

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The prophet Elijah, who we read about in that Old Testament reading we just heard, a rather mysterious account at the end of his life. And that's entirely in keeping, that mystery, with the rest of the story. He goes out of the world just as he lived in the world.

And it would be very easy to dismiss this rather enigmatic passage, which I want to speak about today, as some kind of ancient fable with no particular relevance for today. But much of the significance of the Old Testament, even passages like this which might not strike us as completely, immediately relevant, is that they provide the images, the metaphors, and the vocabulary which are developed in the New Testament and in the Christian tradition.

And that's definitely true of this Old Testament passage that we hear today. And what I want to do is to look at that story of the end of the Elijah's life and see how it speaks to the passage from Galatians, from our epistle, to see how the languages and the images are developed.

And there's an image in the Elijah story that's understood, not just in the New Testament and in the Christian tradition, but actually everybody knows what it is to pass on the mantle, that's a phrase that's entered widely into our culture. And the mantle in this story here is a shawl, it's something worn by Elijah. And we see how Elijah took his mantle off, struck the water, and the water of the Jordan parted so that Elijah and his protégé, Elisha, were able to cross on dry land.

The mantle of Elijah was proof that he'd been anointed by the Spirit of God. It was an outward sign of that inward reality. And if I could just take a diversion here, our regulars will know that we had a congregational meeting a couple of weeks ago where we talked about our organ, which many of you know is not working at the moment because it's reached the end of its life.

And at the meeting I raised the question of what we might do to celebrate and mark the centenary of our church building, which is some way off in 2029, but it's starting to appear on our horizon. What are we going to leave those who will be worshiping in this building for the next 100 years? And that's an important question,

one that Episcopalians should be good at answering because we recognize the importance of continuity.

Church life is not a sprint, it's a relay race. We know the importance of passing things on, of handing on the mantle. We're rarely accused, as Episcopalians, of being particularly innovative or enthralled to the newly fangled. We value faithfulness, commitment, tradition. And pipe organs are a key part of that Episcopal identity and the musical tradition of which we're a part. Which is why I'm committed to seeing a new instrument installed here at St. James and making sure our facilities are appropriate for the next 100 years.

But what we have to hand on isn't limited to our building or our musical tradition, or even a certain way of worshiping. At the heart of what we seek to pass on is a message. We have a Gospel to proclaim, we have good news to share. And I'm hoping that over the course of the next year or so, we might find ways to build our confidence in telling our stories of faith. We need to feel able to share with others something of our spiritual experience.

I have people contacting me several times a day at the moment to try and get me to buy certain bits of medical equipment. So why are we so shy about telling people what we know of God? And if I can embarrass Martin Imhof for a moment, we had a great afternoon yesterday here, when we baptized someone who Martin knows from the swimming pool, and he goes swimming with him every day. But somehow they must have formed ... well, they did form a friendship. And it was a friendship in which they could speak of spiritual things. And it was an absolute pleasure for Martin to bring his friend here, and who we baptized yesterday afternoon. Something that just developed out of a friendship at a swimming pool.

And I've a couple of other comments I'd like to make about Elijah's mantle. Elijah's mantle fell to the ground and Elisha needed to pick it up. He could presumably simply have stepped over the mantle as it fell to the ground. But he didn't. He recognized it was his time to pick up the mantle.

And as I mentioned earlier, Elijah's mantle was proof that he'd been anointed by the Spirit of God. It was an outward sign of a spiritual reality. And in the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is given to characters like Elijah at particular times, at particular places. Which is

why when Elisha said to Elijah, "Let me inherit a double share of your spirit," Elijah said, "That's a hard thing." No one knew when the Spirit would come to certain people at certain times.

But the understanding of the Spirit is developed in the New Testament, as we can see in that reading from Galatians. And there's a refrain in that passage, "Be led by the Spirit," Paul's writing after Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on all God's people. No longer was the gift of the Spirit restricted to particular people at particular times, to perform particular tasks, as it had been in the Old Testament. This was a new age, this was the promise fulfilled of the outpouring of God's Spirit to all God's people, so that we can all, as Paul says, live by the Spirit.

At baptism, the priest says to the one newly baptized, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism." Baptism, like Elijah's mantle, is an outward sign of the inner reality of new birth in the Spirit of God. It's through the Spirit of God that we're born again into new life. And we can, of course, choose to ignore that wonderful gift. But Paul would say, "Pick it up. Nurture your spiritual life. Look to grow in faith. Live and grow in the Spirit. Live by the Spirit," he says, "be guided by the Spirit." That's the wonderful invitation God extends to all his people. That's our inheritance, each of us is sealed by the Holy Spirit. We might not always feel that that's the case, but it's true.

I'm going back to the Elisha story. Elisha wasn't sure he'd received the same Spirit as Elijah. He wasn't sure until he took Elijah's mantle that he'd picked up, and himself struck the water. And when the water parted, that's when he knew he'd received the same Spirit.

How do we know that we've really got the Spirit of God living within us? And the answer is in Paul's letter to the Galatians. We're known by our fruit, the presence of the Spirit is shown in the spiritual fruits of the believer that he lists. And notice how Paul contrasts the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. He doesn't talk about the work of the Spirit. Because fruit grows naturally.

A tree doesn't work at bearing fruit, it's just what happens. It's the natural process. You don't go into an orchard and hear the trees groaning as they look to force out and produce fruit. It just happens. So, the believer, living by the Spirit, bears the fruit of love, joy,

peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And I want to end with a coda. The lectionary, you might know, goes on a three-year cycle. So, when I went back to my notes from three years ago, I discovered that the readings set for today were the readings I preached from the Sunday after the fire at the rectory which claimed the life of my mother-in-law. So, it was interesting to go back and see what I was thinking about then.

Which led me to make two short observations. And the first, that it's true what someone once told me about pain and tragedy. That we can get over it, but it never goes away. It's like an old airfield with a concrete runway which becomes abandoned. And it might get to the point where the weeds grows through the runway and you can look from a distance and it just looks like a green field, but the runway's always there. It never goes away. It's there underneath.

And I mentioned three years ago how much Laura and I felt blessed by the love and the kindness we received from this congregation. Looking back, I realized that we had only been here a few months. It was a rather dramatic introduction to life at St. James. But at that time of great sadness, we really felt supported and blessed by the love and the kindness and the gentleness of this congregation.

And I think that's carried on since, we still feel blessed to be here, to be surrounded by so much love and kindness. And may we be a congregation that picks up the mantle of faith and where the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are to be found. Amen.