

Sermon Archive 542

Sunday 29 June, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on shifting responsibility

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The First Lesson: 1 Kings 19: 15-16, 19-21

Sermon - Part One: Changing of responsibilities:
Burning bridges, and moving forward.

There are changes up North. Not sure what they mean for us down here . . . A new king, Hazael - what will he be like? Is he something like a young Prince William, very young in the eyes of those of us who are older - and not yet ready? Or *is* he ready? Thinking ahead a bit, are we finding the world now resting in the care of the untested? If so, is this an exciting opportunity, or is it just terrifying? This is a time of change, and shifting responsibilities.

Closer to home, Jehu, son of Nimshi, takes up power. Who's *he*? Whose shoes is he filling? Is this going to be like an unfamiliar American stepping into the well-worn shoes of a pope called Francis (with his incremental cultural shifts and warm smile). Who is this new one? We're not quite sure. Where does his heart lie? It'd be really good to know. This is a time of change, shifting responsibilities.

Rumour has it, also, that just outside our own wee sphere of change, other nations' new rulers include despots, dictators and lunatics. Hopefully our tyranny of distance from all that will insulate us (radiation and economic wake notwithstanding). This *is* a time of change - and of new responsibility.

Unfortunately, coinciding with these great political shifts around us, there are other shifts within the house of Faith. There is a sense in the soul of the prophet Elijah, this grand stable figure of faith (who's been there for a long time), that it's also a time for him to let go - hand his role to someone else. Is that someone else ready? What if he's not (she's not)? Shifting responsibilities in a time of serious change.

-ooOoo-

Indeed, the old guard, the prophet Elijah, has done his dash. Years of courageous ministry (high level engagement in conflict with powerful people, speaking of truth to power, dodging, running, eventually hiding) has brought him

to a cave, where he crouches and mourns what's happened to the world - and says that he has no more to give. Outside he hears winds, and flames and earthquakes - but he's so "done" that he can't hear God in any of them. As a kind of vocational mercy-killing, God opens the door to release. God tells Elijah to anoint a new king for the North. Then to anoint a new king for the South. And then he's to call someone to take over the work that **he** has done.

Here's some narrative analysis. God gives Elijah three things to do. Find one king. Find another king. And then find a replacement for himself. A nice natural narrative flow would have him attending to those tasks in order. One king. Another king. Then a replacement prophet. But the narrative races forward straight to Elijah finding his own replacement - as if finding the kings can wait. The first thing, post God-invitation, Elijah does is to seek out Elisha. And when he finds him, he doesn't engage him in conversation about calling, vocation, and responsibility, the needs of the current times. He just throws his cloak over him - something like throwing a net onto an unsuspecting fish we might plan to eat for dinner. "Elijah passed by him", we read, "and threw his mantle over him".

Some entangled fish (of course) will thrash and they will fight - struggle against the reality of being caught. Elisha, though, seems to understand the situation. He's called; he's caught. His only response is to ask his captor for a quick moment to farewell his parents with a kiss.

Elijah responds to Elisha with the curious phrase "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" And three groups of scholars fly into a flurry of wondering!

The first group focuses on the "Go back again" - Elijah suggesting that turning back, rather than immediately going forward, shows Elisha not to be brave enough. If you want to go back, then you're no use to me. No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. The fish is thrown back into the sea.

The second group of scholars focuses on "for what have **I** done to you". It's correcting the young one's understanding that this interaction is only between a tired old man needing to retire and a younger man fit for the coming season - a human interaction, a human negotiation. What have **I** done to do? No, it is **God** who's in the calling! If you go back, you're turning away from God. This second group is confronting the "caught" person with a larger net.

The third group - well, it's just me really. An older man, wearied by the job he's had to do, asks the younger one to take over. He knows it's a huge task. Now his quickness to relinquish the job (maybe beginning the process of the

crushing of his successor) meets a young person saying "yes, I will do this, but first let me just kiss my parents". It's a tender request - something about wanting to kiss those who have nurtured him - it's kind of vulnerable - it shows how young he is. What do you think? Does it make Elijah wonder whether it's been unfair of him to trap this young one? You see the fresh face, the love of parents, maybe a naivete . . . "What am I doing to you - calling you into this? So, no, you go back again!"

Actually, concerning what was meant when Elijah said "go back again", we need to let that be - because we'll never know what was in his heart when he said it - wonderful ambiguous scripture! What we **do** know is that when Elisha felt he'd been given permission to kiss his parents goodbye, he slaughtered the oxen that he had used to make a living - like burning his bridges. Whether the old man has chastised him, reminded him of God, or let him off, he's going forward. There is something compelling in the request that he has received (maybe that means God chose the right person to approach with the request). Using the meat from his slaughtered oxen, Elisha provides a feast for the people from whom he's come. He's parting well - like this moving forward is something that needs to be done with joy and generosity! A kiss for his parents, a feast for his friends, and now onto the work of God.

A new king up North. A new king down South. Change and shifting responsibilities. A young man places a kiss where it needs to be placed, and steps forward.

Music for Reflection

The Gospel Lesson: Luke 9: 51-62

Sermon - Part Two: Is there a "thinness" in the new guard?
The call comes more urgently.

Jesus also is entering a time of transition. It's said that "when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem". Well, his people went out into the world to alert "all and sundry" to this time of change - come on follow us, we're setting ourselves to Jerusalem (whatever that means); but "all and sundry" didn't want to know. They came up with many excuses not to join in with the change.

In passing, I note that James and John are annoyed at the people's reluctance. They ask Jesus if they should call fire to come down from heaven (like they could! - although in their smaller way maybe in their attitude to the world, their working in the world, they could create some resentful

combustion). But Jesus rebukes them. In times of challenge and change, people will sometimes respond with fear and reluctance. The last thing Jesus wants though, as they do that, is for fire to be added to the mix. When we're worried about the new king in the North, the new king in the South, and changes within what used to be stable, the last thing wanted by Christ is more fear and fire.

But to the theme of calling people into the new solution - Jesus' words to his disciples are less ambiguous than Elijah's. Just as Elisha asked, when confronted to take up responsibility, for time to say goodbye to the past, so indeed the people called by Jesus asked him for time. Time to bury the father. Time to farewell the family. They ask for a gentleness in the shifting of responsibility.

Jesus' response can only really be described as harsh. "Leave the dead to bury the dead. No one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Then he says "foxes have holes, birds have nests. But the Son of Man (and those who follow him) have nowhere to lay their heads". When God comes knocking, security is forfeited!

That's what he says.

Here's a point of reckoning for me, as I hear this word of Christ. I now have reached a stage in my life where I am saying "no" to being anywhere other than where I am. I have a house, a garden; in friends and others, I have love at home. I've recently preached a sermon on recognising the prosperity that we have (the meal at home, the friends, the love and simplicity) - where high in the frame was a sense of gratitude for being where we are. Now, the changing world (with its Trumps and Putins) does alarm me; the thinness of the competence of the people who've inherited responsibility for that all lately alarms me. The new kings of North and South distress me. God's old prophet casts out his mantle, net-like, and I hope like hell it flies far and wide and falls on the right people - but not on me. I have parents to bury, and kisses to give, and a home to cherish. . . This fox likes his hole.

The hard word of Jesus lingers: "**you** - come and follow me". The world is changing - responsibilities are shifting. **You** come, and follow me.

In our prayers that will follow, I think we will need to unpack this - but just for now we keep a moment of disquiet.

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