



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Advent Year B

In the spirit and power of Elijah

Readings: Isaiah 61: 1-2, 10-1; Lk 1: 46-50, 53-54, John 1: 6-8, 19-28

There is a legend, deep seated in what remains of the English psyche, that, in our hour of greatest need, our great king will return to save the land. The king referred to, of course, is Arthur, the once and future king and he fulfils, in English mythology, the role of the Davidic line in the story of Israel's Messiah and the history of salvation.

If you are a fan of Lord of the Rings you will recognise the pattern as Strider is successively revealed as Aragorn and then the lost king, heir of Isildur, of the two kingdoms of Arnor and Gondor. (The divided kingdom motif, now reunited under the Saviour, will be familiar.)

So we should not be surprised when John the Baptist hoves into view, the religious and the politically cute are wanting some basic questions answered. John is, after all, from a priestly line that does Temple service and his family live a short distance from the capital city. His birth circumstances, noised abroad all those years ago, angelic visions at the altar of incense, promise of greatness, his father dumbstruck, his strange choice of name – John. Now, all these years later, he has not taken the normal route of establishment ecclesiastical preferment, ascending the

greasy pole by careful language and sniffing the political air, but live a contrary life. Characterised by alones, asceticism, austerity, John has avoided the marbled halls and chosen the desert sky of his ancestors, living, depending utterly on the provision of God until the time of his emergence into the ministry to which he has been called - to prepare the Way for the Messiah, the Christ of God, the promised saviour.

The need to know who he is does not refer to his family origin, they know that. What they want to know is whether he claims to be the Messiah.

John is very clear. He is not. John points always and everywhere to Jesus. The next thing they want to know is whether John is Elijah returned. Now this is a hugely significant question. Why?

In the very closing verses of the Old Testament the prophet Malachi warns that , 'before the great and terrible day of the Lord' God 'will send you Elijah, the prophet'. So they are looking for this sign.

Here there is often confusion in Christian circles. John says he is not Elijah. Jesus appears to say that John is Elijah. Let's try to clear it up before we get into the significance.

John is straightforwardly denying that is he either Elijah reincarnated or returned. However his father Zechariah is told (Luke 1 v 13, 17) that John 'will be filled with the Holy Spirit' and will precede the Messiah 'in the power and spirit of Elijah' and prepare the people for His coming.

Furthermore the prophecy is that Elijah will return 'before the great and terrible day of the Lord', presumably indicating the Last Judgement.

So....John and Jesus are both correct. Phew !

Now to Elijah. What is the extraordinary significance of this great servant of God? How long have you got? (For more extensive detail purchase my CD box set on Elijah!)

Elijah is the greatest of the prophets until John. He never wrote a word. He lived most of his life in exile in desert places on the run from the political and religious establishment. At the end of his ministry he bequeaths 'a double portion of his spirit to his apprentice, the prophet Elisha, and is taken into heaven by the fiery chariots of the hosts of God. He does not die.

When Our Lord is revealed in glory on the Mount of Transfiguration it is not a surprise that Elijah is there to represent all those who have spoken God's Word under the inspiration of the Spirit, the Prophets. So, it is in the spirit of Elijah that John speaks to the generation that will witness the Advent of the Messiah. Their experience is similar – the desert, the asceticism, the prophetic call. The society to which they witness is fat with corruption, economically prosperous, idolatrous, materialistic, forgetful of God.

The kingdom to which Elijah witnesses and which he calls to repentance will fall to the sword and to exile never to return, a ruin never to be rebuilt.

The society to which John preaches repentance will crucify the very Messiah, for which they have long waited, and fall to the sword and endure the longest exile in the history of man.

Both prophets point, with their lives and with their words, to the King of Kings. Indeed Elijah's name means 'God alone is God'. They are forerunners. They are preparers of the Way. They are signposts of salvation.

They do not do this by collaborating with the power structures of a secular state or the comfortable religious establishment. They are driven by obedience to God's Word and His sovereign will. They both point to the once and future King upon whom alone depends not just the safety of this mortal realm but the eternal salvation of man.

It is part of the sacred task of the Christian community, the Catholic Church, to continue to bear prophetic witness to the truth of God's Word in the face of apostasy and idolatry and corruption and always and everywhere point to Jesus. Quietly and firmly, witness to the truth.

Like Elijah and John we may be mocked or vilified or persecuted for it but our duty it remains. And part of our regular duty is to pray for and support practically the Church wherever she is persecuted by indifference, atheism or false religion. (Aid to the Church in Need does this as well as anybody.)