

The Reign of Christ (Song of Zechariah – Luke 1. 68-79)

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Today is the Feast of the Reign of Christ, and the last week of the church's year. Next week we begin the new liturgical year with the season of Advent and our preparations for Christmas. And as I said last Saturday, last week and this, the lectionary readings replace the psalm set for the day with two biblical songs – the Song of Isaiah and the Song of Zechariah. We are taking some notice of this fact!

Both songs, one each from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, express their deep trust that God will come among the people to save them. Both testify prophetically to the fulfilment of this hope in their own experience. 'Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid', sings Isaiah, 'for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation' (Isa. 12.2). I said last week that Isaiah's testimony emerges from his personal encounter with the nature of God as creative possibility, capable always of doing a 'new thing'. The political situation might look bleak, the basis for optimism unclear. But Isaiah's hope is based not in circumstance or the immediacy of likely-looking prospects, but in the very being of God. There is hope for the future and for the people because God is. That is all there is to it.

Zechariah's testimony is equally a matter of faith, but it erupts in response to a happening in history, an event in his own life. He has become against all expectation the father of a son. And in the realisation of this seemingly impossible hope, Zechariah discerns the imminence of God's long promised salvation, the 'dawn from on high' already breaking over the horizon. Let me say a bit more about Zechariah's story, before

we turn to the question of how these two songs connect to the story of Christmas and its significance for us.

According to Luke's gospel, Zechariah was the husband of Elizabeth who was the cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were descendants of the priestly line, both righteous before God and living blamelessly according to all the commandments. 'But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years' (Luke 1.7). It's the classic biblical set-up – God creates out of nothing, God brings light to the darkness, sight to the blind, and causes the barren woman to bear a child. For, as the angel Gabriel tells Mary when she hears the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy, 'nothing will be impossible with God' (Luke 1.37). We are supposed to know that God is at work, because no natural explanation is sufficient.

But Zechariah himself does not recognise what's going on, at least not at first. The angel of the Lord visits him while he is serving as a priest in the temple sanctuary, telling him the good news: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John'. What's more, this son 'will be filled with the Holy Spirit' and will 'make ready a people prepared for the Lord'. Zechariah, however, hasn't got past the first bit: 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years'. His doubt is met by a rather severe response from the angel: 'because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur'. And so it is.

Zechariah finally gets his chance to redeem himself on the day of his son's naming and circumcision. The friends and relatives want to give the boy his father's name, but Elizabeth says, 'No: he is to be called John'. When Zechariah confirms his wife's words, Luke writes, 'immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God'. Filled, then, with the Holy Spirit, his words emerging from

his long silence with clarity and authority, Zechariah gives voice to his song: 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them'.

Now, this is a beautiful story, but it may seem more like a fairy tale than anything connected to our experience. How does it help us, as I believe it does, to hear the Christmas story afresh and to prepare us to receive its transforming possibilities?

In the lectionary's juxtaposition of the songs of Isaiah and Zechariah, we see the movement from a generic, 'ontological' hope grounded simply in faith in God's being, to its concentration in the proclamation of Zechariah as something imminent, historical and particular. It's a bit like the shift that can happen for us from a basic faith that, as long as we face in the direction of life, possibilities will rise up for us, to the recognition that a particular possibility has taken shape and is being realised. I remember that in the months before I finally recognised my sense of vocation to the priesthood, I had entered (after a long period of doubt and confusion) into a state of mysterious trust that as long as I kept true, something would break open; and then one day that state of basic trust turned into a clear perception of a concrete path emerging. It was an experience that gave content, for me, to that lovely biblical phrase, 'when the fullness of time was come'.

Zechariah's song testifies to the faithfulness of the people of Israel over centuries, their holding fast (at least in pockets) to this stance of basic trust, *and* his amazed wonder that in his time, intimately bound up with his own family, this hope has been concretely realised. 'Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham ...'. Notice, then, that it is in the light of this centuries' long hope for 'salvation' that Jesus has the kind of significance he does. The promise heard ages before reveals a kind of deliberateness and purpose about God's dealings with the people of Israel, and

magnifies the meaning of Jesus understood as the fulfilment of that promise. Hence the tone of the birth narratives in Luke and Matthew's gospels.

What's more, the lectionary's juxtaposition suggests that it is this very hoping and waiting and longing that has prepared at least some of the people to receive their salvation: in an analogous way, it was my hoping and waiting and longing in the face of no fixed expectation that prepared me finally to receive the gift of my vocation. Without that preparation, that making space in me, I doubt that it could have happened. And that is true, I think, for many of the big things in life if you think of your own times of waiting. Zechariah and Elizabeth's son John is born to bring to its culmination this long time of preparation and space-making, going 'before the Lord to prepare his ways' so that when 'the tender mercy' of God finally does appear among the people, it has some hope of being recognised and received. Whether or not Zechariah really said these words, this song in Luke's gospel testifies to the experience of the early church that in Jesus, 'the hopes and fears of all the years' *have* been realised, that the long preparation of the people of Israel to receive God's very presence in their midst has culminated in the teaching and ministry, the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

Yet here's the difficulty. For, as Rowan Williams has pointed out, the testimony of the gospels is that mostly this appearing of the Lord to his people, the fulfilment of their hopes for restoration and deliverance went unrecognised.¹ We can hazard a guess why. What could prepare anyone for the fact that when God comes, it is as a child, vulnerable to the creation God has made and so a profound subversion of any concept of divinity available till then? What could prepare anyone for the fact that the way God 'saves' is by undergoing betrayal and death, drawing his followers into lives partaking of that same vulnerability?

¹ Rowan Williams, 'The Finality of Christ', *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.95.

Now it is tempting for us to relate to the stories of Christmas and Easter, as if we are the ones who have got God taped – the 'Israel' of Jesus' day did not recognise his appearing, but well – we know better. But if the story of Christmas suggests anything, it suggests that there is an obscurity, a hiddenness and an unexpectedness about God's coming that perhaps we never get used to. And maybe it takes always a prophetic kind of vision like Isaiah and Zechariah's to discern God's coming in the midst of life going on much as usual. As we approach this season of waiting and preparation, let us do so in humility and with open, receptive hearts for the Lord who still comes to give light in the darkness and to guide our feet in the way of peace.