

Sermon 5 December

Baruch 5.1–9; Benedictus; Philippians 1.3–11; Luke 3.1–6

‘all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’

There was only one book that my grandfather ever insisted that I read. He was a well-read man, the bookshelves of his house were filled with works about politics, economics, psychology, history, art and architecture – but there was only one that he ever pressed into my hands and required that I read. It wasn't a classic either, not Shakespeare or Milton or Dickens, none of the “great works” that grandfathers probably hope their grandsons might read.

No, the text he gave me was a book called ‘The Pity of it All’ by a journalist named Amos Elon. It is a history book, one that tells the story of the Jews in Germany, a story that would include my grandfather's grandparents. Even then, eighty years or so since the last German Jew in my family had died, it was this story, my grandfather believed, that anchored us in the world.

This memory is particular to me and my family but in no other way it is unusual. Stories are handed down alongside the shape of our ears and the colours of our eyes, alongside photographs and furniture – except, I think, that they shape us more deeply than heirlooms and chromosomes. The stories of how great-grandparents lost or made their money, how grandparents moved to towns or cities, of how parents met or where they had their first apartment, of our own births or babyhoods – these stories are answers to the questions: ‘Why are we here now? Who are we today? What will we become?’ In German there is, of course, only one word for both ‘story’ and ‘history’.

All these stories travel backwards in time to talk about the present, all connect the past to the future.

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This dynamic, this going backwards to go forwards, recurs throughout the New Testament and very clearly so in the story of John the Baptist from which we heard an excerpt in the Gospel reading this morning. John is a major figure in all four Gospels: Mark's Gospel begins, in fact, not with the Nativity, the account of Jesus's birth, but with John, preaching in the wilderness. But it is in Luke's Gospel, the one we heard this morning, that the story of John is told most fully.

In Mark's Gospel, John appears first in a place, but in Luke's Gospel, he is introduced not in a place but in a family. Luke begins his Gospel with John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, infertile, elderly, righteous before God. He calls him not ‘John the Baptist’, as we do, but ‘John, son of Zechariah’.

But this family story travels much further back than a single generation – because Luke tells us that both Zechariah and Elizabeth have a lineage beginning with Aaron, the brother of Moses, the first of the priests of Israel. This baby, not yet conceived, already has his feet firmly planted in the sand of the Sinai desert, in the story of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt in the second book of the Bible. Luke, by the way, will introduce Jesus with a genealogy that stretches back even further than John's, further even than the time of Aron and Moses, to Adam himself.

And when Zechariah speaks for the first time after his son is born, he sings one of the famous songs of the Bible, the *Benedictus*, which we just said together. And in this song, Zechariah remembers the covenant that God made with Abraham, he remembers the lineage of David, he remembers the prophets of Israel.

The first thoughts of this new father as he speaks to his son for the first time travel backwards, to the long story of Israel without which this birth can make no sense, a story of God's tireless commitment to his people, a commitment that is about to reach its fulfilment in Jesus.

Only then, with the past before his eyes, does the father begin to sing about the future: 'You, my child [...] will go before the Lord to prepare his way'.

And yet, even here, the future is still drawn out from the past. This phrase, 'prepare the way', might be in the future tense but it is a quote, taken from a text already hundreds of years old by Zechariah's day, the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

It is from a passage of hopefulness and reassurance that some of you know might know from Handel's Messiah, so often sung around Christmas time. In the translation used by Handel, it goes:

Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people, Saith your God. ... The voice of Him that crieth in the wilderness: prepare ye the way of the Lord.

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The father knows the son well. Preparing the way of the Lord is precisely what John, son of Zechariah, is about to do.

After Zechariah finishes his song, at the end of the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, we are told that the child John grows, becomes strong, and enters the wilderness. Then he disappears from view for a chapter. The Gospel reading we heard this morning comes as Luke picks up the story of John again in chapter three.

John is an adult now but he is still in the wilderness, just as he was at the start of Mark's Gospel, and when Luke tells us what he is doing there, he reaches for that same passage from the Book of Isaiah that Zechariah had already quoted. But he goes a little further, he quotes a little more. I'm going to read this again now and you'll hear that what Luke adds is all about the future:

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

This has become much more than just preparing the way. This is no longer just about John and Jesus, it is about us now too.

“All flesh,” Luke writes, “shall see the salvation of God.” This ‘all flesh’ is our flesh. These words were written by Isaiah, they were quoted by Luke, but they are said about us. With them, Luke is binding us into the great, Biblical story of Israel.

He knows that the story that began with Adam will continue long after Jesus’ death. His Gospel, uniquely, has a second half, the text that we know as the Book of Acts, the fifth book of the New Testament, the book that tells us about what happened after the resurrection, as Jesus’ message begins to travel far beyond Jerusalem. It is the connective tissue between us and the story of John and Jesus, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Abraham and Moses. The language of paths and ways that Luke finds in Isaiah will orient Acts too.

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What does it mean for us, two millennia after this text was written, to be joined into the story of the Bible?

Zechariah’s song to John, the *Benedictus*, was appointed by St Benedict, the founder of western monasticism, to be sung by monks every day at the first service of the day. 1500 years later Anglicans continue this tradition in the service of Morning Prayer.

But it is said at another service too, at funerals, at the moment that the body is interred in the earth. It is a song for the rising of the sun and the lowering of the body; for the beginning of the day and the end of life. And, of course, there is no contradiction here: for us, the end of life is the beginning of the day. Just as the births of John and Jesus come not at the end or the beginning, but in the middle of a long story about God’s faithfulness to his people, so do our lives and deaths come in the middle of a long story about God’s faithfulness to us.

This, then, is our calling: to be characters in the middle of this story.

At our baptism, we join a church, a community, a single holy body, a single story that runs from creation to the end of time. When we read the Bible, at home or in church or as we sit on the tram, we read it because it is our story, it tells us who we are, where we came from,

why we are here and where we are going. It is the grand, long history of a faithful God and of his sometimes-faithless people.

Our commitment is to continue this story, to keep ourselves faithful to it, to write a new chapter in the history of the relationship between God and his creation. And as we do so, we add to it the stories of our families, our ancestors, our grandparents and parents, and then we add our lives too.

Amen.