

God Will Not Be Silenced
2Kings 2
27/06/2021 – BPC 5pm Service

Coping with change is something that most of struggle with, especially if the change is significant. This is powerfully seen in the movie UP. Now I know this is meant to be a feel good story but when you take a closer a look, what you see is a man really struggling to come to terms with loss.

If you don't know the story, Carl is an elderly man who has lost his wife, and spends the whole movie trying to fulfil a dream they shared – which really is to distract him from his grief! We see this as he dangerously straps balloons to his house and spends a solid 90 minutes floating across the world despite endangering his own life and the life of this poor stowaway Russell...

Struggling with change, especially the loss of someone important to us, is a common human dilemma. Friday 25th August 2017 was one of the saddest days in Victorian history. Over 48,000 stood and watched. Many cried, others seemed unsure of what to say. It seemed all hope was lost and the end of a golden era as Hawthorn champion Luke Hodge retired and played his final game.

How will we go on? What will happen to us? Is there any hope? Now this is obviously a little dramatic but that's exactly the thought and question we should have in our mind as we abruptly read in v.1 that Elijah is about to leave – taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. This is surely a massive blow for God's people Israel. A huge deal! Elijah has been such a force for good in an evil time.

As Israel keeps putting up horrible king after horrible king, as we saw last week from as we went from Ahab to Ahaziah, Elijah has been the straight shooting, uncompromising, truth speaking prophet of the true God that Israel desperately needs. What will life be like without him? How will they cope?

And v.1 is deliberately put there so we pause and ask that question. What will happen to Israel without him? What hope is there for change now? How will God get through to them without this inspirational leader who has called out idolatry and evil all in the face of constant death threats!

But on the other hand, the end of Elijah's ministry is not a surprise. Back in 1Kings 19 Elijah was already promised that Elisha would succeed him. Elijah had put his cloak on Elisha, a symbolic passing of the batten, which Elisha had unreservedly accepted and had been with him ever since.

Elijah is going: that is the clear and big point and everyone seems to know it. Elijah and Elisha are travelling together. For his final days on earth Elijah goes on a bit of hike. Beginning in Gilgal they head to Bethel then on to Jericho then to the Jordan River.

Elijah seems to go on a little farewell tour of all these schools or companies of prophets – little bible colleges that he probably established in his final years. And in both Bethel and Jericho some prophets come out and say to Elisha *“Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?”* to which he replies *“Yes, I know... so be quiet.”*

Do you get the impression Elisha is having trouble letting go? Not coping so well with the thought of Elijah's departure? But to make matters worse for him, Elijah seems determined to get rid of him.

As they leave Gilgal, Elijah says in v.2, *Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel.* To which Elisha, replies, *As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.*” So they went down to Bethel.

The same thing happens as they head to Jericho in v.4 and to the Jordan in v.6. So what is going on here? Is Elijah a bit grumpy, even sick of Elisha? Or perhaps he is trying to delay the inevitable handover? And this could especially be the case as what we saw back in 1Kings 19, is that Elisha’s ministry has a particular focus on judgement.

Listen to what God told Elijah: 1Kings 19: *anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazeel, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.*

So maybe as Elijah approaches the end of his ministry he is trying to delay this judgement, give Israel more time to change their ways and be spared this judgement. Maybe that’s what he’s doing...

But more likely is that as Elijah goes on this farewell tour, approaching the Jordan where he’ll be taken into heaven, he is testing Elisha’s resolve and willingness to stick with him to then ultimately succeed him. It’s almost as if he’s constantly giving him an out to say are you sure you want this?

And just as Elisha was all in when Elijah called him back in chapter 19, saying goodbye his parents, killing off all his livestock and burning his ploughing gear, he still is. He is sticking it out till the end.

In v.7 they arrive at the Jordan river and they’ve got some spectators: fifty men from the company of prophets are watching on: there is a sense of anticipation as if they know something big is coming! ⁸ *Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.*

Sound familiar? It’s a lot like Moses right? Who parted the Red Sea and walked across on dry land? And in many ways, Elijah has been very much like Moses, a prophet for Israel who has spoken God’s Word and God has used powerfully for the good of his people. But more on that later.

Elijah and Elisha cross over together, now separated from their spectators, and the time has come. And with his departure imminent, Elijah asks in v.9, *“Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”* And what Elisha asks for is both bold and honourable.

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.” Now that may seem a little strange or even greedy to us as the only time we might use the word double portion is at dinnertime! Like a youth camp...

