



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday of Advent - Year C

The man most likely to.... And the most unlikely man

Readings: Zephaniah 3: 14-18, Is 12: 2-6, Philippians 4: 4-7, Luke 3: 10-18

Next week we will recall the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. But this week the story has moves on well past the birth of the Baptist, the appearance of the Forerunner, whose uterine response to the child in the womb of Mary tells us much about the personhood of the unborn child and the Christian insistence on the sanctity of life and the relationship between John and Jesus that would find fulfilment on the banks off the Jordan River some thirty years down the road.

Today's Gospel brings us into that part of the history of salvation where the miracle son is, years later, in full and active ministry. The story jumps thirty years. I want, for a moment, to dwell back behind this to the time of his birth , if we are to understand his significance. John has been born of his impossibly aged parents. The time of purification of Elizabeth, his mother, is under way. The time of dedication to the Covenant of God and the naming of the child is upon us. The joyful assembly waits the declaration. All they know, at this point, is that this is hugely significant. The Angel encountered Zechariah has been struck dumb and, for the three trimesters of his son's creation, quickening and becoming, has been confined to holy silence.

It is a simple question, to which they all think that they know the answer. NAME THIS CHILD. They all know that it will be a family name and most likely that of his father. The American tradition of dynasty is not dissimilar – Hiram J. Pennyfeather IV. Etc. To everyone's astonishment the old man asks for a writing tablet and declares simply, HIS NAME IS JOHN – a gift from God. He will, his promise to the angel now fulfilled and speech restored, now be released to tell the whole story and its import.

The upshot is the Benedictus – the great prophetic canticle that will echo down the centuries of the Church's liturgy of Morning Prayer. The Gospel, in which this is recorded, that of Luke, is awash with the Holy Spirit. Mary conceives by the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth recognises her as the mother of the Lord by the same Holy Spirit and gives us part of the Hail Mary. Zechariah prophesies under the influence of the same Holy Spirit. This gives us the Benedictus. Old Simeon will likewise prophesy to the Holy Family on their visit to the Temple for the Purification. This gives us the Nunc Dimittis which daily graces our evening prayers.

This great song of hope echoes down the years. Zechariah blesses God, the God of Israel, the one true almighty and eternal God who has revealed Himself to this otherwise tiny and insignificant people who are to witness Him to the entire benighted pagan world. God, Zechariah declares, has visited and redeemed His people. This is a mighty and powerful statement echoing the great salvation song of the Passover liberation. And this will come through the line of David, the once and forever King of Israel. We do not preach it much these days but we should never forget that a key part of early church preaching, especially in the Acts of the Apostles, is given to asserting the direct line of descent of Jesus from the royal line. Hence the great genealogies of Matthew and Luke and the vital

information that Joseph and Mary are returning to their native town – Bethlehem – the town of David. Jesus fulfils the prophecies and the promises.

These prophecies are made real in the birth of John and in the coming of Jesus. Herein, Zechariah proclaims, is our salvation. It is also a song of liberation. Zechariah, like most devout Jews, longs for the throwing off of the imperial yoke of Rome. The pagan enemies are to be worsted. 'We shall be saved from our enemies and the hands of all who hate us.' God will honour His promise to Abraham. The Covenant will be restored. His father declares John's role in this to be the Forerunner, the preparer of the Way. He will be a prophet and he will precede the Lord. He will ready the people by leading them to repentance and knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.

Jump forward thirty years. The Holy Family, post flight as refugees from Herod's wrath to Egypt, returning in obscurity to Nazareth. The wild man of the desert emerging from the hidden communities of the thankless wilderness where family had fled long years gone by. Here, suddenly, the boys unborn, who met in that brief respite of the Visitation in the Judean hills half a lifetime ago, are brought together on the Jordan shore. Jesus an obscure unknown, John with the world his feet, Israel in the palm of his hand. The scandal child of a northern one horse town – the son of the presbytery, angel declared and all Israel waiting on his declaration as Messiah.

It is all there for the taking.....but John is faithful. He proclaims the One who is to come. He proclaims Jesus. He humbles himself before the Lord. He points only and always away from himself to the Christ. He says, 'He

must wax and I must wane.' His fidelity and humility are immense and exemplary. For we too are never to be about declaring ourselves but, always and everywhere, pointing to Jesus. *'Behold the Lamb of God. Behold Him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those who are called to the Supper of the Lamb'*

That would be you and me – but also those whom God has charged us to call and introduce to Jesus. For we too are forerunners of Christ – let us do it humbly, faithfully, publicly and everywhere.