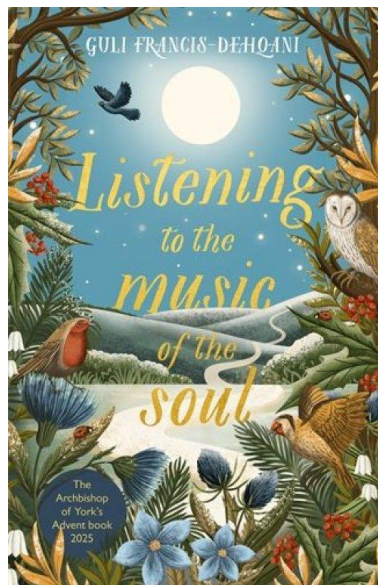


Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

I want to do something rather different this morning, by starting with a piece of music. And a word of warning that, being a YouTube video, we may get an advert first!

Bahram's Melody

I'll explain more about the piece of music a little later, and indeed play it again to conclude. But it's taken from this book 'Listening to the music of the soul' by Bishop Guli Francis-Dehqani¹ who is the Bishop of Chelmsford. The book is the Archbishop of York's Advent Book 2025, and so seemed a good place to start.



The title of the book is rather intriguing – what does it mean to listen to the music of the soul? Bishop Guli explains it like this. There are what we might call the enduring melodies of faith which lie deep within us. For her, these enduring melodies of the soul are about “God’s abiding love shown through the person of Jesus, and the vision of working towards a more just society on earth while waiting for that eternal kingdom beyond death” (p.xii). So, the book is about listening to those enduring melodies within each of us, whatever they may be for us, and relating them to what’s going on in our lives and in the world.

But that “music of the soul” also finds expression in real music – in songs, or pieces of music that hold meaning for us, or express something of those enduring melodies within us. So, each chapter of the book ends with a piece of music that does just that for her – and the piece of music we’ve just heard is one of those.

¹ Guli Francis-Dehqani (2025), *Listening to the music of the soul*, London: SPCK.

Now, I have to confess that I picked this piece of music somewhat at random, and have read the related chapter and a few other selected parts of the book, but not the whole thing. (It's one of the problems of preaching in the early part of Advent, that you don't want to read the whole of an Advent book before it's even started!)

But within this particular chapter, there were some themes that may be helpful to us, and which link to our readings this morning. The first of those is judgement, which is one of the 'four last things' – death, *judgement*, heaven and hell – which are the traditional themes for Advent meditation. Bishop Guli notes that this is not about us judging others – indeed, that we need to beware doing this – but of God's judgement on all of us. She writes, "... all of us, the powerful and the powerless, are together walking the path towards the judgement seat of God". But she continues, "And we can be sure that those who have brought violence on others, will also have to account for their actions, and God's judgement will fall heavy upon them" (p.32).

We get some sense of this in our Gospel reading this morning which, besides the warning that we are to stay alert, also implies judgement – on Noah and on those who didn't believe him, on both of the two people (presumably men) in the field, and both of the two women grinding meal, with judgement clearly falling more heavily on some than others.

And we should thank God for this, both that our lives will be judged, for in that there will be both reckoning and restoration, and that those who have perpetrated violence on others (which may include us, of course) will be judged. And the reason we should be thankful is that judgement is a pre-requisite for justice. And we can then be sure that justice, albeit tinged with mercy, will be done. So, judgement and justice are two big Advent themes, and these clearly resonate with the "music of the soul" for Bishop Guli, and maybe also with us.

But that then links to another great Advent theme, that of hope. Hope that, eventually, all things at every level, from the intensely personal to the global, will be put right. Look at that wonderful prophecy in Isaiah of many peoples streaming towards God in His Temple, longing to be taught God's ways and walk in His paths. And, as a result, as well as personal education and salvation, nation learning not to lift up sword against nation, nor to learn war anymore. How much do we long for that in our own time? How deeply do we believe and pray that this will, eventually, come about?

So, judgement, justice, and hope. But these then link to another theme in this particular chapter of Bishop Guli's book, that of suffering in the present even while we wait in hope for judgement and justice. And the need not just to bear such suffering, but also to challenge it where injustice or persecution are involved.

And she illustrates that by reference to her own story. She came originally from Iran where her father was a Christian convert from Islam, and was indeed the first indigenous Persian bishop of the Anglican Church in Iran. When the Iranian Revolution occurred in 1979, "a

raft of injustices were perpetrated against the Christian community, including the confiscation of several institutions, raids on property, the harassment of members and the murder of one of the clergy” (p.27).

Bishop Guli, then aged 13, and her family had to evacuate, and came to the UK in 1980. And it is a testimony to our country’s and our Church’s welcoming of the stranger that they were able to settle, albeit with some difficulties, and that we now have a female bishop of Iranian origin who has a seat in the House of Lords. What does that say about our present and potential future immigration policies? And Bishop Guli has quite a lot to say about those, as you can imagine!

But before the family left Iran, tragedy struck, in that her older brother Bahram, aged 24, “was gunned down in the prime of life because the small church community, made up primarily of converts and second- or third-generation Christians, was seen as a threat to the emerging Islamic Republic” (p.28). Here is personal and family suffering on a tragic scale, in the context of state-sponsored violence. And how many today, in Ukraine and Russia, in Gaza and Israel know something similar?

But out of tragedy, some good can come. Bahram was a talented musician and pianist, and some years before he died he composed a tune to accompany a hymn written by his father. After his death, this was arranged as a quartet for flute, violin, cello and piano, and it is played at a memorial concert every five years. Bishop Guli says of it: “It is a haunting melody, beautifully arranged, but more importantly it is a reminder of all that was good about Bahram. It is music for the soul, playing on long after violence did its worst and Bahram was taken from us. In life and faith, some things can never be destroyed and there we find the possibility of healing and transformation” (p.38).

And, just to add to the poignancy, the cellist in the video is Bishop Guli’s eldest son, Bahram’s nephew. And so to conclude, with possibly another advert to remind us of the triviality of consumerism in the face of real life issues, here again is Bahram’s melody.

Bahram’s Melody