

Luke 1.78-79: THE SONG OF ZECHARIAH (The Benedictus)

Chelmsford 21/12/08

The birth of a first child always calls for special celebration
But even more so, when it is a child for whom you have waited for many years.
Zechariah had long given up hope of having a child – not only was Elizabeth past it, he knew that he too was past it.
But then – to his utter amazement – he found he was going to be a father after all.

For months he had been speechless – struck dumb by the angel Gabriel, perhaps for his lack of belief.

But the day came when his speech was restored – and with his speech restored he burst into song, a song traditionally called the *Benedictus* after the opening word of the Latin translation. **“Blessed be the Lord”**.

Or in the words of the GNB: **“Let us praise the Lord”**

On this busy Sunday, when many of us will be involved in the children’s party, as also in one or other of the services of Carols by Candlelight, I thought that instead of a full-length three-point sermon expounding the whole of Zechariah’s song, we would focus on the last two verses of the Benedictus:

“Our God is merciful and tender. He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death, to guide our steps into the paths of peace” (78-79)

Or in the more familiar words of the NRSV:

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace”.

The translation is a little complex:

- Zechariah is probably here picturing God's salvation like ***“the morning sun from heaven”*** (NEB) rising and giving light at the beginning of the day. ***“God's Sunrise will break in upon us”*** (Peterson, The Message).
If Zechariah was indeed likening the coming of the Saviour to the coming of the dawn, then there may well be an allusion to the Book of Malachi, where God says through his prophet: **“For you who obey me, my saving power will rise on you like the sun and bring healing like the sun’s rays** (literally, “with healings in its wings”(4.2). It was this verse which provided the inspiration behind the third verse of Charles Wesley’s great carol: ***“Hark the Herald Angels Sing”*** – ***“Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the sun of righteousness. Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings”***
As the sun sweeps the darkness away, so Jesus has come into our world to sweep away the darkness of sin and death.
- On the other hand, it is possible, however, that the reference is not to the sun, but to a bright star - it may be that Zechariah was referring to Num 24.17 where we read: ***“a star shall come forth out of Jacob”***, imagery which was later taken up and applied to Christ in the Book of Revelation: ***“I am descended from the family of David; I am the bright morning star”*** (Rev 22.17).

Whatever, the general thrust is clear. With Jesus light has come into the world. Light has come to those who **"live in the dark shadow of death"**.

Many centuries before the coming of Jesus the prophet Isaiah had looked forward the Saviour. **"A child is born to us! A son is given to us"**. He too had likened this child to a light-giver: **"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. They lived in a land of shadows, but now light is shining upon them"** (Isaiah 9.2)

John in his Gospel also picks up this imagery of light: **"The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to humanity. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out"** (John 1.4,5).

Zechariah however does not just speak of people living in darkness, but rather of people who live **"in the dark shadow of death"**.

Let's reflect for a moment on that image.

In a very real sense *death does cast a shadow – indeed, it casts a shadow on all of life.*

- True, while we are young, we are not so conscious of its shadow. As Jean Paul Sartre said in an interview with the Observer newspaper: *"At one time I thought myself immortal - up to the age of 30"*.
- But with the passing of the years death begins to raise its gloomy head. Most people find the only way they can cope with it is try to not think about - death has been described as *"the great human repression, the universal complex"*. My experience of funerals is even when death stares them in the face, most people seek escape in a vague mist of religious sentimentalism.
- Death casts a shadow – some may out of bravado joke about popping their clogs, but the truth is that most people are afraid of death: they are afraid not simply because they do not know when they will die or how they will die, but what will happen after they die.
- What's more, death casts a shadow not just upon our own individual lives, but upon life in general. For not only must we ourselves die, but so also we know and love must die. Death is really a depressing thought!

But the good news is that **"God has caused the bright dawn of his salvation to rise on us and to shine... on all those who live in the dark shadow of death"**

For, thanks to Jesus coming into our world, death is not the end – for those who believe death it is but the gateway to a new a fuller life.

Yes, Jesus has brought light to those who **"live in the dark shadow of death"**.

Without Jesus we are lost in the dark - without Jesus death is the great unknown

But with Jesus life gains direction - death is not the end - Jesus leads us to God.

Yes, with the coming of Jesus, light shines into our darkness

True, the darkness sought to overcome the light of Jesus – but, as John reminds us, **"the darkness has never put it [the light] out"**.

True, the forces of evil did their best. We see that not least in the Cross of Jesus.

Indeed, the last three hours of Jesus on the Cross were literally marked by darkness.

For from noon on that fateful day **"the whole country was covered with darkness which lasted for three hours"** (Mk 15.33) – the darkness was surely a symbol of the battle that was being fought between the powers of good and evil.

But, the darkness did not put the light out.

The light shone – and still shines.

What's more, it was precisely because of that 'death of deaths' on the Cross, that we can face up to our own individual deaths.

There on the Cross the power of sin and death was broken.

It is that which we remember every time we come to the Lord's Table, to eat bread and drink wine. For we look back not simply to the day when Jesus died for us – but also to the day when with loved ones who have died ahead of us in Christ we shall eat and drink at the Marriage Feast of the Lamb.

“Our God is merciful and tender. He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death”.

True, Zechariah could never have understood the full import of those words.

But we, who live the other side of the Cross and Resurrection, see the wonderful way in which his words were fulfilled.

When John was born, Zechariah couldn't contain himself - he had to burst into song. Let's not contain ourselves either - for Jesus the Saviour has come!