

OUR WORSHIP THIS MORNING INCLUDES THE INDUCTION OF TWO ELDERS

Comment (1): Cloaks

Our bible reading story for today is the passing of Elijah's cloak to Elisha symbolising the succession of authority and leadership. We are thinking today about transition. Recognising that there are endings and new beginnings in the cycle of church life.

I have brought this old minister's cloak with me today. I want to share with you two ways in which it the passing on of a cloak reminds us what we are doing this morning.

1. Firstly it puts tradition in its proper context: by recognising it and bringing it forward into the present. Leadership, like so many other things which make up our community life together, is something that is handed on, down the generations, from one person to another. Thus, in eldership as with so many things there is a continuity, a link with what has gone before. This picks up on what is written into what we understand to be part of the nature and faith and order of the United Reformed Church:

Acknowledging the declarations made in our own tradition by Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Churches of Christ, bringing them with us into the present, but affirming our right and readiness, if the need arises, to change the basis of union which holds us together and to make new statements of faith in ever obedience to the living Christ. For in this way faith becomes alive and active, the gift of an eternal source, renewed for every generation.

Have a look at the pew in which you are sitting. I doubt you remember it being put there. Someone else has sat in that space before you. There was a time when this church will have been full every Sunday and someone will have, as was the tradition then, paid an annual rent for that seat. Well this morning it is you who sit in their place and thus take the tradition forward; but you do it in your own way, in the unique contribution you make to today.

2. The cloak is secondly symbolic of our links with wider URC. For it belonged to David Fox, the former minister of Elfed Road. David, you may remember, disappeared while on holiday two years ago and his body has never been found. You might say there is a bit of a coincidence there with the story of Elijah. Elfed Avenue is where, in fact, I was preaching two Sundays ago. It was Beth who secured this garment for us and so in it we inherit part of the wider tradition of the URC. And I hope we will use it sometimes and make it our own. I think this vacancy more than at any other time we have become far more aware of our wider belonging within the URC, the bigger picture. We have had guest preachers who have brought us different aspects and insights of our wider tradition. We have come to understand that a new minister comes from a process, sometimes complicated and with its own difficulties, from a place within the wider URC. Our church's interim moderator is now the Wales Synod Clerk. It's important to remember that Elders within our tradition are ordained and inducted to the URC as a whole and not just to the local church. So what we do here today affects the URC as a whole. As we also say in our URC statement:

So in our wider belonging, held together in the body of Christ, through the freedom of the spirit, we rejoice in diversity, uphold the rights of personal conviction and commit ourselves to speak the truth in love, growing together in the peace of Christ.

THE INDUCTION OF ELDERS

HYMN: 371 Take my life

Reading 1 Kings 19: 19-21 & 2 Kings 2: 6-15a

COMMENT (2): TEARS

I have here a goblet filled with water, but this is not just any water. This is salty water. Salty like tears and is meant to represent grieving over loss, partings, endings. The tears that come when we fear we are not up to the way ahead. Tears that sometimes come when we know it is crunch time.

There is a tension in new beginnings; for beginnings of things also require first an ending of things. And also by choosing one fork in the road we give up, sacrifice another. By saying yes to one thing, we say no to another. It cannot but be this way, no matter how much we may want it to be otherwise.

Elijah the great prophet receives news from God that his work and witness is finite and is coming to an end. And what's more he himself is to anoint his successor. Eijah must acknowledge an ending for there to be a new beginning. And in this case it is an ending, too, for himself. Perhaps the immediate reaction was a welcome relief but then he must have wondered. It is not easy to stop and find closure. That must have been hard internal struggle towards acceptance. And if Elisha is to follow his new call he has many bridges to burn. He takes those things that are precious to him, symbols of his former life; his yoke and his oxen. He breaks up his yoke and makes a fire from it. He kills his team of oxen and the family share a ritual meal, marking the closure and the new beginning. Tears or not, sorrow or not, there is no going back.

