

## **University Sermon for John the Baptist - The Benedictus**

Morning by morning in churches, chapels and private prayer the canticle called the Benedictus is said or sung. It is the song which Luke's gospel records Zechariah singing for the birth of his son John, whose birthday this sermon is endowed to remember. It is a song of praise – Blessed be the Lord God of Israel who has visited his people and redeemed them. It speaks of the saviour from the house of David promised by the prophets who will free God's people from their foes, free from fear able to live lives of holiness and justice. It then speaks to this new born child, 'And you my child will be a prophet, going beforehand, preparing the way for the light which will shine on those who walk in darkness.'

Luke's account of the birth of this child John is interwoven with the account of the birth of Jesus and in these first two chapters of the gospel we are given three songs which have become staples of the churches liturgy, the Magnificat, the Benedictus and the Nunc Dimittis.

The story begins with a very recognisable Biblical image – the Barren Woman. Elizabeth though good, holy and righteous is barren. This is not a word we like to use anymore as we understand the extremely complex nature of infertility but in the Biblical language a childless woman is like a fruitless tree, a dry land where things do not grow. Children are God's gift so there is a question mark of those who are unable to have them. Elizabeth like Abraham's wife Sara has reached an age which means that the impossibility of children has been accepted. And like Sara she finds that God chooses to do an impossible thing – the God who makes rivers flow in the desert announces that new life will grow in Elizabeth's womb just as he did for Sara. Zechariah informed by the angel Gabriel is sceptical and loses the power of speech. Elizabeth embarrassed, afraid and unwilling to endure the endless discussion hides herself away.

Meanwhile the angel Gabriel is telling another woman of an impossible birth and the young Mary travels to meet her much older cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth's child leaps in her womb and Mary sings her song based on an earlier song from another woman barren for too long now rejoicing - Hannah mother of Samuel the prophet.

I call Mary's song – the Magnificat – a song of levelling. It speaks of lifting up the lowly and bringing down the proud, of filling the hungry whilst the rich are sent empty away. It is a song of changed values, of reordering who is lifted up in the coming kingdom. It is radical and uncomfortable particularly if we are the rich and well fed.

Zechariah's song, the Benedictus, marks his re-found voice after the inability to speak throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy. It calls his son to be a preparer of the way of the Lord and when we meet the adult John later in the gospel we find him drawing on Isaiah's language of a road in the desert which requires a certain levelling out fill in the valleys, lower the mountains, straighten the crooked roads and make the rough ways smooth – a veritable highway for God.

Because these songs have become so familiar to us we tend to miss their revolutionary nature. In this Chapel of Magdalen, in the Cathedral of Christ Church in College chapels, cathedrals and parish churches the canticles are sung to a variety of choral settings ethereal voices beautifully blended lift our hearts and minds in worship but there is a danger that the carefully crafted music can iron out the challenging call of these prophetic words.

They are a call to re-think, re-evaluate and prepare the way for the values of God's kingdom. Preparing the way involves clearing things that are in the way and that is a call to work as one poet puts it

Roadbuilding is rough work hard labour, muscles strained hands calloused, back near breaking even with lifting gear, hard hat, protective boots.

Site clearance is dirty work and dangerous removing rotten structures, risking unsafe ground uncovering long-forgotten corruption, the stink too strong to breathe of waste and dereliction.

God you cry out to us to clear the site, build the road because you are coming and you will come along the road we build.

As the Benedictus tells us John was to shine a light on those walking in darkness and whilst a light in the darkness can be a comfortable thing it can also be about bringing things into the light, exposing what is wrong, unrighteous, unjust and we see that in the preaching of the adult John who challenged people's hypocrisy, people's greed for possessions, extortion of money etc. John's call was to tell people truths and then to give them a hopeful message of forgiveness and renewal to 'give them the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins.' His call was for people to repent, to re-orientate their lives, to re-focus their attention to ready themselves for living lives in accordance with the values Jesus would preach. Turn from the ways of being that depletes our common humanity and enter into the fullness of life. This was and still is an uncomfortable message for those who have many possessions, those who rely on their

own worldly success, those who ignore the needs of the poor and hungry those who have no concept of their neighbour let alone a desire to love them.

Yet, we are not called to do this in our own strength, what seems an impossible task for us is possible in partnership with God.

The impossible pregnancy of Sara, Abraham's wife led to the birth of a nation covenanted to God. The long prayed for pregnancy of Hannah led to the birth of a prophet tasked with recalling those people to their covenant. The impossible long awaited pregnancy of Elizabeth led to the birth of John a new prophet to recall these people again to the values of God and to point to the impossible unexpected pregnancy of the young Mary whose child would be the Light of the World the one through whom all people could become part of God's special people, the one through whom all people could find forgiveness.

Those of us who have become God's people through the reconciling work of Mary's child find ourselves called into the work of John, sharing our knowledge of salvation, living out the reality of forgiveness, shining the light of God's values in the places of darkness walking peacefully into the places of unrest and violence. This is not always a comfortable calling.

In a world where we too readily value people in terms of their wealth and status, where we too readily accept the ongoing poverty and hunger of many, where we know that much power is conducted behind closed doors we are called to shine a light, to proclaim the truths of justice. And as we, the church, sing the song Mary sang with Elizabeth and the song Zechariah sang at John's birth we pray that we may be recalled and refocused becoming brave enough to challenge hypocrisy and injustice where we are able and through our lives proclaim the good news of Christ our saviour who makes us as the Benedictus says 'Free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life.'

The end of the earlier poem by Heather Pencavel serves as a closing prayer

Give your people, we pray the will and stamina for the job. Give us courage, to tackle the clearance of debt and exploitation which corrupt communities and nations. Give us the grit and determination to straighten out the crooked structures which make it hard for the poor and the weak to journey to freedom – And help us to shout aloud that you will come along the road we build.

Amen.

