

Second Sunday of Advent 2016

I Kings 38: 17 – 39; John 1: 19 – 28

It's Advent; the second Sunday in Advent. So we've got the Advent wreath going: three purple candles, one pink candle and a white one in the middle; and the order they come in is purple, purple, pink, purple, white. That means we've now got two purple ones lit, next week is pink, the fourth Sunday of Advent is purple, then it's white for Christmas Day.

There are different traditions for what each candle signifies; so if you violently disagree with what I'm about to say, please don't lynch me: just be post-modern about it and accept that this is one possible truth. The scheme set out in the Church of England's Common Worship books for the four Sundays of Advent is: Patriarchs, Prophets, John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin Mary. So the pink is not for Mary. It's not pink for a girl. Thank the Lord: I've just redeemed the Advent Wreath from feminist ire.

The third candle is pink because the third Sunday is Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday when we're let off all this Advent self-examination and penitence and are allowed to rejoice: Gaudete being the Latin command "Rejoice!" or "Let's rejoice!" and the idea is that pink is a joyful colour; and priests who are even more camp than I am wear pink vestments to match.

So, Patriarchs, Prophets, John the Baptist, Mary, means that on next Sunday, Gaudete Sunday, it's John the Baptist. And yet we've had a reading about him this evening. And that's because we've not had a reading about him as the Baptist: that comes next week. This evening, because it's the second Sunday, the second candle, we've been thinking about him as a prophet; and in fact we've had two readings each about one of the two top dog prophets: Elijah and John.

Elijah is the pre-eminent Hebrew prophet. Tradition has it that he is so special that at the end of his life he didn't die: he was assumed into heaven. Do you

remember the story about him and his apprentice Elisha crossing the Jordan, Elijah passing his mantle to Elisha, then a whirlwind carrying Elijah off into heaven? He didn't die; he was taken straight into heaven. And his return was held to be a necessary prelude to the deliverance and restoration of Israel.

And that's why, when Jesus asks his disciples who people are saying he is, they tell him that some people are saying he's Elijah: they are recognising that he is the one for whom they await. And, of course, in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus, when he takes Peter and James and John up a mountain and there's this dazzling white light, the people they see with Jesus are Moses and Elijah, the symbolism being that Elijah is there to show that salvation is at hand through Jesus. His presence points to Jesus as being the one. And in the same way John the Baptist points the way to Jesus, but does no more than that.

So Elijah and John are important; and their importance is that they point to something which is greater than themselves. That's what a prophet does, or at least what a prophet should do.

When Elijah went up Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal, the contest that they had – whose god could set alight the sacrificial offerings spontaneously? – that contest proved that the prophets of Baal were not pointing to something greater than themselves. They were prophets of a god made by human hands and who was therefore limited to humanity. When Elijah starts mocking them – perhaps he's asleep, perhaps he's thinking about something else – there's a wonderful euphemism that gets a bit lost in translation.

Elijah suggests Baal might not be able to set fire to the sacrifices because he has "gone aside." It's a euphemism for going to the toilet. Elijah is saying Baal is so feeble he can't even concentrate whilst he's

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having a quick jimmy riddle. What Elijah is pointing to, though, is God himself. Not just another god who rivals Baal, but *the* God almighty, God of everything. And in the same way John the Baptist points to nothing less than God's-self.

So as we observe this season of Advent we receive the message of these prophets afresh. They remind us that what all our preparations are about are getting ready to receive God's-self. This is more than something which gives us a nice, warm feeling inside when we sing *Away in a Manger*; it's more than an annual reminder to try to spread a bit of goodwill; it's more than a sort of visual aid that God uses to try to show us how to live: it is nothing less than heaven touching earth and our humanity being completed by God's divinity being joined with our humanity through Jesus. It is the means by which we are invited to participate in the life of God, the real God, the only God, God almighty, the ground of all being.

And as these two prophets do that, they also remind us what prophecy is. It's easy to be caught up in the popular misconception that prophesy is about predicting the future. But actually it about pointing to God, and by doing so drawing the contrast between the world as it is about us and God to whom we are pointing.

In the second week of Advent we light a candle for the prophets. They focus our Advent discipline by making us realise the true nature of what it is we're preparing for; and they shape our Advent discipline. We observe a holy Advent by pointing to God, as Elijah, John and all the prophets did by insisting on his values of peace and justice and respect for creation.

Amen.