



The Fifth Sunday after Trinity  
26 June 2016

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## Inheriting the Mantle

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

**Readings: 2 Kings 2.1-2, 6-14; Galatians 5.1, 13-25; Luke 9.51-end**

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 release the embrace, 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 car park, 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 more than two carry-on items and your toothpaste in a small transparent bag. Of course the company of the prophets keeps 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 films 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 supervisor who became more than just a boss, the priest 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'd 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'll 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's 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. As Jesus says in John 14, 'Anyone who believes in me will do what I have been doing.'

And what of us, today? What does this story mean on the other side of the great wide Jordan of history, all these years later? What does it mean to take up the mantle?

Before we answer that question let's pause and dwell on the two things that make taking up the mantle so challenging. The first is, we're mighty reluctant to say goodbye to Elijah. The world and the church seem so much more secure if we have a father-figure, a parent who'll take care of everything, a mentor we can always turn to for advice or recall as an example, or who simply gives a reassuring sense that everything's going to be fine. I remember a training event with a bunch of youth workers and the trainer began by saying, 'Can we all agree some ground rules around confidentiality' – and the youth workers all laughed; and the trainer was offended and confused; but the youth workers explained, 'People always start training events like that but when everyone leaves they gossip like no one had said it. You have to take responsibility for what you share and whom you share it with.' What they were saying was, sorry, don't go looking for Elijah; he's gone off in his chariot. You have to create your own safe space now. It was a harsh moment for facing up to an uncomfortable truth. Living without Elijah can feel pretty brutal.

The second thing that holds us back from taking up the mantle is we're overwhelmed by the whirlwind. Most of us have had a time in our life when it feels like we're living a rarefied, more intense existence: a terrifying diagnosis, a shocking accident, a season of terrible grief or heartbreak, crushing disappointment or out-of-the blue hurt or betrayal. It's a whirlwind; afterwards you struggle to recall the events in the right order; you realise there's whole chunks of life like national news or wider family events that have completely passed you by; you sense nothing will ever be the same again. Such experiences put us in touch with our tender, vulnerable nature,

and make us reluctant to face the world, take risks or set out on adventures. Maybe you're in the midst of such a time right now.

Both Elisha and the early Christians knew the pain, confusion, denial and grief of realising Elijah was gone. And both Elisha and the early Christians knew what it meant to emerge from the whirlwind. And for both Elisha and the early Christians that was the time for them to take up the mantle.

I wonder what that mantle is for you. Maybe you've been staring at it a long time. Could be you've got so used to looking at it, you've almost forgotten the point is to put it on. Perhaps in all humility you thought you should wait until someone else was going to step up and wear it, but it seems they haven't, and it's your time. Whichever way, I'm pretty confident you don't need me to tell you what it is. You know, deep down. You know.

You don't have to be Elijah. You just have to be the best you you can be. You don't have to do it Elijah's way: you just have to do it with Elijah's integrity, passion, faith, love. Sure there's a whirlwind: but it won't sweep you away, it just reminds you this is real, this matters, this is deep and far.

I don't care if you're 8 or 88; I don't care if you're new to faith or long in the tooth; I don't care how much you miss Elijah or how scary the whirlwind is. God's calling you. God's sending upon you a double portion of Elijah's spirit. It's time to inherit that mantle. It's your time.