

Taking the Initiative

Hospitality

- Story from Lifebuilder Bible Study booklet: Chinese international student or lecturer... "I thought he must be a Christian when he took me to his home for dinner and overnight", recounting how a stranger at the airport had offered him hospitality when he was stranded.
 - wonder what you think the elements of hospitality are?
- In this story we have a woman - whose name we don't even know - who actively welcomes "the man of God" (Elisha)
 - and all that follows on from that
 - its almost like the twists and turns of a typical thriller plot...
 - its going right, then it goes wrong again, then it goes right...!
- Is God merely playing with people's feelings?
 - is what follows the reward of offering such hospitality?

A blessing of life

- Through 2 Kings 4:8-37, Elisha - Elijah's successor - appears to be a man who knows God's heart for life
 - he wanted to bless the Shunammite woman with a gift of life through a son
 - Elisha would have been acutely aware that, being married to an older man (v.14), the woman faced many years of widowhood ahead of her
 - without children, she would have been without security later in life
 - so God, through Elisha, takes the initiative in bringing life
- God's provision of a son was, then, a blessing on more than one level:
 - first, the boy was of course the object of the woman's love...
 - second, he was her hope for security for the future - he was the likely means through which this woman would be able to enjoy life before death
- God says to the woman: live!
 - he is the source, and his desire is for life, for blessing
 - we might even go so far as to say that this son given is a sign of the salvation on offer from God, of new life and hope for the future

A fight for life

- But then things go wrong!
 - the boy dies... God mocking the woman's trust in him...?
 - the woman will settle for nothing less than Elisha's direct intervention
 - it was he who invited God's blessing after all!
 - she fights for the life of her son, even in death!
 - she does not give up, and pursues Elisha way beyond what would be considered "respectable"
 - if we are here because God took the initiative in bringing life in the first place, here we see the woman's initiative, not content to settle for death - having had a taste of life, she fights for it, pursues it, doesn't give up
- Elisha, for his part, also instinctively pursues life on behalf of the woman:
 - and his prayer - enacted through the symbolic act of lying on top of the boy - is granted
 - life returns to the boy
- God given life is worth fighting for - not something to be given up on, when life gets tough or the service gets boring!
 - our own recent experience is that this fight is often conducted in the midst of relationships, perhaps where there are setbacks and disappointments, but where there is also that spark of life....
 - are we fighters, in relationships and in prayer, for life?

A fuller life

- Well, is that it?
 - what are we to make of this, 25 or more centuries later?
 - Elisha, the widow, and indeed her son are all long since dead
 - is that the whole substance of God's blessing - three score years and ten - or even four score years and ten these days!?
- **No** - for Jesus introduced another dimension to our understanding of life
 - where in the Old Testament physical life was the (miniature) canvas on which God painted the picture of his blessing, Jesus paints on a bigger canvas!
 - not so much the revelation of life after death, but the understanding that **he himself is life**
 - **he is the very essence of life** - of which this earthly, physical life is but a part
 - being associated with Jesus is not merely about laying claim to immortality - going on and on and on and on for ever
 - **life with Jesus is about becoming one with the source of life himself!**
- And that relationship, once entered into, is indeed eternal - for he himself is eternal
- So, on every level, **Christ offers life**, in terms of its:
 - **durability, longevity, and its quality**
 - in John 10:10 Jesus says: "**I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.**"
 - and we should expect nothing less from Jesus, the source of all life, through whom all life was made!
 - awesome, abundant, brilliant, creative, forceful, bountiful life!

A fragile life

- But, and this finally, how do we hold this **glorious reality** in tension with the **sad and daily reality of the fragility of life now?**
 - I conduct funerals regularly, sometimes in tragic circumstances...
 - healings and are the exception, **though certainly not unheard of**, and **death is the rule**
 - is God's promise false? Shallow? empty?
- **No!!**
 - but we can today learn from the Shunamite woman, and from Elisha...
 - and indeed from Jesus himself who fought for life even in and through death on the Cross where our new life was won....!
- Whatever life situation we find ourselves in, let us, together, **fight for abundant life** in a way that reflects God's heart for life
 - in our jobs
 - in our caring for the planet
 - in our caring for our neighbour
 - in caring for the poor
 - in the way we vote whenever we are called on to do so
 - in our creativity, the things we make and create
 - in our bearing witness to others of who Jesus is
 - even in our sorrow and disappointments, fight for that which is of the life from God
- **God can grow life, wherever we are, and he can grow it through us!**

Prayer:

- invite folk to identify one area in their life where they feel the call of God to fight for life, to wrestle in prayer, to not settle for less than God's intention...