

Back in the days when I subscribed to the Church Times a big chunk of their back page was devoted to a twenty-questions style interview with the compiler of the Good Pews Guide, the Archbishop's advisor on Evangelical Vanity Projects or Church House's Dean of cat litter. Same questions each week, different person answering. It's a common enough format— it even comes up every week in the New Statesman, where one of the questions is always 'which politician would you least like to be stuck in a lift with'. I mean how do you choose? The Church Times has a more positive- and pious -obviously- take on the question asking interviewees who it is that they'd most *like* to be locked overnight in a church with.

With a bit of luck and by skilful playing of the hand I'm dealt I'll never be interviewed by the Church Crimes and thus never have to consider what my response to that question might be. Given the unlikelihood of my being asked it, nevertheless just in case you were wondering, my answer would be probably something along the lines of... unlock those doors now or I'm calling the police.

It's a little thought experiment that, hopefully, we will never be called on to make, but despair not, there are other such party games we can play today. Given it's me doing the preaching, there's no point going down the road of picking our fantasy football teams. Even I'd start snoozing during this sermon. And more to the point I'd be hard pressed to name more than one football player who wasn't Billie Bremner. That would be my team: him and Mickey Rooney who would no doubt be wondering what on earth all that grass was and where's Judy Garland- she's usually here somewhere, and why didn't they call Wayne instead, at least he can play the game.

No footie then. But we could play Fantasy Dinner Party, that somewhat more Surrey thought experiment where you get to pick who you would invite to share chez candlelight and sample your soufflé. If you can remember back to the gospel reading this morning- five minutes ago, I was standing down there- it's all about banquets, so you can trace the desperate tie-in if you like.

Your dinner party. You can have anyone at all, from any time or place (auto translation included), living or dead (time travel expenses included for the departed). Given where we all currently find ourselves, I think we can all take Jesus for read- he often figures on such lists and somebody has to say grace after all. After that, all you need do is to add your own selection of the great wits and the good conversationalists for your very own ideal fantasy fine-dining soiree.

I'll leave you in your imaginations happily working out the seating arrangements and handing out the canapés while I point out that there is one culture where, once a year at least, that fantasy dinner party thing is not just a little mental exercise to fill half a sermon, but is played out to the point of actually laying a place at dinner for the imaginary guest. For all who share that culture it is always the same guest, so if he did decide to make an appearance he'd have his pick of invitations. It might be a tad difficult to choose which to attend, as each dinner party has precisely the same menu, this being, if you haven't worked it out already, the Passover Seder meal where tradition, of course, dictates that an extra setting is always laid at table— for Elijah: just in case he decides to make an appearance.

So, Elijah has his place or in more frugal traditions just an extra cup. I suppose it's a bit like a much more pious and theological version of leaving out a mince pie and a glass of sherry for Santa (the former no doubt explaining why he only ever seems to be seen in XXXXL red jogging pants and the latter explaining his inability to say anything more sober than ho ho ho). I hope Rudolph likes carrots. Even if we could squirm and twist a lot and bring theo-piety into the equation there is still one even more obvious difference between the two, as Santa is the most welcome sort of guest: he brings presents, has one glass of hooch and then leaves almost immediately. Whereas Elijah... Elijah might not quite be anybody's idea of an ideal dinner party guest.

Where do you start?

Even before he rang the doorbell your heart might be regretting the invite: certainly he'd ruin the tarmac if he parked his chariot of fire in your drive.

Given the amount of time he's spent in the wilderness being fed by ravens his table manners may leave something to be desired.

And yes it's true. Elijah could be a very funny man. When the prophets of Baal couldn't get their God to light the fire for them Elijah leapt into sarcasm overload:

*“Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.”*

Quite brilliant repartee there. What a wag. Unfortunately, for the false prophets it ended in tears, or more accurately, it ends with them cut into little pieces. You don't

really want your dinner guests to be on the receiving end of Elijah's humour. It might be difficult to get the stains out of the table cloth.

And still, if you did manage to save your guests and steer Elijah away from his rib-tickers, his conversation is, well, just the one topic really, and unfortunately that one topic is one of the three topics etiquette demands should never be raised in polite company, those being money, politics and Liz Truss. Sorry. Money, politics and religion.

No points for knowing that Elijah majors on religion. It's pretty much all he ever talks about. It's even in his name- big clue there- which is two words for God- El and YAHWEH- glued together- meaning the Lord is my God or perhaps just God is God.

The single-mindedness of Elijah's monothematic name is reflected in the single-mindedness of his life. Everything about Elijah was dedicated to God. Hard work it was, for precious little reward and always, but always, he ended up the least popular person at the party. Whatever comfort Elijah may have garnered from being the prophet of God's mighty acts of power must soon have been dissipated as he was yet again harried out of town, driven into the wilderness to scrape about in the dust. After the shenanigans with the prophets of Baal- surely the magnum opus of a kind of his ministry- Elijah finds himself once again depressed in the desert and as close as a prophet gets to pretty damned suicidal. And does God cut him a bit of slack? Let him take a breather to lick his wounds? Of course not. God doesn't let him off. He feeds Elijah up, sends him up the mountain, treats him to a personal appearance...

... and then sends him back into the fray. Years later, with apprentice Elisha ready to dive into the deep end, God sends for Elijah and brings him to heaven on that famous fiery chariot. And so Elijah leaves the pages of the Bible and enters the ledgers of legend.

Important to note, that in this account, Elijah has not died. He has departed the earth for the heavenly realms without dying. Because, so legend says, God still has work for him to perform: hence the extra place at Passover. He also, apparently, has a reserved ringside chair at circumcisions, but that's for another, less sitting comfortably sermon.

So even whooshed up to heaven, Elijah's work is not done: the man whose very name was all about God; the man whose very life was all about God; touched by the

hand of God, Elijah is still as a man possessed: of truth, of justice, of love. So it is for all who love God.

We are not Elijah. But hopefully we are trying to love God. And just like God holds his prophet so his hand is on us. All those who have been touched by God have their part to play.

Our part witnessing to the love of God, his power to transform, the irresistibility of his touch.

And. Here's the really good bit.

Remember the fantasy dinner party and Elijah's chair at the Seder meal? There is another grand meal where places are set; currently unoccupied, but ready for the arrival of the guest.

Remember the gospel?

The meal with the vacant place is the heavenly banquet.

And the name on the place setting.

Is yours.