

11<sup>th</sup> February 2018

Preacher: Jen Smith

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**Hymns:** 682 God of grace and God of glory  
564 O thou who camest from above  
251 Jesus Christ is waiting  
545 Be thou my vision

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**Readings:** 2 Kings 2.1-14  
Mark 9.2-9

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### ***“PICKING UP THE MANTLE”***

#### **Prayer**

Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, o Lord our strength, and our redeemer. AMEN.

All around Elisha and Elijah on that last day, the company of prophets tried to make Elisha see sense – Surely you know your master is going to be taken away? And even Elijah himself said ‘stay here, because I’ve got a long way ahead of me.’ And Elisha hung on – From Gilgal to Bethel, and then to Jericho, and finally across the river Jordan, where he was divided from Elijah by the chariot of fire, the horsemen of Israel.

I have always felt like the miracle in that story of Elijah and Elisha is not in the chariots of fire, nor in the whirlwind – but in Elisha’s dogged faithfulness – his daring and commitment through the ambiguity, when everyone around him had some little chat, some little word to give to put him off. Finally he’s there at the edge of the Jordan and his Master is gone – and there is this mantle: and I imagine the wittering still going on among the company of prophets, just off to the side: ‘He would have been better to go home, look at him all alone now’ and ‘it might not work for him anyway, HE’s no Elijah.’

These passages are about God’s faithfulness, and the transfer of authority, about the bridge between one generation’s passion and the next. They are also about resisting the disabling voice of the majority, that company of prophets who seems to be everywhere having their chat, their sucking teeth and carrion voices whittle away until the best among us lack all conviction – there’s a risk we don’t even dare pick up the mantle, let alone know what to do with it.

There is a tradition at a Jewish Seder to leave a cup of wine for Elijah – And the door open – to act as if prophets are still among us, and to be ready to welcome them. The tradition with Elijah is that he will arrive when least expected, and to announce justice we already know but are avoiding – and the coming of the Messiah – no accident that it is he, along with Moses, whom Peter, James, and John see, speaking with Jesus on the mountaintop.

## **You have inherited the authority of the prophet**

I have really only one point today, in this week when we have celebrated 100 years since the passage of the Representation of the People act, 'votes for women' in 1918. We are not just the inheritors of those who worked for that vote, we are not just the inheritors of Suzanna and John and Charles and the others who made their way out from this Chapel - we are the inheritors of Elijah, and Elisha. The mantle is ours to pick up.

SO we bring the scripture to bear on the memory of the 1918 Act which extended the vote to so many. On that day as much as in the days of Elijah, God was faithful.

By God's grace and many peoples' sweat, authority was transferred: the authority implied by having the vote in a democracy was widened from 8 million people to 21 million. This included all men over the age of 21, and servicemen from the age of 19 – and it memorably included women over the age of 30 who owned property or whose husbands did. Before that day, 58% of the male population had the authority of the vote, after that day all did.

Before that day, none of the women had the vote, and after that day nearly 40% did. By God we have used it. And around the world, we have used it – but not enough! Too often the mantle is not picked up – we leave it lying and make our excuses.

People died for us to receive that authority. People offended the sensibilities of the day and took direct action, people embarrassed their churches and families and were imprisoned, tortured with force feeding and deprived of medical care. Men and women of different classes and backgrounds. Some Methodists. People sweated to receive that authority, and it is now ours and we are stood at the edge of the Jordan looking at the mantle on the ground in front of us.

And to pick it up is not just about voting. No, picking up the mantle of these prophets is about daring to be in the minority opinion, countercultural, to believe and keep believing that every child can be fed, that every woman can have the chance to learn to read and to control her own money, that men and women around this world in the humblest village can live in security with water and peace and food - and if we dare believe then take our little part to make it so. And yes, this means starting with the sin in my own heart, coming to face my own prejudice, and fear, and selfishness and weariness. And it also means working for these things, and others, not in a smug hard closed way, such that we seek to obliterate and shame someone who is in disagreement, or even just agrees in a different way – but that when we pick up that mantle and strike the water to make a way, we bring all across the dry land of the Jordan river bed.

I talk about starting with my own sin: a few weeks ago I took an online test, through something called Project Implicit – you can look it up – an initiative of Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington. The test I took was designed to measure implicit gender bias in relation to leadership. And I felt pretty good going in – I mean, I'm in general a progressive person, I spend my money in the 'right' way and vote the 'right' way and took the test and then – then came the result. And I was faced with the fact that the test had uncovered in me, in my deepest heart, and expectation that leadership was more likely to be male, or

masculine. And I took that test again. And got the same result. And then I went and did some reading and tried to discredit that test – surely not!

