
Inheriting the Mantle

2 Kings 2.1-14

A Sermon preached at Lake Junaluska on July 1 2007 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

I'd like to read the story of Elijah's departure into heaven three times this morning, once as a very human story in the lives of Elisha and the company of the prophets, once as a theological story in the hands of the early Church, and a third time as a word from God to us today.

So let's begin with the very human story. I wonder whether you've ever found it difficult to let go. I wonder if you've ever said, or thought, or sung, "I can't live, if living is without you." I wonder if you recall a goodbye where one person, or maybe both, have held the hug so long it made it clear they had no real strength to let go, where maybe tears, maybe platitudes, maybe silence expressed that there was really nothing to say. It's a tough call whether it's harder to be the one leaving, or harder to be the one left behind. The one leaving is heading into the unknown; the one left behind is returning to the known, but without the person who makes the known make sense. Maybe it's a goodbye of a parent to a child. Maybe it's a goodbye of two lovers, or two friends. Or maybe, as in this case, it's the departure of a man who did so many new things and said so many true things that he drew back the veil between heaven and earth. Elijah had opened heaven to earth, and that's why he was known as a prophet – one of the greatest. And now Elisha is facing the question, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?"

And so three times, three times in six verses, Elisha says to Elijah, "I will not leave you." Elisha maybe still isn't quite clear exactly who Elijah is and what his presence among the Israelites means, but he knows that he's got the words of eternal life and so he's sure he's going to stick like a limpet wherever Elijah goes. And we get this little detail. "Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at a distance." It seems that whenever it's time to say one of those big goodbyes, there's someone else watching. You're in a parking lot, and cars driving past linger for a bit of human interest. You're in a hospital ward, and the next door bed is breaking world records for the number of visitors. You're in an airport, and the person checking the boarding passes has no eye for passion or tragedy, only for whether you have two carry-on items and your toothpaste in a small transparent bag. Of course the company of the prophets keep reminding Elisha that this is the day to say goodbye to Elijah – and Elisha each time says, "I know: shut up." It's one thing to say a difficult goodbye, it's another to be in the glare of public attention and be asked every few moments, "How do you feel?"

Well, we get a good sense of how Elisha feels. His master disappears in a whirlwind, and he tears his clothes in two pieces. If you don't *have* many clothes, that's a big deal. Read "tosses away the photo albums", "burns the mattress", or "smashes up the computer" – whatever is your gesture of finality and despair, that's where Elisha is. "The big man... is gone." You can *see* the tears. They don't need to be in the story.

Our literature, song and movies are full of poignant love-scenes like this, and occasionally for a change we get as far as a parent and child separation, though they don't usually involve chariots of fire. But this is two grown up men who don't have access to the conventional vocabulary of farewell. I wonder whether you ever got a chance to say goodbye to your teacher, your mentor, the one faculty person who became more than just a professor, the pastor who really did draw back the veil between heaven and earth for you. There isn't a large vocabulary for such goodbyes. And Elisha isn't just facing the loss of Elijah. He's facing the inheritance. These are big shoes to fill. This is a tough act to follow. Elisha needs a first son's share of the inheritance, and he asks for it. And so we get that last element of a human parting: the fumbling around for a suitable token of remembrance. Will a tangible gift do it? Or is that inadequate, and it must be something intangible? Elijah offers both. A double share of his spirit. And his mantle, physically and metaphorically. Just as well, as it happened, because Elisha had torn up his own mantle in his distress.

So that's the human story. Now look at this story through the eyes of the early Church, after they had recently said goodbye to Jesus. Jesus had spent a good deal of time with them teaching and healing, the way Elijah had. The farewell discourses in John's gospel give a pretty thorough account of how painful it was to say goodbye.

Like Elijah, Jesus promises there will be a double portion of his Spirit to come on his disciples after he's gone, and at Pentecost, as at Elijah's departure, there's a lot of wind involved. Heard through gospel ears, Elisha's injunctions to the company of the prophets to be silent sound rather like Jesus' commands to his disciples and to those he had healed to say nothing to anybody. Elisha's insistence by the highest authority he can name that he will never leave Elijah sounds very much like Peter's insistence at the Last Supper that even if all the other disciples fall away, he, Peter, will never fall away. Even the company of prophets watching from a distance reminds us of the women watching from a distance at Jesus' crucifixion.

And then there is the account of Elijah parting the waters of the Jordan, which is itself reminiscent of first Moses and then Joshua parting the waters. But in Elijah we get for the first time a sense that the waters of the Jordan are like the waters of his own death. His legacy to Elisha is that he, Elisha, too can part the waters of death by picking up Elijah's mantle. And it's easy to see here that this story helped the early Christians perceive Jesus' death and resurrection as standing in this same tradition. Jesus took on his Father's mantle. Jesus too crossed over the Jordan of death to the glory of new life. When Elijah departs Elisha tears his clothes in two. When Jesus died the Temple curtain was torn in two. Remember there was also a cloud at Jesus' baptism at the Jordan, and a descent of the Spirit, and much conversation about Jesus having the Father's blessing and about whether he should be John's follower or John his. And some similar goings on at Jesus' Transfiguration, a party at which Elijah himself put in an appearance. And for the early disciples the implication of this story must have been clear. It was not for them to mourn Jesus and rend their garments: it was for them to take up the mantle and do what he had done, parting the waters of death and living in the power of the double portion of his Spirit.

And what of us, today? What does it mean for us to take up the mantle? Well, my sense is that, just as for Elisha, it has both a theological and a very human dimension. And to understand both we need to tell a story.

