

7th December 2025, Matins

1 Kings 18:17-39, John 1: 19-28

Mother Emma

There is nothing that annoys people more than having other people interfere with the peace and calm of their day to day lives, by suggesting that there might be a different, possibly more ethical, way of doing things. Human beings also don't really like mystery – at least when it concerns those who are making the kind of suggestions just mentioned – they want to know who is criticising them, and what authority they think they have for doing so! Even when they know it, many are very resistant to believing that such people are qualified to comment on their worldview.

In our Old Testament reading today, King Ahab accosts Elijah the prophet, saying, *“Art thou he that troubleth Israel?”* In Elijah's response: *I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord.....* he summarises all King Ahab's wrongdoing – he married a Gentile wife, Jezebel; he planted sacred oaks and groves to other gods; he followed the worship of the Baals, those ancient deities of Canaan and Phoenicia, and in sum, as the writer of 1 Kings declares in chapter 16: *Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him.*

Elijah the Tishbite, on the other hand, is described as a *“man of God”* – the Word of the Lord comes clearly to him; he has been able to predict the drought and famine which are currently besetting the land of Israel; he has brought back a poor widow's son from the dead, and his prayers have made her supply of food inexhaustible. He is clear that King Ahab is not living according to God's teaching and boldly comes before him to tell him so. Because Ahab has turned the country to the worship of the Baals, Elijah believes that he alone is left as the prophet of the Lord God, whilst Baal's prophets in Israel now number 450, and, as we heard, he challenges them to a great contest, to prove the power of the God of Israel. The reading recounts how the prophets seek to call down fire to burn their sacrifices, but when they have finally failed, Elijah also sets up a sacrifice on an altar, douses it in water and successfully calls down fire which burns up the wet wood, the wet sacrifice and everything around. Then the people fall on their faces and declare: *“The Lord, he is the God. The Lord, he is the God.”* Clearly, this is not what King Ahab wants to see or hear, and shortly afterwards Elijah flees in fear of his life to the wilderness, where God strengthens him for his return to anoint a new and better king, before he is able to hand on his mantle to another young prophet. The figure of Elijah, lonely, living alone as a hermit, yet boldly challenging those in power with the words of the Lord, urging them to repent of their sins and failures, is one of the major characters in the Old Testament.

There was an Old Testament belief that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by the return of Elijah – one way in which people would know that the Lord's Anointed was about to arrive. So when John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come near and urging the people to repent of their sins and their failure to follow the Lord's commands, it is perhaps not surprising that some of them immediately wonder if there is a connection between him and the ancient prophet.

The seventeenth century composer and organist, Orlando Gibbons, takes the clamour of the priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem to work out the identity and authority of John the Baptist, which we heard in our Gospel reading, and moulds it into the wonderful anthem which the choir will sing

to us in a few moments. We hear the questioners wrestling with their frustration. Who is this man who has come to unsettle them in their self-belief, their rigorous but possibly unthinking sacred practices, their sense of their own status before God and man? Against the rising tide of their questions (constantly repeated in the Gibbons setting), John the Baptist makes clear that he is not the Christ himself, and neither is he Elijah (translated in the Authorised Version as Elias), or a prophet, but he makes the astounding claim that he is the one described by the prophet Isaiah who cries in the wilderness, "*Make straight the way of the Lord.*"

The music of the anthem becomes beautiful and lyrical with this confession, yet at the same time there is something poignant which could perhaps indicate that John is only too aware of the fate which so often befalls those who prepare the way of the Lord. It is perhaps one of my favourite church anthems and sits so well at this stage in the Advent season, as we encounter John pointing ahead to the coming of the Christ whom we await.

In the reading, not deterred by his breathtaking claim, the Pharisees continue to ask what John is doing baptising people if he doesn't have better credentials than that(!), and John points forward, as the character he reflects in the prophecy of Isaiah would do, to the coming of another *whose shoe's latchet he is not worthy to unloose*. John's role is not to be God's Anointed, the Saviour of the World. He comes, like Elijah, to speak out, not as the Light of the World, but as a witness to that light, as St John's Gospel tells us. He points into the murky darkness of our human lives and societies, to reveal the idolatry, the self-satisfaction, the oppression and the injustice which exist around us, and calls people to repent, so that they too, will fall on their faces and declare, "*The Lord, he is the God*", and prepare to welcome Christ into their midst. Amen