Friends, let me clear that I believe any prejudice towards or against male or female to do with any particular quality in leadership is a sin, because we are all made in the image of God. And if that is a radical thing, then we need to get back to basics in Genesis 1 and remember that God looked at all God's creation and said 'It is good.'

So I took the test again, and it gave the same result – and so this Lent, I know I have some work to do.

Picking up the mantle also means taking that great leap to notice God's love in my life – this is called faith - to believe that this same God might be whispering to me today – right where I am, whispering encouragement and love and empowerment and I might just be caught up in a purpose worth working for. And so when we do encounter sexism, or homophobia, or racism – or just simple economic hardship that should not be - when we see a group of people who are put upon because they are weak, or made into scapegoats for our society, we know we are part of the whisper that says TIME IS UP.

### **A lot of voices telling you what to do with that mantle**

If you go down to the Museum of the Bank of London, there is a room where is displayed around the ceiling and walls the trending words and emojis of London's social media on any given day, every day – what are people feeling about, talking about – literally what words are most coming up in London's social media. And there are the waves of anxious stress, the petty angers, the rolling joy when some good news takes all our lips, too soon replaced by the latest viral gossip. And this is not 'virtual reality,' this is reality as we live our common life today. Whether we are part of it or not. And in it is power for good – for organisation and encouragement and empowerment not just of us, but of, for example, women in rural Sierra Leone who with a smartphone, can share by Bluetooth information about medical care, about legal rights, about political change. That's good news.

And of course it is still true that amongst the waves of words and themes I hear the voice of that same wandering 'company of prophets' that tagged along to see what Elisha would do, and how Elijah would go - in our common culture – wringing hands and analysis of what is wrong, what could go wrong. Carrion voices to undo our confidence and make us doubt and afraid to try for fear of failure or foolishness. Or for fear of doing more harm than good. And then I hear Peter's offer to Jesus 'let us make you each a building here and put you in it' in every too small church plan for growth, every hesitation and attempt to fit God's grace into the into the four walls of our present churches. Jesus didn't bother to answer Peter, but he surely loved him.

According to the Citizenship Foundation, quoted in a 2010 report of the Speaker of the House of Commons, the main reasons why people are not becoming involved in decision-making (in political life) are:

- Lack of time;
- Lack of trust; and

- Lack of the "knowledge, skills and confidence" to make the political process work for them

And yet, the same Speaker's report said that over half of those studied wanted to be engaged. Lack of access, rather than apathy, is the problem. Apathy is a myth, the report said. That's good news. We want to pick up the mantle, we just don't quite know how?

In relation to our scripture, and to our confidence in God, I interpret these reports to show that God is still as faithful and as prophetic as ever God was. And folk of all persuasions are just as observant, just as aware of injustice around us – prejudice, poverty, lack of education, threat of violence. But what seems different is there are fewer of us who seem to have confidence to pick up the mantle or strike the water – we talk ourselves out of it, and are coached in cynicism and fear of failure, and step right over.

Friends we have inherited the authority of the prophet as much as Elisha did, as much as Peter James and John. And if we will heed the voice of God in our Gospel and 'Listen' to the words and life of Jesus, we will be able to pick out the voice of God from amidst the hubbub of restless anxious speech around us. You are able.

**Listen to Jesus – pick up the mantle, strike the water – make a way.**

There is a deep paradox that majority rule, expressed in the vote, is not always just. Not always shown by history to be right. And truth, progress, rarely starts as majority opinion.

We are coming into Lent this week, when some will mark their foreheads with ash to remember our mortality – to stand as a mark of humility and re-commitment to God's purpose. Because we carry the news of the kingdom of God only a short while, you and I – and as we receive it we are also to hand it on.

Remember the heart of the story of Elijah, and of Jesus: God refuses to abandon God's people. This God sends warning and prophecy in every generation – and is the same one in whom Jesus Christ has his being. The voice from the cloud, on that day of transfiguration said to Peter, James and John – and it says to us: This is my son the Beloved, Listen to him! SO Elisha did not go home, despite his fears. And Peter and James and John did not go home, despite their fears. And you and I – we are still here and together we will fight any fear.

This Lent, as we re-connect with God's purpose in our lives, and in the life of the world, friends pick up the mantle, don't listen to the company of prophets, carrion voices that get inside – listen to the life and words of Jesus the beloved, and don't lose heart: stay with the long walk of the kingdom, pick up the mantle, strike the water and we will make a way.