

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 Zechariah 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.

Zechariah's song and the song of Mary which we'll hear in a couple of weeks (Luke 1.39-45) are both rich in their language and imagery. But, in that very richness, they both reach beyond what is "normal" in our experience of faith today. This being the case, we have to take stock when hearing a reading like this, and seeking to discover its word to us, now, in our ordinariness. The thing is that, in the end, 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 is as if 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 would seem that we are left standing outside the window, looking in on the

jubilation of someone else, perhaps hungry for the same but not able actually to partake.

In relation to our response to Zechariah's song itself there is one other thing to note. While we might not be lifted to the great heights that he is, it's quite possible that we also don't identify with the *depths* from which he speaks. While Zechariah exults in what God has done, God's work has been to address things we might not identify in our own lives: God has "set them 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 easy 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 *sharply* felt to be threats or real presences which limit life. If there is possibly a problem in authentically entering into the spirit of Zechariah's song of praise, it may be because we're also not quite able to identify with his problems. Enemies, hate and fear are things which don't much mark our lives these days. We might scowl across a boardroom table, or even a church council one, but these problems are not ones we feel we need to turn to God to resolve. Indeed, 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 speaks about in his song. Once again, it is as if Zechariah's song catches us unprepared or comes to us at the wrong time, and so it is strange. If the Hebrews was lamented, "How can we sing the *Lord's song* in a strange land?" (Psalm 137.4), for us it might be more, "How can *we* sing this strange song?" To put it differently, what would it take for *us* to discover ourselves to be souls set free?

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 a story of liberation, which is probably clear enough. For it to be a story of *our* liberation, we have to come to understand ourselves as *captives*. This is extraordinarily difficult, not least because our captivity might well suit us. For freedom costs us something, and it may well be that we have grown used to, and even to 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 our 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 *why* nakedness serves for shame here). 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 the clothing – what it represents and how it is valued. As far as the story goes, the clothing both symbolises the Fall from grace *and* becomes indispensable. There is no stripping off, metaphorical or otherwise, which is going to undo what has happened. But neither is there much of a *desire* to dispense with the coverings. It's a very subtle point the text makes: *If* – and we might debate the absolute truth of the assertion – but *if* our birthday suit is an adequate sign of our innocence, then our clothing is a sign of the loss of innocence. Perhaps we see this in our willingness to allow toddlers to run around naked on a beach, until such time as it seems that it's no longer right. As far as the story goes, 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?), 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 who doesn't wonder about whether or 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 their judgement about it.

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. 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.

Just as we might be *able* to go naked for a while, and yet grasp again after clothing, so the dynamic of freedom and captivity works in the Scriptures. As one final illustration of the point, we'll look at an odd little detail which appears in the resurrection narrative of John's gospel (John 21). After the crucifixion, the disciples have returned to their old ways, and are fishing on 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? We would seem to get the point if we didn't hear about the nakedness and the dressing – is not the point 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, would this not be the point, *unless* perhaps 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?

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 the song of a soul set free, we need to come to feel the pathos of that captivity. It's not that we must feel absolutely destitute in order to feel saved, as if we must to whip up self-loathing in order to feel God's salvation, or run around naked and bear the shame of it, waiting for God to dress us. Salvation is the thing which *reveals* both the shame and loss, *and* our clinging to them for what little life they still enable. It is as if, we lived too long in a dimly lit room to be able to bear the light, yet this is more or less OK, because dim though it is, there is still a little light be which to see.

The song of a soul set free, then – *truly* set free – is a miracle not only in that we *are* set free, but also in that our true captivities are revealed. The gift of God will always be more than we bargained for. It's only when God turns on the light that we realise how dark it was.

When we look to God's coming light – for which light we pray each of these weeks of Advent as we light the candles – we look not only for life and freedoms we know we lack but must expect to discover that much of what we *thought* was life-giving, perhaps which we even declared was from God, was simply signs of what we had lost, to which we had become accustomed, and without which we could not imagine living. A soul set free has learned who its enemies are, and what are the cages within it has been held. And it sings praise to God for both the freedom now experienced and the clear view over prisons now left behind.

This 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.