

“ZECHARIAH’S SONG”

Luke 1:67-79

If you were here last week, you may recall that we’re taking time this Advent to look at the three great songs which accompanied the story of the Nativity, all from Luke’s Gospel. Last Sunday we focussed on Mary’s Song, *The Magnificat*, which she sang out having heard that she was to be the mother of Jesus and having received Elizabeth’s blessing. Next week we’re going to look at the Song of the Angels who came to announce Jesus’ birth to the shepherds. Sandwiched in between them – and thus often overlooked – is the Song of Zechariah, also used in the worship of the Church, and called *The Benedictus* according to the first word of the song in Latin. When I was looking back through the stuff we’d done in Advent in previous years, I realised we’d looked at these songs last year, too, but there’s always something different to spot in the words of Scripture, so this isn’t just a repeat of last year’s sermon (as if anyone would remember!).

Mary’s Song was sung in response to the news that she was pregnant. Zechariah’s Song is in response to the actual birth, not of Jesus himself, but of his cousin and his forerunner, John the Baptist. John’s birth has been pretty unusual in many ways. There was an announcement by an angel again. Mary and Joseph weren’t expecting to have a baby because they were not they married and Mary was a virgin, whereas Zechariah and Elizabeth weren’t expecting to have a baby because Elizabeth was barren and they were – as Luke puts it – “*well on in years*” (*Luke 1:7*). [The Greek word Luke uses for “*well on in years*” is actually the same as the word used in 2:36 of Anna, there translated “*very old*”, who is at least 84, possibly as much as 96, depending on how you translate things.] And to cap it all, Zechariah was struck dumb when the announcement was made.

So when John is born, Zechariah is obviously pretty chuffed, but he’s also very relieved that he’s now got his voice back. And immediately he is filled with the Holy Spirit and sings out this great song of praise and joy. In many ways it’s just like any new dad who is really over the moon at the birth of a child. I can remember the sense of joy I had driving back from the hospital through the relatively quiet early morning streets of North London and down the A38 from Burton after the birth of our children. But anything I might have been singing on those occasions has not found its way into the prayer books of the church as Zechariah’s has. This is a special song indeed.

And in this song, Zechariah looks three ways. He begins by praising **God’s mercy**, then he says a bit about **John’s ministry**, before singing about **Jesus’s mission**. He doesn’t give the same amount of words to each of those three, but here are things to learn from each part, particularly the last line, which is where we’ll probably spend most of our time this morning.

Zechariah starts off quite properly – and as a great example for us to follow – praising God. He is, of course, delighted that he has had a son himself, but he is able to see what’s going on in his own life as a part of God’s great overarching plan for the salvation of all humanity, all creation. Zechariah can see, if you want to use such language, how this little story fits into the great metanarrative of God’s eternal work. He sings of God as a **Redeemer** (v68) who has liberated his people – a constant theme in the praise and worship of God’s people, the Jews. That is all bound up in his overall plan of **salvation** (vv69,71). Although Zechariah isn’t fully aware of how it’s going to be accomplished, he knows that God has something special in mind for humanity through the birth not only of his own son John, but through the birth of the one to whom John will point.

This is, of course, all bound up with the aspect of God’s character and work to which Mary makes reference in her song, God’s **mercy** (v72). God wants to rescue his creation from the consequences of sin and evil’s presence in what he had originally created perfect. It’s something that has been part of his plan from the beginning – another reference here back to the promise God made to Zechariah’s distant ancestor, Abraham. This mercy will not only enable men and women to be rescued from their enemies, but will also help them – help us – to “*serve him without fear*”. Part of our destiny as human beings is to serve God, not in a cowed and subservient way, but with a positive sense of joy and privilege, “*in holiness and righteousness*”. That was all well worth praising God for.