And later, when Elijah is gone, as a symbolic act of succession, he picks up his predecessor's cloak. And did you notice that the succession is acknowledged by the fifty prophets from Jericho. Elisha's family share in the meal of closure and the prophets share in the revelation of the succession. For there must be consensus for there to be leadership.

For Augur and Beth, our newly inducted elders for the next three years, this is a time to burn bridges, to make sacrifices, in order to take on the mantle of leadership, that we, this church community have asked of them. Like the family of Elisha and the fifty prophets we acknowledge in humility and are grateful for Beth and Augur's sacrifice that is at the heart of their service to this church and the wider church, seeing in it a mirror of our own sacrifice. For whether you are a leader or a follower you have made choices to be on this road. You are sitting here today instead of being somewhere else. Perhaps you have felt a need to take one direction in your life and that has called you to close the door on something else. And so this cup of tears is also for you and me. It is for us all.

And as we acknowledge and support our renewed leadership within our community we recognise that we will under their guidance make choices that demand priorities and sacrifices of us as a church. For in serving God and one another we make sacrifices. And so this goblet is also for this community of City URC as it continues to explore what it should be doing for those who live and work in this city and perhaps walk past our doors from time to time and even for those who may not even yet be aware that we are here.

Augur's hymn: 495 Father hear the prayer we offer

Second reading Luke 9: 51-62

Comment (3): Light

The leadership journey is always about opening the door to new possibilities. New opportunities. It is like seeing a new light before us, among us or even in us. This light may be fragile or strong, clear and bright, or just a spark of insight, but to be a leader is to expect to see it in each next moment.

Remembering Jesus' words "I am the light of the world", we light a candle now, acknowledging the reformed and ever reforming vision of this church to which we all contribute, anticipating and welcoming newness and change.

When I was learning to ride a motorbike my instructor told me one very important thing: always look in the direction you want to go and the bike will go with you. This was highlighted quite dramatically one morning as I was turning right at a T junction. I became fixated on the grassy bank ahead of me and although I intended to turn right the next thing I knew I was flying up in the air and landed on my back with the motorbike on its side next to me. It was much the same with the plough in Jesus time. You needed a consistent even handed pull on the yoke that guided the oxen and so kept them ploughing in a straight line. If you looked back you would alter the pressure and the oxen would go off course. So the gospel writer makes it clear that we need to stay focussed on the light ahead, the way forward, the dream, the vision, if we are to succeed. No detours, no distractions.

Leadership is to actively participate in a dream for humankind and all that is. It is to believe that we see a dream and can give it shape and voice, energy and courage, to free it to be what it wants to be. It is a dream for each and for all. In this we are all leaders, believing as we do that there is something here in this Christian message not just for ourselves, but for the world at large. City URC has its part to play in this. And we are City URC.

The experience of the disciples who see Jesus rejected by Samaria reminds us that the dream, the message is not always welcomed or well received. But that should not deter us or invite us to pass judgment. Jesus makes it clear that passing judgment invokes judgment. He rebukes his disciples for

their desire for retribution and tells them to just get on with the job in hand and to stay focussed on loving God with all their heart and soul and mind and loving their neighbour as self.

For there is no effective leadership without love. Love for even those who reject the dream. Just as there is no leadership without service, there can be no meaningful service without love. Do you serve the dream, a vision for this place? Then nurture it, but nurture it in love. Do you serve a dream, a vision for the world, then nurture it, but nurture it in love. The commandment to love one another is not just for those who hold to the same vision; more so is it for those who reject it. If we do not show love then our words are platitudes and we are in the words of St Paul, noisy gongs or clanging cymbals and our actions will be hollow, empty. So let us stay focussed and vision centred and let it be filled with love. Let there be love shared among us, but not just among us. And let us love one another - and not just one another here, but one another beyond these artificial walls. That way people will see we mean what we say. And they might too see the vision and catch the dream.

Which brings me to Beth's hymn for today: 745 A new commandment