

Sweet Chariot

2 Kings 2 (the whole chapter)

On the 12th June 2005, Steve Jobs, the inventor of the iMac, the iPhone, the iPad, stood to give the commencement address to students at Stanford University.

In it he said that his biggest motivator in life was the knowledge that one day he would die, and he wanted to live each day as his last...

He said these words

“No one wants to die,
Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there.
And yet death is the destination that we all share.
No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new.”

I don't know how you find those last few sentences?
Do you find them a bit raw, a bit too chipper and glib perhaps.

Imagine at a funeral, as the congregation were to grieve, the minister saying
“Death is very likely the single best invention of Life,
It is life's change agent,
It clears out the old to make way for the new.”

What would we all say if we heard these words?
Wouldn't we say
“Death is a terrible invention,
Yes it changes life, but the cost is too high
The pain is too much.”

Perhaps we might prefer the words of WH Auden, famously quoted in the Four Weddings and a Funeral
“He was my North, my South, My East, My West
My working week and Sunday rest
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song
I thought that love would last forever, I was wrong.”

What is very striking in this story of Elijah ascending to heaven
Is that he is one of a very very small group of people in the Old Testament who seem to evade death
(the others being Enoch and possibly Moses)

And yet despite the fact that death is cheated, the response from Elisha is much closer to WH Auden, and the despair of losing someone you loved.

The story in 2 Kings begins with us being told that Elijah is going to be taken up to heaven in a whirlwind.

And Elijah seems to know this, but he will not discuss this with Elisha, he wants Elisha to be away from him,

So instead of saying "Today is the day I am going to be taken up to heaven"

He tries to get Elisha to go away, and says to him

"Stay here, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel."

And Elisha says

"As the Lord lives, and as you live, I will not leave you."

So we have here two people,

And one of them is about to be taken away, and they both know this

But they don't talk about it

And one who is going to be taken says "Stay here, don't come with me"

And the other says "There is absolutely no way I am leaving you."

What I find fascinating is that Elijah is not going to die

But all the same dynamics

Not talking about this, even though they both know

One wanting to be left, the other refusing to leave.

All those things are what happen when it is known that someone is about to die.

You see it is not the death that is causing this as much as it is the departure.

I find it fascinating, that in this story,

even if you know that the person is going to another place,

The departure still brings the same emotions

As death.

My grandmother lived well into her eighties

When her time came, she was more than ready to go

She kept a flower by her bedside which was addressed to her husband, Alistair, my grandfather who had died twenty years previously,

On which were written the words "To my love Alistair, I look forward to seeing you soon"

My grandmother believed in heaven

She believed that her loved ones were going to heaven

We believed that she was going to heaven

And yet we still missed her,

And I was in tears at her funeral

Because she was gone,

And with her all the times that we shared were gone
And there were now going to be times that we weren't going to share together.

And I remember the minister reading the words of Henry Scott Holland, Canon of St Paul's Cathedral. These words were meant by Scott-Holland as the description of a particular kind of response to death, he was describing the views of other people, rather than his own, and yet they are often quoted out of context, and without Scott-Holland's critique of their sentiments.

At my grandmother's funeral they were read as if these were words which were meant to speak to us in our grief...

Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room. Nothing has happened. Everything remains exactly as it was. I am I, and you are you, and the old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged. Whatever we were to each other, that we are still. Call me by the old familiar name. Speak of me in the easy way which you always used. Put no difference into your tone. Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes that we enjoyed together.

The point is that death is something, - it does count,
The person has not slipped away into the next room,
Because if they were in the next room I would be able to go and see them
But because they have died I cannot,
And even at the funeral of grandmother, I resisted and resented these words
Annoyed at the insensitivity of the minister for choosing them.

So let us rejoin Elijah and Elisha as they travel to Bethel.
At Bethel they meet a group of prophets, fifty of them,
And all of them also seem to know that today is the day that Elijah is going to die.