The story goes like this. There was a time, let's call it the first half of the twentieth century, when life was hard but faith was clear. Two world wars and the Depression made life tough, but churches, particularly Protestant churches, were the firm foundation and blessed assurance of society. Family, church and nation provided the backbone, and institutions with an ecclesial flavor like universities and hospitals and voluntary organizations filled out the skeleton. Something was changing, but the change was so subtle it was hard to notice. What was changing was that the institutions the churches had founded were losing their ecclesial identity. The church was trading its theological identity in order to retain its social and institutional influence. We could call that era chapter one.

Chapter two names the period broadly filling the third quarter of the twentieth century. This was the time when many of those who had been excluded from the benefits of the story up to this point demanded to become a part of the story. We could call this period the whirlwind. Many of the movements were led by people who resonated deeply with the Christian story; but what was let loose was a profound and relentless questioning about the sources of authority, the abuses of power, and the vested interests lurking behind all claims to truth.

And we find ourselves in chapter three. Chapter three doesn't yet have a narrative of its own, but it's characterized by battles between those who deeply mourn the passing of chapter one, with its certainties about character, faith, chastity, patriotism, and good manners, and those who want us still to be living in chapter two, with its passion, intensity, debate, conviction, and idealism. Some individuals, congregations and even denominations see themselves as dedicated to rounding off the unfinished agenda of chapter two; others see themselves as dedicated to restoring the simplicity and virtue of chapter one.

But we're with Elisha. We're in chapter three, on the other side of the Jordan. We can't go back to Elijah's time and resume chapter one, and we can't spend our lives in the whirlwind of chapter two. And that has a theological and a human dimension.

The theological dimension is the question of whose mantle we think we're taking up. I have a sense that in chapter one the mantle was that of those who came to this country from Europe in the seventeenth century. They were fleeing persecution by the state or by other Christians, and they sought to make America a uniquely Christian nation, uniquely blessed by God. They believed the kingdom of God had a chance in America in a way

unprecedented in previous history, and they set about vigorously establishing institutions to set it in stone. In chapter two I sense that the mantle is different. Here the key date is 1787. The American Constitution guarantees the unique blessing of America to its citizens and to the world, but it does so by keeping religion in its place, and the explicit claims of Christ invisible.

So the theological challenge for us in chapter three is to take up a mantle that isn't dominated by seventeenth or eighteenth century expectations, but by first century expectations. The challenge is to read the story of Elisha not as the New England Puritans or the Founding Fathers would have read it, but as the early Church would have read it. And that means letting go of our social influence, letting go of our sense of being a natural majority, and rediscovering that the early Christians, like Elijah and Elisha, were a thorn in the flesh of religious and political authority, were frequently bewildered and unsure of the right way ahead, and were in regular danger of their lives.

Which brings us back to the human dimension of taking up the mantle and living across the Jordan. Because there's a lot of tearing of garments in grief in the Church today. And from a human point of view it's not hard to see why. It *was* great in chapter one. The pastor really *was* somebody, churches really mattered, theological vocabulary really *did* have a place in daily conversation, family, church and nation really *did* seem to have a consistent thread running through them, marriages really *did* seem to stick together, teenagers really *did* have an economically driven sense of purpose that kept them to recognizable standards and goals. And perhaps even easier to miss, it *was* great in chapter two. Churches really *mattered*, and their leaders quite *frequently* marched at the head of the social movements of the time. The political language of the period, in the mouths of men like Dr King, was drenched in theological rhetoric, and there really *was* a sense that people were coming out of the wilderness and may *indeed* reach the Promised Land sometime *soon*. They were great days, when the story really seemed to be about us. There is a human dimension to this. The grief is *real*.

So what does it mean to pick up the mantle today, to inhabit chapter three, to walk from the Jordan leaving Elijah and the whirlwind behind? It means enjoying what is possible now that wasn't so possible before. For example, the word Christian used to be an adjective – in chapter one it meant “American” and in chapter two it meant “person of good will.” Now in chapter three it can go back to what it was for the early Church – a noun. A Christian is a socially deviant politically unreliable worshiper of a God beyond the imagination of the advertisers and social critics. Be very careful about using the word Christian as anything other than a noun.

To pick up the mantle today means to continue to build institutions, but to do so without the pretensions of social control. Our job is not to run America, it is to model a society that would be impossible without the death and resurrection of Jesus and to provoke people's curiosity into how such a thing is possible. We need institutions to train people to live in and lead and inspire such communities.

And finally we need to hear Elisha calling “Father, father!” We need to hear his pain but we also need to hear the unique opportunity we now have. Elisha is saying he is a *child*, a child who has lost his teacher, his mentor, his father. In chapter one the churches tried to parent the whole nation, and did a pretty good job at it. In chapter two the churches became teenagers, angry adolescents demanding the parents set the house straight and make sure everyone got fair shares. Now, perhaps for a fleeting moment, in chapter three, we get the chance to be children. We get to use our imaginations. We get to play. We get to laugh, to trust, to love instinctively and to see life as an adventure. Wouldn't it be wonderful for a moment to see church not as parent, not as adolescent, but as child; not seeing decline in numbers, faith and social influence, not blinded by injustice, rights and campaigns, but seeing the wonder of God's miracles, the glory of God's goodness, the joy of God's humor? For a moment, here in chapter three, on this side of Jordan, with Elijah gone and the whirlwind over, let us live with the early Church in the delirious joy of the discipleship adventure, the wonder of God's grace, good as new. For a moment let us like a child dance in the meadow of God's glory and drink in the nectar of God's Spirit. For a moment let us rest in the palm of the everlasting hands and play in the pool of the ever-renewing waters. And let that moment be now.