

Worcester Cathedral

Trinity 10, Sunday 13 August 2023

*Then the Lord said to Elijah, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill.'*

It is an early form of succession planning – albeit a rather gloomy one which involves a few too many swords and deaths. But it is quite the right thing for organisations to plan for the future; for governance, management, leadership, and the sustainability of any organisation, succession planning is vital. Though as we hear of God's plan for Elijah we might wonder if this is exactly what we want to hear when it results in a stark plan which will not be easy for Elijah. In fact, he fulfils only one of the three charges which God makes: Elijah invests his successor Elisha – and it is up to Elisha to carry out the rest.

I have been thinking a lot about succession planning recently. I give thanks to God that the mantle which falls on me is not one of gloom and judgement, but a happy one of ministry among the faithful people of Worcester's cathedral community.

Nevertheless, I am conscious that I sometimes feel a little bemused and anxious to find myself preparing to take on the role of Interim Dean - in less than a fortnight. As I have been saying to many people recently, I didn't sign up for this.

There is a wonderfully familiar phenomenon known as imposter syndrome, the inability to come to terms with, or believe, that despite the outward signs, one is actually in a position of authority or leadership or whatever it is that is actually happening. I know I am not alone in this, and

I am grateful that it is not only a commonplace but a useful tool to check ourselves from time to time.

Although the circumstances are different, I rather like the recurring question the Lord asks of Elijah in today's reading from First Kings, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' It is a good question and one worth asking ourselves regularly. What am I doing here? Who am I and what does it mean to be called by God into the future? Unsurprisingly, today's gospel points us to an answer.

Elijah's character is one of strength – defending the faith, prophesying, and looking to the future. A man of determination and of solidity. In some ways he contrasts nicely with the very different personality of Peter who we meet in today's gospel. Peter, often characterised as impetuous, quick to jump in without much thought, and perhaps a bit less thorough than other disciples, is also one from whom a different type of succession is often claimed. The prince of the apostles, the rock, the one who becomes a principal leader in the early Church. Peter it is who inspires me today as I think about stepping out into the future.

There are many things which can be said about this vivid scene of Jesus walking on the water and the sheer terror of the disciples in the boat as they see Jesus but are not quite sure if it is him or that they are seeing a ghost. It is, of course, a straight forward story of faith, a lesson in keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. It is often used as a strengthening story to remind us of our faith in stormy times.

But although the boat was battered by the waves, and far from the land, for the wind was against them, by the time they see Jesus the night has passed and, we might imagine, so has the storm. It is the morning, the next day. It is then, when tired, longing for home, and feeling separated that they see Jesus coming towards them.

In the midst of the storm they are occupied with fighting the waves, but in the stillness afterwards it is in their exhaustion, their weariness, that they begin to doubt and fear and experience their anxieties. The trauma of their journey catches up with them and they think they are seeing a ghost.

I cannot allow this intense scene to pass without making connection with the trauma facing those who are at peril on the sea in our own day. In our final hymn, after communion, we shall sing the famous words of William Whiting, *O hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea*. As a naval hymn our prayers are naturally drawn to those serving in the armed forces, and also for all whose work takes them out to sea day by day, night by night; for those who fish, for container ships, for lifeguards and so many other professions as well as boats of leisure.

But this week, as in most weeks, our minds are drawn to those whose lives have been lost at sea when they were seeking a better future. Yesterday six more people died after a boat carrying migrants sank in the Channel. The number of deaths increases at such an alarming rate that it is difficult to count the lives. And often we choose not to register these lives; these lost lives are pushed out of our news because of their frequency, the political ramifications render us paralysed, and we so often fall short of any basic human compassion and concern.

It may sound trite to recall us immediately to the gospel scene set before us today, but when Jesus sees his brother drowning, fearful, afraid, and at risk, Jesus does not judge Peter's intentions or even his faith. At this point Jesus does what we are all called to do: Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him. It is then, when Peter is safe and held, that Jesus asks the question. Peter isn't being laughed at, humiliated, or made an example of. The gospel doesn't say that Jesus rebuked, or chided, or reprimanded. Jesus simply saves him: reaching out his hand, catching hold of Peter. Compassion. This is the way of Jesus and it must be our way too.

And then, when Peter is safe, Jesus then asks why did you hesitate? Our translation this morning has Jesus asking 'why did you doubt?' but the word is in fact, *hesitate*. 'Why did you hesitate?' Jesus asks. I suggested earlier that there were many obvious ways to think through this gospel passage – and looking at faith (or lack of it) is one of them.

But a closer reading suggests that the real message is not just about faith, but about compassion – our inability to trust the compassion of our Lord. Our hesitation, our questioning, our deliberation, our unwillingness to respond to Christ's love for us, our inability to respond with compassion to the storms which we encounter.

Peter is us and we are Peter. We hesitate, we falter, we question, we are fearful. And yet Christ still comes to us and rescues us, reaches out and pulls us through to safety and the nearness of his presence. Perhaps we ought to worry less about the level of our faith, and trust more simply in our response to Jesus' outstretched hand.

So I prepare myself to step out into a new role knowing that I am called to place my trust in Jesus who, as he did with Peter, so with me, and you, stretches out his hand to catch us when we fall. The gospel speaks of the importance of trusting Jesus. 'When Peter accepted the Lord's invitation to follow him across the waters he was taking a risk – it was a leap in the dark, a journey into the unknown. Likewise we have been invited by Christ to leave our relative security and follow him with conviction and courage through the storms and trials of life.'

Peter asks Jesus to call him; Jesus calls. Peter waivers and falters; Jesus shows compassion and catches him. When I look to the future I see much of Peter in myself: a stepping out which is a mix of doubt and excitement and trust.

We shall all be frustrated by falls and failures, and we are often weighed down by doubt and insecurity. But Jesus responds only with compassion and this is our call as Christians. Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus and placing our hand firmly in his, we can not only step out with confidence,

but we can begin to respond to life's storms with compassion. In faith there is no fear; hear the words of Jesus, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

Stephen Edwards  
*Vice-Dean*