They do not speak to Elijah directly
But instead go to Elisha
And say
"Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you"
And Elisha says
"Yes, I know, Keep silent"
Actually the word he says in Hebrew is literally "Hush"

So even though Elijah isn't going to actually die,
He is going to depart
And everyone is talking about this in groups, but not Elijah himself

And when they speak to Elisha, his closest follower, Elisha says "Hush"

Why, we are not told, but we can guess he wants the privacy of his own thoughts
Perhaps he contemplating just what it is going to be like without Elijah
Perhaps he realises that he is going to have to follow and who can be like Elijah,
He is feeling daunted.

Elijah and Elisha have travelled to Bethel
But they now they are going to walk even further
Elijah turns to Elisha and says
"Stay here, I am going to Jericho" which is near where they came from
It's another 25 kilometres, down hill
That is a lot of walking
But Elisha says the same again
"As the Lord lives, and as you live, I am not going to abandon you."

So they to Jericho
And the same thing happens
The prophets say to Elisha, "your master is going to go"
And Elisha says "Yes, I know, Hush"

And then Elijah makes a third attempt to be by himself
"Stay here, the Lord has sent me to the Jordan"
Once again Elisha says
"As the Lord lives, and as you live, I am not going to abandon you."

Can you hear the determination of friends and relatives to stay close
I wonder if Elijah was at last glad of some company

Together the two of them reach the Jordan river
Elijah puts down his mantle, strikes the river, it splits in two - just as it did when Israel
entered the promised land, and the two of them make it across.

At last Elijah says something different.
"What can I do for you Elisha?"
Elisha has an answer
"Let me inherit a double portion of your Spirit"
"That is a hard thing", replies Elijah
"But if you keep watching me whilst I am taken from you, it will be granted."

I find this so interesting as well.
Elisha doesn't ask for Elijah not to go,
He asks for a double portion of his spirit - as if he still wants Elijah near him

And also because he wants to be able to do the job that is going to await him when Elijah is gone.

Why does he ask for a double portion?

Maybe he hoped that by asking for double, he might get the same?

Maybe he was so worried about his own lack of ability, that he wanted a double portion to compensate?

Or maybe he just wanted as much of Elijah as he possible could.

And Elijah says this is hard, a hard thing to receive my Spirit double

Hard but not impossible,

But you have to watch as I go.

If you don't avoid facing the fact that I am going

If you literally turn your face towards it

Then yes, you will inherit.

So Elisha watches as the chariot of fire appear

Not just the chariot of fire, but also the horsemen of fire

And then Elijah is carried up

And as he watches,

Elisha cries out

"My Father, My Father" - what a thing to shout to Elijah who has had not children

"My Father, My Father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen"

And then when he could no longer see

He took a hold of his clothing and ripped them into pieces

Such was his grief

Even though Elijah has not died

He has departed

Even though there is a possibility that Elisha has inherited a double portion

Elisha still rips his clothes such is his grief

And if Steve Jobs had shown up saying "Death is probably the single best invention of life, death is life's change agent" he would have ripped Steve Jobs clothing in two

And if someone had shown up quoting Henry Scott-Holland

"Death is nothing at all, keep laughing, they have only gone into the next room"

He would have ripped their clothes apart as well.

The story goes on beyond the reading...

Elisha comes to the Jordan river,

And now the first big question

Will he indeed inherit a portion of Elijah's Spirit

This is the great test, so rolls up the mantle of Elijah which had fallen from him as he rose to heaven

And Elisha strikes the water, and it does indeed part
Exactly as it did for Elisha.

It seems that he has inherited Elijah's Spirit.

Then he reaches a band of prophets who were at Jericho
And they say to each other
"The Spirit of Elijah does indeed rest upon Elisha".

But now it is their turn to be in denial.

Perhaps Elijah is not dead, perhaps he has been thrown down from the chariot onto a mountain, or into a valley.

This does not show a lot of confidence in heaven's chariot riders, that they would just drop their most important passenger and carry on riding,

Elisha has been watching the departure,

He knows that Elijah has gone, he has for the moment accepted,

So he says "No, don't look"

But the prophets keep pressing him, pressing him, until the text tells us that Elisha felt shame.

