

Of Prophets, Chariot Wheels, and our Discipleship. 2 Kings 2: 1-12, Mark .9:2-13

What do you think of when you consider a prophet?

In 1667, Samuel Pepys recorded a man called Solomon Eccles, who seemed to fit the description. He writes, 'A man, trembling, came naked through Westminster Hall, only very civilly tied about the privates to avoid scandal, and with a chafing-dish of fire and brimstone burning upon his head... crying, "Repent! Repent!"

The Old Testament world, like the world of Samuel Pepys, like today, was awash with people who claimed to foretell the future, yet from these Israelite prophets are sharply differentiated.

The prophets did not believe that the future was determined in an unchanging way. They did not believe that the future would be changed by following a detailed set of obscure instructions. They were not those who lick their lips at the prospect of the world ending – for the prophetic mindset has traditionally focused on how the present affected the eventual.

So, for an Israelite prophet, their purpose was not to predict the future, but to shape it, by eliciting a favourable response to their message – usually powerfully and vividly inspired by God.

There are a lot of references to the Spirit of God feeling like the sensation of being swept up – we may think of the prophet Isaiah (The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me) or the prophet Ezekiel (Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple) or Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians (I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven) or Samuel (Here I am, Lord, send me)– sort of like the take off of a plane I guess.

The prophets were concerned with the grateful appreciation of God's active blessings on the world. Their perspective can be best expressed by the line of the Lord's prayer, 'on earth as it is in heaven'

The prophets were concerned with God's work in their lives here and now. A one line summary could be from the Lord's Prayer: 'on earth as it is in heaven'. They looked forward to, and sought a time when, the purposes of the Lord would be discerned, proclaimed and pursued by the whole people of God.

This is picked up in our Old Testament reading today.

We have two men, two prophets. Both stand in contrast to the amusing description of Solomon Eccles, but also in contrast to each other.

Elijah was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel in the divided monarchy during the reigns of Ahab, Ahaziah, and Jehoram. The first is a comment on societal and religious change in Israel. For Elijah – the King was accountable to God's word delivered by the prophets and was bound by the Mosaic laws protecting the poor. One writer has described him as 'solitary Elijah with his unswerving hostility to the house of Ormi'. He proclaims a drought on the land,

angers Queen Jezebel, humiliates her religion by a public contest, and curses the king. He has quite a record.

Elijah is seeking to be alone – for God to take him away. Three times he asks his disciple Elisha to leave him alone, but he won't. How immensely frustrating for Elijah.

Because, recalling to mind what we know about Elijah, we can understand that Elijah had received his most profound epiphany at Mount Horeb, and like Moses (the other shadowy figure appearing in our gospel reading) encounters God (like Moses, who had been given the 10 commandments here).

What Elijah can teach us about the striving for solitariness is a desire for stillness. Elijah wanted to face the journey alone because he had received his most profound insight into the nature of God, and was given his most important task through 'the still small voice'. Not the wind, of the fire, but as one translation helpfully puts it: the 'sound of sheer silence'. Pause.

For Elijah, speaking and listening with God in the silence of the heart was intrinsic to our very nature – it is almost one of the purest and simplest forms of grace.

Elisha was first chosen as Elijah's disciple when Elijah casts his mantle on him when he is ploughing (and preparing the ground) – which seems appropriate for what he would later do – finish the tasks left to Elijah of appointing a just king in Israel.

So for Elisha, who has been following this man – who it is quite dangerous to be with – must have naturally been concerned for any repercussions after the departure of his Master. But, in response to Elijah's offer of a parting gift – seeing that his master will not be dissuaded - then he responds in a very shrewd way.

Elisha, asking for a double share of Elijah's spirit is asking for but in line with the law to receive the eldest son's share to carry on Elijah's name and work. Another example of this is when Jacob cheats his brother Esau into giving his share up in Genesis.

Elisha asks for the ability to have some of the skills that he has watched Elijah use to fulfil God's instructions to him. And it is Elisha that eventually complete the mission that was given to Elijah – but in very different ways according to the way he lived out the prompting of God's Spirit.

But in our story today, the clearest discipline that Elisha teaches us is the discipline of watchfulness/ awareness. He watches, until his teacher was out of sight, straining his gaze, before shouldering the mantle and completing the tasks in his own way.

Elijah's mantle is eventually left with Elisha at his ascension, and Elisha finishes Elijah's tasks of anointing the Kings. He leads prophetic guilds (companies of prophets) and is occasionally in friendly contact with the Israelite ruling houses – in opposition to Elijah's concerns.

I want to draw your attention to the wheels of the chariot. As Elijah is swept up – he will be swept into the middle of the whirlwind. And at the centre of the whirlwind, there may be a sense of calm – a place of stillness – a place unlike any other. I want you ponder the words of

Hermes Trismegistus 'God is that reality whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere'.

If, as the new Testament suggests, and the example of these prophets show, we can be united with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit enlivening us, then our awareness can change. Take the spokes of the wheel – if the hub of the wheel is God, and we are the spokes. Out on the rim of the wheel the spokes are furthest away from each other, but at the centre, the hub and the spokes are more united – and nearer to the axle that spins. The more we journey towards the centre, then the closer we are to each other and to God.

So, far from being a confusing aside – the Israelite prophets can teach us 2 things for our discipleship today. 1) The importance of waiting for God in the silence of our hearts, and 2) the prophetic practise of watching for the signs of God's work in the world.

Of you our hearts have spoken 'seek his face' (Ps. 27: 8)

For God alone, our souls, in stillness, wait. (Ps.62. 1,6.)

Amen.