



## Revd Ro's Reflection on 3rd Sunday of Advent

### Year A

Luke 1.46-55

Matthew 11.2-11

Today we remember John the Baptist, the last of the prophets and forerunner of the Messiah. We looked in detail at John last week. This week's gospel reading takes a different perspective on him, the perspective of Jesus himself. I have chosen this time to look at the Song of Mary, the Magnificat in conjunction with the gospel reading from Matthew, the Magnificat is the canticle set for today. It is pure joy that infuses the whole of Mary's song. It is of course spoken at her meeting with Elizabeth. Elizabeth had no children, and her chance was well past as far as the parents were concerned. Poor Elizabeth, in that society it meant shame to be childless but to her it was also her deep sorrow. Now suddenly the Lord is at work because the Angel Gabriel appears by the altar with a message for John's father.

<sup>13</sup> 'But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup> You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.' (Luke 1)

The angel is quite specific: John will bring many to the Lord and most importantly his commission is, 'to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' John then, is to be the one who appears by the Jordan demanding repentance, demanding that people turn to God once more and proclaiming the coming of God's Messiah.

Gabriel visits the young girl Mary and announces the great news,

'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

We have heard this read at carol services so many times over the years but if we look carefully the news the angel brings is stunning. It is frightening too. Mary is engaged to Joseph, she is not married to him, to conceive a child under these circumstances is therefore terrifying; it could have cost her

her life. Unlike Zechariah, when he hears the news of John, Mary believes absolutely, and her reply to Gabriel echoes down the ages and changes the course of human history.

‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.’<sup>36</sup> And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.<sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God.’<sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’

It is six months after Elizabeth conceived John that Mary is visited by Gabriel and she goes at once to visit her relation. Is this simply because the women are close or is it deeper than this, is Mary drawn to her because both children are from God and destined to achieve wonderful things in his name? The meeting is a wonderful celebration of God and it is irradiated with pure joy. The first thing that happens at their meeting is that we are told ‘the child leapt in her womb.’ Even John the unborn child senses the presence of Mary, the mother of the saviour. Elizabeth’s words really set the scene for the rest of the passage.

‘And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit<sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.’<sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?’<sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

There is no doubt in Elizabeth’s mind that Mary is carrying the saviour of the world, the long awaited Messiah, the one who would rule Israel and set them free. This takes us to another famous passage from Isaiah 9 seen as foretelling the coming of the Messiah.

<sup>6</sup> ‘For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
<sup>7</sup>His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onwards and for evermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.’

This was the dream of Israel’s people; one day there would come a leader, a man of God who would save them. One day the Messiah would walk the earth. He would bring God’s reign on earth. To do this, evil would have to be destroyed. Mary and Elizabeth were of an oppressed people, they knew all about corruption, bullying and brutality. They knew the rich had much and the poor had nothing. Knowing this background helps us to understand Mary’s song, known to us as the Magnificat, it is actually based on the Song of Hannah, 1 Samuel 2, as she sings of her son.

Mary and Elizabeth would have known all the biblical passages which prophesied freedom and the day of God’s victory over evil. Jesus comes to set the prisoners free. These words from Isaiah 61 are what Jesus reads on the Sabbath day in the synagogue in Nazareth, He is really saying, ‘I am he,’

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

How similar are these words to Mary's song and indeed of his words to John's disciples which we will look at later. It is a song of pure joy but it is a song of revolution. It is a hymn of praise to God, a thanksgiving for God's favour to her, the 'handmaid of the Lord' but it is full of words which show the old order of oppression turned on its head and goodness restored. It tells of the time when evil, bullying and oppression will be vanquished. A time when the greedy rich upper classes will be removed and the poor will have all they need, when corruption will be no more and 'justice will roll down like the waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream.' Amos 5.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

God will undo all evil oppression. It is God who rights the wrong and her song celebrates this as fact. All the promises made to his people from Abraham down will be fulfilled in this child, the child she carries in her womb, and John will be the 'prophet of the most high, he will go before him to prepare his way.'

What love of God these women show, what utter faith, and jubilation, what certainty that the just ways of God will come to fruition. They will have their trials but they do not think of that, their concern is not for themselves but their focus is entirely on the children they carry for the Lord their God.

It is a good thing to read this passage at times when maybe we feel down, and experience once again the total joy of these two women. To know that they have handed themselves with total faith into God's hands, he will protect them, he will care for them. There is a lesson for all of us. This is the God who holds us all in the palm of his hand.

