Taking the mantle

Elijah had been God's faithful servant and prophet for years, and as we read his throughout the book 1 Kings, we find his main task was challenging the worship of Baal. The climax of Elijah's ministry was in 1 Kings Chapter 18, when Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal.

You'll probably remember the story: The priests of Baal went first, putting the pieces of a sacrifice on wood, and they prayed to Baal for fire, but there was no answer. They danced around their offering, and Elijah even taunted them to "pray louder", and the priests ranted and cut themselves but received no answer from Baal.

And then Elijah prepared his offering, on a rebuilt altar, putting the pieces of the bull on the wood. He had a trench dug around the altar and filled it with water. And then Elijah had water poured over the wood. And then more water. And then more water.

Then Elijah simply prayed over the sacrifice: No ranting, no dancing, no cutting. Just an earnest prayer.

And "Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!"" (1 Kings 18:38-39).

What a mighty witness to the power of God!

Elijah was not the forgiving sort: "Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!"" (1 Kings 18:40) Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered them there. All 450.

King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were unimpressed and set out to take revenge on Elijah – and Elijah fled. He'd had enough.

God came to Elijah on Mt Horeb, in the 'still small voice' (1 Kings 19), to strengthen him, and to send him on the next part of his ministry – the final part of his ministry which included annointing Elisha to succeed him as prophet.

Elisha then entered the story: "So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was ploughing. [...] Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him." (1 Kings 19:19)

Today's reading, from the second book of Kings, began: "Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal" (2:1).

For some reason, Elijah doesn't want his disciple to go with him, and as they leave Gilgal, Elijah tells Elisha to stay there, while he goes on to Bethel. Elisha isn't having that, though, he's going to go with Elijah.

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.

Finally, they get to Jericho, where Elijah tells his disciple "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan."

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

Ultimately, they came to the Jordan River, and the reading tells us that the fifty prophets from Jericho followed Elijah and Elisha to the Jordan – where they stood at a distance and watched Elijah and Elisha. They watched as Elijah took off his mantle, 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 I may do for you, before I am taken from you."

"Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit," Elisha replied.

That might sound greedy, but in Jewish tradition, the firstborn son – the heir – received a double share of inheritance: if there we 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.

Asking for a double share identifies Elisha as <u>wanting</u> to be Elijah's heir - he <u>wanted</u> to be more than another prophet – and don't forget there were many prophets around, after all there were fifty back on the other side of the river!

I think the request for the double share shows that Elisha wanted to be all Elijah was and more. To build on Elijah's work.

It was a big request, but it wasn't Elijah's to grant. It was God's choice.

Elijah told his disciple "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." (2:10)

And so they walked on together, talking together, as they had done for so long.

But as they walked, "…a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven."

Elisha saw this and cried out, "'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!"

Sure enough: Elisha <u>did</u> see Elijah taken up…

And when he could no longer see Elijah, he took his own clothes and tore them.

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.

Despite 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.

Everyone gets a single share - a single share of life – and while some single shares will be far better than others, they all come to an end. In Jesus, though, we are offered a double share of life – the chance to be born again. But if we are to claim that double share, we need to respond to him.

Whatever discouragements we face in our own lives – or indeed whatever temptations we face just to remain where we are – we need to stay the course and keep our focus on God, just as Elisha did.

Had Elisha stayed at any of the places on the way to the Jordan, or even simply stayed on the other bank, had he not been walking with Elijah right up until the chariots swung low to carry Elijah away, Elisha wouldn't have received his double share. It's the same 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 God's call to him through Elijah and followed Elijah in his ministry. 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 have this wonderful scene of Elisha picking up Elijah's mantle: a simple cloak, but so symbolic – it was the cloak that Elijah had placed on him at the beginning of their ministry together. Elisha went back to the Jordan River.

He and struck the water, saying, 'Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. (19:14b)

In the parting of the water, Elisha's double share was confirmed. In the following verse, we learn that the prophets from Jericho witnessed this, and declared "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him."

But even though they saw the spirit of Elijah was resting Elisha they weren't quite ready to give up on Elijah.

"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."

It's hard to move on, isn't it? Change is not easy, even sometimes in the face of overwhelming evidence or need. We like Elijah, don't we? We know Elisha's good… but he's not Elijah. Let's see if we can get Elijah back.

We can be like those prophets watching from the bank of Jordan. Why did they want to 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 just going to accept that change.

Which is a very human response. We miss what we had, and we fear what's to come. We long for the good old days, don't we? We remembered the 48th anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia last week – but it's not like it once was. We saw that grainy footage from that ceremony in 1977, the founding of the denomination to which we belong. It was a different church, back then. But it was a different time, too. And a very different society. Things have changed.

We are the bearers of the mantle of the church. Not just our President or our Moderator or our General Secretary or our ministry agents, but all of us. As individuals and together.

It's a bit daunting, isn't it? But it was also daunting for Elisha – he was taking the mantle – taking the place – of Elijah – the prophet who'd summoned fire from heaven! Who hadn't died, but had been taken up by God.

And it was daunting for the fifty prophets on the Jordan's bank: they 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, don't they? They 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.

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

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.

As people, and as a church we shouldn't be looking for Elijah – or longing for him – 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, in staying with Elijah to the end, not persistent like the fifty prophets were. The Jericho prophets wanted Elijah back and went looking for him. By contrast, 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. He was 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.

We should try to be like Elisha. We should try to not be content with what we have done – or with what others have done. Instead let's go forward together building on that past, building on the good and faithful work of those who have gone before us, and 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, remembering and building on the work of those who have gone before us, but always claiming a double share, as we follow our saviour into the future.

Amen.