But the language is actually of inheritance. The double portion is what the eldest son inherited from his father. Elisha is asking to be Elijah’s heir, to take over his ministry and to be equipped for by the Spirit. Because Elisha gets how significant it is for Elijah to go.

He understands how important Elijah’s ministry has been for Israel, how challenging, confronting, agonizing it is to speak God’s Word into a broken and apathetic world. He’s seen Elijah hit rock bottom with death threats against him and yet he still says, I want to take up that role.

As Pink says, “he asked not anything nature might have coveted but that which was spiritual, seeking not his own aggrandizement but the glory of God and the good of God’s people. Therefore, he wished to be equipped for his mission. He asked for a double portion of the spirit of prophecy—of wisdom and grace, of faith and strength—that he might be thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

Elijah gets this so he says in v.10, *this is a hard thing*. I think he’s saying that what Elisha wants is hard – to carry on Elijah’s work is a ministry of cost and rejection in faithfulness to God. Because I don’t think he’s saying it’s really hard to give this to Elisha because Elijah knows that ultimately God himself is the only one who can give this. That’s why he says, *“yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not.”*

He’s saying God will decide and we don’t have to wait long to find out. ¹¹ *As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.*

Now if you’re realising in this moment that Elijah didn’t actually go to heaven in a flaming chariot but a whirlwind... That’s good because that’s what the bible says! And just like that, Elijah is gone, one of just two in the bible that had the privilege of not experiencing death.

Now at this point we might want to stop and ask, why the chariot? Why flaming horses? Why a whirlwind? Are they angels? Why didn’t Elijah have to die when Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, and all the other prophets did? And while they are legitimate questions the focus is clearly on something bigger.

What will Elijah’s absence mean for Israel? How will they cope? And we see what a big deal it is in Elisha’s response. v.12 ¹² *Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.*

It may seem at he’s simply narrating what he sees. But when he says, *the chariots and horsemen of Israel* he’s actually describing Elijah. The prophets bringing God’s Word to the people were the nation’s spiritual defence (Elisha called the same 2Kings 13:14). Israel is losing its chief prophet who has continually and boldly spoken the truth of God for the good of the people and now he’s gone.

And so Elisha mourns and laments this reality as he tears his garments. Which leads to the critical question and point of this whole passage: Elijah IS going so what will this mean for Israel? Or what Elisha himself asks as he now stands at the Jordan again, by himself.

¹⁴ *He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. “Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over.*

Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah? Well the answer couldn’t be more obvious: he’s with Elisha. This is confirmed in v.15 as the 50 men from the company of prophets who have just awkwardly been waiting around this whole time say: *“The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.” And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.*

Elijah is gone but God will not be silenced, he will keep speaking and working and revealing as Elisha takes up his ministry. That's the whole point of the geography of this narrative as Elisha now returns to all the places he'd been to with Elijah as he takes up his role as prophet and speaking of God's Word – especially in those famous events in Jericho and Bethel which will look at shortly.

God has raised up a new prophet to keep speaking his word just as he's done before. Because Elisha crossing the Jordan on dry ground to lead God's people is also meant to remind us of Joshua.

As Joshua received the role as leader of God's people from Moses, he too crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land. So whether Moses to Joshua or now Elijah to Elisha, God keeps speaking and is never limited or restricted by people or circumstances or culture.

And I think it is so helpful for us to hear and know this. It is easy for us to become discouraged or to despair as culture moves further and further away from God and think it will all just be easier 20 years ago. And you'll meet people in the church, usually older, who will talk about the good old days and how what we really need is a Billy Graham or John Stott to see God really at work.

But God doesn't grow tired or weary, he isn't shocked or diminished based on culture or ideas. Do you honestly think Jesus is telling the Father "Did you see that change or suppression bill they introduced in Victoria? How are we ever going to reach them now?"

Do you think God is trembling in the corner because religious education was removed from schools or as Jesus is rejected or scorned in our society? No of course not. God is not limited by a certain era or location or culture, and nor is he short on resources...

The whole tension in this passage is Elijah is going, what will this mean for God's people? And the answer is bluntly given in 2 verses... God will keep speaking, keep revealing and saving and warning.

Now this is a big deal for us to grasp as God does amazingly bless and use particular people at particular times that can really leave their mark.

We see this in the hilarious events of vv.16-18 as the 50 prophets want to send out a search party for Elijah, just in case God dropped him out of the whirlwind somewhere. And although Elisha insists they don't, he caves in, they go searching for 3 days, to which Elisha says 'I told you so' in v.18.

God does amazingly use servants of the Gospel to bless his people. Many of you I'm sure know this all too well. But that doesn't mean God is ever limited to them... Now this may sound controversial, but God doesn't need Neil Chambers or Andy May or Chris Shaw and me!

