

SERMON: 30 June 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Ploughing a Straight Furrow - A Long Obedience in the Ways of Love” (1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21 and Luke 9:51-62)

It's out of obedience that the prophets Elijah finds Elisha and anoints him as his successor. Elijah's time has come. Its time for a replacement. The land needs a new prophetic voice.

We might ask why? Why might Elijah's time have come? Why indeed might Elisha's time have come?

Looking back, to the incident before this story, in 1 Kings 19, we find Elijah hiding under the threat of death because Queen Jezebel has vowed to take his life. She vowed to do so as revenge, because Elijah had slaughtered her 450 false prophets of Baal, following the great contest on Mount Carmel.

Incidentally, the slaughter wasn't something the Lord asked Elijah to carry out. We can't blame God for the violence, as so many are apt to do, even in our day.

We wouldn't dream of attributing Jezebel's revenge and violent acts to Divine guidance. Clearly, we see that as the work of evil.

But when it comes to Elijah, as the Lord's prophet. Our minds think he can do no evil, and we find it hard because Elijah is remembered as a good prophet, a great prophet even.

But perhaps this reminds us that people are a mixture of both good and bad. All of humanity are. That's why when they come to Jesus and call him 'good teacher' he refuses to allow them to call him good, for only God is fully good.

But back to Elijah and his hiding. Jezebel's false gods of Baal had been shown to be worthless in the presence of the Lord's goodness, the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob.

Yet despite this high point in Elijah's calling, we find him on the run for his life and even wishing his life were over.

Its into this very human condition of vulnerability, that an angel visits him in his sleep and provides bread and water, a communion of food for the 40 day journey to Mount Sinai, the mountain of God, where Elijah will meet God in a cave.

Its at the point of giving up and filing sorry for himself, that the Lord appears to Elijah; not in the wind, or the earth quake or the fire - because our God is not like other gods, gods of weather, like Baal - but is the God who appears in the still voice of a gentle whisper.

Our God is a personal God who speaks in and from the depth of our being, who speaks through the channel of our inherent oneness with God, not shouting at us from a distance, or sitting “up there” looking down disapprovingly, an image so wrong yet held by so many.

Much of the challenge of our calling to be Christians, is to dispel that image and proclaim a different gospel; to bring good news in place of fake news.

I like how the Oxford Bible Commentary describes the way the Lord God appears to Elijah as “extremely powerful and quietly beautiful”.

Be still and know that I am God.

In the conversation, Elijah is commissioned, called, to anoint a new King of Aram, a new King of Israel and a new prophet to replace himself.

We can't possibly understand the full complexity of what's happening in the anointing of Elisha. But like the first disciples of Jesus, Elisha is prepared to drop his nets (as it were) and follow his Master.

There may well have been hesitation - “first let me go and kiss my mother and father good-bye and then I will go with you” - but he leaves behind family and occupation to pursue a higher call, which at the time might have felt more like a daring leap into the unknown.

The killing of the oxen and the burning of the plough and the sharing of the roasted meat with the other 11 teams of plough men, might just tell us that he's leaving that old life behind completely, with no intention of going back to it. And as he goes on this new calling, he wants to bless his colleagues in one final costly, sacrificial act of providing, which may also have been a sign that his new calling would involve feeding people, albeit in different ways.

The call to follow Jesus, at the start of Luke 9, is a call to announce the coming of the Kingdom of God, to cast out and heal the sick.

Just as Elisha wasn't going to need his oxen and his plough, neither would the disciples of Jesus need a bag or food or money or extra clothing. Instead they would need to rely on the hospitality of strangers as part of God's Divine providing.

Jesus too had a calling to follow. He came to show us how to live in obedience to the still small Voice of Love. Jesus reveals to us and makes available to us, the power to live following the Call of Love. Even when it's tough to do so, like when Jesus knows his time was getting near to return to heaven, and the only way to reach Heaven's Gate would be to go via King's Cross.

And despite the hour of what's ahead, Jesus finds within himself, a strength to keep going, despite the fear, the temptation to turn away, or the pull of other distractions.

Jesus shares this vulnerability with his two disciples when he talks to them about the cost of following his Way. Essentially, he says, firstly, the Son of Man has no home, no place to lay his head - in other words, followers of Jesus are not to consider the world as it is as their home but instead are to seek the coming of the Kingdom of God, the peaceable kingdom which will last for eternity as a place where everyone will want to be, once they've glimpsed it.

Again, a big calling for we who are Christians is to create spaces which resonate as spaces of God's presence in this way. The Church's role is to be a foretaste of what is to come, whereby people can glimpse the heavenly kingdom.

And before the Church gets too full of pride, we're going to need everyone on board, we're going to have to break down barriers, cross cultures, get to a place of oneness and unity with all people before we can truly begin to see this as a reality.

And secondly, Jesus responds to the disciple who says, "I'll follow you, but first let me return home and bury my father, with the response "let the dead bury the dead".

It sounds harsh but I think Jesus is saying that disciples have a high calling to preach the coming of the Kingdom of God which will sometimes take priority over earthly affairs.

And perhaps also he's hinting at the idea that not everyone is immediately attracted to following Jesus and that's just the way it is. Disciples will need to be able to walk away and let go and let God find another way of reaching those God wants to reach.

And thirdly, to the response, "yes I'll follow you but first let me say goodbye to my family", Jesus' answer to not look back once you've started to plough, might say to us that discipleship is as Eugene Peterson says, 'a long obedience in the one direction'.

Think how unproductive it would be to not look ahead as you were ploughing a furrow. It would end up crooked.

The Church is called and exists to support disciples in their long obedience in the Way of Jesus, the Way of Love. Let's be a Church that is good at that.