

Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 8th December 2024, Advent 2

Readings: Malachi 3:1-4
Philippians 1:1-11

Song of Zechariah (APBA pp10)
Luke 3:1-6

At the risk of causing some of you to smile, I admit that over the last ten and a half years I've listened to a lot of country music as I've driven from place to place in the Western Region. One of the things I enjoy about this musical genre is that most of the songs tell a story that speak out of and into the human experience of longing. This includes the romantic longing to be with another person, and the emotional longing to be reconciled; the hopeless longing of grief for someone who has died... and the seasonal longing for rains to come and fill the dams.

Today's Canticle, which comes from the first chapter of Luke, is attributed to a man who had some deep longings, and when these were fulfilled, he is remembered offering this song. Zechariah was an older Jewish man with considerable social standing. He and his wife, Elizabeth came from good families, and they lived blamelessly according to the commandments and regulations of the Lord. In addition, Zechariah was a priest who served in the temple which was at that time the very centre of Jewish ritual practice. There was only one temple, and it was in Jerusalem.

As well as these good things Luke's Gospel also explains that Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children, and that both of them were 'getting on in years'. When we hear the phrase 'getting on in years' we might think of someone being seventy-five years old, but with the much lower life expectancy of two thousand years ago you could be considered to be getting on in years when you were in your thirties!

Not having a child would have been a great grief for Elizabeth in a culture where a woman was largely valued in her community for her ability to have children and raise them well. So, imagine the unkind comments from some neighbours and extended family members? It was also a legitimate reason for divorce in that time, or for your husband to take a second wife. For Zechariah there would have been the grief that his family name would not be passed on through his children and, if we consider this through a romantic lens, that the woman he loved had this deep unfulfilled longing.

Already there are things for us to think about. On the surface Zechariah and Elizabeth had a good life, for Zechariah had a good job and both were well respected in their community. Similarly, we can look at the lives of others from the outside and assume that because they have a good income, a nice car, and a comfortable home... they are happy. It's only when we take time to get to know people that we will get the opportunity to recognise potentially deep and unfulfilled longings. How well do we know the people that we sit

beside at church or at work, and how willing are we to risk vulnerability and be known by them at a deep level?

Anyway, the Gospel writer tells us that one day Zechariah was at work and an angel appeared to him. I'd love to hear this story expressed in a country song! I imagine a fiddle playing quickly, or a banjo playing urgently, to reflect Zechariah's heart rate, and the sense that God was doing something exciting and disruptive!

The angel told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth were going to have a son, and that the baby should be called John. Further, that this baby would be filled with the Holy Spirit and would do extraordinary things for God. I love Zechariah's response. He did not fall to his knees and say, 'Hallelujah!' – he said – and I paraphrase – 'Are you kidding me? My wife and I are old!'

Happily for Zechariah he was not killed for his audacity, but he was struck mute. When he returned from the Temple sanctuary he was not able to speak about his encounter with the angel – and if we had met him we might have assumed that he had had a stroke. Go home Zechariah, rest up, and hopefully you'll get well again!

Elizabeth conceived a baby. and nine months later gave birth to a son. Everyone was happy, and I imagine Zechariah weeping with joy – unable to speak, but so grateful that this longing for a child had been fulfilled. Eight days later the family gathered for the baby to be named and circumcised and Elizabeth had this strange idea that the baby should be called John, when this had never previously been a family name. So, the family asked Zechariah to write what he thought the baby should be called, and astonishingly, like Elizabeth, he wrote that the baby should be called John.

As if this was not surprising enough, Zechariah then began to speak. After nine months of silence Zechariah had recovered his ability to speak. After praising God, Zechariah went on to give a prophecy, and that prophecy became a song for early Christian communities. It would not be right to think of Zechariah bursting into song like he was a character in a Broadway musical – but sometimes we remember it in this way, and we call it 'The Benedictus'.

This title comes from the first line, "*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel: who has come to his people and set them free...*" The prophecy, or song, of Zechariah speaks about God doing something new in human history. Zechariah's son, John the Baptist, would prepare the way for people to recognise this, and '*in the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high would break upon us, to shine on those who dwelt in darkness and the shadow of death: and guide our feet into the way of peace...*' The words are almost breathless with excitement! They affirm that God would do, was doing, had done... something new.

I wonder if we have a continuing sense of excitement about this two thousand years later, or whether our friendship with God in Christ has become so familiar we take it for granted? We no longer fall to our knees, or sing with joy filled hearts, we just shrug our shoulders knowing that we are loved, and loved deeply, by the creator of the known and unknown universe.

As we each look forward to Christmas celebrations may God's Spirit rekindle within us a sense of wonder at the way God meets us in the midst of each day. Not just Mary as she hung out the washing, and not just Zechariah as he went about his work in the Temple. Not just people in an ancient story from a faraway land – but in our story, in our time, in our place... today.

At some stage this week I encourage you to choose a time to be quiet, like Zechariah was forced to be, and think about the wonder of God becoming present in human history in the person of Jesus, and of that same God being present in our lives each day through the Holy Spirit. And may wonder give way to gratitude and prayer, and maybe... song.

I pray this for you and me,
in the name of the One
who became the baby,
and then the man,
who makes all the difference,
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.