Our gospel reading begins,

<sup>2</sup> 'When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples,'

John as we know had disciples as did Jesus. Now John sends a message to Jesus. To begin with he sends it from prison! Last week I emphasised just how dangerous being a prophet was. Prophets issued warnings, they stood up against authority and all that was wrong. They rocked the boat and fell foul of kings; they usually ended up in prison or being killed. Neither John nor Jesus were about to take any notice of threats. John is brave; he tells it like it is. He stands up to the influential and powerful sects calling them a 'viper's brood.' We know that he has been speaking out against Herod who had married his brother Phillip's wife Herodias after her divorce. That was forbidden by law. It is not a person's job to keep out of politics when they are speaking out for what is right. It always annoys me when a church leader is condemned for doing just that. It wasn't by keeping out of politics that took Jesus to Calvary.

John was a threat to Herod and the powers that be, not just because of his marriage but because John was drawing the people to him in droves and those people were being told that they must repent because the kingdom was near. The Messiah was coming and John was the herald of good tidings. Any mention of a King would send shockwaves through a tyrant like Herod. Just look what his father did when he got news of the birth of the King in Bethlehem. He sent his troops to massacre any children under two. Mary and Joseph had rushed away with Jesus to gain sanctuary in Egypt. The same threat hangs over Jesus now in his ministry.

John asks a question,

'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

Why is this? John recognised Jesus at the baptism but maybe he expected action at once, maybe he simply didn't understand what sort of Messiah Jesus was. Maybe, stuck in a vile dungeon he needed reassurance. Jesus did not simply say 'Yes.' To start with that wouldn't have been safe, Herod was perfectly capable of arresting Jesus as a would be Messiah i.e. a threat to his power. Jesus' time is not yet and he has much to do. Arrest now is not an option, he has a mission to fulfil. No, he answers in this way.

<sup>4</sup> 'Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup>the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

That takes us right back to Isaiah and particularly to the passages I have quoted above, particularly Isaiah 61 which Jesus read in the Synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry. He is basically saying, 'I am he' and John would have known that.

So Jesus turns to the crowds,

<sup>7</sup> 'As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup> What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.'

We saw John in the wilderness last week, we saw his fearless preaching and the fact that he was calling on people to repent. He, like Jesus, was not born in a palace; he wears a hair shirt and not purple robes. He is not a king or a noble. Yet he is the greatest that has been. Why? because he is the last of the prophets, the last in a long line of those appointed by God to point forward to the coming of the Messiah and the fulfilment of God's promises to his people. John is one of God's chosen, chosen to do a specific job and that was told at his birth, a birth that was in itself miraculous. He was brought up in God's way. Now he is the last in the line of the great prophets because he says that the scriptures are to be fulfilled with the coming of Jesus now. Like Simeon

John can say, 'Now Lord let your servant depart in peace, because my eyes have seen your salvation.' At his baptism the promised one of God and hope of the whole world stands before him. John is the one who baptises his Messiah. No wonder he is humbled. Now in prison John seeks reassurance. It must have been an awful place to be and John though possessing great courage, must have wanted reassurance which indeed he gets. Who else can do the Messianic things Jesus does?

'A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.'<sup>10</sup> This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

<sup>11</sup> Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.'

John is greater than the rest not just because he is the last in a long line but because he is the harbinger of the good news, he is the herald of Jesus the Messiah. He is the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy so he is the greatest of all mortals, says Jesus.

But,

'yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.'

What does this mean to you? It is a tough one, is Jesus talking about the heavenly ones, the angels and so forth? Maybe, but for me with the advent of Jesus Christ the promised recreated order of God has begun. The new age had begun with him and it will come to its fulfilment in God's time when Jesus will return to judge the earth. That is part of the focus of Advent. Well then, if the kingdom of heaven came to earth in Jesus Christ, it follows that all who believe in him, all who turn to him in faith, all who carry the good news out into the world are those Jesus is referring to. Very soon John will be dead, after the sordid episode with Herod and Salome. He will not have the chance to follow Jesus, John's work is done.

<sup>6</sup> 'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. (John 1)

Now it is up to the followers of Jesus to carry the baton, to become children of God and co-heirs with Jesus. With Jesus the new age has dawned. We are children of light.

<sup>12</sup> 'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.'

This Advent maybe we need to remind ourselves that the new order has begun in Christ and that we have his commission to live as people of that kingdom. All that is not in tune with that needs to be left behind. As in Lent, Advent is a time of self-examination when we ask ourselves, do I measure up? Am I ready for Jesus' coming at Christmas and indeed his second coming? Jesus Emmanuel, God with us is such a cause for rejoicing. We too can echo Mary's joy in the Magnificat. Jesus walks with us now and forever, his presence is as close as our own breathing.

*All praise eternal Son to thee whose advent doth thy people free.* Charles Coffin

