

# Queering the Mantle

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 26 June 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 3C

2 Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14; Luke 9: 51-62

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

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The stories of the great biblical prophets are certainly extraordinary, not least those of Elijah and Elisha. As Penny said last week, in some ways such biblical narratives are really top cartoon action stuff. That is certainly true of our story from the Hebrew Scriptures today. This contains powerful features which have had enduring value in faith communities, and elements which have been overlooked. There has also always been a good deal of tidying up, and ignoring, of some aspects of the narratives. For one thing we can assuredly say about the prophets is that they are not comfortable figures.

We see this too in the story of Jesus which we will come to later. After all, as we have just sung, in John Bell's words, Jesus is a *'provocative preacher'*, an *'itinerant teacher'*, and an *'outsider's friend'*. Be clear about that if you want to follow Jesus – all things may be up for grabs and turned upside down. To put it another way, your life and world may be profoundly queered...

Let's focus for the moment on Elijah and Elisha. Much traditional interpretation of their shared story centres on well-rehearsed features of the passing on of ministry from Elijah to Elisha. Two aspects are particularly prominent in dominant Christian reflection. Firstly, as in other places in the wider Elijah-Elisha narratives, we are witness to the centrality of God, displayed in awesome, indeed supernatural power. For Elijah is taken up into heaven spectacularly: in a chariot of fire, with horses of fire, and in a whirlwind.

In this, I suspect, there is a first great challenge to many of us in Pitt Street Uniting Church, prone as we can perhaps be to reducing the realm of the mystical, the miraculous and the magical. Are we open to the possibilities of God beyond everyday experience and one dimensional naturalistic causal relationships? In picking up Elijah's mantle, Elisha also shares in divine miraculous powers, as he parts the waters, like Moses before him. Like Elisha's request for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, it is a striking reminder of how God, and not human power or ingenuity, is the ultimate mover and shaker of spiritual transformation. The story thus challenges us to ask: what are we expecting of God?

Secondly, traditional reflections develop the second central theme of spiritual succession within the story, symbolised in the passing of Elijah's mantle to Elisha. Depending on particular Christian faith traditions, much has therefore been said about such vital concerns as the sharing and passing on of ministry; about mentoring and discipleship; about the intimate relationship of spiritual guide and pupil; and about spiritual roles and offices, not least prophecy and priesthood.

Again, the story may thus prompt us, in this faith community, to ask questions. How, for example, are we going in nurturing and sharing spiritual gifts, and how are spiritual roles and offices being passed on?

Significantly, much less has been said about the dark and violent aspects of the Elijah and Elisha narratives. Elijah, in particular, is frequently exalted as a great biblical hero, without much qualification. With Elisha, he is also sometimes offered as a model of ministry and mission, as if times and mores were unchanged. Even such things as ordinations are occasionally seen in the framework of this Elijah-Elisha story.

Church traditions have indeed typically emphasised Elijah as a particularly mighty man of God: confronting unjust and murderous powers; offering mercy and restoring life to a non-Israelite widow and her son; being faithful to God despite great danger; and even having the ability to discern God's voice in silence and stillness, not only in sound and power.

Elijah thus becomes Moses reborn, a model for John the Baptist and Jesus, and a great hope for justice, restoration, and, as in the African-American spirituals, release from slavery into freedom. On all of these aspects we may rightly draw. Yet Elijah, and Elisha too in following him, is also a man of great violence. As Amy Merrill Willis has put it (in her online essay '*The Politics of Elijah: Struggling with Elijah's Legacy*'),<sup>i</sup> Elijah may be a '*hero of the covenant*', but:

*If we are honest about our own (Faith) family history, we might concede that in the hands of the writers of 1-2 Kings, Elijah and Elisha sometimes act and speak as culture warriors.*

The Elijah-Elisha narratives are therefore a mix of very ambiguous, including some quite disturbing elements. If we are to appreciate them properly, we need to have honesty. Just as we must not practice amnesia about our own personal, communal, and national contributions to violence and distress, so we must recognise the shadow sides to our faith traditions. Unless we do so, we cannot fully receive the healing gifts of the Spirit, and we may ourselves be consumed by destructive fires of our own.

