

Bennoch church: 26th June 2016

Do you believe it? A man is taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Do you believe that actually happened? These kind of passages, particularly from the Old Testament, challenge how we understand the bible. Are these events to be literally understood, or are they stories with meaning. The very fact that the miracle is foretold suggests that it is not the most important part of the story. For the reader the element of surprise had been removed.

In the ancient near east we are literally in a another world, where story, was more important than recorded history. The writer is here making a statement about who Elijah is, not as an individual, but his place in the bigger picture, of the history of Israel and the work of God. More of that in a moment.

Think about the people recorded in scripture who not die a 'natural' death. Here is a clue. Who did Jesus meet on the Mount of transfiguration? He met Elijah, taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot and he met Moses, who we are told in the book of Deuteronomy was 'buried by the Lord'. Whatever that means, it opens up the theological possibility of their return, at a later date. This is a unique gathering, 'fiery chariots', 'buried by the lord' and, the soon to be 'resurrected' Jesus. So it is no coincidence that we find Elijah and Moses with Jesus. If Moses was given the law by God at Mount Sinai, Jesus is understood as the one who brings God's new law. He is the new Moses. And

Elijah, precisely because he had not died, was understood by some as the forerunner to the coming Messiah.

⁵ *"But before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes, I will send you the prophet Elijah.* ⁶ *He will bring fathers and children together again; otherwise I would have to come and destroy your country."* (Malachi 4: 5-6) The very last recorded words of the Old Testament

In Jesus day, the debate raged, was John the Baptist, the last of the great prophets, or even Jesus himself, Elijah returned. So on the mount of transfiguration stood the law and the prophets, old and new, brought together in Jesus Christ. There is a theological thread that runs between these two stories of Elijah.

We don't need to understand this ancient theology, but we need to recognise that it is all somehow interconnected. There is purpose and meaning here. To make this all possible, these men who represented the ancient law of God and the prophets of old, had to leave the earth in such a way that made it possible, for them to return. To the writers of ancient scripture this all made perfect sense!

So Elijah is taken up in a chariot of fire. The writers of scripture are saying to us, if we want to understand the work of God, we need to see these stories in their wider context. They are not just that moment in time, they resonate which create theological waves that ripple down though the centuries and

reappear, linked with another ancient story of faith. That is how they understood the 'history' of God to work. It is a theological history. And it is the only way it makes any sense. These ancient stories are the mobile phones of their day. If we record in picture and video, they recorded in story. So we don't need to take the story literally, to grasp something of what the writer is trying to say. Indeed to do so, we might actually miss the point!

One of the key aspects of this story is the journey of Elijah and Elisha. What is described is like a grand tour of some of the areas religious centres; Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho and the River Jordan. One commentator said this, it is as if they are retracing some of Israel's early steps, finishing off with a re-enactment of the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land. And Elisha the apprentice, will not leave the masters side. In spite of what he is told, he continues the journey.

God seems to like miracle of the parting of the waters! It is one of his favourites. It got Israel out of Egypt. Moses held up a staff; for Joshua, it was carrying of the ark of the covenant into the waters of the Jordan; in this story, Elijah takes off his cloak, rolls it up and strikes the water and crosses the Jordan, as the people of Israel had done before.

It is a key moment in the story. It allows the 2 men to journey alone. Elisha makes a request and to be granted, he must witness Elijah being taken up to heaven. Only after that, can he pick up Elijah's cloak, as a symbol that he would carry on Elijah's

work. So responsibility is passed from one man to another. To confirm this, that he was now the prophet of God, Elisha performs the same miracle of the parting of the waters, witnessed by 50 prophets. In their eyes, the miracle was his successful job interview. It confirmed who Elisha now was. Prophet of God.

You then have the strange account, almost describing a game of hide and seek, where the 50 prophets decide to go and look for Elijah. You can almost hear Elisha thinking, well this is going to be a total waste of time. We must assume that these guys did not see the miracle, but eventually Elisha gives in. "*Off you go*". Funnily enough they never found him.

Having said all that, I want you to set the miracle of the fiery chariot and the mystery of Elijah's death to one side. Even if we recognise that the ancient theology is interesting, what has it got to do with us? Are we not sophisticated 21st century Scots!

We can admire Elisha's perseverance to stick with the journey and we can learn from that. Stay with God through the trials and tribulations of life's journey. But the hinge around which this passage revolves is revealed in their final conversation. To succeed Elijah, Elisha must see what happens to him, and here to see, means to understand. Not the miracle, but the ordinary.

Look carefully, and see ordinary almost hidden in the glare of the miraculous. It is so easy for our eyes to turn to the

dramatic, and miss God in the every day. Yes, God is in the miracle, but he is also in the ordinary, and that is where we will meet him. Elisha bends down to pick up the cloak. In his journey, that is where God is. In following him, we cannot wait for the miraculous to happen. We must seek to follow God in the everyday and the ordinary. It may not sound very exciting, but that is the reality of life!

So it does not matter if we take the miraculous literally or not. There are enough miracles of God, all around us, in the ordinary moments of life. Let us pick up the cloak of faith, and follow Jesus. Amen.