



11<sup>th</sup> February 2018  
2 Kings 2.1-15

## The Chariot of Fire

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*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.*

Political commentators tell us that the handover of power is a brutal affair in our country. Harold Macmillan, Prime Minister at the time when this church was built, recalled that just an hour after his resignation as Premier from his hospital bed a man from the GPO arrived to take away his scrambler telephone – he thought such efficiency was a touch overzealous.

This morning's Old Testament lectionary reading is all about a change of leadership. Prophetic influence passes on from Elijah to Elisha. Other similar transitions are chronicled in scripture such as Moses to Joshua and Paul to Timothy. Each one reaffirming that as the baton is passed the presence of God remains constant.

Well, 2 Kings 2 is our text this morning and in verses 1-8 I notice that for Elisha this had been a remarkably Successful Apprenticeship.

These servants of God actually seemed to like each other and worked well as a team.

In my final year at college we had a new principal. He was a super person in many ways but sometimes suffered from a tendency to put his foot in it. So, on our last morning we all queued up after chapel to shake his hand and say farewell. He shook mine and said, *So Ian, what will you be doing?* I said I was going to be an Assistant Minister. *Oh, he said, well just remember half of assistantships fail!* And with that he wished me a cheery farewell!!

Well this partnership between these two – Elijah and Elisha seems to have been a great success.

They are a bit like an inseparable double act in these opening eight verses. Did you notice that Elisha simply refused to be parted from his mentor? Verse 2: *Elijah said to Elisha: Stay here for the Lord has sent me to Bethel. Elisha replied, As the Lord lives, your life upon it, I shall not leave you.*

This was to be repeated again as Elijah goes off to Jericho and a final time as he travels on to the Jordan.

Maybe Elijah wanted to spare his apprentice the sorrow of seeing him die. Whatever the reason Elisha's tenacity wins the day and he is there when the chariot of fire arrives.

This was undoubtedly a highly valued partnership. Elijah – an old man with much to teach his young successor. Elisha – not pushing to take over but happy to wait in the wings, learns his craft and steps forward only in God's good time.

In one of the churches where I served I read in the church history that in 1896 the pastor of that church – had his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. As a present the church agreed to give him a co-pastor – to be paid for by the pew rents of the day totally £225 a year. So, an assistant minister was appointed to serve in a junior capacity for three years and then step up to the lead role in 1899 when the senior pastor retired. The church history I was reading told me the facts but didn't give any hints as to whether or not these two ministers, one at the beginning of his ministry, the other at the end, actually got on.

Well I don't think you can read 2 Kings 2 without sensing there was a great deal of mutual trust and respect between Elijah and Elisha. And their situation was similar, with one at the end of his time, the other at the beginning. And everyone seemed to know what was about to happen. So, we read again and again that on arrival at Bethel, Jericho or Jordan these two would be met by a company of the prophets who would draw Elisha aside and ask if he knew that Elijah's days were numbered.

Elijah is considered one of the greatest of Israel's prophets. He even has an empty chair set aside for him at every Passover Meal. And alongside Moses it was he who appears with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

To have been so long in your country's limelight could have become an all-consuming, and inflating experience. But not for him, it seems, any sense of jealousy or resentment towards his successor Elisha. Instead he offers wise counsel as he brings to an end a well-rounded apprenticeship.

Back in the 1980's the people of Merseyside were fortunate to have a similar clerical partnership in their midst. It too was one based on mutual respect and was between David Shepherd – Anglican Bishop and Derek Warlock – Catholic Archbishop. It all began, apparently one Good Friday when they spent time on the phone telling each other what the day meant to them. Next year they marched down Hope Street from one of their cathedrals to the other. It was a great witness to an often-divided city. It spoke about the value of friendship, respect and the willingness to take risks in our journey together. You might remember that because they always gave joint press conferences about Liverpool they were dubbed with the nick name; Fish and Chips – because they were always in the newspaper together!

We believe that such collegiality is worth striving for today. You might be part of the Eldership, on the junior church team or part of church group. It's great when these forums become places where every voice is valued, where the old give assistance to the young, where tomorrow's leaders listen to those about to retire.

And all of this is a basic recognition that we are not at the centre of the church's ministry – that place belongs to Christ. As Paul says later in the New Testament – as he speaks against the tendency towards personality cults in churches – I planted the seed, Apollos watered but it was God who gave the increase.

