

Over the last few weeks, you have been listening to accounts of the life and ministry of Elijah.

Today the story moves on and we encounter a time of transition. Elijah's ministry is drawing to a close. Those who have been following him are aware that he is to be taken away from them.

This is particularly true of Elisha who had been especially close to Elijah since an event recorded in the first book of Kings.

Elijah had encountered Elisha while he was tilling the ground with a team of oxen. As Elijah walked past him, he threw his mantle around Elisha who interpreted this as a call to ministry

and straightaway left his home and family to follow Elijah and became his servant. Interestingly we then hear no more about Elisha until the second book of Kings, part of which was this morning's first reading.

As Elijah moves towards the moment of departing, Elisha walks with him each step of the way. Despite Elijah's attempts to send him back, he sticks to his master's side. On arrival at the edge of the river Jordan, Elijah takes his mantle,

Rolls it up and strikes the water which parts allowing the two men to cross to the other side on dry land, leaving the group of prophets behind.

This secluded spot is the setting for the empowering and commissioning of Elisha as his master's successor.

As they continue walking and talking Elisha sees a chariot of fire with fiery horses and Elijah is caught up into heaven in a whirlwind.

It is the end of an era, but it heralds something very important, the start of the process to a new beginning. Having expressed his grief Elisha notices Elijah's mantle lying on the ground. Here is a moment of decision, does he pick it up or let it lie where it has fallen.

Elisha had felt called to ministry since that moment in the fields when that mantle was first put round his shoulders. Not only does he pick it up. But he does what Elijah did and rolls it up and strikes the water of the Jordan and lo and behold the waters part and he passes back from the secluded place to the other side to re-join the others.

So, Elisha begins his ministry following in his mentor's footsteps.

Last Sunday I was in Dorchester Abbey for the ordination of 8 people to the priesthood. I had been invited by one of the candidates who I know well to go forward and join the Bishop and fellow priest in the laying on of hands.

It was a defining moment as we prayed for the Holy Spirit to come upon the candidate, as it had come upon us at our ordinations. Here is a powerfully embodied the continuity of handing on the mantle from one generation of priests to another.

Before this happens, The Bishop said to those who were to be ordained "we bid you remember the greatness of the trust that is now being committed to your charge. Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure now to be entrusted to you is Christ's own flock."

The Bishop of Dorchester went on to say

"...you cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength but only by the grace and power of God"

Bishop Steven at the recent Diocesan Clergy Conference gave three excellent expositions on passages in St Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. (If you're interested you can listen to

these on the Diocesan web site) One of the talks was based on 2 Corinthians chapter 4 v 1-18, let me read you a short extract, "Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart...For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come us."

We have the good news of Christ's saving grace, "this treasure", in clay vessels. Not silver or gold containers, but clay. The earthen ware pots, which ordinary people use.

But in them, and us is a treasure beyond price. It is a treasure, which is to be handed on to others as it was shared with us.

We are, by virtue of our baptism all called to ministry. The mantle is put on when the water is poured over our heads in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Along our Christian journey, we, like Elisha, have those who we come into contact with and from whom we learn. But however good our teacher we can't fulfil our calling alone, which is why we have the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us.

And there is one more very important thing which is required of us, to be faithful to our vocation whatever the circumstances. Once we have started on the journey as Christ's disciples, we are not to look back but be faithful to the task entrusted to us.

The words of Teresa of Avila remind us

"Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours,
no feet but yours,
yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the earth,
yours are the feet by which He is to go about doing good
and yours are the hands by which He is to bless us now."

The treasure of the Gospel is ours and we possess it in the poor clay, often cracked pots that we are. As this treasure was passed down to us, our calling is to pass it on to others to the glory of God and the furtherance of His Kingdom.