Perhaps there was a feeling that he wasn't doing enough for his friend, his father, his mentor, maybe he should send out a search party.

So they choose 50 men who search for three days,

Find nothing

And when they come back saying "we found nothing"

Elijah says "I told you so, didn't I say to you, do not go"

So even though Elijah has not died

People are reacting in different ways

Some are trying to pretend it might not have happened

Trying still to bring about a rescue

Elisha has accepted, but goes along with what he doesn't want to do,

Just because he no longer has the strength to keep arguing with him

Or has an inner sense of shame that he ought to do more.

All these different reactions,

And different reactions from different people at different times.

Then they get to the city

And this is Jericho which was a cursed city,

It was never meant to be rebuilt after Joshua destroyed many many years ago
It is in a good location
But there is bad water here.
Which is causing death and it would appear miscarriage.

Elisha asks for a bowl of salt,
And he goes to a spring of water, and he throws the salt into the water
And he says
“As the Lord lives, so I have healed the water”
And sure enough he has
He has healed the water, he has undone the curse of the city
And there is no more death or miscarriage from the water.

And you might think that Elisha is over everything, he is recovered
Because now he has the Spirit of Elijah
And everyone can carry on
And he can carry on doing miracles
And it is almost as if Elijah hasn't left.
Now that Elisha is here.

And that is one of the most common misconceptions about grief that you get over it,
Or that a good day means that we are on the up
But that is not the way it happens.

Elisha is going up past Bethel
And some small boys come out to him.
They shout in Hebrew
“Go up Baldy, Go up Baldy”.

Now the word for Go up, is the same word for Elijah going up to heaven
Perhaps I am speculating too much
But perhaps that makes Elisha think of the departure of Elijah
Or maybe he has just had enough.

And he curses them boys in the name of the Lord
And two she bears come out of the forest and kill 42 two of the boys.

What do we make of that story, which is not often told in Sunday school.

Is it a cautionary tale?

I once heard Hospice Chaplain Tom Gordon, talk about this passage, and in it he saw the
Anger of grief, that Elisha is still angry

Even though he has double portion of Elijah's spirit
Even though Elijah's death has made way for Elisha
Even then he is still hurting
In ways that even he does not fully understand.

What is this story about?

This is a story that holds before us the Christian hope
Of a life to come
That God, who is the God of life, is able to defeat death, and keep a hold of us
And bring us to him.

In the Old Testament this was given to Elijah, Enoch and possibly Moses
In Jesus Christ, this is given to us all.

So this is a story about hope,
Of a living beyond our dying.
Of a God who is stronger than death.
Of Jesus who died and rose, so that we might all die and rise.

So it is a story about hope.

It is also a story about grief.
That we are not exempted from grief, even when we believe in a heaven
And that grief comes in strange ways
And at different times
And sometimes it makes us quiet, and other times we shout out,
And at other times we carry on as normal, and other times we lash out at those around us
So this is a story about grief.

And this is a story about change.
It says that death does indeed bring change
Change to Elisha, and there is a future for him.

And this was a story that African slaves knew
And they took themselves right into the heart of the story
"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, coming for to carry"
Not Elijah, but
"Coming for to carry ME home"

For them this was about the life that lay beyond death.
When they would go home to Christ and they would know freedom and liberation.

But there is a strong possibility that this was also a coded song,
And that the Chariot that was coming to take them home
Was the Slavery escape route known as the Underground Railroad.
It was song about hope for this life, as well last he next.

That there are many deaths, and many departures
And in Christ, beyond them all,
There is a hope of living
In the next world
And in this one.

So where would you like the chariot to come
Where is the home you would like to be taken to.

What is the departure that you have to face?
The leaving that you have to come to terms with?
And what is the task that you have now,
Because you have not been given Elijah's Spirit
But you have been given Christ's Spirit
And the Spirit has work for us to do.

AMEN