

Elisha Takes Up The Mantle

1 Kings 19:19-21; 2 Kings 2:1-18

If there is one Bible story I remember vividly as a child, it was the healing of Naaman. You know how Elisha the prophet told him to bathe in the river Jordan to cure him of his leprosy? I couldn't believe that Naaman was so stubborn and wouldn't do what Elisha told him to do to be healed. Now perhaps I was a very obedient child and just couldn't comprehend someone disobeying instructions!

Well that story is for another time, but we all like a good story and so here today we have the story of the start of Elisha's ministry. Let's do some unpacking, as they say, of a story that may be familiar to you. And if it is new to you, then so much the better. And then we will explore how it speaks to us today, nearly 3000 years later.

So, I am picking up from where Dan Harris left off some three months ago. (I know that you've had a couple of other episodes from Elijah's' life since then.) May I remind you – Elijah had a bit of a downer. Despite seeing off the prophets of Baal, he gets very downhearted. But his pilgrimage to Mount Sinai (AKA Horeb) restores him as he appreciates God in a new way and is re-commissioned to continue his prophetic mission, including to train up an assistant!

[1 Kings 19:19-20]

So, let us paint that picture, forgive me for using the present tense (unless I slip up) - it helps to re-tell the story, even though I'm told this technique it makes one sound like a historian!

Picture Elisha the dutiful farmer's son out in the fields, it's the time for ploughing, he's one of the team working with a couple of oxen. By all accounts he seems to be part of a wealthy family, with a total of 12 pairs of oxen out in the field.

Then, out of the blue, Elijah turns up and very symbolically drapes his cloak over Elisha's shoulders. Whether anything is said, we do not know. Did Elisha recognise Elijah? Did he have an inkling of what was about to happen? We don't know. Anyway, Elijah seems to stand back and give Elisha space to respond.

And respond he does, by deserting his ploughing equipment and running after Elijah, (like the first disciples when Jesus called them).

He accepts immediately, and knows he must follow Elijah. So, he asks Elijah's permission if he can say goodbye to his parents, his family.

But Elijah's response is unclear – even if you work through different translations they tend to differ – but it seems that Elijah wants it to be up to Elisha whether or not he responds to God's call

Well Elisha certainly shows his commitment!

[v 21]

He burns his boats, or rather quite literally his bovines. He takes his pair of oxen and using the wood of the plough rustles up a rare old BBQ for everyone. What with all the preparation and the cooking and the eating, it must have been quite a while before he left to follow Elijah. But leave he does.

So, he accepts the call and becomes Elijah's assistant. rather like Joshua to Moses – where the Bible writers use the term aide, (in fact, the same Hebrew word is used). There are many parallels between the lives of Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha.

Elisha means God is salvation or God saves. Joshua means Yahweh is salvation or The Lord saves

Elisha makes the dramatic transition from a settled well-to-do farming family to itinerant apprentice, out on the road with a great prophet (who until then had cut very much a solitary figure).

Taking on someone's mantle can be intimidating. Think of the high expectations. I'm reminded of a footballing example. Perhaps you remember when David Moyes took over as the manager of Manchester United a few years ago? He had a hard act to follow in that of the extraordinarily successful Alex Ferguson. It's not easy measuring up to a well-established predecessor. There are big boots to fill. Unfortunately, in that example things didn't work out very well.

So here we have Elijah, one of the big guns of the OT – who'd want to be *his* next in line? Couple that with the prospects for prophets at this time (or perhaps any time). Elisha will have been very familiar with the religious landscape of Israel at this time, where most of the population had succumbed to the worship of Baal, led by a series of unbelieving kings. To be a prophet, calling a nation to account and revealing the true God, was a hard, unpopular and dangerous job.

Anyway, some (may be four?) years pass before we hear of Elisha again. There have been some episodes (Naboth's vineyard; Elijah and Ahaziah) where Elijah is centre stage, but presumably Elisha is there in the background. Learning, supporting, and, according to the enigmatic statement of an officer of Israel's army that he "used to pour water on the hands of Elijah" (2Ki 3:11), which The Message interprets as "Elijah's right-hand man".

