

Sermon for the Birth of St John Baptist by The Reverend Colin James
All Saints Church Wokingham 24 June 2018
Luke 1.57-66,80

When, after nine months of enforced silence, Zechariah at last finds his voice, it's not to speak to Elizabeth his wife, or the family or even to his baby son. His very first words are to praise God. "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel who has come to his people and set them free." Nor does he suppose that the birth of John is the main event. "He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, born of the house of his servant David."

Zechariah has been told that John's part in this is to "go before (the Saviour)...to make ready a people prepared for (him)." (1.17) It's just the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promise made long ago to "show mercy" to his people and to "remember (the) holy covenant" he'd made with them. That promise was to "set them free", "free to worship him without fear".

Only when he's made this ringing declaration of praise and faith does Zechariah turn to the baby and speak directly to him. Although I say the words every day as part of Morning Prayer, they still give me a thrill: "And you child, shall be called the prophet of the most high, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way." This infant in his cot has been put on earth to share "knowledge of salvation", "the forgiveness of sins", to declare "the tender compassion of our God", to usher in "the dawn from on high" and "to guide our feet into the way of peace". That's quite a load to place on such tiny shoulders. But of course it's not nearly as much as Jesus himself will have to bear.

Mary and Elizabeth have shared the joy of the unexpected gift of a child. Both have been told that these will be no ordinary children, but Mary will be warned that her joy will be mingled with great pain. Since Zechariah and Elizabeth are already old when John is born, it's reasonable to suppose that they at least will be saved from knowing the gruesome fate that awaits him.

Before that happens, however, they may still have been around when John left home and set off on his own into the desert, waiting for the moment when his mission of proclaiming the Saviour's arrival should begin. It's sometimes been suggested that John may have linked up with the Essenes, that ultra exclusive sect at Qumran beside the Dead Sea, many of whose scrolls have come down to us. But it doesn't seem very likely that someone trained in that school would've greeted Jesus' arrival with such enthusiasm, hailing him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the (whole) world." (Jn 1.29b)

We don't know how well, if at all, Jesus and John knew each other before that encounter. We do know that Jesus recognised that their "styles", as we might say today, were very different. "John has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say 'He has a demon'. The Son of Man has come eating, and drinking and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard.'" (Lk 7.33-34)

And when Jesus receives the dreadful news of John's murder he withdraws to a deserted place to be alone. (Mt 14.13) Does he ask himself whether God's great

project in which he and John have so great a part to play is about to fail? Or does he, as seems more probable, have a new realisation of how badly things are likely to turn for anyone who dares to stand up and oppose evil? Does it confirm for him that in the end there'll be no avoiding a similarly brutal outcome?

Throughout his life Jesus is plagued with thoughts of what lies ahead. He knows why he's there and never flinches from what he has to do. But right up until the end he still hopes there may be a way to be spared the cup of suffering. (Lk 22.42) John's untimely death tells him loud and clear that that's extremely unlikely. In his death, as in his life, John the Baptist is indeed the forerunner of Jesus the Saviour.

So do these sombre thoughts mean that God's great purpose, that of setting us free, is destined to fail from the start? Not at all! If I'd thought that for a moment, I should've abandoned my dog collar years ago! Zechariah declaims that the oath God swore was to set his people free from the hands of their enemies. Is that oath still valid for us, and if so what does it mean today?

On its own the word "freedom" is meaningless! No doubt that's why it makes such a convenient political slogan. It has a ring about it. But it's a hollow ring until we can say "free from what" and perhaps even more importantly, "free for what" And how can we be sure that our expectations are the right ones? Jesus' contemporaries still looked for God's anointed one, the Messiah, to drive out from the country God had given them the enemies who occupied it and oppressed them. Surely the time would one day come when they'd regain control of it and settle down to feed on the fruits of the land and worship God in a magnificently restored Temple.

But they were forgetting, or ignoring, all the lessons of history. The fact was that every time they'd enjoyed peace and prosperity they very quickly turned away from God and sought their happiness elsewhere in selfish pursuits. And that can surely only mean that the enemies from whom God wills to set them and us free are not to be understood principally as people or nations.

What deprives us of our freedom is something much more subtle and pernicious. Something which acts within us, often without our even realising it. It results from our natural self-centredness. That's the sort of default position we so readily slip back into unless we're constantly being set free from it. If this were something we could somehow keep to ourselves, it might not be so bad. But the trouble is that my self-centredness inevitably comes up against everyone else's, and then the scene is set for strife. What's worse is that we can't solve the problem, because we are the problem.

We need help. And that's what we believe God offers us in the totally unself-centred life of Jesus. He is so much more than just an inspiring model. He can help us because he's been here before us and longs to stand beside us in our moments of temptation and weakness.

So, if what we need God to free us from is essentially our own selfish selves, what is it he's to free us for? The song of Zechariah helps us here too. We're to be "free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous all the days of our life." Expressed in such beautiful words it may sound simple, if unachievable. But there's another way

of putting it, which is to say that God wants to set us free to be the selves he always intended us to be.

God created us because he loved us, even before we existed. And if we're created by love, it must surely follow that we're created for love, to be loving creatures. And that means being empty of the self-centred-ness which, as we've seen, is our real enemy.

Being set free to worship means putting God at the centre in place of ourselves. That's a pretty fearsome prospect. How could we possibly achieve it? Not on our own, that's for sure. Which is why there's such comfort in those additional words, "to worship him without fear."

And we're also assured of God's unfailing constancy in the words "all the days of our life". Generations of those who have gone before us and died with a blessing on their lips should remind us that, however far we may wander from our heavenly Father, he will never walk away from us. "When were still far off (he) met us in (his) Son and brought us home." The life that Jesus shared, and still shares with us in this all too often sad and frightening place is the proof that, however little we may deserve it, he wills that all his children shall be free and the whole earth live to praise his name.

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