9 December 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Second Sunday of Advent
The Revd Canon Dr Edmund Newey, Sub Dean

‘For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him’ (Baruch 5)

In nomine…

In the new church year that began on Advent Sunday last week, we’ll be reading our way through the gospel according to Saint Luke. Last year we heard Saint Mark and parts of Saint John, the year before we read Saint Matthew, but this time it’s the turn of Luke. Luke has always been my favourite evangelist. In fact at the age of about six, I clearly remember telling my father that I liked Luke best of the four gospels. Not that I was an unnaturally pious child – my preference wasn’t based on an intimate knowledge of all four gospels. It’s just that the first film I ever saw at the cinema was Star Wars and my favourite character in it was Luke Skywalker; so my solemn pronouncement had more to do with a liking for his name than a sympathy for his gospel.

But as I’ve grown up I’ve found my early preference confirmed. Luke is held to have been a doctor and the voice in which he tells his gospel has all the qualities we look for in a good medic. Calm, knowledgeable, confident – no doubt Luke had a great bedside manner! One scholar has described Luke’s gospel as ‘the least apocalyptic of all the NT writings’. What he meant by that is that Luke doesn’t provide much support for the fanatic or the fundamentalist. His gospel is a doctor’s account of Jesus the Messiah: the Messiah sent to heal the ills of the world and the sickness of the human race. But the steady calm of Luke’s style certainly doesn’t mean that he is dull. The pages of this gospel are filled with what Ambrose of Milan called sobria ebriatas, the sober drunkenness of the Holy Spirit. This intoxication with the Holy Spirit manifests itself not so much in drama and miracle, but in moments of intimacy and insight when men and women shine with the likeness of God in whose image they are made.
This Sunday and next we hear the passages from Luke’s third chapter about John the Baptist, ‘the voice…crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord”’. Next week we’ll hear about John’s ministry in a bit more detail, but today I’d like to take us a step back to the moment two chapters earlier when John the Baptist is born - and look at the great song, the Benedictus, that his father Zechariah sings.

The first few chapters of Luke’s gospel are full of song:

First comes the Magnificat, the song that Mary sings on receiving the angel’s tidings that she will bear a son and will name him Jesus: ‘My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour…’.

In the second chapter there is the song the angels sing when they announce the news of the birth of Christ to the shepherds: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth’.

And then there is the Nunc Dimittis, the song that Simeon sings when he receives Jesus in his arms in the temple at Jerusalem: ‘Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace…for mine eyes have seen thy salvation…a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel’.

Each of these songs is sung out of overflowing joy – joy at the workings of God among humankind; joy that, in Christ, heaven and earth are reconciled.

And just the same kind of joy is there in the Benedictus, Zechariah’s song. Remember the background to this song of praise. Zechariah, priest of the temple, and his wife Elizabeth have been childless all their married life; now they have reached old age. But suddenly, when Zechariah is serving at the altar an angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him that Elizabeth will bear a son and will name him John. Naturally Zechariah is amazed at this news: the right word is dumbfounded, because he is literally unable to speak from the moment of the angel’s visitation until the boy is born. ‘…you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur’.

Then, in due course, Elizabeth gives birth to the as yet unnamed child and, according to Jewish custom, he is taken to be circumcised. Just as today, there is much interest in the new baby’s name: ‘What are you going to call him?’, say Elizabeth’s friends and relatives. Jewish tradition would suggest that he should be named after his father or another close relative, but Elizabeth is adamant that he is to be called John. The child’s father, being struck dumb, has no say in the matter, until to resolve the dispute, a writing tablet is
brought, and he spells out the words: ‘His name is John’. And, immediately, on writing those words, his speech returns. Zechariah’s initial disbelief, his reluctance to trust in the angel’s message, turns to delight at the birth of his son, who will prepare the way of the Lord: ‘Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God’.

And the Benedictus is our record of the words of praise that the Holy Spirit placed in Zechariah’s mouth. First, he praises God for his grace and faithfulness in times past, and for the covenant he has kept, that his people might ‘worship him without fear, holy and righteous all the days of [their] life’. Then he turns to his child John and sings directly to him: ‘And you child will be called the prophet of the Highest, for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation to his people, for the forgiveness of their sins’. And, finally, he looks to the future, to the light of salvation to be brought by Christ: ‘the dawn from on high … to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide your feet into the way of peace’. Ghirlandaio’s painting, reproduced in the pew sheet, shows us the tenderness of this moment as Zechariah writes John’s name, gazing at him with love and pride. The old man, his dumbness suddenly banished, sings to his child, his voice perhaps quavering slightly, but filled with the sober joy of the Spirit: tracing the pattern of God’s blessing upon his people from the past, through the present, to the future soon to be revealed in Christ.

It’s with good reason that the Church has chosen to make these three great songs from the beginning of Luke’s gospel a part of our daily round of prayer. At Evensong, with Mary, we sing the Magnificat and, with Simeon, the Nunc Dimittis. We rejoice that God has exalted the humble and meek, showing that before him the whole human race are equal and beloved; and we pray that, our days work done, we may depart in peace. But in the morning at Matins it’s Zechariah’s song that we make our own. We look forward with him to what glimpses of God’s kingdom the new day will bring. And now, in this season of Advent, we do the same: blessing God who has visited and redeemed his people, and waiting in joyful expectation for the dawn from on high to break upon us. So let’s hear the Benedictus again; and let’s hear it slightly differently – spoken to you:

Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel,

who has come to you and set you free.

He has raised up for you a mighty Saviour,
born of the house of his servant David.

Through his holy prophets God promised of old •
to save you from your enemies,
from the hands of all that hate you,
To show mercy to your ancestors, •
and to remember his holy covenant.
This was the oath God swore to your father Abraham: •
to set you free from the hands of your enemies,
Free to worship him without fear, •
holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of your life.

…

In the tender compassion of your God •
the dawn from on high shall break upon you,
To shine on you who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, •
and to guide your feet into the way of peace.