

The Third Sunday in Advent (Matins)

Luke 1:57-66 (+Benedictus)

Alexander Jensen, St Botolph's, Cambridge, 13th December 2020

Each Sunday in Advent is connected with important biblical figures. I'd like to think of this as 'waiting with' those figures, first the Patriarchs, then the Prophets and then on the third Sunday in Advent we wait for the arrival of the Lord together with John the Baptist. What does it mean to wait with him? What is distinct about the way in which he announces the coming of the Christ?

In our New Testament reading this morning we heard a part of the story of the birth of John. John's father Zechariah was a priest and whilst he was on duty in the temple an angel appeared to him and announced that his wife Elizabeth would conceive and bear a son and that the son should be called John. Elizabeth was old and beyond childbearing age and so Zechariah did not believe this. As a punishment the angel struck him dumb. But Elizabeth conceived a child and the angel was proven right. This is where today's reading comes in. Elizabeth gives birth and the baby boy is called John and everyone is amazed. Then Zechariah is filled by the Holy Spirit and begins to sing, and the song he sings is the Song of Zechariah, the Benedictus, which the choir rather fittingly sung straight after the reading.

The way in which the narrative is arranged makes very strong and deliberate links with Old Testament prophecy. Last Sunday we were waiting for the coming of the Lord together with the Prophets, who foretold the coming of the Lord to restore his people. And this is the theme of the Benedictus:

Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel
who has come to his people to set them free.
He has raised up for us a mighty saviour
borne of the house of his servant David.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel :
for he hath visited and redeemed his people;
And hath raised up a mighty salvation for us :
in the house of his servant David;

This is seriously good news, that the saviour whom the prophets foretold is now at hand, who will come to set Israel free from the hands of its enemies and who will save his people from slavery and bondage, from Roman occupation. And in this messianic Kingdom Israel will be free to worship God without fear and live in a just and godly society: holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life.

And John is the forerunner who precedes and announces the Messiah, he is the returning prophet Elijah:

And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.
To give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of all their sins.

And thou, Child, shalt be called the Prophet of the Highest :
for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;
To give knowledge of salvation unto his people :
for the remission of their sins...

A few chapters later, before John baptised Jesus in the river Jordan, he is introduced in a way which makes this link very clear. John is described as the voice in the wilderness, as the one who prepares the way of the Lord. And as the act of preparation, he baptises people, with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

So far so good, but there is something else: unlike what is said in the ancient prophecies, the ministry of John the Baptist ends in disappointment. As part of his prophetic ministry he denounced Herod the ruler's wicked rule as well marriage to the wife of his brother.

Now, we know that the Roman and Jewish rulers of Palestine, among them Herod, kept some form of peace in Palestine by mercilessly crushing any sign of revolt. So as soon as a political or religious leader had too much of a following, he would be arrested and executed. When John the Baptist proclaimed the imminent arrival of the Messiah and denounces Herod then this looked like sedition and it is no surprise that Herod squashed the potential uprising before it could gather momentum. And so John was arrested and, a little later, executed.

Now, we are told Jesus then went off into the wilderness straight after having been baptised by John. Jesus started his ministry only when he heard the John had been arrested. So John missed the Jesus' whole ministry – he already languishes in prison when Jesus starts proclaiming that the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand.

And he was already dead when Jesus ministry was fulfilled, when he was crucified and rose again. He never saw the final triumph.

He died somewhere in the middle between the beginning of Jesus's earthly ministry and its conclusion. He did not see the final fulfilment of the promise. He missed the whole action.

Now, this is odd. Because in Jewish expectation Elijah puts the house in order, as it were, and then the Messiah arrives. There is no notion of a suffering Elijah who is killed by God's adversaries – but then, a suffering Elijah is a fitting forerunner for a suffering Messiah.

So there are two ways in which John's expectation of the messiah is distinct: first, there is a sense of urgency. The time is now, the Kingdom is at hand the messiah is here among us already. Get ready, quick!

Then there is the sense of disappointment: The end of John's life was not very Elijah-like. He saw Jesus at the baptism and then left the scene, missing the arrival of the Kingdom. The sense of disappointment and doubt is very clear when later in Luke's gospel John sent messengers from his prison cell, asking Jesus: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Was this all a mistake?

I suppose we can identify with this, being torn between the sense of urgency, and disappointment and doubt. Yes, this broken world needs healing, we need the Kingdom of God to become real in this world, and then the disappointment that the world is not getting better, that the Kingdom is not here.

This ambivalence is precisely the place from which we can see the world as it is and act appropriately. Yes, this broken world needs healing urgently, the Kingdom of God can't wait much longer. But then, the temptation is to bring the Kingdom about

ourselves. History is littered with such attempts, and, as the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper observed aptly, every attempt to bring about heaven on earth has inevitably led to hell on earth. So the doubt and disappointment keep that urge in check. The temptation then is to accommodate ourselves in this world in which we are but pilgrims. But the urgency of the expectation leaves us rightly unsettled in a world in which we can never be fully at home, where we have no lasting city.

So this is what we can learn from John the Baptist as we are waiting for the Christ: We long impatiently for the coming of the Kingdom and the healing of this broken world while we have to learn to live with disappointment that the time is never quite here yet. But if you look carefully, you can see signs of it wherever goodness and justice, faith, hope and love are present.

Amen