

Handing on the mantle

A title for our Scripture passage this morning from the 2nd book of Kings might well be ‘all change’, for in these verses we are thrown into a scenario where everything is changing. So, for example, turn back to the end of Chapter 1 that immediately precedes our passage, and we read there of the death of the king of Israel, King Ahaziah. And then turn ahead to the start of Chapter 3 that follows our reading and you will find that the rule of a new king, King Jehoram, is just beginning. So chapter 2 is set in an in-between time, a time of political transition, between two royal regimes. And then of course the story that we have read in chapter 2 is also one of change. It begins with the words, ‘Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven...’ In other words Elijah’s life is now over and it’s all change as God takes him and he hands over his prophetic ministry to his successor, Elijah.

Well, immediately this passage can ring bells with us, for if there is one thing that is common to us all it is the experience of change. It is one of the great constants of human life – everything changes. I forget which Greek philosopher it was who said that you can never step in the same river twice, and that can make the world an unpredictable and fearful place. And what an appropriate week it is for this church, with its British connections, to be considering the subject of change. I still recall voting in the referendum on remaining in the then Common Market 41 years ago - I know you find that impossible to believe given my youthful countenance, but it’s true. And now the UK has voted to leave the European Union and it enters uncharted waters and no-one really knows for sure what is going to happen and the consequences of our choice. But we are surrounded too by other massive changes. 41 years ago we knew nothing of personal computers, i-phones, the internet and all the technological innovations that are transforming our world. And there are great social changes and upheavals too: who would have thought 41 – even 21 - years ago that so many global peace and conflict issues would revolve around the rise of extreme Islam? It’s a changing world, and I wonder what it does to us when everything around us is shifting and sliding and in flux.

This passage from Scripture, however, is also about personal change. There is Elijah, facing his immanent death and departure, confronting his own

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mortality, having to let go of attachments, of the familiar, of life itself. And there is Elisha too, struggling with the immanent loss of his beloved mentor and leader. And as we read their story we see both Elijah and Elisha trying to come to terms with these changes. Elijah, knowing that his life is ending, embarks on this strange journey around a number of sites – Gilgal and Bethel and the Jordan – and we have no idea quite what these represent or why Elijah needs to visit them. Except, perhaps, that they are all places associated one way or another with the presence of God and with encounters with God, in which case this was like a pilgrimage that Elijah undertook, connecting with God in these holy places and shrines and thus preparing himself for his final, ultimate encounter with God in heaven. And in times of change and transition we need that kind of connection with God. In the shifting changes of life when foundations are shaking and old familiarities are vanishing there is a need for that kind of connect with God, with the eternal, with the One who is enthroned above the storms and shifting tides of life.

It would seem, however, that Elijah also needs solitude. He needs to be on his own. Each time he moves onto a new location he tells Elisha, who is following him, to stay behind: ‘stay here, for the Lord has sent me...’. And maybe that indicates a need to be alone with God, to be undistracted by the company of another. And in the change and disarray of life we need those moments of solitude when we can face ourselves and commune with our own spirit. And that will involve turning off the phone and email and Facebook and all the other distractions that assail us and that divert us – from ourselves.

There is too, however, the need for company, for human companionship. Elisha certainly needs this. He needs to be with Elijah in these last hours, and the fact that despite his instruction to Elisha to stay behind Elijah allows him to accompany him suggests that Elijah needs company too, that he is torn between the need for solitude and the need for human solidarity. And then there are these prophets too, these infuriating companies of prophets who show up at Gilgal and at Bethel and the Jordan. They could be a source of support and strength for both Elijah and Elisha but they need to learn a lesson or two about sensitivity and tact, because all they do is keep reminding Elisha that Elijah is about to be taken from him – as if he didn’t know! ‘Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?’ they repeat. ‘Yes, I know’, replies Elisha; ‘keep silent’. In other words, ‘of course I know – now put a sock in it!’ These prophets are a nuisance to Elisha and to Elijah who are

facing the trauma of loss. And we are reminded here of the need in times of crisis and change for community, for friendship, for companionship, but the company of those who know the art of pastoral sensitivity. And the church should be such a company of people who are here for one another and who offer the precious gift of fellowship and friendship.

So we see in this passage the necessities for living in this unpredictable and unstable world, a world of ‘change and decay in all around I see’ as the hymn puts it. We see the importance of connecting with the God who changes not, the sovereign God who makes the clouds his chariot and who rides on the wings of the wind. And we see the need to connect with ourselves in those moments of solitude, and we see the need to connect with others in the solidarity of companionship.

One last thing that we learn from this passage, one last necessity in an uncertain world of flux and transition and that is a sense of purpose, a sense of task, of calling even – and let me explain. This story of Elijah and Elisha is really one of succession, of handing on the baton, of passing on from one generation to another. Elijah here, at the end of his life as a prophet, is handing over to Elisha. And what he leaves behind and passes on to Elisha is his mantle his cloak. And think about that cloak for a moment. Towards the end of this story the two men come to the River Jordan and Elijah takes that mantle and strikes the water with it and the waters part to allow them to cross over. And then Elijah is taken up into heaven in the whirlwind and Elisha is left alone – and he takes the mantle and does the same thing, striking the waters so that they part. Now, what does that remind us of? Who had previously parted the waters like that? Well Moses had, when he led the people of Israel out of Egypt. And Moses’ successor Joshua had when he had led the people into the promised land. And so, you see, this mantle embodies these key memories from the past, memories of a God who lead his people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. This mantle becomes a symbol, a repository of those memories of God’s great acts of deliverance. And now, at the end of his journey, Elijah is passing it on, passing it on to his successor, the next generation. In all the changes and upheavals, all the ups and downs he has been called to live faithfully the traditions of his faith that were handed on to him – and now to passes them on to Elisha, woven into his mantle. So he dies in peace, his task complete, his life fulfilled.

So too with us. I wonder how life has treated you. I wonder what upheavals and crises you have faced or have yet to face. I wonder what winds and storms have battered your doors or may yet. You may find strength and solace in God, in solitude, in companionship. But when, like Elijah, you come to that last day, when you face that final transition, what will enable you to be taken up above the storms, to ride that fiery chariot with a sense of peace and fulfilment? It won't be what you've accumulated. It won't be the little empire of dust that you've built here. No. It will be the knowledge that you have received the faith, you've lived it, and you've handed it on. And to God be the glory forever. Amen.