

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Mothers' Union Provincial Council
'Renewing our Image, Transforming our World'
12 December 2009

2 Kings 2:6-11 – Elisha inherits Elijah's ministry, and a double portion of his spirit.
Ps 80:1-3, 14-19
Matt 17:9-13 – Elijah 'must come first'

May I speak in the name of God, ...

Dear Members of the Mothers' Union Provincial Council, dear sisters (and brothers!) in Christ – thank you again for the invitation to be with you today.

I want to reflect on your theme of 'Renewing our Image, Transforming our World' by setting it alongside the Eucharist readings which our lectionary gives us for today.

These tell us part of the story of Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament, and then in the new we find Jesus identifying John the Baptist as the 'Elijah' who must come to prepare the way of the Messiah.

Our first reading gives us a brief snapshot of the end of Elijah's ministry, and the beginning of Elisha's.

We first come across Elisha in chapter 19 of the First Book of Kings, where God tells Elijah he must anoint him as prophet in his place.

Elijah finds Elisha ploughing. Twelve pair of oxen are ploughing a field, and Elijah is at the back of them all, directing the final pair. Elijah comes by and throws his mantle over Elisha's shoulder, and walks on.

But Elisha understands the meaning of this strange gesture, and runs after him, saying 'Let me kiss my father and mother, and then I will follow you.'

Elijah, who has a reputation as a bit of a grumpy chap says 'Go back again, for what have I done to you?'

But Elisha is not put off, and he slaughters the oxen, cooks them over the ploughing yoke, feeds the people, and then follows Elijah as his servant.

We never do hear whether Elijah actually does anoint him, as God instructed!

And now, in today's passage, they come to the river Jordan. The wider company of prophets have told Elisha twice that the Lord is going to take Elijah that day. 'Yes, I know – keep silent' says the Bible. I suspect that what Elisha actually said was something closer to 'Yes, I know – now shut up.'

Anyway, the two of them come to the river, and Elijah, taking his mantle strikes the water, and it parts and they cross over.

The time for parting has come.

Elijah asks Elisha what he might do for him.

Elisha is more than daunted at the prospect of becoming Elijah's successor, so he asks for a double helping of the spirit that is in his master.

Elijah says that if he sees him being taken up into heaven, he will know that he has received his request.

And if we were to have read on further just now, we would have heard how Elisha did indeed watch Elijah being carried up by a chariot and horses of fire.

And we would have heard how he picks up Elijah's mantle from the ground, returns to the banks of the Jordan, and – taking a very deep breath, I am sure – strikes the water, crying 'Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?'

And the answer comes that the Lord is indeed with him also, the God now of Elisha in his turn.

For the water parts for him also, and he walks back across the river bed.

This is a story of continuity and change.

For the God who, in Christ, is the same yesterday, today and for ever (Heb 13:8), is also the One who makes everything new (Rev 21:5).

And I am sure that as you have been looking at issues of renewal and transformation, these twin themes have been running through them.

Sometimes we might be tempted to see them as in opposition, contradictory, even.

It might appear as if the choice is between staying the same and becoming different – and that to compromise is to have some unsatisfactory hodge-podge that is neither one thing nor the other.

But the story of Elijah and Elisha suggests something else.

The same God is with us – and yet each of us is unique, and, whether individually or together, our circumstances are unique, with the rolling forward of time.

And even so, Elisha takes up the mantle of his predecessor, to guide him as he takes his first steps forward into his own particular ministry and calling.

Transformation and renewal reflect this.

We should have confidence in the God who calls us.

We should have confidence in building on the foundations of those who have gone before, who built according to God's guiding, God's leading, God's empowering and equipping – according to the Spirit of God within them.

We should also have confidence that God is with us too, as the mantle is passed to us in our turn – or, if you prefer a sporting metaphor, as the baton passes to us in the relay race of life!

And, more than this, we should also have confidence to go forward in new directions, new ways, into the newness of life of changing and unfolding circumstances, into the newness of life that Jesus promises to bring us.

So my prayer is that in this meeting you will find yourselves identifying Elisha, called to take the next steps, to go forward into the future that God has prepared for you.

Or perhaps you would rather engage with the gospel reading.

The short passage we heard read comes at the end of the account of the Transfiguration – when Jesus, accompanied by Peter, James and John, went up the mountain, and Jesus became transfigured with brightness and light, and spoke with Moses and Elijah – signifying his promise of fulfilment to all of the Law and the Prophets.

The disciples would have been well aware of the verses in the book of the prophet Malachi where the Lord says

‘I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse’ (Mal 4:5,6).

And because Elijah had been taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire, rather than having died and been buried, the religious teachers of the day believed that Elijah would somehow return in a similar way, and be seen by all, to restore right relationships among humanity, turning hearts and minds to live according to God’s will.

Jesus tells his disciples that in fact it is John the Baptist whom they should see as Elijah – who came to call people to repentance – to turn their lives around and live according to God’s will.

Of course, last Sunday was the Second Sunday in Advent, when we particularly remembered John the Baptist.

He did not himself claim to be Elijah, but rather quoted words from the prophet Isaiah, about the voice who cries out in the wilderness, calling us to prepare the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight, and the rough ways smooth (Lk 3:4-6).

He preached ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’ (Mt 3:2).

We remember John as the one who points others to Jesus, telling his own disciples ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God’ (Jn 1:36).

And he also said ‘I baptize you with water, but ... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire’ and he said he was not worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals (Lk 3:16).

I suppose you might say that John takes over where Elijah left off, just as Elisha took over where Elijah left off.

And just as you can reflect on your calling from the perspective of Elisha, perhaps you might also do so from the perspective of John the Baptist.

So, for example, you might ask how it is that the Mothers' Union can best point others to Jesus.

Where in the circumstances which you face, are the ways crooked, and the paths rough? What are the obstacles that make it difficult for people to come to Jesus; or for Jesus, through his church, to reach out to them?

Where in our own lives do we need to repent?

And where do we recognise the kingdom of heaven drawing near?

[Perhaps you might like to add in some concrete suggestions / concerns?]

Let me end with that refrain from our Psalm:

'Restore us again, O Lord of Hosts: show us the light of your countenance and we shall be saved.'

Restoration and renewal are the God's desire and delight. We can seek his transforming, transfiguring, Spirit to come upon us, with confidence – not the uncertainty that Elisha faced over Elijah's spirit.

For our confidence comes from seeking the Lord, seeking his countenance – in other words his face – by which the Psalmist means, seeking to see him as he truly is, head-on.

And when we see him head-on, we will surely be saved, we will surely know what his salvation is all about.

It is a reminder that though we must point others to Jesus, as John the Baptist did – first and foremost we must point ourselves to Jesus, and make him the focus of our lives.

Let us hold this thought in our hearts and minds, as we come close to his table in a moment, responding to his invitation, to eat and drink of him.

Let us come, opening our lives to him afresh, and asking him, the Alpha and Omega, to feed us, so we may lead renewed and transformed lives, for the renewing and transforming of his world.

Amen