

**“Then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him and struck the water, saying, ‘Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?’ ” (2 Kings 2.14)**

St. Paul, in his Epistles, rationalizes that Christ *had* to Ascend since he first descended at his birth. Yet, the Ascension of Christ is no less jarring even if it was completely necessary. I think of how we might feel to see a friend or family member ascend bodily into heaven – I don’t think I’d know what to do. Yet, this completely necessary Ascension took place according to what Jesus had foretold, and fulfilled the need for Jesus to leave the world so that the Comforter, the Spirit, could come.

But this act of fulfillment makes it no less amazing, no less awe-inspiring. For in yet another moment, the power of God was on display. The ascending Lord taken up in the clouds in front of the witnesses who also bore witness to his life, death, and resurrection. This was the closing of one chapter and the opening of another. The time on earth for Jesus has come to an end, the time of the Spirit was about to begin. But now, the disciples waited. Now the disciples paused to reflect upon all that they had been taught, while they waited for the promised comforter to arrive.

And, as jarring as this moment must have been, any doubt that remained in the minds of the disciples as to Jesus’ identity must have vanished. Jesus was clearly highly favoured, the Son of God, and the promised Messiah. And despite the apparent uniqueness of this event, those familiar with the scriptures would have recognized the moment as reminiscent of the ascension of one other person in Scripture – the prophet Elijah, as we read in our Old Testament Lesson.

In the whole Old Testament, when a figure dies, they are said to be gathered to their fathers, or descend to the place of the dead – Sheol. Only once was a man raised up instead of sent down – and that was in 2 Kings, when the prophet Elijah was carried up into heaven. The longer version of this lesson is what we read at Morning Prayer on Thursday – Ascension Day itself: Elisha follows Elijah his master to the place where he was to leave the earth. This was the day the Lord foretold that Elisha would succeed his master as the Lord’s prophet – a day that all who had prophetic callings knew about. Elijah and Elisha travelled to the place, crossing the Jordan on dry ground by the action of Elijah putting down his mantle.

When they arrived, Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind to heaven, separated from Elisha by chariots of fire and horses of fire (symbolic of the presence and power of God). Elisha tore his clothes in mourning and despair, and took up Elijah’s mantle, and all the spiritual power of God. He then also parted the Jordan, crossed on the dry bottom, and was immediately recognized as Elijah’s successor by the other prophets.

What a tremendous story this is, and ripe with meaning and symbolism – I’ll walk through some of this symbolism with you. First is the parallels this story makes about the succession of Elijah and Elisha with that of Moses and Joshua. Joshua, following Moses’ death, was also able to cross the Jordan River on the dry bottom in order to let the children of Israel into the Promised Land. Just as both masters could part the waters, so, too, could their true successors. Then there is the symbolism of the chariots and horses of fire. Chariots and horses are symbolic of power and kingly might, while fire is one of the most attributed features to a story of meeting with God face to face. All of this together with a “whirlwind” or perhaps we might understand a fierce storm (Hebrew *sah’-ar*), is a Theophany – a divine revelation of Almighty God in all his power and glory.

Elisha is rightfully shaken by all that happens, and he rips his clothes – itself a powerful symbol in Hebrew culture. But this ripping of his clothes also is layered. Elisha rips his clothes out of despair and puts on Elijah’s mantle for practical reasons, but it is also symbolic of Elisha casting off and ripping up his old life, and taking up the new life to which he was called to serve the Lord as his prophet. With this mantle came the spirit of Elijah, and the power of God.

It is this taking up of the mantle, this conversion to new life, and this coming of the spirit that we turn our attention towards now. As the Church, we are soon to recall the coming of the Spirit after Jesus' Ascension. We are soon to recall once again the call to our vocation – just like Elisha. “What are we to do now?” we must ask ourselves. But this is not only to do with our lives in light of the Spirit – but also to take and apply this to the here and now: What does it mean to be searching for a new leader in the parishes? What does it mean to be facing a time of transition? What does it mean for there to be change?

We encounter this reality frequently in our lives: things change, transitions happen. And we have here this week modelled for us two examples of transitions of leadership. From Elijah to Elisha, and from Jesus to the Holy Spirit. In both of these cases there is hesitation, there is fear, and there is uncertainty. But in both of these cases, those facing the loss of their leader are forced to rely solely on God. For it is ultimately God that knows our path, it is God who knows where he wants us to go. And really, he's the only one – despite our best attempts to know. So, I encourage you to trust fully in him, in his grace and providence, as we now approach our own time of transition, our own new life as a parish family. As we know from Holy Scripture, and especially in the wake of Easter, the Gospel is the promise of new life.

The Scriptures are always pointing us to look ahead, to see what's next. We are called to look towards God's promises and to try to discern how they are being filled in our lives. This is similarly true of St. Peter, who was already in his day looking ahead to what comes next. He says “the end of all things is at hand”, not because he believed that the world would end anytime soon, but that all the steps necessary for salvation – including the climax of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, as well as the coming of the Holy Spirit – had been done. So, logically, next on the list was the Second Coming of Christ. St. Peter, in this Epistle, encourages us to love one another in a reflection of the way we are loved by God – and symbolic of the fact that we know the end is next. To keep God's commandments in our daily lives is to reflect the knowledge we will be gathered back to him when the time comes.

It is a message of encouragement and reassurance. Despite the fact that we do not know when Jesus will come back in Glory, we are assured that we are not left alone by the gift of the Spirit he sent to dwell in His Church. In the Gospel, the word he uses to describe this third person of the Trinity is variously translated as advocate, comforter, helper, and counselor – all coming from the Greek word *parakletos*, or *paraclete*, meaning the one who is “called to one's aid” or “summoned”. Jesus, God the Son, along with God the Father summons the Holy Spirit to descend upon the Church, as we affirm in the Nicene Creed every week. In so doing, the Holy Spirit simultaneously fills the gap the disciples felt after Jesus left, and also multiplies it a million-fold so that all believers around the world can experience the reassuring presence of God in our life.

So now, we wait. Liturgically, we wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit as we celebrate Pentecost next week. In the parish, we wait as the Lord calls for us the next priest. In our lives, we wait until we are summoned back into the Lord's presence. All the while, we can be confident that God is at work – that his hand is in all that we do, and is at the fore of all our endeavours.

For all the fuss that surrounded the ascension of Elijah prepared Elisha to, truly and fully, take on the mantle as God's prophet. All the anxiety and nervousness surrounding Jesus' ascension made a space for the Holy Spirit to indwell at His coming. God is at work. He has been at work, He is at work now, and He will continue to be at work long after you and I are gone. Thanks be to God for this reassurance. Thanks be to God for this Salvation – from the world and from ourselves. May we fully give ourselves to him, that he may guide us. And may we be open to listen when he calls.

*And now unto God Almighty...*