

Sunday Next before Lent 2020 Evensong

(23.02.2020)

Ecclesiasticus 48: 1 – 10; Matthew 17: 9 – 23

OK, some simple questions about sequences. If I ask what comes before night, the answer is day. If I ask what comes before 17, the answer is 16. If I ask what comes before the third, the answer is the second. Of course, if I ask what comes before the egg, it gets rather trickier! Because nobody knows which comes first: the chicken or the egg? But you see how it works. What comes before the cart is the horse. What comes before the Nunc Dimitis is the second lesson. But what comes before this evening's second lesson? The Magnificat is not the answer I'm looking for! What comes before *this evening's* second lesson is this morning's Gospel Reading!

Today the Church has read Matthew 17: 1 -23, but it's read 1 -9 this morning and 9 -23 this evening. We've had two halves of a story, the first half this morning

and the second half this evening. And the theme running through both halves is Elijah. And just to make the point clear, the other reading this evening has been a summary, in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, of all the do-derring we read Elijah getting up to in 1 Kings 17 to 19.

The reason that Elijah features so prominently in today's readings is because, in Jewish religious thought at the time of Jesus, there were very specific beliefs about Elijah in relation to the coming of the Messiah. And we think that the original audience for Matthew's Gospel was a community of Jewish converts to Christianity, so they would have had specific beliefs about Elijah in relation to the coming of the Messiah.

If you remember your 1 Kings 19, the story is that Elijah didn't die: he was simply assumed into heaven. That's part of the summary we've heard in the Ecclesiasticus reading this evening. And the belief was that Elijah would return again to prepare, to proclaim,

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to herald the coming of the Messiah. And indeed the disciples comment to Jesus in this evening's reading "the scribes say that Elijah must come first." We've just heard Yvonne read it. And Jesus says that Elijah has already come and they "understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist."

Now, let me just make it clear that it is not part of official Christian dogma to assert that Elijah has returned and taken the form of John the Baptist. If you've been coming to Evensong for decades, and are now quietly worrying that for all those years you've been failing to notice that part of the creed, let me put your mind at rest: it isn't there. It is not part of Christian belief that "Elijah descendeth unto earth and didst take upon him the corporeal substance of John the Baptist." But it is a good way of arresting the attention of first century Jewish converts – and for that matter twenty-first century Brid believers – and whacking home the point that, in Jesus, we see the

glory of God revealed. Lift up your eyes, behold it, take a deep breath and let it sustain you.

There is a perennial debate over pew Bibles and having a monthly sheet with the words of the choir's anthems printed on it. At the Priory have both. And we do so because there are cogent and compelling reasons to do so which are advanced by quite *formidable* members of the congregation. Words are designed to communicate. We must therefore optimise the opportunity for them to do so. We must be able to follow what is being read or sung and know its meaning. We are children of the Enlightenment. Our very sense of identity is tied to our ability to think and to understand. Therefore we need to have the words in front of us.

The story of the Transfiguration, this morning, and the further reflection on the role of Elijah this evening, serve to pull in the opposite direction. They direct us to God's glory and simply invite us to behold it – not to

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conquer it with our intellect, but to stand in awe and wonder before it. So the invitation is to allow the soaring beauty of the choir's singing to seep into your soul without worrying about whether you catch the endin' of every wor'; and to allow the cadences of scripture proclaimed to bounce off the walls and settle on your heart, without being concerned about whether you can get your head round everything.

This beholding and being assured of the glory of God revealed in Jesus is important within the internal context of the narrative of Matthew's Gospel. This evening's passage closes with Jesus telling the disciples "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him." And we're told the disciples were greatly distressed. And well they might have been. This person for whom they'd given up everything, in whom they'd invested all their hopes, was about to walk headlong into an ignominious arrest, show trial, torture and execution. That would be a betrayal of the investment of all that time and

effort and hope if it were not for the fillip and reassurance that Jesus is more than a preacher who's too inept to keep himself out of trouble. There's the glory of God there and worth persevering with him, even if that means going to hell and back – quite literally – because he will be coming back.

And the beholding and being assured of the glory of God revealed in Jesus is important to us at this time of year. It's good to hold our heads up, to lift up our eyes, release them from the tyranny of intellectual comprehension and simply bask in the glory of God before getting our heads down to observing a holy Lent: it's worth it because a joyous Easter is coming.

And it's important to us on a week by week basis, also, to lift up our eyes, behold God's glory, soak it in, allow our spiritual batteries to be recharged through the receptors of all our senses in readiness for being propelled from worship to engage in the harshness and

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the brokenness and the injustices of life in the power
of his Spirit.

Amen.