In life-giving ways, applying queer eyes to scripture has been part of finding fresh hope and healing in scripture with greater honesty. Rather than merely following traditional interpretations, and essentially just linking Elisha with Elijah in succession, the US scholar Rhiannon Graybill is, for example, one interpreter who offers us fresh insight.<sup>ii</sup>

Moving beyond the well-rehearsed themes, she is among those who have brought contemporary critical and cultural theory into study of the biblical texts. As in Rhiannon's own work on issues such as rape, sexual violence, and masculinity, this allows a necessary wrestling with the violence in the biblical narratives. It also enables fresh light to be shed on hidden aspects of figures such as Elisha.<sup>iii</sup>

Rather than continuity with Elijah, Graybill has highlighted how Elisha is a quite different figure, especially when viewed through the interpretative lens of the body. For conventional interpretations tend to assume that both the work of biblical prophecy and the bodies of those who carry them out are typically always similar. Instead, whilst almost all the biblical prophets are male, the reality is that their masculinities are quite different, and, as prophets, as in the case of Elisha, they can indeed be quite queer. I won't tire us now with all the ins and outs, but note the radical difference between the powerful body of the very macho Elijah, and the seemingly weak and deficient body of Elisha.

Perhaps the strongest expression is found in the later story where Elisha curses some boys in the name of Yahweh. Two female bears then emerge from out of the woods and tear forty-two of the children to pieces.

Leaving this aside for a moment as another act of violence, the point is that the provocation was the boys' mockery of Elisha as a bald man. For, as we see elsewhere in the Bible, whilst baldness is a property of many men, hairiness is typically to be more valued.

This brings us back to the mantle of Elijah, who was said to be a very hairy man. In putting on Elijah's mantle, although he was bald and in other ways a comparably 'deficient' man, Elisha was assuming Elijah's power and position. Still more, he was literally wrapping himself in the very touch and traces of Elijah's own body, including perhaps some of his hair.

Now, in Christian tradition, touch has certainly been an important feature of the communication of ministry down the ages: think, for example, of laying on of hands and anointing with oil at ordinations. Yet this has been somewhat sanitised from the Elijah-Elisha sharing of call, which appears as so much more physical, and even tinged with the erotic.

In Elisha, we also see how queer God's Spirit is in prophetic action. For whilst Elijah's powerful body and miraculous actions are one model for divine life, in Elisha we have another. God it seems, does indeed move in various, as well as mysterious, ways. Whereas Elijah waves his powerful staff and things just happen, the more impotent Elisha constantly needs assistance.

Even when he inflicts violence, he does not do so directly but through the agency of others, even female animals. Moreover, Elisha's healings are not, like Elijah's, worked from a patriarchal distance. As with his healing of the Shunnamite's son, they not only involve touch, but typically intimate, close touch: the kind of touch that is resonant with mothers and other women, or men who do not fit the masculine stereotype.

Seeing with queer eyes thus opens up fresh vistas on the biblical texts. In the case of today's story, looking again, we can see that Elisha's body offers new ways of thinking about gender (especially masculinity), about embodiment, prophecy and vocation. We see how God can use all kinds of bodies, how bodies and touch are intimately involved, and how ambiguity is tied up in the work of God's prophets, in their bodies and in their actions.

In this light, Elisha is perhaps nearer to us than we might immediately think. He is so very human as a divine follower: in his intermittent weakness and power, in his violence and his healing, and in his overwhelming desire to be like Elijah yet with his real gifts coming when he is most himself. There is spiritual strength and there is also shadow, like the biblical books of Kings as a whole and their response to God and their treatment of Canaanite culture. Elisha may not be a perfect model for us, but he helps queer any straightforward idea of calling and taking up Elijah's mantle.

The real queering of the mantle comes however with Jesus. Let me therefore conclude by touching briefly on our Gospel text today. Note well key features in comparison to the Elijah-Elisha narrative:

- It opens in Samaria, where Elijah and Elisha had struggled against the kings of Israel. Knowing their stories, the disciples therefore assume that when some reject his message, Jesus will act like Elijah and call down fire from heaven.

- Jesus is absolutely clear: this is not the way of God in Christ.
- Nor do female bears rip apart children.
- No one could deny that he was a prophet, but, so much beyond even the ambiguities of Elisha, Jesus shows us a very different kind of masculinity, and even more embodied forms of healing and hope.
- Like Elijah with Elisha, Jesus also has those around him who would follow in his place, share his own spirit, and take up his mantle.
- Unlike the story of Elijah and Elisha however, the mantle of Jesus is also very different.
- It will also be stained in blood, but not the blood of others.
- Following is not an act of repetition, but involves stepping into the unknown.

True strength for Jesus is not in supernatural acts of power, nor even in a mantle, however queer, but in his Body, freely given, suffering and resurrected.

May those who have ears hear.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-elijah-struggling-with-elijahs-legacy-2kings-2-1-2-6-14/#\\_ftn2](https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-elijah-struggling-with-elijahs-legacy-2kings-2-1-2-6-14/#_ftn2)

<sup>ii</sup> See for example her book *Are We Not Men? Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Prophets* (Oxford, 2016).

<sup>iii</sup> Graybill, R 'Elisha's Body and the Queer Touch of Prophecy' in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (2019) vol.49. no.1 pp.32-40 at <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/btba>