

Last week, we looked at the story of Elijah being strengthened by God at Mount Horeb, and at the end of that story, after there'd been the wind, the earthquake and the fire, and God had spoken to Elijah in the still small voice, God commissioned Elijah to go back the way he came, and do three things – to anoint Hazael king over Aram, to anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and to anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed Elijah as prophet.

Elijah of course had been God's faithful servant and prophet for years. God worked miracles through him, so his ministry was more than just prophesying. The scriptures don't give us any background on him, except that he is described as a 'Tishbite' – which might sound exotic tribe or something, but simply means in Hebrew 'my God is Yahweh'.

As we read the story of Elijah throughout the book 1 Kings, his main task was challenging the worship of Baal, and following from that, was also challenging King Ahab and Queen Jezebel.

It was a tough job, and Elijah had had enough. As we were reminded last week, he'd even prayed that God would take his life.

But God strengthened him, and provided for Elijah to appoint his successor.

And so, in the middle of 1 Kings 19, Elisha enters the story. "He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him."

Today's reading, from the second book of Kings, gets straight to the point: "When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind..." (2:1) so everything that happens is in the context that Elijah is going from this world to heaven – not by dying, but by God's direct intervention.

We pick up the story as Elijah and Elisha leave Gilgal.

Gilgal was the first place the Israelites came to in the promised land, and it served as a base for Joshua.

Strangely, as they leave Gilgal, Elijah tells Elisha to stay there, while he goes on to Bethel. "Beth-El" is in Hebrew, literally, the House of God. And if we go back to the book of Genesis, Chapter 28 tells us that that is where Jacob had an encounter with God in a dream.

For some reason, Elijah doesn't want his disciple to go with him, but Elisha says "No, I'm going with you" – well, he says it much more forcefully: "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you."

In verses 3-5, which are left out of the lectionary reading, they travel together, and Elisha is repeatedly warned that Elijah is going to be taken by God, and Elijah repeatedly tries to leave Elisha behind.

They go next to Bethel, and there they meet a group of prophets, who go up to Elisha and say – "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?" – I don't know if they're concerned that he may not know, or if they are worried that if Elisha is with Elijah when God takes him – he might be taken too – or hurt in the process.

But Elisha doesn't want to talk about it. "Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet." (19:3)

And then, Elijah again tells Elisha to stay there in Bethel: Verse 4 "Stay here, Elisha; the Lord has sent me to Jericho." But once more, Elisha responds: "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."

And so they go to yet another significant site, to Jericho – now Gilgal and Bethel may not be that well known, but certainly Jericho is. That is, of course, where Joshua fought the battle of Jericho - where the walls came tumbling down. If you remember the story, Joshua didn't win the battle through military might, he won through faithfulness and God's power.

Surprisingly, in Jericho, there's another company of prophets who warn Elisha that Elijah is going to be taken away from him.

And again, Elisha doesn't want to talk about it.

You might think this story is getting a bit repetitive... and it is, because in verse 6, Elijah said to Elisha "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan."

But Elisha holds firm, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you."

Last stop: The Jordan River. The Jordan that the Israelites crossed to enter the promised land. The Jordan that separates the wilderness from the land of Canaan. And the Jordan where John would later call the nation of Israel to repentance and baptism, and would baptise his cousin Jesus.

The reading tells us that the Jericho prophets followed Elijah and Elisha to the bank of the river – where they stood at a distance and watched Elijah them. They watched as Elijah took off his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water – and water parted... and Elijah and Elisha crossed over. From the promised land, into the wilderness.

Verse 9 tells us when they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?””

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.

A double share.

Now that might sound a bit greedy. But in Jewish tradition, the firstborn son – the heir – received a double share of inheritance. So if there were two sons, the elder would receive two thirds, and the younger one third. If there were four, the eldest would receive two fifths, and the others one fifth each. And so on.

So the double share identifies Elisha as wanting to be Elijah’s heir. He wanted to be more than another prophet – and don’t forget there were many prophets around – there were fifty back on the other side of the river, and others back in Jericho and Bethel before that.

And I think the request for the double share means Elisha wants to be all Elijah was and more. To build on Elijah’s work.

It is a big request. And it wasn’t really Elijah’s to grant.

Elijah did know that Elisha was to be his successor – God had told him so back on Mount Horeb – but he also knew that ultimately, it was God’s choice.

So Elijah told his disciple that he has asked a hard thing “You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.”
(2:10)

Elijah knew that God was going to take him away, so he effectively handed Elisha’s request over to God – “if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours”.

