

Taking up the mantle

II Kings 2:1-2,6-14; Luke 9:51-62

At the recent South Morningside School Assembly held in our Church the Primary 7s, coming to the end of their time at school led the service by showing us something of their lives in the last year. What they'd learned, what they enjoyed, where they had been, and where they were going. They finished with a song telling us they were 'on their way'. The young people changed from their current uniforms into the uniforms of their next schools and as they left, another generation prepared to step up.

I get the same feeling when conducting a baptism. What will that tiny morsel of humanity, being welcomed into the family of faith through they symbol of water, have passed on to them in their life time, and what will they pass on to generations yet unborn.

What have we, in our Christian faith, received from previous generations, and what will we pass on to the generations to come? Faith and change is always around!

Last Sunday morning on Radio Four's Point of View, Linda Colley, a British Historian, gave a short, thought-provoking talk on leadership and succession. Noting the many C21st political challenges that are world-wide, she commented that in our world there was never a greater need for joined-up, long-range thinking whereas most politicians appeared to focus on the short term and just muddling through. The challenge was not only to politicians, for voters have responsibilities too, though we try to avoid them. When what is going on in the world, or our country, or our city, or our Church, or our lives is so overwhelming, it is tempting to give up and to retreat into our shells and 'hope for the best'.

Colley went on to say that membership of the National Trust is around 5 million, whereas there are around 540 thousand member sin the Labour Party, 124 thousand members in the Conservatives, 125 thousand members in the SNP, and said wryly that it was more appealing to visit gardens and stately homes than to invest time in political parties and meetings.

Equally worrying is the sense that people now look for a populist hero to make the bad things go away. We see it in the United States, India, parts of Europe, and the UK, and the death of liberal democracy. President Putin recently endorsed the rise of populist so-called charismatic leadership prior to the G20 summit meeting last week.

Looking for a knight in shining armour on a white horse to save our ‘world’ is a common response to periods of catastrophic change. The French embraced Napoleon at the end of the C18th. The Germans saw Hitler as their saviour in the 1930s. The problem with charismatic leaders is they never properly deliver and often do immense damage. Pernicious, populist leaders will often blame others for the ills of their worlds, ‘the people overseas’, and other groups at home who are not seen as ‘normal.’ Villains tend to be somewhere else or there is a need to blame and scapegoat ‘Other people’.

Our story about the prophets Elijah and Elisha fits into a time of social, religious and political change in ancient Israel. There was ongoing tension between the political élite around the king, and the religious leaders like Elijah doggedly attempted to keep the people of Israel true to the faithful worship of God, and the application of God’s loving mercy to the way society was governed and people were treated. When the state encroached on people’s freedom to worship, or tried to control religious allegiance by diluting the relationship of Israel to God by introducing foreign, more controllable deities, Elijah spoke out consistently to challenge king and spoke truth to power.

But Elijah’s time was coming to an end and a successor needed to come forward. No contest was held; no speculation about red wine spilled on sofas or recorded shouted arguments through party walls made. Elijah had already seen Elisha, and what we heard this morning is the final testing. Does Elisha have the staying power to lead? Will he be committed to the cause of God in testing times? Will Elisha recognise God at work in the world, as Elijah had done? Will he continue to speak truth to power, or will he hide away, or be stage-managed by lesser prophets because they feared what he might say in public?

The answer is yes. Elijah's mantle strike the River Jordan, and the two pass over. The Elisha does the same on the return journey. The symbolic imagery is meant to remind us of Moses and Joshua in earlier challenging times doing they same. The two prophets ascend a little hill. I walked up it when I visited Jordan last year; it's beside the baptismal site of Jesus. On that hill God's presence was felt. The symbolic chariot of fire and the horses represent God's protection, and the whirlwind represents God's dynamism. Somewhere in the midst of this imagery, Elijah is gone, and Elisha left behind; but with the mantle.

Elijah's mantle is the symbol, not the source, of his power. When Elisha picks the mantle up, he is claiming the symbol of prophetic authority and responsibility that goes with it as his own. Elijah was no longer there. Another generation had to step up, and carry God's work onward.

There is an insidious danger at work in our world today that yearns for political, or religious, or social, or economic saviours on horseback, galloping in to sort everything out. Such a false hope encourages passivity. There are no handsome princes or princesses on white horses coming to save us. There is no substitute for individual and community effort. We all have responsibilities in every area of life we enter into. We all need to do the grubby work of party politics, voting, seeking out the competent and not flashy or buffoonish leaders. The same is true in community work and church life where we lament things not happening, yet deftly sidestep the fact that they won't happen unless we make them happen.

In the end it all comes down to *all* of us. The mantle has been passed on to us in our time to **be** the change we want to see; to accept the responsibilities that will make a difference in our church life, work place, home setting and country. The mantle is passed on and needs to be taken up, or it falls to the ground, and nothing will happen.

The Italian composer Giacomo Puccini wrote a number of famous operas. In 1922 he was suddenly stricken by cancer while working on his last opera, *Turandot*, which many now consider his best. Puccini said to his students, "If I don't finish *Turandot*, I want you to finish it for me." Shortly afterwards he died. Puccini's students studied the opera carefully and soon

completed it. In 1926 the world premiere of *Turandot* was performed in Milan with Puccini's favourite student, Arturo Toscanini, directing.

Everything went beautifully until the opera reached the point where Puccini had been forced to put down his pen. Tears ran down Toscanini's face. He stopped the music, turned to the audience, and cried out, "Thus far the Master wrote, but he died." A vast silence filled the opera house. Toscanini smiled through his tears and exclaimed, "But his disciples finished his work."
When *Turandot* ended, the audience broke into thunderous applause.ⁱ

Passed-on mantles need to be picked up for God's work still needs to be done, and then the mantles are passed on to the next generation. That's what we're doing in our building work in the Church, and that's what we do in so many other ways in our worship, education, social events and nurturing people of faith today, so that they will become the people of faith tomorrow. The mantle was passed on to us. Take up the mantle, do God's work today, then pass the mantle on.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Carrie N Mitchell, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, p176