God is never short on resources or power, he is the living God who has spoken, does speak, and will speak. And that is not just what Israel living in exile needed to hear but what we need to hear too.

As Elijah ascends to heaven in a whirlwind he strangely appears again in the final verse of the OT as God promises in Malachi 4:5, "*See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. So God himself is going to come but before that Elijah will come.*"

And that promise just sits there for 400 years until we read in Mark 1 that a guy named John the Baptist appears, wearing clothing made of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist (1:6) – just as Elijah was described last week – and John's message is that after him will come one greater than he is will baptise people with the Holy Spirit.

John is the fulfilment of Elijah's promised return which Jesus himself says is the case in Matthew 11. So as Elijah leads us to John who leads us to Jesus, the message is still the same: God is still speaking.

We see this especially in Mark 9. Jesus heads up a mountain with some of his disciples and he is transfigured before them. And standing with Jesus is Moses and Elijah having a chat! And God himself speaks them in v.7, *"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"*

Listen to him. As we see Elijah pass the batten to Elisha, as Elijah point us to John who points to Jesus, the message is the same: God continues to speak, he will not be silenced, and we must listen to Jesus.

Now I imagine for many of you this is not ground-breaking or revolutionary. But it is one thing for us to accept this and something entirely different to grasp it. It's so easy for us to simply give lip service to this reality but not take it seriously. We say we know God speaks, that God actually addresses us in his Word, yet do we actually give time, energy, and focus to listen to him every day?

Do you long to listen? Is it your goal or desire to not simply know this word but to have it shape your identity, priorities, and worldview as you hear the good and loving God speak life-giving truth to you?

How often have we sat in growth group and simply talked about how hard it is to give time to the bible rather than how necessary and wonderful it is? Because the conviction that God will not be silenced and speaks is not merely some throw away theological line but a life-changing reality.

We see this 2Kings 2 Elisha continues to retrace the journey he and Elijah had taken. From the Jordan he has gone to Jericho and the people come to greet him in v.19 because they have a real problem. ¹⁹*The people of the city said to Elisha, "Look, our lord, this town is well situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive."*

The translation that the 'land is unproductive' is a little vague. More literally, the water is causing miscarriages (NJB). The water isn't simply bad but lethal! And although that might sound strange to us, it actually isn't random but takes us back to two key events at Jericho.

When Joshua captured Jericho, he said, *"Cursed before the LORD is the one who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho: "At the cost of his firstborn son he will lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest he will set up its gates."* (Joshua 6:26)

Then in 1Kings 16, under the new dodgy king Ahab (sound familiar), Jericho is rebuilt by a guy named Hiel who loses two of his sons for doing so in accordance with what Joshua said (16:34).

So Elisha arrives in Jericho, which is cursed and plagued by death and what does he do? Well in v.20 he calls for a bowl and some salt, then throws it into the water in v.21, saying *"This is what*

the LORD says: 'I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.'"

The temptation is again to get caught up the details. Why a new bowl? Why salt? How did Elisha know this would fix it? How much salt? Was it Himalayan, volcanic, pink or white, rock or table?

But that would be to miss the point. The focus is not the salt but the word of God through Elisha: ²²*And the water has remained pure to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken.*

As God continues to speak he brings grace. As Ralph Davis says, "Curseville has become Graceburgh." It is remarkable isn't it that as Elisha begins his solo ministry, even though he's been promised to bring judgement, the first thing he does is bring grace and life to those suffering curse.

And yet as people who know Jesus and live this side of the cross, we know this isn't surprising at all. For Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, to seek and save the lost, giving life to the dead.

The world of Jericho is our world, the world Jesus came to: a world that rejects God and is suffering for it, a world of curse and suffering, and death – a world without answers. Jesus tells us in Luke 4, he came to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to the prisoners, sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed. Gentle to the weary, kind to needy, and generous to the undeserving is who God is.

As Dane Ortland says in his great little book *Gentle and Lowly*, "Christ does not get flustered and frustrated when we come to him for fresh forgiveness, for renewed pardon, with distress and need and emptiness. That's the whole point. It's what he came to heal. He went down into the horror of death and plunged out through the other side in order to provide a limitless supply of mercy and grace to his people"

And so I hope you can see that it is to our great loss that we neglect this word. We must fight, resist, and confront every temptation to be bored or underwhelmed or unwilling to listen to Jesus.

And we need to see that refusing to listen to Jesus is not just neglecting nourishment for our souls, but something God takes very seriously, which we see in the final scene of Elisha and the boys...

