

2 Kings 2:1-2,6-14

Psalms 77:1-2,11-20

Galatians 5:1,13-25

Luke 9:51-62

It's not always easy to say "Good bye." It means a departure and a transition, and departures and transitions mean change, and we don't like change. Change can be difficult; it requires us to adjust, it requires *us* to change. Change causes change, and we don't like change. However, the other thing about change, besides being difficult, is that it is *inevitable*. Change is part of life, part of God's plan – for the world, for each of us and for all.

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. A departure and a transition. Elijah is about to depart, and Elisha his assistant is about to take Elijah's place as a prophet. We are not told that Elijah and Elisha knew this or were told this, but we get the sense as the story unfolds that they knew something was about to happen. After they have travelled to Bethel, then the Jordan, and across the Jordan (with the help of Elijah's magic mantle parting the waters for them to pass over), after they have arrived on the other side of the Jordan, Elijah asks Elisha what he may do for him before he is taken from him. So clearly, they know by now that something is about to happen.

Elisha asks for something that, as far as I can see, was outside Elijah's control or power to grant, he asks for a "double share" of Elijah's spirit. He wants to be like Elijah, but even more so, even more Elijah than Elijah was, if that makes any sense. (And in fact, the Bible records Elisha performing twenty-eight miracles compared to Elijah's fourteen). The point is that they knew something was about to happen, Elisha expresses a wish to be Elijah's successor, Elijah says it's really out of his hands, which means it's up to God. Hence, *if you see me as I am being taken from you*. Elisha just has to stick close, just as he has been doing even though Elijah has given him every opportunity to stay behind wherever they have gone. Elisha has been faithful; the rest is up to God. Which is really how it is for all of us, isn't it: we remain faithful, as far as we can, and the rest is up to God. We do what we do, and leave the outcome to God. Departures and transitions.

Our psalm this morning offers a reminder appropriate at all times, but especially so in a time of transition, that just as God has guided and provided and directed in the past, so God will continue to do so as we go forward into the future. *In the day of trouble I seek the Lord*. Now, transition doesn't necessarily mean trouble as such, but it does mean that regular patterns may be interrupted or disturbed, routines and practices may have to change. God is troubling the waters of our serenity! You may or may not continue to get communion every week for a while (until Sarah is ordained priest in a few months' time, but you will get it at least twice a month if you want it); Sarah's ways of doing things will not be the same as mine, just as mine are not the same as Sharon's. But just as the psalmist looks back to remind themselves of how God led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, so we at St. Catherine's are able to look back over the years this church has been here and see God's hand in all the changes and transitions of the past, bringing you to where you stand today.

As I have said before, and as I have to keep reminding myself, whatever situation we are going through, including times of departures and transition, it is not the specifics of the situation that

are so important as *how we are* as we go through them. It is not so much about outcomes, success or failure, as it is about how the experience helps us to become the people God is making us to be. This can be a hard lesson, and one that we seem to have to learn over and over again. Our reading from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians reminds that we have been given great freedom in Christ – freedom to become all that we can be, but also a freedom to choose – a freedom to choose freedom. In other words, in Christ we are free to be all that we can be, but it's not inevitable; we have to choose our freedom, we have to grasp it and live it.

The door to our freedom has been opened; we still have to walk through it. Ironically, we can be so focussed on ourselves that we allow ourselves to become or remain enslaved, and so we don't grow and develop and become all that we can be. Instead, we are reminded that the fruit of the Spirit (the Spirit of freedom in Christ) is *love*. It's all love. I know it says *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*, but they are all different manifestations of the first word, *love*. So, whatever we are going through, times of trouble, or grief, or loss, or challenge, times of departures and transition, the key to becoming who God wants us to be is to focus on love. To keep our energy flowing outward towards others, rather than inwardly towards ourselves. To hold fast to what we know is good and right; to fulfil the law by loving one another, conscious that we are all going through the transition and that we need to support one another as we go through it. Hold fast, stick close, just like Elijah told Elisha to do as he was about to be taken from him so that he might inherit the double share of his spirit. Walk faithfully. Follow.

When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. This seems to echo the opening sentence of our first reading: *Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.* Again, an impending departure and transition and a journey. There are two things I take from this short passage that sets the stage for all that is to unfold. Firstly, the resoluteness and steadfastness of Jesus in the face of this: he sets his face towards Jerusalem. A sense of acceptance and of trust: this is what is to happen and God will see us through. I think, in a way, that is the point of the rebuke to James and John (the sons of thunder) for their suggestion of calling down fire from heaven on the Samaritans for not receiving Jesus – aside from the rejection of violence itself, it is about accepting rather than resisting the path that is laid out for us. Acceptance and trust.

But the second thing I take from this passage has to do with those who claim they want to follow Jesus, walk the same road that he walks. Each time they are challenged, we also hear the challenge to ourselves, if we think we want to be followers of Jesus. And the challenge has to do with why they/we/anyone would want to follow someone who makes such demands. For what or for who are we prepared to give up physical comfort and security? *Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.* Why would we do that? What is worth more than physical comfort and security? What about family ties, commitments and obligations? To the one who says, *Let me go and bury my father*, Jesus harshly answers, *Let the dead bury their own dead.* Do you still want to follow Jesus? *Let me first say farewell to those at my home* – before I go on with you, first let me acknowledge where I have come from and the road I have walked. To which Jesus responds with an analogy from farming that anyone who sets their hand to the plough and looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God. Their furrows will not be straight because to plough a straight furrow you have to look where you are going! Where you look is where you go. (As we all know!)

Again, I ask, why would anyone want to follow someone who makes such demands? Do you really still want to follow? Do I? If so, why? I see in these three challenges – to physical comfort and security, to earthly relationships, and to the stories of our lives – a parallel with the two times that Elijah told Elisha to stay put and not follow him further, and then the final time when Elijah asks Elisha what he may do for him before he is taken from him, and the answer means that Elisha has to continue to follow closely. It's as if Jesus is giving those who want to follow him an opportunity to turn back, just like Elijah did for Elisha, or at least to ask ourselves if we really want to follow Jesus, given what that means; do we *really* want to be followers of Jesus? And if so, why?

As I struggle to form an answer to this question for myself, I hear in my head the words of Simon Peter in John's Gospel after Jesus has been talking about how he is the "bread of life" that has come down from heaven to give life to the world. Jesus has said that his flesh is the true bread, and that his blood is true drink, and at these words we are told that many turned back and no longer followed Jesus. *This teaching is difficult*, they said, *who can accept it?* It was too much for them. Too graphic perhaps: consuming the flesh and blood of Jesus. So, Jesus turns to the twelve disciples and asks them, *Do you also wish to go away?* To which Simon Peter replies on behalf of the twelve: *Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*

I am tempted to leave it there: *Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.* But I feel that perhaps that needs to be unpacked a little: what does it mean for Jesus to have the words of eternal life? What is this *eternal life* that we are talking about? I'm sure that if we were to stop and ask each of us this question, each of us would be able to articulate something of what this means for us – otherwise, I don't think we'd be here! For me, I think I would say that it is true life, life itself, life that is beyond and not dependent on physical security, or family ties, or the stories of our lives with their successes and failures. It is that hidden dimension of life that deepens and enriches our physical existence on this earth, that deepens and enriches our earthly relationships, and that helps us to make sense of the stories of our lives, of all the departures and transitions that have brought us to where we are today.

It is about holding lightly and letting go of what we know we cannot keep (all that passes away; and all things must pass), in order to gain what we cannot lose. This is true wisdom: *to give up what we cannot keep in order to gain what we cannot lose.*

*Angus Stuart
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