

Advent 2
6/12/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 1:68-79 (Song of Zechariah)

Luke 3:1-6

The song of a soul set free

Our canticle reading this morning from Luke is the song of a soul set free. But, as such, it is in fact a strange song. Listen again to some of what sings, noting especially the force of what he says:

Blessed be the Lord...
 he has come to his people and set them free.
He has raised up for us a *mighty* saviour...
...[to] save us from our enemies,
 from the hands of all who hate us.
 ...to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
...[freeing us] to worship him without fear,
 holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.

The song is rich in its language and imagery. But, in that very richness, it reaches beyond what is “normal” in the experience of most of us today. We read this text because it is Advent and because it is *set* for us to read, and not because there is necessarily any sense in which it reflects our own experience. These words, then, are likely to catch us unprepared; it will usually be that they come to us at the wrong time.

How then might we best respond, authentically? By this I mean, how can Zechariah’s song be both ours – as valued Scripture – and yet also *not* ours, because it may have come to us at the wrong time, given where *we* find ourselves to be right now? Out of a sense of Christian duty, we may try to try to *make* this language ours by responding accordingly. Where the text laments, we lament; where the text is jubilant, we too will leap for joy. The only problem is that it won’t be for joy that we leap so much as that we feel that now must be the time for leaping because the text says so. There’s nothing authentic about a response like that. It is as if we are standing outside a window, looking in on the jubilation of someone else, perhaps hungry for the same but not able actually to partake.

If the *jubilant* of Zechariah’s song *is* beyond the sense of many of us, it’s quite possible that this is because we also don’t identify with the *depths* from which he speaks. While he exults in what God has done, God’s work has been to address things we might not identify as pressing issues in our own lives: God has “set [us] free”, saved “us from our enemies [and] from the hands of all who hate us”, set us free “to worship without fear”, we who “dwell in darkness and the shadow of death”.

It’s tempting to soften this language into metaphor, but people tend not to get too worked up about being set free from “metaphorical” oppressions. Enemies, hate, fear, darkness and the shadow of death all here seem to mean what they say. Or, at least, these indicate things felt *sharply* to be threats or real presences which limit life.

Yet enemies, hate and fear are things which don't much mark *our* lives these days. Of course there are the "rumours of wars" which distant terrorist activity is to us here, concerns about local economic vitality, environmental concerns and the personal challenges which each of us face. But among all this we might struggle to identify anything from which we might want *God* to free us, or expect him to free us, along the lines of what Zechariah sings in his song. Once again, it is as if Zechariah's song comes to us at the wrong time, and so it is strange.

The fact that not only the heights of the song might feel strange, but also the depths they imply, is very important for our getting to grips with the text. Zechariah's song tells us a story, and it seeks to be *our* story. It is clear enough that it is a story of liberation but for it to be a story of *our* liberation we have to come to understand ourselves as true *captives*. This can be very difficult because it may well be that we have grown used to, and even value, the things which hold us captive. Captivity of the "soul" can come to *suit* us.

The old story of Adam and Eve with their fig leaves summarises this situation well for us. We know the story well enough. Having been warned not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, they still do, and suddenly find their nakedness a cause for shame. (It doesn't matter here *why* nakedness might bring shame). They stitch together a few leaves and hide in the bushes, until they are found out by God who ultimately expels them from the Garden, although not before giving them much more substantial coverings in place of the fig leaves.

My interest here is in this clothing – what it represents and how it is valued. In the story the clothing both symbolises the fall from grace *and* becomes indispensable. It's a subtle point the text makes: If our birthday suit is an adequate sign of our innocence, then our clothing is a sign of the loss of innocence. For the Eden story, clothing is not simply something practical we have gained but becomes a *sacrament* of something that has been lost, and which we *cannot* regain simply by stripping off. There is no returning to childlike innocence for, if we do have the front to uncover (a front worth uncovering?) for a while, we will nevertheless dress again. It may be the case, or not, that nakedness is inherently shameful – but this isn't the point in the Eden story. Nudist philosophy and aesthetic appreciations of the human body have nothing to do with the point of the Garden narrative. The point there *is* that Adam and Eve, uncovered, pre-apple, *assume* that it must be OK to be bare, *simply because God doesn't object*. It is the same for the toddler on the beach who doesn't wonder about whether or not clothes should be worn, but knows only that Mum doesn't seem to mind how he is at the moment. This is life lived in grace – not knowing whether I'm right or wrong, but knowing only that God's OK with me as I am. What God finally does object to is Adam and Eve's awareness of their condition, and that they now make a judgement about it and foist that judgement on God.

Now all this talk of getting our gear off (or not) might seem to have led us far from the modestly attired Zechariah, but the reason for visiting Eden was to see how hard it is to be free of the things which hold us captive, for these now seem to be means of *life* for us.

As another illustration of the point, we might consider an odd little detail in the resurrection narrative of John's gospel (John 21). After the crucifixion, the disciples have returned to fishing on Lake Galilee. After they take the advice shouted from a stranger on the beach, they haul up a miraculous catch of fish, and Peter recognises the stranger on the shore as Jesus. We then hear the strange detail: Peter "put on some

clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea”. The odd thing is that normally you’d *undress* to go swimming. But, quite apart from the practical point, why does John even bother to tell us this at all? If we didn’t hear about the nakedness and the dressing the point would seem to be that Peter is again being his impulsive self and leaping into the sea while the rest of his friends have enough sense to sail back to shore.

Or, this would be the point *unless* there’s an allusion here to the Genesis story. Peter, at the sight of the risen Lord, now knows his shame, his “nakedness”, and his first, very human response, is to cover it over and to hide it. For how could God-in-Christ not also see that his was naked, and turn away in embarrassment?

(To make the same point with another story from Genesis without the complications of our squeamishness about nudity, after Cain kills his brother Abel (Genesis 4) the murderer is given “the mark of Cain”. The important point is that this is given *not* in order to identify him as a killer but for his protection, as a warning from God that no one should kill Cain for what he has done, under threat of a sevenfold vengeance *from God*. The thing which marks Cain as fallen is also what he now needs to continue living.)

We can only stand before God and others now bearing the sign or mark of our failure. Our *need* for the things which are signs of our loss and failure is indicative of the depth of our captivity. To be able to sing with Zechariah the song of a soul set free, we need to be brought to feel the pathos of that captivity.

But salvation is not then a return to Eden’s blessed nakedness or any other sign of some former innocence. When St Paul talks about salvation, he does not use the image of casting off the signs of sin – our God-given “garments of leather” – but of putting on something else: the person of Christ (Galatians 3.27, Romans 13.14, Ephesians 4.22-24). The “garments of leather” are replaced (or covered over) by Christ himself. Christ becomes our garment. The sign of our former innocence are gone; a new kind of innocence, wholeness, is given to us.

The song of a soul set free, then – *truly* set free – is a miracle not only in that we *are* set free, but in that it is a freedom which is peculiar to each one of us, as we actually are. As we are broken in our own personal or communal ways, so will the shape of our healing be. Things which are no longer even evidence to us that we are broken are revealed as such, but then made a sign no longer of our distance from our true selves but the sign of God’s power to heal and restore according to what we are now.

People *set* free are very different from people “created” free. Those who are set free have something to celebrate, something for which to give thanks: I was lost but now am found, blind but now I see. A soul set free has seen its captivity even to things it thought a blessing, and has found freedom by God’s grace in blessing *upon* blessing. And so such a soul sings, as did Zechariah.

This is we all need, and so we do well to pray that God indeed come, that, by his “tender mercy” “the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death”. Amen.
