**Zechariah’s praise**

**1st December 2013**

**Luke 1.67-80; Jeremiah 33.14-16**

Like most men I don’t like Christmas shopping. It’s not just the thought of parting with money, but it is also the search. You know, the search for the right present—*just* the right present. It is such pressure.

One boy was talking to another boy and said ‘my dad’s very rich, so I don’t know what to get him for Christmas. What do you give a man who has everything?’ the other boy replied: ‘How’s about a burglar alarm’

During his first year at university, Steve couldn’t get home for Christmas, so he sent his father a set of inexpensive cufflinks and a note reading, ‘Dear Dad: This isn’t much, but it’s all that you could afford’.

They say Christmas is the season when you buy this year’s gifts with next year’s money.

Of course some people will be struggling with finances this Christmas. Our Foodbank is symptomatic of hardships facing many in our community. This week people were queuing at our door for Food bank parcels. Many of those people were in tears. Benefit cuts, benefit delays being the main reason for their need. The foodbank cupboard was virtually emptied twice this week. If you have some time today before 4pm please shop at Tesco’s for the foodbank.

We look for a better world. We search for hope. I hate those adverts on the TV that promise a wonderful Christmas if only you shop at this supermarket, or buy this electrical item or drink this bottle of spirits. Promises promises.

I am however a big fan of Advent. I love the whole package of Advent—songs of longing, lighting candles, sprigs of greenery here and there. I especially like Advent because it is a time for reminding ourselves that we live by promises—which means we live by faith and hope. In a very real sense, then, Advent is a time for—well, for *looking*! Looking for the fulfilment of God’s promises.

Looking for redemption is a whole different thing from looking for presents. We look for it in the world and we look for it within ourselves.

During Advent we are looking at some Songs of Praise in the Christmas Story. Very appropriate with our media commitments.

Our text today is where Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, gives a song of praise at the birth of his son. It is called the Benedictus: because the opening word in the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible is Benedictus, which is Latin for ‘Praise Be’. Whereas the Magnificat which we will look at next week is similar to a psalm, the Benedictus is more like a prophecy.

Zechariah was a man who was looking for the fulfilment of God’s promise. He lived his life in faith and hope—faith in the promises made to the ancestors and hope that God would be faithful to fulfil them. And when his son was born and his tongue was loosed, Zechariah sang a song of praise to God for fulfilling those promises. The specific way in which Zachariah saw this promise fulfilled was in the birth of his son John as a messenger to “prepare the way for the Lord.”

Now I dare say that when we think of John the Baptist, we probably don’t think of promises of salvation. We think of John the Baptist as a firebrand preacher with a message of warning.

But in Zechariah’s song there is a different emphasis— In Zechariah’s song, the messenger of the coming Lord will bring “knowledge of salvation … by the forgiveness of their sins” (Lk. 1:77). The messenger will effect “the dawn from on high” through the “tender mercy of our God” that will bring light to those who are in darkness under the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Lk. 1:78-79).

We have had some frosty morning recently. I’m sure there will be more to come. It usually coincides with clear night skies and clear mornings and if you are a lark and you are a morning person and get up at dawn you will know how beautiful it can be to see the dawn break and the light to shine through the darkness. And with the sun’s heat the fog gradually dispenses and the frost thaws. Luke the gospel writer employs this imagery for the promise of God to humanity in sending us Jesus.

This is always the hope of humanity, isn’t it?  That whatever bad thing is occurring now won’t last forever.  That the fog that obscures our vision of the future will be dissolved by the light of hope.  That the freezing darkness and death that seem so near—especially, for many, this time of year—will begin to melt from the warmth of peace.

This is a promise to look forward to. A promise to look for.

During the Second World War, the allies were advancing through France. The Germans were making a last stand wherever they could. During a night of heavy fog the opposing armies moved very close. Only a long green meadow and one farmhouse separated them.

As dawn came, the fog lifted. Bullets and bombs began to explode, and men began to die. After a long period of severe battle, the house in the green meadow was hit and began to burn. Then someone whispered, ‘look! It was unbelievable, but there was a small baby crawling across the field.

As the soldiers saw the child, the shooting stopped. It became very still. Every eye was on the baby.

Suddenly, a soldier got up from his position, ran out into the open, grabbed the baby up in his arms, and ran back to his line. In a moment a great cheer went up on both sides, but then the bullets began to fly again. The baby brought peace just for a moment.

If you follow Jesus Christ you follow the Prince of Peace – the one who will guide your feet into the way of peace. Who are you at war with at this moment? Who are you in conflict with at this moment? Look for the way of peace. Be open to have your feet be guided into the way of peace.

Advent was one week away, so a family thought they’d see what the kids remembered from the previous year’s celebrations.

‘Who can tell me what the four candles in the Advent Wreath represent?’ the father asked.

His son jumped in with seven year old wisdom, saying, ‘there is love, joy, peace and …

At that moment his young sister interrupted, ‘Peace and QUIET!’

Love joy peace and quiet!

Sometimes finding salvation, confronting one’s sins and confronting others with their sins is not a quiet process. Living in the shadows of fear or anxiety, conflict, uncertainty, is not quiet. But I’m afraid to say you haven’t been called to a quiet life. You have been called to follow Jesus Christ, who brought light to those in darkness and in shadow and who sought out the way of peace. That is no quiet life.

