

## **Year B**

### **2 Kings 2:1-12**

The U.S. standard railroad gauge, the distance between the rails, is four feet, eight-and-one-half inches.

Why such an odd number? Because that's the way they built them in Britain, and American railroads were built by British expatriates.

Why did the English adopt that particular gauge? Because the people who built the pre-railroad tramways used that gauge.

They in turn were locked into that gauge because the people who built tramways used the same standards and tools they had used for building wagons, which were set on a gauge of four feet, eight-and-one-half inches.

"Why were wagons built to that scale? Because with any other size, the wheels did not match the old wheel ruts on the roads.

"So who built these old rutted roads?

"The first long-distance highways in Europe were built by Imperial Rome for the benefit of their legions. The roads have been in use ever since. The ruts were first made by Roman war chariots. Four feet, eight-and-

one-half inches was the width a chariot needed to be to accommodate the rear ends of two war horses."

And hence the expression in life; "that's the way it's always been".

Elisha might have hoped that Elijah was going to be there forever, but that just wasn't going to happen. Jesus as he climbed the mountain with a few of disciples knew that he wasn't going to be there forever. The lessons of Transfiguration Sunday, the final Sunday before the season of Lent begins, are lessons delivered in times of change; in the in-between times that most of us struggle so

much with. We live in a very tight window of time called the present. But this present is haunted by a growing past that is unrecoverable and dominated by a limitless future which is currently unattainable. That leaves us all in tension, with insecurities and uncertainties all around.

He's the most successful songwriter in history; his boyhood home has been preserved by the National Trust. He's one of the world's most famous people. He's been knighted by the Queen. He has a personal fortune of hundreds of millions of pounds. Yet he's insecure. When interviewed by the

Sydney Morning Herald in 2002 and asked about his dispute with Yoko Ono over the order in which his and John Lennon's names appeared on songs they wrote together, Sir Paul McCartney explained it this way. Why does it matter? "Because I'm human. And humans are insecure. Show me one who isn't. Henry Kissinger? Insecure. George Bush? Insecure. Bill Clinton? Very insecure."<sup>1</sup>

This present, this in-between is a very uneasy place to dwell and we're all in it; every one of us. But Jesus recognised this

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<sup>1</sup> Sydney Morning Herald Good Weekend magazine August 17, 2002.

and it did not stop him willingly entering into our human story to live in vulnerability; for a time haunted by the past and uncertain about the future. Elisha found himself in a similar predicament in our Old Testament text today. He knew that all was not well with Elijah and that change was on the way and regardless of how he felt about it he had to cope with it. And his first strategy in coping was persistence. He was not going to listen to Elijah's instruction to stay put as he journeyed to the significant holy sites in Israel and beyond. Just as the disciples needed to take a deep breath and climb the

mountain with Jesus so Elisha had to be determined to stay with his master.

One of the best things about the BBC iPlayer is that you can watch programmes from other BBC regions that you might ordinarily miss. I have been watching a short series on iPlayer from back home on BBC Northern Ireland. It's called Survivors and it's the story of a group of people who have survived the recent Troubles in Northern Ireland. The stories are very moving and deeply harrowing. There was no concept of trauma counselling in 1970s or 80s Britain and these poor people just had to soldier on as

best they could. Many of them spoke of a crisis point when they just couldn't take anymore and decided that suicide was the only answer. In the face of such terrible experiences persistence in life is very difficult. One survivor said that it was only when he realised that dedicated medical staff had fought for his life for days and that his wife had fought to keep him going every day since, that he was able to pick himself up and persist.

Elisha persisted with Elijah despite the background discouragement of the company of prophets. These were the doom

merchants who wanted to pull him down and after all weren't they right? Elijah's time was up so why go after him? Why keep going? Well, ultimately and well beyond the vision of Elisha, there was another man who would walk a lonely road to betrayal and death, and the example of the faithful Elisha would therefore not be in vain; a point almost confirmed by the lonely man, Jesus, as he met with Elisha's master, Elijah on the mountain-top. Jesus remains our inspiration as we are confronted with the insecurities and challenges of life lived in the present. There is a sense in which Elisha,

like Jesus, was transfigured, as the apparently transfigured Elijah disappeared from view and Elisha tore his clothes in two. Was this the double share of Elijah's spirit that he had asked for? I think it was. Note that when the doubters, on several occasions, closed around Elisha and warned him about the consequences of persisting, Elisha told them to be silent.

During his years as premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev denounced many of the policies and atrocities of Joseph Stalin. Once, as he censured Stalin in a public meeting, Khrushchev was interrupted by a

shout from a heckler in the audience. "You were one of Stalin's colleagues. Why didn't you stop him?" "Who said that?" roared Khrushchev. An agonising silence followed as nobody in the room dared move a muscle. Then Khrushchev replied quietly, "Now you know why."<sup>2</sup>

We can talk too much. Peter stood gawping on the mountain-top as Jesus, Elijah and Moses spoke together. Then what did he do? He opened his mouth and said something silly! Mark simply comments that Peter did not know what to say. So why say anything.

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<sup>2</sup> Today in the Word, July 13, 1993

When they were descending the mountain Jesus instructed them to tell no one what they had seen. Elisha needed silence as he intently watched Elijah. He would never take his eyes off him because he must not miss the promise of the future. Hopefully, the application is clear for us today. Belief in Jesus Christ is a transfiguring experience because through it we are cast forward into God's future. We cannot continue to live as if he hadn't lived. When Elijah disappeared from view the people never forgot him. In fact they were waiting for his reappearance because they believed he had never died in

the first place. When Jesus met with Elijah before the witnesses of Israel that wait came to an end in the form of the one who would take the people and the world forward into God's future. May the awareness of that fact inspire us today as we continue to experience life in the in-between. May our insecurities and vulnerabilities be eased by the one who lives beyond death in God's future. Amen.