

Sermon John 1: 19-28 and 1 Kings 18: 17-39

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you seen the advert on television where the fairy waves her magic wand and all the scene is bright and full of festive joy. But life isn't like that. We have to work hard to do what we have to do, to make what we have to make and to be where we have agreed to be. So, it was with Elijah from our first reading this evening. He is having a tough time; he knows what he has to do; he has been called to do all this and soon he will run away from his calling because it is all too much and now, he just knows he has to get on and do God's calling. He was rugged and he spoke the truth regardless of the situation. The same goes for John in our second reading; he knows what he has to do but he also knows that it won't be easy – no magic wand for him.

Elijah has led a lonely life; prophets do tend to as what they say is often not welcome news. He has spent a long time living on his own, knowing that he is instrumental in holding off the rain, so desperately needed because the people of Israel had been turning away from God.

John too has led a lonely life. He was set aside from birth to be God's chosen vessel. He lived in the desert; wearing rough clothes and feeding on locusts and honey. I was lucky to visit the rugged area where he is reported to have lived and believe me it is very desolate and very cut off. John like Elijah was destined to carry out God's wishes, saying things that were not welcomed and accepted. He knew what he had to do and he was called to do God's wishes – whatever the cost.

Elijah was called to bring the people of Israel back to God. They had drifted away and were worshipping Baal in their old ways and on Mount Carmel, he brought them back in a pretty dramatic manner described in our first reading. Elijah had provoked the prophets that his God is more powerful than theirs so they were trying to call their gods to set fire to the offering

but they failed but once Elijah called God even after he had doused the stones with precious water the whole offering leapt with fire. Needless to say, Elijah succeeded and the prophets themselves were destroyed.

When we come to our second reading, we hear that John is asked if he is Elijah, the one who the Israelites were waiting for (and still are to this day) and immediately John replies that he is not. Though he has on two occasions been compared with Elijah – The angel at his birth ties him to Elijah and Jesus, sometime after this, does, too. He is not any of the things asked but is adamant that he is preparing the way for that chosen one – the Christ. Just as we are at this time of Advent. This John is a signpost to Jesus; he is the forerunner on a mission. He is a very noble, determined man - he is the man who prepares the ground for the one who will come after. There is no questioning what God has called him to do; he knew who Jesus was; he knew his mission was to prepare people's hearts to receive God; like Elijah who prepares the way for the Israelites to return to God but unlike Elijah who does get cold feet at one stage. God chose him for a specific task to prepare the way for Christ.

Yet John is the most unassuming of all people. He does not build himself up but humbles himself. He's really not anything, it seems – but he is important in the whole Jesus unfolding – he carries the important job of preparing the way.

Every year the Diocese runs courses named: 'It's your calling' and I remember going on one as I was thinking of following a career path change. We were asked to write or draw what has drawn us to come on this course and I drew a great big horn shouting into my ear. I felt that God was calling me to change from teaching French to taking up teaching RE. It was the best thing I ever did. It was not easy; but it has been fulfilling. But I am no different from anyone who has a calling; just look at any professional; long hours, hard work. There really is no magic wand just hard graft and a lot of determination

For me it is the penultimate phrase that most stands out in our second reading: (The Messiah) is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. Here is the man who has such an important role yet he considers himself not even worthy to do the job that is normally done by a slave! Here is a man paving the way for Jesus, the Christ, our Saviour which is something that we must never forget yet he thinks of himself lower than a slave.

It makes me think back to the pandemic when daily we used to clap the care workers because we recognised the importance of the work that they were doing. Any care worker has a calling because they certainly don't do the work for the money. All the way through the pandemic they just kept on working; helping those in need; untying and tying up the shoe laces of those unable to do it themselves. They bring joy to those people they meet; they are often the only people who speak to the housebound. When we see that kind of utter selflessness shine forth, we know we are in the presence of something very precious. John the Baptist's example is a powerful one for us all to follow. Those care workers humble themselves to provide compassionate care to the sick -work that other people cannot or will not do. They too do not have a magic wand but they do bring light and life and happiness to those they care for. They certainly have my respect.

Hilary Morgan

December '24