24 June 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Birth of John the Baptist
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For my text:

*Even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. (Luke 1.15-16)*

Those words are part of the announcement of the Angel to Zechariah that he is to have a son, whom he should name John. Our Gospel reading was the story of the subsequent birth of that child.

The angel’s message to Zechariah was all about God’s Spirit going into action in the world in a new way – “Even before his birth he (that is the infant John) will be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Luke, in the first couple of chapters of his Gospel, forges a unity of the stories of the birth of John and Jesus, and the unifying theme of this narrative is the force of God as the Great Disrupter.

Zechariah’s life was turned upside down for a start. There he was, performing a time-hallowed ritual in the inner sanctuary of the Temple, something that represented for mortals a glimpse of eternity, and he was abruptly interrupted by an angel, bringing a message from God telling of something dramatically new.

Specifically, the angel had come to foretell the birth of John, and Zechariah had the temerity to doubt the message, as a result of which he was struck dumb until such time as he had witnessed the truth of the angel’s message. We heard in our Gospel how the angel’s words were fulfilled in the birth of John; and in our Gospel reading God’s disruption struck again.
The family and the priests were going to follow tradition and call the child Zechariah, but his mother put her foot down and, in accordance with the angel’s message to Zechariah, she said, “No; he is to be called John.”

They, of course, thought that she had lost the plot, and so they appealed to Zechariah, who had to write down his reply, because he was still dumb, but he confirmed that the child was indeed to be called John, thus departing from the tradition of perpetuating the father’s name in the next generation, and instead giving the child a name which had no precedent in that family.

This was not, of course, just divine capriciousness; there was a message in this God-given name – the Hebrew form of John, Johanan, means God’s Grace, or God has acted graciously.

Zechariah’s power of speech was then restored, and we are told that, empowered by the Holy Spirit, he gave voice to a great poetic stream of praise and prophecy. We didn’t hear those words in this morning’s reading, but most of you know them from the Prayer Book service of Matins, or from concerts of sacred music: it’s what we know as the Benedictus, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people”. And in that hymn of praise Zechariah goes on to prophesy about the mission which will be entrusted to John by God:

“…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,
Through the tender mercy of our God:
whereby the day-spring from on high hath visited us;
To give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death:
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

In the lines that I have quoted there have been two references to God’s visitation, in other words: to God promising to intervene in our world to open for humanity a new way to encounter his love and his mercy, something that he will do through Jesus Christ, whose forerunner John is to be.

I have quoted those words in the language of the old Prayer Book, partly because that is the version that many of you will know from our worship, but partly also because that
formal and poetic language reflects the fact that in the original that passage stands out from the ordinary language of the rest of Luke’s narrative.

He tells us that Zechariah spoke these words filled with the spirit, which puts him in the same category as the Old Testament prophets, whose prophecies were not their own ideas, but were divinely inspired; so Zechariah’s elevated poetic language in this passage makes it clear that it is about God’s future, not Zechariah’s own hopes and fears.

There are two other passages in the early chapters of St Luke’s Gospel that have this prophetic style and grandeur, and it is not surprising that this stand-out quality has ensured that they, like the Benedictus, have become part of Christian worship from the very early centuries, in our case coming down to us in the Prayer Book service of Evensong: they are the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, “My soul doth magnify the Lord” and the Nunc dimittis, or Song of Simeon, “Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace”.

Luke sees all three of these hymns or prophecies as part of a single story, his account of God’s dramatic new initiative in the births of those two babies six months apart, John and Jesus.

The Nunc Dimittis, the third of these, is gentle and peaceful in tone, but the theme of the passing away of the old order is very much there, in the person of the old and devout Simeon.

He glimpses God’s future in the infant saviour whom he holds in his arms, even while he recognises that his own life is drawing to a close, “Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace…” And he goes on to tell of the new offer of salvation in Christ, who will be “a light to lighten the gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel”.

However, if we come back to the Song of Mary, the theme of the disruption of the established order of things is prominent, just as it was in hymn of praise at the birth of John.

Mary’s prophetic words are also about confounding expectations: yes, it begins with her tender expression of her own thanks for the part that God is entrusting to her in this new thing that is coming to pass – “He hath regarded: the lowliness of his handmaiden”, but it goes on to proclaim how the child she is carrying in her womb will sweep away the old, and bring in a radically new world order:
“…he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek.
He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.”

It’s described in the past, as if it has already happened, but that is a familiar idiom of Old Testament prophecies, emphasising that God’s future is so certain that it has for all practical purposes already been established. And notice how those lines tell of God’s condemnation of the iniquities of the existing state of affairs.

That theme of God’s judgement of the existing order of things is something that is there again when the adult John the Baptist proclaims the arrival of Jesus: he warns that the axe is already laid at the root of the tree, and that Jesus will cast the unfruitful wood into the fire.

John also uses the symbolism of fire when he describes Jesus as having his winnowing fork in his hand, “to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

That imagery of fire has helped to shape the ancient tradition of celebrating the eve of this festival of the birth of John the Baptist with bonfires.

It has died out in this part of the world, and I first encountered it as a teenager travelling up a Norwegian fjord at this time of year; on the Eve of this festival of St John we had gone ashore for an evening meal, and afterwards our hosts took us to the water’s edge to gather round a bonfire and eat bowls of a special porridge.

It didn’t take much imagination to think ourselves back to the days of the Vikings as we saw fires reflected in the water from surrounding coastal villages; and indeed that sort of commemoration of St John may have been grafted by the early Christians on to a pre-Christian midsummer ritual, which celebrated light and warmth at the very point where the nights would start getting longer and the days shorter.

We don’t need to fear contamination from such cultural borrowings: let us rather focus on the biblical imagery of light and fire as we celebrate Christian truth in the story of the births of John and Jesus: Zechariah’s proclamation that “the dayspring from on high hath visited us”, the promise of light for them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death; Simeon rejoicing in the salvation that he had glimpsed in the infant Christ as “a light to lighten the gentiles”, and the adult John the Baptist warning that Christ would cast the dead wood and the chaff into a fire.
I can’t imagine that anyone here was part of a traditional St John’s Eve bonfire party last night, but we can and should embrace its imagery. The contemporary priest and poet, Malcolm Guite, wrote a sonnet on that vigil, which includes these lines:

…“Behold
The One who stands amongst you comes with fire!”
So keep his fires burning through this night,
Beacons and gateways for the child of light.

Let us on this feast of St John resolve, not only on St John’s Eve, but all the year through, to embrace Christ’s proclamation of a new set of values to live by, and let us pray that our lives become more effective beacons for the child of light, whose forerunner St John was.

Amen