



Second Sunday of Advent

9th December 2012

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Malachi 3: 1-4; Song of Zechariah (Lk 1: 68-79); Phil 1: 1-11; Luke 3: 1-6

'All flesh shall see the salvation of our God' – for me, these last words of our Gospel reading strike the authentic note of Advent. We are in purple garb, but this is not Lent. We are thinking of ourselves, not as penitent sinners but as those who *need God*, and come to God (perhaps come here today) to hear a word of hope.

For as humans we are *flesh*, frail and vulnerable. The prophet says, 'All flesh is grass, and its constancy is like the flower of the field' (Is 40: 6). A human body is a fragile contraption: we do not live very long, and our lives can be snuffed out in a moment by disease or the carelessness of a drunken driver.

And being weak and needy, we punish ourselves. Karen Armstrong writes [*Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, p. 74]:

'We are so often the cause of our own misery. We pursue things and people, even though we know in our heart of hearts that they cannot make us happy. ... The moment we acquire something we start to worry about losing it. ... When we hear of someone else's success, our first reaction is often a pang of jealousy or resentment'.

And here is the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg talking about some of the casualties of life's frailty:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked,

dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an
angry fix

angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the
starry dynamo in the machinery of night

What a tangle of strange obsessions.

Or listen to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, lying awake at night in a Nazi prison:

I hear, I hear
The silent thoughts
Of my fellow sufferers asleep or awake,
As if voices, cries,
As if shouts for planks to save them.
I hear the uneasy creak of the beds,

I hear chains ...
When at grey dawn sleep finds them
They murmur in dreams of their wives and children.

Letters and Papers from Prison

Yes, we are flesh, creatures of need, and being flesh we are easily led astray. When I was ordained priest in 1989, part of the Bishop's charge was this:
'As messengers, watchmen and stewards ... [you are] to search for God's children in the wilderness of this world's temptations, and to guide them through its confusions, so that they may be saved by Christ for ever.'

That's a high calling I've never come anywhere near fulfilling.

In our state of need, God speaks to us two words: peace, and compassion.

At the centre of our readings today is the figure of John the Baptist, and he may seem like one who comes with a threat of judgement and a demand that we sort ourselves out – until you remember that he is a voice crying in that same wilderness we all inhabit, and he is sent for reconciliation, 'to turn the hearts of children to their parents and the hearts of parents to their children' (Mal 4: 5) .

Behind his ministry is a story which sadly never makes it into our Sunday readings, but St Luke begins his Gospel by reminding us that this fiery figure coming out of the desert was once *a child*, and an answer to two people's very specific human longing.

Whether it is history or a pious legend I don't know, but the story he tells is that John's parents were an aged priest, Zechariah, and his equally old wife Elizabeth, faithful servants of God but deeply saddened that they had no children. This couple reminds us of Abraham and Sarah, back in the beginning, longing for a son; and they remind us of Israel, the nation as a whole, longing for a messiah.

Into this state of longing breaks the living God, who sends an angel to assure them that they will have a son, who will be God's prophet to prepare the way for all. And the angel gives them signs: Zechariah is struck dumb by this encounter until his tongue is freed by faith to communicate the good news. And Elizabeth takes her unborn child into a secluded place, a place of contemplation, affirming 'This is what the Lord has done for me'; and when the child is born she is inspired to claim for him the name laid down by the angel, the name Joannes, John, meaning 'God's gracious gift'.

And then the father Zechariah is inspired to sing the Song we have just shared, often called the *Benedictus*, from the first word of the Latin version: 'Blessed' –
'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
for he has visited his people and set them free.'

It's a song of fulfilment. What God has promised, through Abraham and the prophets, and sealed in the covenant, is now fulfilled in the imminent birth of a 'mighty saviour' from the house of David. Jesus is not named here but he is

pointed to in these words, and again at the end he is pointed to in the messianic image of 'the dawn' or (in the lovely word in the older translation) the dayspring from on high', the one in whom a new age will begin.

In Christ, Zechariah says, God comes: comes

'To set us free from the hands of our enemies

Free to worship him without fear

Holy and righteous all the days of our life.'

This is how life should be: free from our enemies, free from fear, to live with joy before God. Isn't it fear which drives all those obsessions and distortions of human living named by Ginsberg and Bonhoeffer and Karen Armstrong? – fear of death, fear of meaninglessness, fear of not being loved – those fears which drive people to pursue cocaine and hatred and wealth and other drugs. We may have outward enemies ready to plunge a knife in our back, but they are nothing beside these inner enemies, these fears, which clamour endlessly beneath the surface of consciousness and destroy our rest.

But do we know that we are loved, we are forgiven? and that all this happens 'in the tender compassion of our God'?

The words 'tender compassion' are literally 'bowels of mercy'. Compassion is like a feeling felt in the most tender inward part of our body; and God who is beyond all flesh feels for us in our fleshly need with the most tender and inward feeling. Our needs are embedded in God's deepest being, as a child is embedded in a mother's deepest being, before and after birth. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, the word 'compassion' is literally 'wombs': God loves us indeed with wombs of compassion. When Jacob sends his sons down to Egypt to beg for their brother's life he says, 'Go, and may you find wombs – may you find compassion – In the sight of the man there', and they do (Gen 43: 14).

God is the infinite compassion out of whose womb the whole universe is born.

And so God come to us wherever we are, and however we are causing misery to ourselves and others. Can we learn from God that we are loved, forgiven, whatever we have done? God waits for us to live without fear, to know that we are holy and righteous in his sight, all the days of our life.

God waits for us to forgive ourselves and forgive others. Can we learn from God's compassion to forgive ourselves, have compassion on ourselves and others? Can we learn from God's compassion to see those who are different from us – the stranger, the weirdo, the difficult person who irritates us to death – to see them as loved by God with the same tender compassion God has for us? Can we catch and share that compassion?

Can we by these means find peace in ourselves so that we can be makers of peace with others? Without the inner peace which comes from compassion there can be no outward peace. Can we find an interior silence, free from those fear-begotten enemies – anxiety, self-doubt, self-hatred? Can we find a quiet heart where we can receive in peace God's gift of peace?

This Song of Zechariah, this Benedictus, proclaims the coming of Christ once. But for at least 1500 years it has been used daily in Christian worship as a canticle of praise in morning prayer. It has been used in medieval monasteries and in Anglican prayer books.

Because every day is the day when the dawn, the dayspring from on high breaks upon us out of God's tender and inward compassion, shining especially on 'those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death'. Every day God comes to us as a promise and a power 'to set us free from our enemies', 'to guide our feet into the way of peace'.