Then Zechariah turns to his own son, this miracle baby who is to be called John and who will make a name for himself (quite literally) by baptising people. But also he will be known as “*a prophet of the Most High*”. John is, if you like the very last of the Old Testament prophets. He stands in the tradition of those who will make known to people God’s ways and who will point to a Messiah figure who has yet to appear. He will call people to repentance – that’s what the baptism was all about – but also point them in the direction of the one who is to come and make God’s eternal plan reality for humanity. John is to be the trailblazer for Jesus.

And the rest of the song deals with him, the promised Messiah, the Christ. Zechariah does not know all the details about Jesus – and it’s John’s job to point to him, anyway, but he gives us some hints here as to what might be expected of this figure. He is going to “*give his people the knowledge of salvation*” (v77). Jesus will bring people a means of escape from their enemies, the enemies of sin and death, the enemies which blight the lives of all men and women and give rise to the fears, anxieties and hopelessness that can easily drive us to despair.

Part of that “*knowledge of salvation*” comes from the assurance of forgiveness. The things that wear us down, that cause us to despair, that cut us off from God, that haunt our minds and stunt our growth

towards wholeness can be dealt with by Jesus. And the reason for that is, Zechariah mentions once again, “*the tender mercy of our God*” (v78). That is like a shaft of sunlight streaming out of heaven and lighting up our otherwise dark lives. In the midst of all that surrounds us, all that scares us, all that depresses us, all that threatens to overcome us, there is the light of God’s mercy, salvation, forgiveness. In a world where it often seems difficult to know where to turn, in the fog of competing and confusing human ideas and ideologies, God shines a light, a guiding light, a light that points out for us the way of peace.

That light points to the peace we can know in our relationship with God. We can be once again restored to the place God intended for us. Because of Jesus, we can know the assurance that our sins have not cut us off from God. That enables us to face life, with all its ups and downs, all its uncertainties and mysteries, with a powerful sense of peace. But it also means that we ourselves are to model that peace in our own dealings with each other. This is one of the ways – one of the very important ways – in which we are “*to serve him*”. In a world which is so confused, so conflicted, so unsure of what is going on, those who have had their lives transformed by Jesus need to be shining out for him. Are we truly walking the way of peace, walking in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace?

That is so crucial in the times through which we are currently passing. I’m usually a fairly upbeat kind of person, but I have to admit that the events of the past few months have really concerned me – upset me, even. Look at what is happening in our world, in our own culture, in our own neighbourhoods and workplaces and – dare I say – churches. We have seen a couple of pretty significant international political events this year – the European referendum and the Presidential election in the USA. The actual results themselves may be troubling to many people – history will judge that: at the moment we know we need to move forward with Brexit and Donald Trump as given. They were both decisions taken within a broadly democratic framework (not that democracy is necessarily God’s ideal). (And, just so you know, they were both decisions with which I did not agree.)

What concerns me, though, and what I sense is totally at odds with what God in his mercy wants for humanity, is the exceptionally sharp polarisation that has been caused by these events and the appalling abuse that has been hurled by each side in the respective debates. There was plenty of it all in the run-up to both votes, but the way that has developed since the decision to leave the EU and the election of Donald Trump – whose name you rarely hear now without some pejorative epithet attached, often by people who call themselves Christians – the way that it has developed is quite unprecedented, I think.

And that name-calling is part of the problem. We have allowed a casual use of demonising labels to creep into our speech. Everyone seems to be trying to claim the moral high ground – very often with little sense of actual morality involved. There are sharp disagreements over all kinds of policies and plans,

which is only natural in the cut and thrust of human politics, but I am at a loss to understand why so many people – especially, it seems in recent months, those who normally conduct themselves with an air of smug self-righteousness at the unarguable correctness of their point of view – have been so abusive of those who have a different set of prejudices from their own. How often have you heard those who voted to leave the EU or for Donald Trump referred to as stupid or ignorant? How often have you yourself assumed and, indeed, implied that those who don't share your opinion on such matters are simply less educated, less well-informed, less worthy of space on this planet than you? Is that walking in the path of peace?