Elijah was his teacher and mentor, but nevertheless one day Elisha will be on his own...

[2 Kings 2:1-2]

And we heard that eventually that time arrives, Elijah and Elisha clearly know what is about to happen, as indeed do the local groups of faithful prophets.

We now witness almost a sort of comedy being acted out – perhaps the situation is a bit awkward for both of them; both of them seeking some confirmation of what the future holds?

[verses 3 - 6]

Elijah says he is to go to Bethel and Elisha should stay where he is. Elisha is having none of it, so they both go to Bethel. then Elijah says he is to go to Jericho, but without Elisha, again Elisha insists on coming. When they get to Jericho than Elijah says he is to go further west to The Jordan River. And Elisha one again like a limpet sticks with him.

So, was Elijah wanting to slip away? Was he uncertain quite how to relinquish his role? Was he testing his servant's devotion by asking him three times to remain while he went on in turn to other places?

Elisha was well aware of what was about to happen, and he refused to leave his master. He was intensely loyal, he was not wanting to miss out on the final chapter of his mentor's life, and yet, was he quite ready to take responsibility?

[verses 7 - 8]

And then – a miracle. Elijah takes the very same cloak used earlier to symbolically appoint Elisha for the Lord's work. He rolls it up, strikes the water with it and crosses the River Jordan dry-shod. The parallel with Moses crossing the Red Sea is, pardon the pun, striking. So, Elijah will end his days on earth outside the Promised Land, just as Moses died just short of its border.

[verses 9 - 10]

There, some distance from the audience on the other bank, Elijah asks an interesting question, "What can I do for you?"

Elisha's answer is perhaps in the manner of Solomon's when he asked for wisdom rather than wealth from God. Elisha requests a double portion of 'Elijah's spirit' .

This is not greed. This is not Elisha asking to be twice as successful as Elijah, or to perform twice the miracles (although more are recorded for him than his predecessor!). No quite the opposite he is asking for only a part of Elijah's spirit, albeit a double share. But his words are significant, because according to the Law the oldest son inherited a double portion of the father's goods. So Elisha is asking to be recognised as the heir of Elijah, to inherit like an eldest son.

But it is also Elisha seeking to inherit Elijah's zeal, his get up and go, his heart and passion for his ministry. Something he will need for the task in the years ahead.

That, of course, is not something that Elijah can give – rather than inherited, it is a gift of God

And as for the answer, well Elijah sees that that is clearly in God's hands. If Elisha fully experiences what will shortly happen to Elijah, then that will mean the gift is granted.

[verses 11 - 12]

And then the great scene takes place, with chariots of fire and Elijah rising up in a whirlwind. Elisha calls out "My father" – the relationship as son and heir is sealed, and Elisha declares that Elijah indeed has been the protector of God's people and the embodiment of the true strength of the nation – a role that in due course will also be seen to be Elisha's.

Elisha responds by tearing his own clothes (garments) – is it because of sadness, or anguish, or is it the symbol of change and the dawn a new era?

And now, at this point he takes up the cloak – fallen from his master – so Elijah left it for Elisha after all!

[verses 13 - 14]

And now Elisha must return, which involves crossing the Jordan. He asks the rhetorical question "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" and repeats the miracle of crossing, and we see again a parallel to the past where in Joshua enters goes into the Promised Land crossing the Jordan without getting his feet wet.

Is he seeking assurance that he is empowered to continue the task of Elijah to warn and turn the Israelites back to their God? Well the Lord certainly endorses his succession to Elijah's ministry and it is plain to all that the same powerful spirit now rests on Elisha.

[verse 15]

The prophets waiting for him on the other bank recognise Elisha now for who and what he has become - Elijah's true successor.