I went to the cinema last week to see the film Philomena, partly in preparation for last Thursday’s talk I gave on Faith and Film. The film is a true story of Philomena Lee – wonderfully played by Judi Dench – who with the help of journalist Martin Sixsmith, played by Steve Coogan, went searching for the son who had been adopted without her consent decades earlier. As a pregnant unmarried teenager in 1950s Ireland, Philomena had suffered the full penalty exacted by the repressive and punitive attitudes of the time. Without wanting to give too much away, her quest for her son throws up unexpected and deeply moving surprises. Philomena is a devout Catholic despite what has happened to her. Sixsmith is a skeptical atheist who is baffled as to how she can still have a faith after having suffered at the hands of the religious establishment. Yet Philomena finds her peace at the end of her quest and also forgiveness, whereas Sixsmith is shown to be a man who doesn’t have peace and who lives under a shadow of bitterness.

Another film out at the moment is Gravity – a lost in space drama featuring Sandra Bullock as an astronaut stranded by some freak accident, totally alone in zero gravity, in a world beyond sound and oxygen. Giles Fraser, writing last week in the Guardian, described it as one of the most beautifully religious things he’s seen in ages. He writes that ‘looking down on the world, Bullocks isolation is complete and terrifying, suspended in nothingness. It is the ultimate retreat. Just her and her pain at losing a daughter. At the point where all hope feels lost, she reflects on her inability to pray – ‘nobody ever taught me how’ – and lies down in the cabin to allow the rising CO2 slowly to lead her into the calm of oblivion. The fever of life seems over. On one level the story is an escape drama, on another it is a work of powerful existential ism with moments of quasi- religious insight, a reflection on the unbearable lightness of being and our need for weight, for a gravity that pulls us towards each other and the Earth in all its beauty’.

Film reviews over for the moment ( though I will talk about the Hunger Games next week).

Christmas is about that gravity. God coming down to Earth. Human and divine touching, being reunited. The dawn from on high breaking and shining light into our existence. Too good to be true? Or so good and so true? Surely if you are more a Martin Sixsmith than a Philomena Lee, it is worth seeking with all your heart and all your mind?

The claim of Christmas is that God broke through the darkness.  As Zachariah said, ”Because of God’s compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace.” (Luke 1:78-79 CEB)

Many of us have experienced that kind of fear, the fear of being in shadows.  We have experienced that kind of sorrow or loss.  When the chaos of the world is too much to bear, we sit in the shadow.  When the diagnosis is positive, and the prognosis is not optimistic, we sit in the shadow.  When the job is lost and the source of the next pay cheque is a mystery, we sit in the shadow.  When we fail to love as we were called to love, we sit in the shadow.  When thousands of children die from under-nourishment or  preventable disease, we sit in the shadow.

Though some would claim that God does not go where God is not wanted, such a claim stands in direct opposition to the claim of Christmas.  The claim of Christmas is that God goes where God is not expected and is not wanted.  God goes where it one time seemed impossible.  God breaks through the cosmos, tears through the curtain, crumbles our dividing walls, and makes the audacious and spectacular claim that God was made flesh.  God was a baby.

My friends, each one of us lives in the shadow of the apocalypse - the dark reality of the end of our time and the end of the world's time. That is the warning of Advent. But there is also good news. There is also the promise of Advent - the promise that in the darkness, in the shadows, in the unpredictable anxiety of our unfinished lives, God is present. God is in control, and God will come again.

With each candle we light, the shadows recede a bit, and the promise comes closer. With each candle we light, we are proclaiming that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it. And as long as the night seems, morning will come - in God's good time and God's good way.

Today is 1st December World Aids Day. Since 1996 I always wear a red ribbon on this day. In 1996 Debbie and I went to visit a good friend of ours who was working as a Christian missionary in Uganda, helping local people out in the bush to dig water wells and use those projects as a way of bringing warring tribes together in peace. We were based in a village out in the bush called Kapelebyong. One in five people in that village were HIV positive and were living with the Aids virus. Many had already died. Yet the Christian church was vibrant.

They were led by one of the most inspirational men I’ve met, the Revd. Charles Eboru. Charles had seen his brother macheteed to death by some of Idi Amin’s thugs in the 1970s but had subsequently forgiven those murderers and led one of them to Christ. Their hope in Christ kept then going. With only mud huts, a regular diet of beans, poverty and death to look forward to, these people still smiled and praised God. They had found light in their shadows, and a Saviour to guide them in the footsteps of peace.

Zachariah saw a great purpose in his son’s life.  People wondered, “What then will this child be?”  John grew to be the voice in the wilderness that cried out, “Prepare the way of the Lord.”

What then will you be?  For what purpose have you been created?  Use what you have been given to do as John did.  Prepare the way of the Lord.  Show people the way of salvation.  Find those that sit in the shadow of death, and sit next to them.  Hold their hand.  Weep with them.  Give them love.  Show them the light, and declare that the dawn is coming.  Declare that the dawn is coming, and let the Holy Spirit guide you on the path of peace.

Simon Helme With material from:

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Alan Brehm <http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.co.uk/2009/12/looking-for-salvation-mal.html>

Giles Fraser – Guardian 23.11.13

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