

Sermon Archive 225

Sunday 9 December, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Luke 1: 68-79

Luke 3: 1-6

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Background to the first reading, the song of Zechariah. Zechariah, an elderly priest, had had a vision while serving in the temple. Somewhere through the smoke of the incense, amid the white noise of the chanting of the people, he thought he'd glimpsed an angel - an angel telling him that he's to become a father. He and his elderly wife, Elizabeth, are to welcome into the world a little boy. They're to nurture and love him. They're to name him John. It's not a family name - but it means "God is gracious". They are to name their child after the graciousness of God.

Zechariah's response to the angel is incredulity. He can't see it happening. Whereupon the angel takes his tongue - tells him that he won't speak again until the day that he knows the promise has been kept. So it is, that some months later, as he and Elizabeth are holding their little baby, cradling him and bringing him to the temple for naming, saying Amen to the name of John, ("God is gracious"), that Zechariah finds his voice again. He opens his mouth, and out falls this great hymn of praise and thanksgiving. It's the song of a flabbergasted father at the beginning of his son's life.

The other reading is the song of that same son, nearing the end of his life. Two songs, book-ending the life of a man who was sent to show that light is shining, that compassion is coming, that forgiveness is flowing.

And so: a two song sermon of singing, of nurturing, of fulfilment and the dawn.

-ooOoo-

No surprise that Zechariah should know his religious history! He's a priest, after all. He knows the Hebrew stories of the ancestors: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He knows about the covenant, about great king David, about the prophets. When he launches into his very public song, the first song for a long time since

the loss of his voice, he covers all the usual things that a priest in good standing would cover. "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel!", comes straight out of the psalms - words for public worship. Holiness and righteousness of the nation; affirmation of the national identity. It's regular party line, a piling up of acceptable stock phrases for a people looking backwards - defined by the early chapters, telling the regular public story. Zechariah's being the priest.

Until his song gets kidnapped. Kidnapped by the heart? Kidnapped by a little child in his wife's embrace? Suddenly: the phrase "And you my child . . ." The priest shuts up, and the father takes over. Now he's singing to his son - his unexpected, surprising son - this little person he's naming after the graciousness of God. In fact, Zechariah's no longer talking to God, no longer addressing the people. He's talking to this little miracle he's calling John. And now the song's no longer about what has happened, history and tradition. It's about what will happen tomorrow - what the child will be nurtured to do - how he's going to be grown - how he's going to fit into something that is only just now beginning to dawn. Zechariah's been kidnapped into the future, recruited into hope, snaffled into nurturing a baby prophet. He's praying about what his child shall become . . .

Who will our children become? There's a prayer that often gets said here, when we baptise little children. It goes like this:

"We thank you for . . . the new life you have created; for this child who has been born among us, and whom you have entrusted to our care. You have given him ears with which to hear, and eyes with which to see. Bless too his mouth, so that he may learn how to laugh, and to use human speech. Bless his hands and feet, so that he may learn to walk and dance and run. Bless his mind, so that he may learn from his own experience that everything you have made is good. May he be secure within his family, growing in wisdom and strength, learning to take the ups and downs of life in his stride. May we who are mature and responsible never cause him to stumble, but rather love him, and lead him to the truth. Above all, may we help him to grow in knowledge of your love and acceptance and find fulfillment in following the way of Jesus Christ."

They're the sorts of things we pray for our children.

Who will they become? Suspicious or trusting? Closed or open? Mean or generous? Cruel or kind? Cynical or full of hope? Judging or accepting?

Hurting or healing? Living in lies or seeking the truth?

Zechariah is distracted from his stock religious phrases, and sings instead a song of hope for his brand new child. He and Elizabeth are now giving themselves to be nurturers; and somehow in *that* the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on all who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

I'm reminded of the words of some other person called John. "Beloved, let us love another, for love is of God." Nurturing the human being, encouraging the beauty, drawing out from one another that which is good.

There it is. The Song of Zechariah marking the beginning of a father's task of love and nurture. A new life starts, a new song is sung, a new task of loving begins. One book end is in place.

-ooOoo-

The second book end - the second song. The little child has become an adult, and he's taking up the task for which he was born. He has been nurtured. He has been formed. He has been made ready to be called a prophet of the Most High.

So he appears in the wilderness, opens his mouth - out comes the song: "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain made low, the crooked made straight, the rough made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God".

No surprise that John's song deploys the imagery of bulldozing - knocking down mountains that are in the way, punching the straightest, shortest route through to the other side. John will become known for his simplicity and directness. (You brood of vipers. The axe already is at the root. Repent, repent!) Straight talking truth to power is going to get him arrested eventually, and finally killed. I wonder; did his parents encourage his sharper edges? Did they feed him a diet of courage? Did they swaddle him in directness? Did they fill his childhood wardrobe with the whole armour of God - including helmet, breastplate and sword? Probably! The power of the parent to form the child is great. Seldom is it entirely all just in the genes - a slightly angular, "it's in the blood" pure gift from God.

When we talk about nurturing the child, praying those sort of baptismal

prayers we pray, it's easy to fall into sentimental thoughts about gentleness and softness and bunnies. But such is the world, and such is the thorny task of pursuing the right, that more is required from us than fluff and bunnies. Strength is required. Courage is required. Commitment is required. And these too need to be nurtured. I suspect that Zechariah and Elizabeth may have been canny parents, quite sophisticated practitioners of prophetic nurture. "And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High - so we need to get you ready".

Two songs, buttressing the life of a person called John. Two book ends, placed around the life of someone who fulfils his purpose - opening the door for God to be with us. There it is.

-ooOoo-

A few words in conclusion.

As we journey through Advent, cradling within our concern the world within which we live, as we approach the delicate nativity scene above which angels sing of peace on earth, what should be our song? - the song that we sing together?

I dare to say that I hope it will be a song of nurture - of nurturing all the good within us that is needed for peace. I dare to say I hope it will be about forgiveness, about compassion, about the banishing of fear. It will be about keeping the promise, showing mercy, all flesh seeing that which heals them. It will be about equipping one another, strengthening one another, to do the demanding work of God. Can we learn to sing that kind of song?

Listen my child! "In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Distracted from our old priestly duties to the past, we're beguiled by a gift in the present, a life to be nurtured - turning to the singing of a new kind of song.

We keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.