And so they walked on together, talking together, as they had done for so long. Both of them knew, though, that this would be the last time – but neither of them knew how it would happen.

And we read that “...suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.”

Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”

Sure enough: Elisha saw Elijah taken up...

And when he could no longer see Elijah, he took hold of his own garment and tore it in two.

Tearing clothes is a Jewish sign of mourning. Elisha grieved the loss of his teacher; Elijah might not have died, but he was still gone.

In spite of Elijah’s urging throughout the journey, Elisha stayed with him until the end, and staying with him until the very end

had enabled him to receive Elijah's inheritance – a double share. A great gift from God... a great privilege to serve God in that way... but also a great responsibility. But one that Elisha sought and valued and held on to.

In a way, I guess, everyone gets a single share of life – and while some single shares will be far better than others, they all come to an end. But Jesus offers each one of us a double portion of life – the chance to be born again – or born from above if you prefer that term.

Whatever discouragements we face in our own lives – or indeed whatever temptations we face just to remain where we are – we need to keep moving forward and keep our focus on God.

Had Elisha stayed at Gilgal or Bethel or Jericho or even simply stayed on the other side of the Jordan, he wouldn't have received his double share. And so it is with us: Jesus calls us to follow him, to receive the gift of eternal life. But we can't just follow him for a little while and expect to receive it. It doesn't matter how long we've already followed him, we need to be with him right till the end.

Elisha didn't simply arrive on the scene one day and decide to be a prophet. Elisha responded to Elijah's call and followed Elijah. He was Elijah's helper and his disciple. He learned from the prophet before him. He built on the work on the one that went before him.

In the verse 13 we read that Elisha picked up Elijah's cloak, went back to the Jordan, and struck the water with Elijah's cloak – and the water parted, and he crossed back.

Crossed back to where the fifty prophets from Jericho are waiting... “The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.” And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. “Look,” they said, “we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley.”

They saw the spirit of Elijah was resting Elisha... but they weren't ready to give up on Elijah... they wanted to go looking for him.

But Elijah had gone. “No,” Elisha replied, “do not send them.”

They were persistent, though, and finally Elisha was too embarrassed to refuse. So he said, “Send them.”

They searched for three days, and then went back to Elisha who was staying in Jericho, who said “Didn't I tell you not to go?”

If Elijah is gone, you won't find him.

So why did they go looking? Well, they knew Elijah. They respected him. Even though they knew he was going to be taken up, and even though Elisha told them that Elijah had gone, they still wanted him. Elijah was who they knew. Elisha certainly received Elijah's power... but even so they didn't really know who he was.

Things had changed, and they weren't happy.

Which is a very human response. We miss what we had, and fear what's to come. We long for the good old days, don't we?

And while we should remember the past and learn from it and build on it, we mustn't dwell in it. We mustn't pine for the past while we miss the opportunities the present provides.

The fifty prophets knew that Elijah was going, they saw that Elisha had inherited his power... and yet they wanted to go and look for Elijah.

They remembered the miracles that God had done through Elijah, but they should have been more concerned about what God could do through Elisha.

Of course, people often have similar views of the church. We remember what happened in the church 25 or 50 or a hundred a years ago, and wonder why the same things aren't happening today.

Well, we don't have the people or the resources that we had 25 or 50 or a hundred years ago. But we have different people. We have new people. We have technologies and access to knowledge and access to communication channels that we wouldn't have dreamed of 50 years ago.

So let's not go looking for Elijah, when Elisha is with us.

We need to use yesterday as a track record, not as a medal of achievement or as a benchmark. Whether it is of something you did or something that someone else did, the past is the past.

We need to be persistent, but persistent for the right things like Elisha was, not persistent like the fifty prophets were. The Jericho prophets wanted Elijah back and went looking for him. But Elisha was persistent in his desire to be with be with Elijah right up until the end. Persistent in his desire to receive a

double share. It would have been easier for him not to keep going on with Elijah. If you think about it, not one person in our reading encouraged Elisha, but he continued on determined to get a double share. Determined to follow in Elijah's place, and take on his teacher's responsibilities. And brave enough to keep watching even as the chariot of fire took Elijah.

So let's all try be like Elisha. Let's not be content with what we have done – or with what others have done. Instead let's go forward together and claim our inheritance.... Claim our double share of life which comes to us through Jesus.

Jesus died for us, once and for all, and John tells us that “to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,”

Let each one of us claim or reclaim that right today, and every day, and let us be like Elisha, building on the work of those who have gone before us, but claiming a double share, as we follow our saviour into the future.

Amen.