

**The sermon preached by the Dean of St Paul's, The Very Revd Dr David Ison,  
at the Patronal Festival Eucharist of St Botolph-without-Bishopgate, 20 June 2018**

*2 Kings 2.1,6-14; Mark 6.1-6*

I don't know about you, but I love history – and I'm guessing you like it too, because you're here for a significant anniversary. The story of persons or places, how they come to be and what they've been in the past, are clues to what people and places might be called to be in the future.

The past forms us, but doesn't determine us – and there are countless films and books on the theme of how someone or somewhere breaks out of the expectations and sorrows of the past and becomes someone or something different.

So it was with St Botolph, in more ways than one. His first career started as an apprentice monk in the seventh century, the period of Christian expansion into and out of Saxon England. It was a vibrant time which saw the foundation of St Paul's Cathedral in 604, and the missions of St Cedd and St Erkenwald, and the arrival of Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus leading to the conversion of the East Saxons and a strong catholic faith in England, as well as sending missionaries such as Boniface and Willibrord to convert the pagans in continental Europe.

St Botolph's first memorial at Iken and his fame as a saint came out of his commitment to monastic life, following Jesus Christ and sharing the good news of new life with God through a life of prayer, sacrifice and service.

So far so straightforward; and if his monastery had survived, I guess he would have remained a locally venerated East Anglian saint. But the Danes intervened by destroying his monastery 200 years after he died.

As a result, a king 100 years later decided to dismember his body and send the relics travelling around the country – and that changed the course of history for Botolph, as he embarked on his new career as the patron saint of travellers and hence the saint of churches at city gates, including this one.

The bible readings we've just heard apply both to Botolph himself, and to us. There's Elisha the farmer's son, who at God's command became the follower of Elijah and saw him taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. Just as Botolph had to face the question of how to move on from being an apprentice monk in Germany to being an abbot in England, so Elisha has to face the question of whether he will inherit Elijah's spirit, his calling, his task.

In the history of both Botolph and Elisha you can see the currents of their calling at work, God shaping them for their ongoing vocation, but a vocation they also have to move into and discover for themselves. Until it happens, Elisha doesn't know that God's Spirit will descend on him. Until it happens, Botolph doesn't know that his venture to build a monastic community will be successful. But both Botolph and Elisha were willing to give it a try, to step out in faith and follow their vocation, to do something new and challenging coming out of their history, for the sake of following after God.

And neither Elisha nor Botolph knew what would happen after they died, and how their ministry and reputation would grow and develop in ways they hadn't foreseen.

And of course the villagers in the place where Jesus grew up didn't have an inkling of the story they were going to be part of. In our gospel reading from Mark, Jesus goes back to his home town to preach and heal, and people can't believe it. They know the history of Jesus and his family, of course – and they can't get beyond it.

They only look back, and can't imagine how God can call and change a person, and how the Jesus they knew could become the prophet and healer they didn't expect. For the people of Nazareth, the past determined your present and future – you were who you were.

But for Jesus, and Botolph, and Elisha, what they were, led on to God's call to change into what they would become.

And so for us: Jesus calls us as a church to follow him, as Elijah called Elisha, as Jesus used Botolph to reach people in new ways, unforeseen.

As Elijah hands his mantle on to Elisha, so Botolph hands his ministry on to us: to be a church which welcomes strangers, pilgrims and travellers, to open these doors and enable those around us who wouldn't dream that they had anything to do with church, to discover the reality of spiritual life, and the good news of the God who loves us, that we might find our hope and life in Him.

And Jesus calls us not only as a church, but as individuals too, to take up our vocation and follow him, even when it means turning our lives round and doing something unexpected – a change of career, dedication to Christian service, something which will be lurking there in our past history but is waiting to be called out and lived out.

Where is God moving you, in your life, calling you to grow beyond your history into something new? God is at work in the life of each one of us, to move and change us in ways both half-suspected and unexpected, that we too may take up the mantle and go on the journey of following Jesus.

May God bless this church and all its people, may God make us into what he calls us to become, and may God through us touch and transform the lives of many.