Peter Rhodes, a columnist in one of the evening papers whose opinions I usually find very unattractive, recently wrote that he tells people, "*I voted for Brexit because I am poorly educated and hate foreigners*", because that is the assumption most people have of pro-leave voters and they then leave him alone. It's a bit like the idea in Soviet Russia and, I think, in North Korea now, that those who disagree with the party leadership's clearly unarguable policies must surely be mentally ill and should be locked up.

There's a lot more I could say about all that, but I won't go on. What I will say, though – and, again, this is clearly not a characteristic of the path of peace – is that what we are now witnessing and what many of us have been uncritically sucked into, is the result of the climate of mistrust and suspicion that has been steadily developing in our society. We have a considerably more fragmented society that we had even half a century ago and we are all on the lookout for the worst in people. We don't trust anyone any more. Look at the rise in the usage of CCTV cameras, the powers that the Police and Justice Department have to tap into our communications, the ways in which everything needs to be evidenced by a piece of paper. We are gradually being trained to assume that everyone is up to no good, whether they are calling at our door to try and sell us something, taking our children out for the day on an organised trip, or sitting on the bus wearing a rucksack and a big beard. Is that walking in the way of peace?

That polarisation and fragmentation of our society is happening because of our ignorance of other people's feelings, beliefs and customs. Why did many people vote to leave the EU? Not because they're racists, not even because they're xenophobes, but because they felt no-one listened to them or understood their concerns. Why did 70% of white working class males vote for Donald Trump? Not because they're sexist or corrupt or racist but because they felt ignored by a ruling class that had other priorities than them. Why do Muslims close ranks and retreat to the safety of their mosques and community centres? Not because they're all building bombs but because they feel that they are all being judged for the actions of a very small minority. Why do so many people want nothing to do with Jesus? Not because they have

heard the gospel and rejected it but because they believe that his followers are watching them, judging them and condemning them.

You see, once you start to lose touch with others, once you decide that you don't need to understand them (which is definitely not the same as agreeing with them, by the way), then you can start to see them not as people like yourself but with different ideas, but as things you can label and for which you do not need to feel any sense of mercy or sympathy. It becomes easy to refer to those people who don't agree with you as racist or homophobic or misogynistic or fundamentalist or extremist or whatever – easy and simplistic ways to try and dismiss them, without really trying to discover what they think and why.

Some of you may be thinking that the preacher shouldn't be talking about politics like this from the pulpit. Well, I don't agree with that – but I'm not actually talking about politics this morning: I'm talking about attitudes. And your faith, your desire to follow Jesus should absolutely affect your attitudes. You cannot call yourself a disciple of Jesus and not let him transform your attitudes.

Things are not as they should be in our world – and let's be honest, they never really have been. But we are, I believe, living in dark times. Do we want to contribute to that darkness by following the ways of the culture around us? Or do we want to get involved in allowing God's light "*to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death*"? Remember those words to which we so often return in chapter 12 of Paul's *Letter to the Romans* – we are not to conform to what's going on around us, not to be swept up in the fog of mistrust and suspicion that is blowing around us, not to be sucked into a mind-set that contributes to fragmentation and polarisation, not to assume that we've got it all right and we can just get on and enjoy life. We are to be transformed by the power of God's Spirit renewing our attitudes and mind-set. Later on in that twelfth chapter, Paul writes this: "*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*" It is possible – that's why Jesus came into our world and died. So think carefully about how much it depends on you. Ask for God's light to shine on and through you, so that you can display – however imperfectly as a flawed human being – something of God's tender mercy to those who so desperately need to experience it for themselves.

Zechariah's song is a great song of praise to a God who is merciful, who offers salvation, who can redeem anyone from the most desperate situation, who longs for all men and women to be able to walk in his light in the path of peace. God sent his Son, Jesus, into this world to do something amazing to enable all that to happen. Are we going to proclaim that message, as John did? Or are we going to contribute to the darkness that prevents so many people from enjoying that peace? Once again this Christmas, let's have a go at proclaiming the message of forgiveness and mercy. Let's walk the path of peace and share that peace with each other and with those who as yet are outside the church. For the glory of God through

whose *“tender mercy the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.”*