[verses 16 - 18]

An epilogue – the conscientious members of the prophetic community come to him and despite his objections they insist on conducting a search for Elijah. They just saw Elijah disappear – but Elisha knew more because he alone had witnessed the full glory of Elijah being taken up to heaven. The search is fruitless and Elisha has the dubious privilege of telling them, "I told you so!"

And if you care to read beyond verse 18 you can see that he starts his mission with two miracles before the chapter is out. He is a man of action indeed – acting upon the calling, taking up the mantle, confident that God's Spirit was with him

What can we learn from this familiar episode?

There is so much here, but I would like to limit to three things that I think make Elisha distinctive, things that could make us distinctive as we live out our faith.

- Elisha had commitment

Firstly, Elisha showed commitment. We have heard of the way that he responded to the call from Elijah, how he stopped what he was doing and after saying goodbye to his people in a generous, costly, way he unswervingly dedicates his life to following his teacher and his God.

Jesus alludes to this event in Luke chapter 9, when someone comes up to him and says: 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.'

Jesus stresses that to be one of his disciples requires even greater commitment.

Remember how we read of those disciples who, when He called them, *left everything* and followed Him – Peter, James, John, Andrew, Matthew? As Peter says, "We have left everything to follow you!" That's commitment!

Elisha was willing to be uprooted from his quiet, peaceful, rural life with its financial security to follow the Lord's direction. Obviously, he knew what his nation needed was the Word of the Lord.

Surely, we should respond wholeheartedly. But is our commitment up to scratch? Are we are holding back, guilty of being half-hearted, failing to make Jesus a priority?

Paul writing in Ephesians 6:7 says "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people" and then in 1 Corinthians 15:58 "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain."

Elisha had commitment, can we emulate that? There will be cost. There will be sacrifice.

- Elisha had a mentor

Elisha had Elijah as a mentor.

Many others us here will have been fortunate to have known the blessing of a mentor at some point in our lives, who leads the way, modelling committed service, and pointing to God at work in our lives.

Some years ago, I attended a series of meetings on leadership in the Church. And part of the programme was that we each met up regularly with another on the course to reflect, to share, to listen and to pray together. I found it very helpful and was very grateful for the experience and wisdom of my pair, who was Eric Swain. who many of you will remember. I found it a valuable experience.

We can learn from all ages: not just those older than ourselves! We in turn, especially when we move into a less active stage of life, long for others to carry on the work, when we can invest in them out of our years of experience of God and his ways. (Jennifer Turner).

Think about it, are you being called in that way? Is there an opportunity you have not grasped? Pray on it. Reach out to someone.

- Elisha asked for a double portion

Elisha asked for a big share in the spirit that was in his mentor – his zeal, his big heart, his passion for God's people to turn from their ways and return to their God.

Do we pray continually that we will be filled with enthusiasm for the Kingdom? I know I don't. To share in the passion of others to preach Christ crucified? To ask for the Holy Spirit to fall afresh on us daily?

Or are we content to be passive, unstretched, safe in the comfort of our home, our community, our church?

There is a world out there that is crying out for meaning in its life, for rescue from what is fake and false, for fairness and freedom. Not so very different from the ninth century BC?

As followers of Christ, we are called to ministry according to the gifts God gives us – wherever we find ourselves: in school, in the work place, in the home, in our relationships, in our daily activities, even in the church! We believe every believer has a spiritual gift (or gifts) and this represents at least a portion of the mantle of God's call on each individual's life. So, what has God gifted you to do? Ask him or ask your mentor.

Finale

It is one week after Pentecost – when the mantle of spreading the good news of Jesus was entrusted to His church through the work of the Holy Spirit. Are we still committed to that?

It is Father's Day – when we remember and are grateful for those who have been a father or like a father to us. Who have led us, guided us, mentored us. Take the opportunity to thank them if you are able. Can we do the same for each other in Christ's church?

And it is Trinity Sunday – when, by tradition, the church celebrates the Trinity, the unity of the three persons of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we are commissioned to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. For that we need to seek our double portion daily.

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