²³*From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. "Get out of here, baldy!" they said. "Get out of here, baldy!"* ²⁴*He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the LORD. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.* ²⁵*And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria.*

Now before we get into the details, what do you do with this? If by some accident your daily bible readings landed in 2Kings and you came to this, what would you do?

Pass it off as a funny story or joke? Think it's a bit weird? I asked my growth group that exact question to which some said they'd just move on quickly because they don't get it, others were shocked but ultimately keep going, others had read the chapter but not remembered the event at all...

When reading for this sermon one commentator said this: “the episode at Bethel is in every respect a puerile tale’ and that ‘there is no serious point to this incident.” What would you do? How seriously do you take God’s Word not just occasionally reading it but priority and effort listen and understand.

So let’s look at the details of this surprising, even shocking story because on the surface it looks like an over-reaction to a somewhat familiar scene. There’s a group of kids hanging out, probably outside a shopping centre, and they mock an over-sensitive adult who over-reacts.

But notice a few things. Don’t let the phrase ‘some boys’ or even ‘small boys’ in the ESV throw you. These are teenagers and there are at least 42 of them! This is a mob! And they aren’t just hanging out at Uni Hill after school, in v.23 they have come out of town to meet Elisha – this is targeted.

And so is their insult. They tell him to get out or more literally, ‘go up’. Now it could be they are simply telling him to leave town, or it may be that they are even telling him to ‘go up’ and participate in the idol worship that had taken over Bethel for the last 80 years (cf. 1Kings 12:25-33).

They are telling him either to confirm to their idol worship or get out of town – especially because they don’t think he’s a real prophet of God. By calling him baldly they are not just teasing or being insensitive. This too is targeted, especially as Elisha would have had his head covered as he travelled.

And you may recall from last week, that Elijah was known to be a hairy guy! And so this mob of teenagers deliberately come out to meet Elisha to tell him there is no place for him in Bethel as he’s no hairy Elijah, not a real prophet who speaks the word of God anyway.

They deliberately reject his authority to speak God’s Word, which makes sense of why the bears come out as Elisha curses them in the name of the LORD. These are covenant bears! Listen to what God promised in Leviticus 26: ²¹ *‘If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me...* ²² *I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted.*

So as God says he will not be silenced as Elijah hands over to Elisha, these two stories that complete Elisha’s return journey through Jericho and Bethel, work together to show us that when God speaks there can be either grace or judgement; deliverance or disaster!

There is no forgiveness, no life with God, no grace for our need outside of God’s Word. God continues to speak to but to reject that word is death.

And so for many of us who are so familiar with the idea of listening to God, so comfortable to have the bible open and read, we must recover the awe and privilege and yes, even the holy fright that comes with listening to the holy God speak.

When God speaks it is no small thing. Now I imagine for many of us this is not new or surprising – but the clear question must be how are you responding?

Are you constantly finding issue with the message or messengers? Focussing only on why don't have to listen or change or respond?

Has a daily commitment to listen to Jesus been replaced with daily excuses for why you can't? Have you let yourself become convinced that neglecting God's Word isn't a big deal? A necessary sacrifice in a busy schedule? Or have you persuaded yourself that nothing good will come from it?

That it's all a bit boring, confusing, and complex? But hear again that our goal is not merely to read some words on a page but hear our God speak! As Eugene Peterson says, "The Holy Scriptures give witness to a living voice sounding variously as Father, Son, and Spirit, addressing us personally and involving us personally as participants. This text is not words to be studied in the quiet preserves of a library, but a voice to be believed and loved and adored in workplace and playground, on the streets and in the kitchen. Receptivity is required."

This is not to say you'll never struggle with a routine or discipline, or that you'll never be confused or perplexed by what you read. We all will and do. But as we grasp the reality that our God has and does and will speak to us through his Word, we must never be content to stay there.

We won't be satisfied with our inconsistent habits, our forgetfulness or lack of understanding. We'll pray and plan and prioritise because we know God has declared that, "*These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.* (Isa 66:2)

And as we work to hear the voice of our good shepherd, as we pray we'd grasp and apply it and have Jesus change all of who we are, we must to then learn from Elisha that we would not just be willing but long to take this life giving good news to others, even in the face of apathy and opposition, and yes, even at great personal cost.

The God who will not be silenced continues to speak words of grace, words of life and love, meaning, hope, and rescue to a broken and needy world. So let's be those that long to listen, to grasp what our God is saying, but also to be grasped by it and speak it to a wanting world. Let's pray.