

**SERMON: 22 September 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper**  
**“Elisha - Alopecia, curses and she bears”**  
**(2 Kings 2:15-25 and Matthew 5:13-16)**

There are three parts to the Elisha story we read today. There is the recognition of Elisha’s authority as the new prophet of the Lord. Secondly, there is the healing of the waters. And thirdly, there is the cursing of the young men who mocked Elisha’s lack of hair.

I know that I’ve not always been happy with my receding hair line but I’ve not yet felt the need to react in the way that Elisha did. But more of that later.

Overall, the Elisha story is at least a question about the right use of power. It’s certainly questionable whether or not the destruction of the boys who taunted Elisha was indeed an abuse of God given power by the prophet.

And so for that reason alone, we need to look to the life of Christ for help. Hence the reading from the Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, to teach us that we are called to be light and salt, to do good deeds and to love enemies.

Elisha may have been a type of Christ in many ways but he wasn’t the fullness of Christ. He may have had the power of God but he seemed to lack the wisdom on how to use that power well. Power and authority need wisdom and humility in their use.

We’ve probably all seen power misused and maybe even suffered as a result. We often see it in workplaces or even in politics, where leaders make decisions which are not always good for anyone other than themselves.

Let’s have a closer look at the story from 2 Kings. In chapter 2, verses 15-18 tackle the issue of Elisha’s authority being recognised. Elisha seems secure enough to sit by as the company of prophets send off 50 men to just have a last final check to make sure Elijah’s not still around, maybe lurking in a bush somewhere.

Sure enough after three days they return empty handed, no sign of Elijah anywhere. Elisha's the man now and he gives them the equivalent of "didn't I tell you not to go, but you wouldn't listen to me!"

But I think a key thing here, at the start of Elisha's ministry, is that Elisha lets them go and do what they want to do. He doesn't insist on stopping them. He lets them find out for themselves. He lets them make their own mistakes so that they can learn to trust him.

Any parent knows there comes a time when their children need to find out for themselves. There comes a time when the parent thinks 'that's not a good idea, it's not what I would do', but they realise they have a choice - to risk a falling out or to let them go and find out for themselves.

Obviously when children are small they need lots of guidance and input but as they grow and make their own choices, that's when relationships can be tested and great wisdom is needed on the part of the parent to manage those times with sensitivity.

Elisha seems to do that here in allowing the group of prophets to find out for themselves. And in the end it seems that was the best approach as Elisha's reputation is enhanced as they realise he was right after all.

Well it seems no sooner is this over than Elisha gets his first real chance to prove the Lord's power at work through him. The waters of Jericho were polluted. Some think it was bilharzia or schistosomiasis, a wee parasitic flat worm that gets into people's guts and can live in them for years causing all sorts of health problems.

Remember Jericho had been cursed by Joshua centuries before - "Cursed before the Lord is the one who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: "At the cost of his firstborn son he will lay its foundations at the cost of his youngest he will set up its gates" (Joshua 6:26).

And children and women were dying in child birth supposedly because of the polluted waters.

But the addition of a wee bowl of salt was all that was needed to transform the water.

“This is what the Lord says: ‘I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.’” (21).

The Lord is able to completely turn around the badness and the unfruitfulness and transform it to good. It just needs a wee bit salt.

So when Jesus calls his followers the salt of the earth, what great potential is in that calling. The potential to transform our society from bad to good, to change this world into the kingdom of God, to bring peace into broken families, to heal rifts, to eradicate disease, to build hope and bring joy.

Our God is able and our God is willing and our God is looking for people to be new bowls to be filled with salt and to be poured out into the muddy waters of this world. Are you up for it?

But what, if anything, are we to make of verses 23-25 and Elisha cursing the young men who mocked him?

Its a horrible story and whether it happened or not it does have the power to teach truth. I don't think this episode teaches historical fact. That's not its intention, like other parts of the Bible. It likely belongs to the genre of poetry, designed to teach a moral.

It's interesting to note some of the ways bible scholars have tried to understand this part of the story. One claims that The 42 were young men not boys. As if that makes it alright.

In our own culture we learn these sort of stories from childhood. Think of the story of Little Red Riding Hood. No one seriously believes that a wolf dressed up in a nightgown and night cap and got into bed and pretended to be the granny. But the tale teaches us that not everything is how it looks.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus uses that same teaching, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. (Matthew 7:15).

So what might this Elisha and the she bears teach us?

Well perhaps two things:

That its not good to insult God's authority or put God to the test.

That returning insults with cursing only results in more violence.

Get out of here baldy, or go on up, baldy, is an insult as well as a test to the authority of God in Elisha. The test to 'go on up' was to do what Elijah did. In other words, prove to us that you're as good as Elijah was. Prove it by going up to heaven like he did.

Its not good to test God in that way or to demand that sort of performance from someone. Wherever its possible to, its better to trust people for who they are, especially if they are seeking God in what they are doing.

But its not good to throw curses around either.

Again, in the sermon on the mount, Jesus teaches us how to deal with insults.

I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. (Matt 5:39).

And Proverbs 9:7 advises,

Whoever corrects a mocker invites insults;  
whoever rebukes the wicked incurs abuse.

Not turning the other cheek only incites more abuse and more violence. It doesn't resolve the conflict but escalates it.

Jesus calls us to be peace makers who love enemies, who bless those who curse us, who do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who persecute us; and in so doing, that we would children of our father in heaven (5:43-45).

This is only the beginning of Elisha's story. He goes on to do some incredibly amazing things. God doesn't give up on him. He lets him make his own mistakes, find out for himself, learn God's ways and grow in faith and trust.

## Humility

There's hope for all of us to learn from our own mistakes of the past and to grow up in the ways of God. Our world needs people to use power and authority with the wisdom that God gives. Our world needs us to be the body of Christ bringing salt and light for the healing of the nation.