



26th June 2022 COTHA at St Michael's
1 Kings 19.15-16, 19-21
Luke 9.51-62

Regime Change

Regime change, in any context, school, office, church or government can be brutal.

Our American friends often express their surprise at the speed with which British Administrations change hands after a General Election. In the United States the incoming team has a two month wait, yet in Britain even before the outgoing PM gets back from the palace the removal vans are already at the garden gates of No.10.

Yet change can also be gentler; more incremental. And maybe that was the subtext of the recent Jubilee that we are already moving from one reign to another.

Today's narrative from the Jewish scriptures is all about Regime Change.

Elijah, honoured as one of Israel's most significant prophets, wasn't always someone who felt comfortable being a mouthpiece for God. Just a few verses back he'd been hiding in a cave full of self-doubt even though he'd just experienced one of the greatest moments of success in his career.

After all that drama God decreed there should be a new beginning. He charged Elijah to anoint two new kings, Hazael to rule over Aram and Jehu over Israel, and then appoint his successor, Elisha.

Actually, no mention is ever made that he got round to the first couple of tasks, but we do know he not only appointed, but he also mentored his successor, Elisha.

Apprenticeships get a good press in the bible. There's Moses and Joshua, Paul and Timothy and, of course, Elijah and Elisha.

These two prophets came from different sides of the track. Elijah was always an outsider, coming from the east side of the Jordan, yet Elisha's family came from the centre of the country. Elijah was poor, having to rely on the birds to bring him food, Elisha was rich, and in today's story his wealth was so great that we are told he owned no less than twelve pairs

of oxen. He didn't come from a subsistence farming family but from a well-heeled one.

Yet, they got on. Despite, maybe even because of, their differences they worked well together. This mentoring programme became a great success, and when it ended their parting seems to have broken the heart of Elisha.

But that's a little way off. Today's story is about the beginning of the prophetic partnership. And it's clear that Elisha certainly wasn't looking for a job! He'd already got one, ploughing the field and looking after the family business. Yet, as so often happens, the call of God upon our lives comes when maybe we least expect it. God surprises us with his invitation to come and follow, his commission to be his servant.

Elisha responded positively, hardly looking back, but he does ask for time to say goodbye to his family.

Now, unlike our New Testament passage this morning, this moment of farewell, which had a rather splendid party at its centre, with a two oxen BBQ, isn't frowned upon. Instead, it's something of a seminal moment, signifying the end of one sort of life and the start of another. A transitional juncture, marked by a party and a family gathering. A time to recognise the call of God upon Elisha's life with the implied blessing given to him by his family as he goes off to join Elijah as his apprentice.

So, what do we make of the pairing of this Jewish narrative with today's Gospel from Luke?

Of course, both contain the idea of saying farewell to parents before taking up a God given task. In the Old Testament that gets the thumbs up, but the opposite seems to be the case in the New.

It's surely the Call of God which binds them together. Elisha is sensitive to it in 1 Kings, yet the villagers of Luke 9 turn a deaf ear. And maybe that was a surprise.

In this part of Luke Jesus is on a southward journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. His northern ministry is at an end and he's now making his way to the cross. Again and again, he tries to speak with his disciples about this. This wasn't the road to glory but suffering. Yet it was one willingly taken because at the centre of this journey was his gospel message that God's love was inclusive, and God's character was forgiving. Others would twist that message, think of it as weak or misinterpret it as seditious, yet Jesus wouldn't be deflected. This is the road he must travel, not an easy one, but a pathway of peace and love with every step infused by the Good News found at the heart of God.

So, messengers were sent out to prepare the way and there seems to be the expectation that this Samaritan village would welcome a visit from Jesus. Indeed, in the other book Luke wrote, The Acts of The Apostles, there is an account of such a village in Samaria being open to the gospel. But not here.

And maybe this was all about tradition.
All about history. All about unresolved tensions.

The clue is found in that phrase *They would not receive him because he was on his way to Jerusalem.*

Samaritans believed the place to worship God was Mount Gerizim, so why was Jesus not making his way there?

We so often boundary our religious practices with things that have so very little to do with our core beliefs. Surely God could be found, worshipped and honoured in both Mounts: Gerizim and Zion? Yet to these villagers the only thing that mattered that day was where Jesus was headed rather than what he had to say.

On an ecumenical Sunday such as today might we not have the courage, humility and grace to admit that many of the differences that have scarred the Church down the centuries have been about our religious practices rather than our core beliefs.

My own Baptist tradition has always valued Believer's Baptism, usually by full immersion. I understand why my forebears, protestant dissenters from the 17th century, formed a denomination which today is called the Baptist Union. Yet, it's with a wry smile that I note in recently published statistics that it is The Church of England that last year held more Believer's Baptisms by full immersion than the Baptist Union.

I think it all goes to show that God's got a mischievous sense of humour!

James and John are angry with this village. They are not called *The Sons of Thunder* for nothing! They suggest that fire from heaven should be called down to consume these unresponsive Samaritans, but Jesus wouldn't hear of it.

This journey was all about the Benevolent Kingdom of God, so he walks away. He's not going to get drawn into the battle between Gerizim and Jerusalem. He moves on and in doing so shows that some things we magnify as being so fundamental, so central, so important to faith, simply don't register at all on God's radar.

Yet, from today's New Testament narrative what is clear is Jesus' take on discipleship and commitment.

This road to Jerusalem wasn't an easy one for him because it led to the cross.

Jesus, the Man for Others, lived a life of service. He goes the extra mile, he speaks of love and showed forgiveness. His service of God was to serve us, and it was so misunderstood and misinterpreted that he died upon the cross. And all of that will find its focus in our Eucharistic thanksgiving in a few moments.

Let me close by trying to draw this together.

This year I have the huge privilege of having a Sabbatical. It's one I started in 2019 but then Covid came along. Instead of choosing the usual three months I asked the AFC Elders if I might take a Sunday off a month for a year to visit other churches and sit in the pew. For 35 years now I've spent most Sundays in a pulpit so I thought it was high time I sat once again in a pew, and it's been wonderful!

We've attended services in Gibraltar, Edinburgh, the Peak District and London. We've gathered with Methodists, Catholics using the Latin rite, Black Majority Christians and a number of congregations in London. And I've written up these experiences in a blog called *A View from the Pew*.

Perhaps, and we are not quite finished with the Sabbatical yet, the most telling time was a weekend in Oxford. On the Saturday we went to choral evensong at one of the Colleges. It was formal, filled with well sung music from a full choir accompanied by a magnificent organ. The next morning, we attended worship in one of the city's Anglican churches full of young families, a praise band with backing singers and more arms in the air than you could count.

Now, what's obvious about that weekend is that we Christians find it genuinely helpful to worship in different ways.

Just as Elijah was different to Elisha, just as Mount Gerizim inspired some whilst Jerusalem did it for others, those services, one on Saturday evening the other on Sunday morning, were full of difference. Yet, young people were present at both, as were older people. At both there was a spirit of prayer and an honouring of scripture. In both places it was easy to feel a deep sense of community. One expression was like Canterbury, the other more like Glastonbury, yet I think it was wonderfully obvious that God was in both, as was a deep sense of commitment.

Today, at this COTHA service, as we begin to recalibrate our relationship as two churches in partnership rather than three, God binds us together, even in our understandable and valuable differentness, as we share that journey with Jesus, responding to his call to walk with him.

May we do that, united in love and eager to serve, in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen