

Zacharias' Story

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Chris Cheah

6 December 2009— Given at Calvary Hospital

Luke 1: 68-79 (aka Song of Zacharias or The Benedictus); Luke 3:1-6

Today is the second Sunday in Advent, and on this day we normally hear about John the Baptist, and his message of repentance. Advent, of course, is the beginning of our church year, and is a time of preparation and reflection, before we hear the story of Jesus' coming at Christmas. It is a time mixed with messages of hope, and of prophecies long in the waiting. It also has a slightly austere edge as it encourages us to quieten down and turn our minds to John the Baptist's message of repentance – which means turning towards God, and making decisions about change.

This year, I want to come at this by looking at the story of John the Baptist's father – the priest Zacharias. Our first reading was Zacharias' great prophesy about his son John, known commonly as the Benedictus. That prophecy is, though, the end of Zacharias' story. While it is an almost perfect summary of what Advent is about, in fact Zacharias' story is much more interesting and one we almost never get to ponder via our lectionary readings.

Over the course of the next year our gospel readings mainly come from St Luke's gospel. Luke is interesting for many reasons, but one big difference between him and all of the others is that chooses to start his story of Jesus' life with lots of other stories – stories of angels and visitations and people bursting into prophetic song, - all of this long before we hear about Jesus' birth, let alone his life. Very Advent-ish.

There are two interleaving lines of story throughout the first chapter of Luke's gospel. The really famous one is of course the story of the Annunciation when the angel Gabriel visits Mary, when we hear their courteous interaction, including Mary's response – her reflective and great “yes” to accept the conception of God's Truth within her.

However, woven around Mary's story, is the somewhat longer story of Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth.

In fact, the very first person to walk onto the stage in Luke's gospel – long before Jesus – is in fact this old priest, Zacharias, closely followed by his wife Elizabeth – which itself makes them worth looking at more closely. We hear that they are decent, respectable and important older people. In fact, Zacharias is Jewish establishment – he served as an important priest in the temple.

This is interesting, in part maybe because it underlines by contrast how different Mary is – she is young, female, and miles from the centres of power – in short it underlines just how much she is a nobody in the worldly sense.

But back to Zacharias. It is late in the afternoon, and right in the middle of an important service (the hour of incense ... (Beryl and Grace please note!)), he suddenly finds an angel next to him who starts talking (very inconvenient). Please note that again in contrast with Mary, the angel visits Zacharias, the man and priest, and not Elizabeth the woman and mother.

The angel explains John the Baptist's role at some length (more than Mary gets, in fact) and quite clearly. And this is worth hearing in full because it helps explain why John the Baptist features so prominently during Advent.

READ Luke 1: 13-17

Now, having heard all of this Zacharias foolishly asks a question – “how shall I know this? I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.”

To which the angel explains that he is a Gabriel (aka not just any old angel, but a really important one), and Zacharias gets struck dumb, unable to speak “until the day these things take place” because he had not believed. He then comes out of the temple, and everyone realises that something has happened, but no-one, seemingly even Elizabeth, knows just what – Elizabeth realises she is pregnant only some time later.

Already, what a strange but fascinating story don't you think? It is both powerful in its own right, but it also has lots of resonances, and contrasts, with Mary's own annunciation – just as John the Baptist's story will have resonances and contrasts with Jesus' story.

It is only after we have heard this first part of Zacharias' story (and its rather fearful seeming end) that we get to hear the story of the Annunciation to Mary. Mary the nobody who listens, ponders, and then accepts. A little later Mary visits Elizabeth and the babies seem to recognise each other in the wombs and so on, and Elizabeth is the first person to burst out into a poem. Not long after, Mary sort of responds with her much grander prophetic song – the canticle we call the Magnificat which describes both her response to God, and a grand vision for what the coming of grace into the world means.

A bit later, John the Baptist is finally born. Eight long days later, John is finally brought to the temple for his Jewish naming and circumcision ceremony – they are about to name him “Zacharias” after his dad, but then ... thank goodness ... Elizabeth says no, no ... is to be called “John”. Surprised, the others turn around to check with dad, who with difficulty writes his name down – and yes, it is ... John.

It is only then that Zacharias is finally able to speak and he praises the Lord, and then bursts out into a wonderful prophecy of his own – with the Benedictus, our first reading today. And then we simply hear that John grew strong, and went into the desert.

Now – why talk about this? Well in part it is because the coming of Jesus into the world is bound up with John's story, very intimately. John the final son of the righteous tradition, who is important and whose message of repentance is the way of preparation for healing the real message of truth, who is Jesus.

Just as John is not Jesus, so Zacharias is not Mary. He came close, but maybe did not have Mary's clarity nor ability to say yes to the strange and scary message of REAL truth visiting his soul. And as a result he got struck dumb. Maybe that is what happens to us when we recognise at some level of our being the truth but find we can't properly respond to the Truth – we maybe kind of get struck dumb for a while? Grace often works in very mysterious ways. But maybe a period of silence was what Zacharias with all his worldly success and status needed to develop? Certainly the wait was worth it, as the Benedictus would have to be one of the most beautiful poems of hope that exists. It is theologically rich as befits a man who had been a

priest all his life, but had been forced to think and wrestle. For us, when things happen, maybe we should ponder as he did and maybe our moment may come unexpectedly, like it did for Zacharias on that strange afternoon in the temple.

I love those words of the Benedictus. The first part of it is a song of thanksgiving that God's longstanding promises are about to be fulfilled, and that Israel will be delivered from its misery. It is such a wonderful song of hope.

The second part is, well, a benediction directed towards his son John, where Zacharias lovingly talks about his own son's role. This is very deep poetry with many messages about what this Advent Season of preparation is about : including of promises being kept by God, a message of a beautiful end that can be maybe intuited but not described directly, a message about the imminent coming of spiritual truth into the world – the Dayspring from on high to mention a few. What does that image of a “Dayspring” conjure up for you?

So let me finish by reading out again, Zacharias' loving words to his own son, John the Baptist. I like to imagine him holding John as he says these words :

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.' — Luke 1: 76 79