

## Readings for the Sunday before Lent

11<sup>th</sup> February 2024

### First Reading: 2 Kings 2:1-12

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, 'Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel.' But Elisha said, 'As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, 'Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?' And he said, 'Yes, I know; keep silent.' Elijah said to him, 'Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho.' But he said, 'As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So they came to Jericho.

The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, 'Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?' And he answered, 'Yes, I know; be silent.' Then Elijah said to him, 'Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan.' But he said, 'As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.' Elisha said, 'Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.'

He responded, 'You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.' As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

### Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

### Gospel: St Mark 9:2-9

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my

Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

### **A Reflection for the Sunday before Lent**

Do you, or have you had, someone that you particularly admire or look up to? It is not uncommon to hear of superstars in many different disciplines being described as role models – for good or bad – for the people that follow them. Whether our heroes and role models are famous or simply quite ordinary people we happen to know, we probably all have people we admire and perhaps we aspire to be like them in some way.

One of the reasons I feel an affinity with the story of Elijah and Elisha is because it reminds me of the positive relationships of this type I have been fortunate to have with a few people at different stages in my life.

We aren’t given much detail of the relationship between these two prophets, a relationship which reaches its earthly conclusion in today’s Old Testament reading. It is the only example of a prophetic succession in the Old Testament, although there are similarities with Moses being succeeded by Joshua as the leader of the people. I have mentioned before that it is a model of a good apprenticeship, the younger prophet, Elisha, learning from the older, more-experienced Elijah, but it also strikes me as more than that. Beyond acquiring knowledge and skills, we see that Elisha had great admiration for Elijah and aspired to be like him.

Elisha first appears in the first book of Kings (19:19) when Elijah, already an established prophet, passes by while he is ploughing with his oxen. Elijah throws his mantle over him, and Elisha leaves the oxen and his home and becomes Elijah’s servant and disciple. After that, we hear nothing more of Elisha, even though Elijah’s prophetic activity continued, until the events we read of today. However, it seems reasonable to assume that, as Elisha went with Elijah, he witnessed much of what happened in between.

In today’s passage, Elijah seems remarkably unwilling to have Elisha go with him and witness what is about to occur. Three times he tries to send Elisha away, but Elisha refuses to abandon him. This reflects a traditional Jewish practice: if someone tries to convert to Judaism, they are rejected three times before being admitted – they need to show they are serious. So this could be interpreted as a test of Elisha’s commitment.

The pair then cross the river Jordan, entering the wilderness, recalling the time that the Israelites spent in the wilderness, and, for us as Christians, the time that Jesus also spent in the wilderness at the beginning of his public ministry. In response to Elijah’s question, Elisha then asks to inherit a double portion of Elijah’s spirit.

One way of viewing this request is as a reference to Jewish inheritance laws. The firstborn son was entitled to a double portion of his father’s estate, so Elisha is asking to be considered as Elijah’s firstborn son - a bold request! It is bold in another way too. When we lose a good leader or a respected elder, be it in public life, business, or within a family, we feel the loss and can think that no-one else will be able to fulfil that role, that in some way things will be worse in the future. Here, Elisha defies that logic, effectively saying that whatever made Elijah great, he wants to be twice that.

What Elisha asks for is not Elijah's material wealth, if he had any, but for a double portion of his spirit. According to one Bible dictionary, in this context the Hebrew word *ruach*, translated as spirit, refers to the energy which gives power, wisdom, bravery and physical capacity; those things that gave Elijah's ministry its vitality and authority. Elisha recognised that simply having had Elijah's mantle thrown over him, simply being Elijah's apprentice, wasn't enough. He needed to be more fully like Elijah, to have Elijah's prophetic power.

Perhaps surprisingly to us, Elijah seems uncertain and gives a qualified response: 'if you see me as I am being taken from you...' Is this another test for Elisha? If so, he comes through successfully and his request is fulfilled: there are eight recorded miracles of Elijah and sixteen miracles of Elisha.

Elijah doesn't die, but is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind with a chariot and horses of fire – a revelation of God's glory. Jewish tradition expects Elijah to come again. In the very last verses of Old Testament, at the end of the book of the prophet Malachi, God says:

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

Based on this, it is perhaps unsurprising that Jesus was sometimes mistaken for Elijah in the Gospels. Of course, Elijah did appear again; not as Jesus but as John the Baptist, and also, as we heard in today's Gospel, at the Transfiguration.

Another link to our Gospel is the vision of God's glory. Just as Elisha witnesses God's glory as Elijah is taken up to heaven, so the disciples on the mountain see God's glory in Jesus fully revealed as he is transfigured before them. These visions are not just wondrous spectacles but events that spur the witnesses into action. Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle and went on to be the great prophet he aspired to be. Jesus' disciples came down the mountain, continued as his followers, and eventually founded God's church.

The story of Elijah and Elisha is an example of discipleship that we can learn from. Discipleship is a process that takes time, time spent together. Just as Elijah and Elisha were like father and son, so we too need to spend time with our heavenly father. Discipleship requires training – the apprenticeship part, learning knowledge and skills. That comes through following the example of an expert, in our case the example of Jesus. Discipleship is a journey. Elijah and Elisha walked and talked together as they journeyed together in today's reading. Jesus often taught his disciples 'on the way'. And discipleship is about learning to see the spiritual reality, learning to understand. Elisha was told by Elijah '...if you see me as I am being taken...', if you really understand, if you are really prepared, then you will receive your spiritual inheritance, that double portion you asked for.

We are all disciples, doing our best to follow in the footsteps and example of Jesus. It takes time, it is a journey, but we gradually learn and start to understand. One day, the full reality of God's glory will be revealed to us too. And the journey of discipleship is one on which we can, and should, encourage one another. Sometimes, someone else will be Elijah to our Elisha, helping us to move forward on our journey of faith. At other times, we will have the opportunity to be Elijah to someone else's Elisha, helping them on the way. It is a model for being church together to aspire to. Something to reflect on as we turn our thoughts towards Lent.