. You see, you never quite know when Elijah might show up and you are always waiting for him, always on the lookout. When the Jews celebrate the Passover to this day they leave an empty chair for Elijah, just in case he arrives. Elijah represents the element of surprise. He reminds us that the future is always open, always waiting for God to come, always poised for the unexpected.

That's the other thing we need to bear in mind when we are in transition, facing change. Keep that space for Elijah. You never know when he'll turn up, what he'll look like or what he might say. But one thing for sure – he will be a blessing. I hope you recognise him, even though it will probably be after he's gone. Amen.

Holy God, eternal and faithful one,  
we praise and worship you,  
glorious God, radiant God whose love is proclaimed  
by the light and warmth and splendour of this new day.  
We praise you, gracious God come to us in Jesus Christ,  
calling us by name, calling us to leave lesser things  
and to follow;  
we praise you present God whose Spirit mingles with our  
spirits, prompting us to respond to your call,  
stirring us to walk with you into newness of life.  
O God forgive us for our reluctance,  
forgive us for our yielding to the pull of the old,  
forgive us for our attachment to what is dead,  
forgive us for lives cluttered with things  
we need to let go of.  
And so we come today – called and yet reluctant,  
longing and yet held back and we pray together:  
Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy upon us...

Loving God,  
wrap us in the mantle of grace and forgiveness,  
and speak words of reassurance to our troubled hearts,  
and give us grace to rise up and follow,  
for we pray in Jesus' name and in the words  
he taught us we pray together, saying...