Elijah and Elisha – a inspiring example, I think, of a successful apprenticeship.

Here's another thought from 2 Kings 2 about a Sincere Bereavement.

It's the end for Elijah and Elisha has to cope with that sad fact. Elijah's death is described in poetic terms. They were walking along and suddenly a chariot of fire separates them and Elijah is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind.

Elisha responds according to the funereal customs of his day. He expresses his sincere bereavement by tearing his clothes – a very public expression of mourning not unlike the sort we see today at Middle Eastern funerals.

One of the most moving books I've ever read about bereavement is C.S.Lewis' *A Grief Observed*. Men are not always known for their openness when it comes to issues like bereavement, but in this book Lewis is at his most honest. He lost his wife Joy through cancer. He wrote: *No one ever told me that grief feels so much like fear. Where is God? When I go to him I feel he's slammed the door in my face.*

C.S.Lewis found his grief at times simply overwhelming – he called his sorrow not a state but a process – always changing.

Most of us ministers have books about bereavement on our shelves. We have our own experiences and regularly have the privilege of walking beside people in their grief. And maybe one of the best ways to view bereavement is as a process – as Lewis did. Some say it moves through stages like shock, searching, sadness and finally stability.

For you it might have been a different journey and maybe you're not aware when one stage ends and another starts.

I mention this not only because it's part of Elisha's experience in today's passage but because it's a part of life for every one of us. There is nothing unchristian about grieving. To grieve is not to fail in our walk with God.

Elisha loses his spiritual father, his great mentor Elijah. He tears his clothes. And perhaps our minds recall the Lord Jesus Christ standing outside of Lazarus' tomb, a beloved friend who had gone to an early grave, and rather than show the stiff upper lip he sheds tears instead.

Now a final thought for this morning – we began by thinking of Elisha's Successful Apprenticeship, and then his Sincere Bereavement, let's conclude with a few words about this Spirit Filled Succession.

Just before he died Elisha requests of Elijah that he might have a double portion of his spirit in order to carry on with God's work.

Isn't that an interesting request. He's so inspired by his role model and so unsure of his own ability to succeed him, that he asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit.

I remember after I served in Kettering for five years as an Assistant Minister – in a partnership with The Revd Donald MacKenzie that, by the way, actually worked! I moved on to Hitchin in Hertfordshire, just up the road from here, to start my first sole pastoral charge assignment.

I didn't ask for a double portion of Donald's spirit but I do remember, especially in the

opening years at Hitchin saying to myself on many occasions as I faced an issue or a challenge: *Now, what would Donald have done.*

Well, we know that the Holy Spirit isn't just to be encountered in the New Testament but she is there in the Jewish Scriptures as well. We read that the Spirit rested upon leaders like Abraham, prophets like Elijah or kings like David – gifting them and equipping them.

In the New Testament there is a great emphasis on the Holy Spirit at work in the world and in The Church.

We are not asked to live this Christian life by ourselves. We are promised that the Spirit of Jesus fills us with the love and peace of God.

The Book of Common Prayer in old, but very beautiful language, puts it this way:

*O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee, mercifully grant that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.*

So, Elisha wanted, as it were, the spirit of Elijah to rest upon him.

At the Ascension the disciples of Jesus felt much the same. They too looked up to heaven and saw the one they loved and respected being taken from them.

Afterwards, the disciples locked themselves behind closed doors. But then on the Day of Pentecost they received the Holy Spirit – the spirit of Jesus which has been filling the Church ever since.

So, remember just like Elisha and those first apostles we too are part of a Spirit filled succession. Remember that as you begin a new task. Remember that as you continue with your calling.

Well I must bring this sermon to a close.

In looking at this narrative of one leader leaving and the apprentice taking over, a narrative of change yet also one with a message about the constancy of God I'm reminded of that profoundly moving little speech Abraham Lincoln gave to his home town crowd who gathered as the station to wave him off the day before his Inauguration.

They were sad to see one of their own leave them but reassured when he said: *The God who goes with me is the same God who stays with you.*

May that sense of God, ever present through all the changing scenes of life, continue to encourage and inspire us in both our personal and corporate pilgrimages, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.