

TRANSFORMED BY LIGHT

2 Kings 2. 1-12

2 Corinthians 4. 3-6

Mark 9. 2-9

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The second chapter of 2 Kings begins with one of the most dramatic openings in the scriptures. In an almost casual manner, we are informed of God's plan to sweep Elijah away to heaven in a whirlwind.

It is not clear how much Elijah knew of his impending fate; however, his disciple Elisha is aware that his spiritual father¹ is leaving, and is reluctant to leave his side. The prophets of Bethel (2 Kings 2. 3) and Jericho (2 Kings 2. 5) also knew that God was planning to take Elijah. Elijah's ascension was apparently the worst kept secret on this side of heaven.

In the Old Testament, Elijah and Elisha are both miracle-working prophets, and their exploits will have no equal until our Lord comes to earth to perform his own miracles. Jewish readers of this text in 2 Kings see Elijah and Elisha as one of the pairs of great men who led each generation from Moses and Aaron to the time of the rabbinic period. Indeed, Moses is Elijah's miracle-working forbear. Elijah demonstrates his connection to Moses by parting the waters of the Jordan, just as Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea.² And some Christian readers see Jesus and John the Baptist as continuing in that same tradition; although they add that one of the proofs of Christ's divinity is that he performs or exceeds all of Elijah's miracles.

¹ Elijah and Elisha will both be addressed by the title 'father' in the community of prophets sometimes known as the children (meaning disciples) of the prophets. Cf. 2 Kings 13. 4 and the prophet Deborah as a mother in Israel in Judg 5. 7.

² Cf. Ex 14. 21-22. Joshua, Moses's successor in the tradition, did the same in Josh 3. 7-17; Caleb is regarded as his partner in leadership.

A growing crowd accompanies Elijah and Elisha on their journey. It seems that prophets from Bethel and Jericho join them. Elijah's extraordinary ministry has come to an end, and not necessarily at a time of his choosing. The community knows that the time for change has come. They accompany the outgoing leader and his newly appointed successor through the transition. Elisha is not quite ready to let go of Elijah. Life transitions can be difficult, even when they lead to things that are positive and joyful.

In this transition, the outgoing leader offers his successor the benefit of his wisdom and experience. Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him before God takes him, and Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit.³ Elijah's bequest is, however, conditional. If Elisha can watch what God will do with and to Elijah, then he will receive what he has asked. Our appointed text does not reveal the bestowal of Elijah's spirit on Elisha; subsequent verses will, none the less, demonstrate the scope of Elisha's powers.

The passage ends with Elijah's ascent. One moment Elijah is walking and talking with his successor, and the next moment he is in the whirlwind. Elisha's cry, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' has been traditionally understood to mean that he saw chariots of fire associated with the whirlwind.⁴

Elisha is left in a new role with the larger-than-life legacy of his predecessor looming over him. If he is daunted by it, he shows no sign. This lesson from 2 Kings is read as a companion text to the story of our Lord's transfiguration; and here, Elisha has his own transfiguration. He becomes the senior prophet of his community, empowered by the gifts of the prophet who nurtured his own gifts.

³ An allusion to the legal right of the first-born (cf. Deut 21. 15-17).

⁴ This is supported by Elisha's later vision of the chariots in 2 Kings 6. 17 where he prays that his servant's eyes be opened to see the chariots.

But we cannot leave the question of transfiguration only with Elisha (or with Jesus for that matter); because St Paul, in our appointed text taken from the second epistle to the Corinthians, reminds us of our own transfiguration.

Our clue for interpreting this text is found in the preceding chapter of Paul's letter. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul speaks about how (through the Spirit of God) all of us, with 'unveiled faces', can 'behold' and 'reflect' the glory of the Lord as in a mirror. And as this happens, we are 'transformed' into that image, from one degree of glory to another (3. 18).

What does this mean exactly? In verse 6 of 2 Corinthians 4, Paul writes that it is 'God...who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. In our hearts, God has shone the light of his gospel; and that gospel reveals the glory of our crucified Lord, the one who died so that we all might live. That gospel reveals Jesus, who is the very image of God,⁵ as our text tells us (4. 4), and as we saw again in our sermon last week.

There are many people around us who do not recognise this light of the gospel. They have been fooled into thinking that God manifests himself rather as power, as wealth, and as many other things. But those of us who have recognised the light of the gospel that reveals the glory of Christ, and who have this light shining in our hearts, have two privileges that carry both a *blessing* and a *responsibility*.

The first privilege is one that we have already referred to, and that is the privilege of being transformed by God's Holy Spirit. But there is also a responsibility that goes along with this privilege. In order to *reflect* the glory of the Lord, we need to fix our gaze upon him, and to *behold* him. Today, can you and I say that we are keeping our eyes on God, and that we are focussing on him? It is an important question to ask.

⁵ Cf. Col 1. 15.

The second privilege is that those of us who have the light of the gospel shining in our hearts are then enabled to *radiate* the glory of the Messiah. This is a divine blessing indeed; but again we must ask ourselves, ‘if I am shining, who is receiving the benefit of my light?’

If we look closely at the text of Paul’s letter, we might be tempted to think of ‘unbelievers’ as a big category of people who are ‘out there’; a group of people for whom the gospel is veiled; and whom we will never be able to influence. But we deceive ourselves. Yes, it is true that ‘unbelievers’ refer to individuals and communities who have not embraced the gospel. But another possibility is that Paul is referring here not only to people who are outside the Church, but also to people who are inside the Church, who misinterpret and misunderstand the gospel. Might there be people within the Christian Church who claim to believe, but who have missed what the gospel is all about?

All of these individuals and communities are potential witnesses and *recipients* of the light of the gospel. Whilst it is true that the ‘god of this world’ trades in the spreading of darkness and keeping people lost in a maze of lies, our God who called light into existence at the dawn of time is also at work today in our hearts. And as he shines the light of his gospel in our hearts, he transforms our lives.

Our God is the God who traffics in light, and not in darkness. Our God is the God who can bring light to every dark corner of the world, and to every aspect of our lives. In the end, no veil will be able to cover his powerful light.

Amen.