

A SECOND HELPING

Evensong - 17 August 2008

Rather than follow Paul through the Mountains of Turkey, I thought this evening we might spend some time with Elisha - we had a splendid episode read to us in our first Lesson. (- 2 Kings 4.)

Elisha was the apprentice and successor of Elijah. He too ministered in Israel, the Northern Kingdom. During Elisha's life, Ben-Hadad and then Hazael ruled Syria, building a powerful Aramean empire. The Bible narratives however, focus on Elisha and only secondarily on the political and military situation. Stories of Elisha and his miracles have been the source of thousands of sermons as well as stories for boys and girls. So I shall add another!

When Elijah was taken up into heaven alive, Elisha begged to “inherit **a double portion of Elijah's spirit**” (2 Kings 2:9). The request reflects Old Testament inheritance law: the oldest son and successor of his father was given a double portion. Elisha was asking to succeed Elijah as leading prophet in the land. So it isn't surprising that the Bible also reports twice as many miracles of Elisha as Elijah (14 compared to 7). They are: (for the inky swots out there I list them to prove that I have done the homework. In the sermon I mentioned only a couple.)

- (1) separating the Jordan waters, 2:14;
- (2) healing spring waters, 2:21;
- (3) cursing jeering young men, 2:24; (
- 4) filling ditches with water and winning a battle, 3:15–26;
- (5) multiplying a widow's oil, 4:1–7;
- (6) promising a pregnancy, 4:14–17;
- (7) raising a Shunammite's son from the dead, 4:32–37;
- (8) making poison harmless, 4:38–41;
- (9) multiplying loaves, 4:42–44;
- (10) healing Naaman the leper, 5:1–19; cursing Gehazi with leprosy, 5:19–27;
- (11) making an axehead float, 6:1–6;
- (12) blinding and trapping an Aramean army, 6:8–23;
- (13) showing his servant an angel army, 6:15–17;

(14) and predicting an excess of food for besieged Samaria, 6:24–7:20.

The miracles in chapter 4 are significant in several respects. First, they show the Old Testament prophet engaged not just in affairs of state but also in the lives of ordinary people. God is not just concerned with kings. God is concerned about the daily needs of everyone. And second, these miracles seem to prefigure some of the miracles of Jesus. Elisha raised the Shunammite's son from the dead, and multiplied loaves to feed a hundred. These clearly foreshadow Christ's raising of the dead and feeding of thousands.

Third, each of these miracles was intended to enrich and save lives, just as every one of Jesus' miracles was performed to demonstrate the love of God rather than His justice or wrath.

But we shall not cover the whole of Chapter 4 this evening you may be relieved to hear.

I want to focus on the raising of the boy, the Shunammite's son. A well-to-do woman, who lived in Shunem, welcomed Elisha whenever he passed by. He was known to be a man who had influence with the king. He was a man to know. She went so far as to having a room built for his exclusive use. A room separated from the main part of the house makes an ideal place of rest for visitors, or for what was then called "the master of the house." Eglon, King of Moab, was in a room of this type in his summer palace when he was assassinated by Ehud (Judges 3:20). And the room was a place of rest from the heat, with the latticed windows arranged so as to keep the room as cool and comfortable as possible. It was in just such an 'aliyah' where Daniel lived and prayed three times daily to the one true God. Based upon the room built for Elisha, it has been the custom for many years in some Christian churches that a room should be set aside in the pastor's home or in the home of one or more members of the congregation for the exclusive use of visiting Bible teachers and evangelists or other church dignitaries. The room is customarily designated "the prophet's room."

No planning permission required of course. And if you go round the middle East today, you see many houses which have flat roofs with the necessary steel rods protruding, ready to build rooms upstairs on the roof reached by an external stair, when the money allows.

The guest room set up on the roof by the husband upon his wife's request

shows wealth and generosity: it is equipped with luxurious furniture (v. 10). Wishing to show his host appreciation, Elisha offers support from the highest offices in the state - and this alone tells us that he is a very influential man. The woman proudly refuses this, referring to her own equally influential clan. She seemed to want for nothing. But through the kitchen gossip of his servant, the prophet discovered her one real, heart-felt need: the woman had no children, and her husband was old. How often this situation is recorded in the scriptures. The siring of sons was a religious duty for the man. And the shame felt by a childless woman is something that is hard to appreciate these days. But the role of the woman in that world was primarily to bear children for her husband. Failure to conceive was a sign of failure as a person. And often it was the cause of great suffering and pain. Elisha promised her that she would have a child - and she did. Initially, the woman hardly dared to take Elisha at his word. She is not dismissive or disrespectful - just afraid of possible failure. We all know how awful is it to have raised expectations and then to see them dashed. Although the announced birth takes place promptly and punctually (v. 17), the child is snatched away at a tender age, by sunstroke, it seems (vv. 18–20). He becomes sick in the morning and dies at midday (v. 20).

The desperate mother immediately knows that only Elisha can help her now. She carries the child's dead body to Elisha's room and locks it in there, as if to stop the spirit from going too far from the body. A dramatic race against time begins, despite the fact that the child has already died. There is great faith here. The woman clearly believes that Elisha can bring good out of all this, and the only good that she would accept would be the return of her only son. "I must see the prophet" she says. "But it isn't a new moon or anything." The husband's rather curt retort reminds the reader that one usually only sought out prophets on holy days. Nevertheless, the mother swiftly rides for about 20km. to the nearby Mount Carmel and finds Elisha there. She won't let a mere servant delay her. She barges in to Elisha's presence and pours out her heart. Elisha had made Gehazi his deputy. "Lay the staff on the boy. That will do it." Nor is she satisfied with the prophet's suggestion that a servant should rush to Shunem with the prophet's staff. To lay the rod, a symbol of God's power, upon the child's head was to arrest the oncoming death. Elisha clearly believed the child was not dead. The distraught mother caught him by the feet. Her anguish could no longer be held in. The boy is dead. Elisha must come back

with her. Nothing else will do. She hopes for nothing less than an awakening of the dead and seems to realize that the prophet must be personally present for this.

Elisha is not the first great man to be pressurized into changing his plans. He travels back with her. First of all he prays (v. 33): probably a concession to the piety of a later time. Then he undertakes an apparently magical task in two steps (vv. 34–5): by laying his entire body exactly next to the corpse he transfers his own life-energy to the child. Initially the boy's warmed body, then a hefty sneeze, show a return to life. The story finishes abruptly (vv. 36–7): Elisha places the child in his mother's arms for the second time. All over in a day, as the drama ends on the same day as it had begun.

As with other miracles, natural explanations for this phenomenon, such as mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, are really not necessary. Something metaphysical has happened, something wonderful was achieved through the miracle-working power of a prophet of Almighty God and the decisive action and faith of a mother.

This woman may have been married to money – but as a woman she was much more pushy than one would have expected in those days. And the result of her initiative and her faith led to a marvelous gift from God. This reminded me of occasions in Jesus' life when women rather pushed in: the woman, possibly Mary Magdalene, pushed into a men-only supper in the house of Simon the Pharisee, and washed Jesus' feet. And what did Jesus say: 'Your faith has saved you'. Or, when he was on the way to raise a dead girl, a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed." Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment.

And I could go on. Women, second class citizens, had faith and their faith was rewarded. Jesus worked on the fringes, where the powerless could normally expect a raw deal. Jesus gave them the grace of God as a free gift. Jesus told us that all we need is a very little faith, which God will use and turn into prayers which are answered. If we can really take that on board we should then

prepare to be confronted with the amazing goodness of God.