

A sermon preached at St Andrew's Church, Soham on the Sunday next before Lent 2018. 2 Kings 2: 1-12; Mk 9: 2-9

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the living God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was thinking yesterday how not long ago

Susan suggested to me

that I saved myself some time

by downloading my sermons from the internet.

She said none of you'd notice.

I've not resorted to doing that this morning.

Instead, I'm going to take a risk in the opposite direction

and risk looking pious.

I don't mean to look pious - I hope you know that.

I wanted to share with you an experience I had

Just over a year ago

when I first moved to Soham.

I had a fortnight's break before I started here,

and I spent it thinking and praying

about what had gone before and what was coming next.

One morning I prayed with one of the psalms.

It was Psalm 29, which is my favourite psalm.

As I read it, I had a very clear sense of God's reassurance –

Reassurance of the strength and the power of God –

Strength I knew would sustain me

whatever this new phase would bring.

I felt that strength

to be very much stronger than my own.

I was very clear I needed it

and I was clear it would be given:

given not a moment too early

and not a moment too late

as an old friend of mine used to say.

The sense I had then – the vision I had then, if you like -

was - and still is - very powerful.

I knew it was important, and I knew I needed to remember it.

What I did to help me remember it

was turn some of the words from Psalm 29

into the password for my sohamwickenvicar gmail account.

It means I type them into my computer

many times each day.

It means I don't forget them –

and I don't forget the promise - the reassurance – the strength

that came to me with them.

In our readings this morning,

we meet people who - like I did then -

stand on the brink of transition.

We meet people whose worlds

are about to change –

people moving from one phase of life to another.

Elisha is about to pick up the baton of Elijah, his master –

Literally he's about

to pick up Elijah's mantle.

Elijah will be taken up to heaven,

and Elisha,

Elijah's protégé, will be left behind.

Elisha will continue where Elijah left off.

Elisha is all too aware that his task is a tall order:

He knows he needs all the help he can get.

'Give me a double share of your spirit' he begs Elijah –

In other words, give me your strength and more -

My own strength isn't enough.

I can't do this on my own.

When we turn to today's Gospel reading

It helps to know where that story comes

within Mark's Gospel as a whole.

Mark puts the transfiguration just before

Jesus talks to his disciples

about his suffering and death –

just before he breaks

what will seem like terrible news.

When they see Jesus transfigured –

Peter, James and John are given something to remember –

they're given a vision to cling on to –

a vision which, when they think back to it,

should give them strength and sustain them -

it should help them stay faithful to Jesus

throughout the dark days to come.

God reassures Peter, James and John

as to who Jesus is.

They see his glory, and a voice comes from heaven:

'This is my Son, the beloved: listen to him'.

There is - at that stage - no greater confirmation than that

that Jesus is the Messiah.

They're right to be following him.

But despite that confirmation –

in the short-term at least -

the vision, and what the disciples remember of it

prove not to be enough:

Peter, James and John must have remembered what they saw,

but still they go on to let Christ down.

Maybe they questioned

if what they'd seen had really happened.

Wondering about that,

I go back to the story of Elisha.

That first reading got cut off at the end of verse 12 of chapter 2 of the 2nd Book of Kings.

It ended with what Elisha saw -

the vision of the chariot and his horsemen –

the vision that Elijah said, if Elisha saw it,

would be the sign that Elisha had received

that double-share of Elijah's spirit –

in other words, received the strength he had asked for.

If we'd carried on reading for just another two verses,

we'd've heard what Elisha does next.

Elisha bends down and picks up a piece of cloth.

He picks up Elijah's mantle – the mantle Elijah has dropped

as he's been carried up in the whirlwind.

Elisha gets the strength he needs to go forward

not just from what he's seen -

not just from what he remembers.

Elisha also gets strength from something physical –

He gets strength from that bit of cloth – from the mantle.

The mantle is something tangible – something he can literally hold onto.

When Elisha looked at the mantle,

It must have reassured him that what he thought happened really did happen.

The mantle tells him

the vision of the chariot

and the strength that came to him with it were real.

He wasn't imagining things.

Once Elisha has picked up the mantle

he does the same thing as Elijah did earlier a few verses earlier:

He goes and stands on the bank of the Jordan.

He hits the waters of the Jordan with the mantle. When he hits them, the waters part, and Elisha crosses over.

Elisha crosses the Jordan,

Just as Elijah did before him.

The prophets who teased him before

can see the change in him:

'the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha' they say.

The prophets bow down.

They accept Elisha's authority.

They accept him as Elijah's successor.

Elisha has 'crossed over' in every sense –

He's moved into a new phase of life -

And that - in part –

is thanks to this tangible thing – this bit of cloth - the mantle.

For most human beings, it seems to me stuff is important – things are important.

Sometime we say we've got too much of it. Sometimes we feel guilty about having too much of it.

Very often when I go round to see people, the first thing they do when I get through the door is apologise for all the stuff there is around .

Maybe we have got too much stuff,

But before we start beating out breasts about it,

it's good to remember that often stuff can be helpful - things can be helpful.

That mantle was helpful to Elisha.

It was helpful for a time.

It got Elisha across the Jordan.

It helped him make that transition in that new phase of life -

that phase where he steps into Elijah's very big shoes.

Part of what gives me strength, I've told you, in my ministry here

is the memory of an experience of prayer.

The memory of reading words from a psalm and hearing God speak to me through them.

By turning those words into a computer password

I've found a way to make them concrete –

make them tangible – I physically type them into my computer. I've made them hard to forget.

Tangible things

can help make real the promise of God's presence and God's power.

They can help truth move from our head to our hearts.

They can help faith become lived experience

and so they help strengthen our faith.

On Ash Wednesday this week,

We Christians move into a new phase in the Church's year a new phase in the Church's life:

we enter the season of Lent.

At our Ash Wednesday service,

I'll take ash and daub it on the foreheads

of those of you who come forward to receive it.

Later I'll consecrate and distribute bread and wine.

These are tangible things – every-day things –

things that are channels for God's grace.

That's what the Church means by sacraments –

Outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace –

Sacraments can make truth easier grasp – literally -

than truth that's restricted to concepts or words.

Like Elijah's mantle,

crosses made in ash,

bread and wine

can be the things God uses to reassure us –

reassure us of his power working within us;

reassure of his presence alongside us – reassure us that his strength will be given to us -

strength that we need whatever phase of life we are in,

or whatever phase of life we - or those dear to us - are moving towards.

Strength that is stronger than our own.

As Peter says, when he writes years later and remembers the transfiguration,

'[We] will do well to be attentive to this, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in [our] hearts' (2 Peter 1: 19) **Amen.**