

Sunday 5th December 2021

ADVENT II

Luke 1; 67-79

Preparing

The second Sunday in Advent, with its challenge of Peace, invites of to ask questions on preparing. Which is strange in a way, especially when the shops have been filled with lights and decorations since the end of October (at the very least). Or the supermarkets sharing their Christmas ads, controversial or not. So, it is not that Christmas will catch us by surprise. And yet, for what are we preparing? I do hope that it is much more than simply exchange of presents, a hefty meal, ticking the list of Christmas cards... because if that is what it comes down to, I think we have lost the meaning of Christmas.

Today's reading is part of a wonderfully surprising story: though Zechariah sings his joy today, the story began earlier. Zechariah and Elizabeth were part of the priestly family of the time. Descendants of Aaron and upright in the sight of God, and yet they felt a gap in their lives. They had not children. In Biblical times children were seen as a blessing of God, and not to have children was seen as a curse. Of course, things are hugely different today, but not then. And if a priest as Zechariah had no children and was believed to be cursed, how would he be seen a faithful priest. And despite this we are told *they were old, they were blameless, they were upright, BUT...*

One day an angel of the Lord appears and tells Zachariah that Elizabeth would bear a child, but he cannot grasp this, he says he and his wife are old, beyond any human possibility. Their human times were closed. But were they experiencing human times? Zechariah who as a priest was called to help people live in hope even in uncertain times, to trust God, but when it comes down to him, he doubts. And as a result, he will not be able to speak until the promise happens. And what we have heard today, are the first words of Zechariah for many months. The promised child has been born. Zachariah has realised that the times of God so very often are different from human times and learn it he does. But do we? We are not always particularly good at waiting for God's times, are we?

Without this introduction, we could not fully grasp the significance of the reading today. We hear the rejoicing of Zechariah (= *Benedictus*), he speaks not of John but of the "horn of salvation for us..." (= this refers to the Messiah: Jesus), what John will do is prepare the way (vs 76), and he also reminds us of God as grace and forgiveness. *And this is what we will learn in the teachings of Jesus*, and this is what Advent is all about. There is Hope, Trust and Peace and they are a part of God's plan. And it is not a message that begins and ends with John the Baptist; John is no longer here, so there is need of other messengers, so this becomes a call to each and all of us to prepare to become messengers, as you can read in the Weekly News today: "*Do not ask who the messenger is – it is you.*". Does knowing this change our understanding of life, faith, and hope? And this is what we should be preparing for.

In so many ways we live in a savage world, where we are valued by who we know, how much we have, what type of education we have received, where the prosperity gospel that so many "fall far" seems to indicate that wealth and health are signs of God's blessing, similar to what having children was in times of Elizabeth and Zachariah, and yet this is so far from God's definition of the Kingdom we hear proclaimed by Jesus, and anticipated by John. God is against injustice, discrimination, xenophobia, and all expressions of marginalization; none of that can ever be acceptable.

We live in uncertain times, and uncertainty is hard – not knowing the how, the when, the if. I for one can relate to that, and I am sure most of you can as well. So we can understand Zachariah and Elizabeth, and we can understand the feelings of many in the world today.

We hear Zachariah today, reminding us of “*God’s tender mercy which will shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death*”. This is the God we believe, proclaim, and need to share. The God that brings us Hope and Trust as a way of life. We need to hear this again and again and prepare to live this in such a way that it will help us, as well as help others, see, know, and hope for the way ahead. May God guide us on this journey. Amen