

Thought For The Day Advent 22nd December Struck Dumb.

Advent has arrived and so with it comes our Thought For The Day! These are an email sent to your inbox every Monday to Saturday from the 4th to the 23rd December. Each email will include a Thought for the day from one of our contributors for you to reflect on. Hopefully these will be a source of spiritual nourishment to you and help you to draw closer to God this Advent.



Luke 1: 57-66

The Birth of John the Baptist

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Thought: Struck Dumb.

When I was called to the priesthood, I felt touched by the grace of God who at long last called me to extraordinary things. But when I became ordained, I soon found that it can be all too easy to be consumed with the 'business' of Church; to let the rotas, the PCC, the social events, the ordinariness of parish life to become the primary focus, and there is a very real risk of losing sight of the divine vision. This is true for all Christians as it is for those in the clergy. The divine vision is that we, as the Church, are caught up into the mystery that God, 'the author of life' (Acts 3:15), is actually interested in us and wants us to become involved in his economy for the salvation of the world. That's our business.

In this sense, I have a lot of sympathy for the old priest Zechariah. He was put on the rota to offer the sacrifice of incense on the altar in the temple. There in the daily routine of the 'busy-ness' of the temple, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him that in their grand old age both he and his wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son. The miracles abounded when this angel informed them that John will 'be in the spirit and power of Elijah' (Luke 1:16). Zechariah had become so consumed by the ordinariness of his work that he was unable to have faith in the ultimate purpose that God has for him, and was instead stuck in his incredulity. To use the common parlance, he was struck dumb. That is how we meet Zechariah in this passage, as a mute.

Elizabeth on the other hand, greeted the angel's news with a deep appreciation of the mystery of God at work, and I think her seclusion enabled her to take this news in with prayerfulness. It all seems like a reversal of the story of Sarah and Abraham in Genesis 12, Sarah greets the angel's news with incredulity, with a laugh. Not so with Elizabeth, who in her meeting with Mary is said to have been 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (Luke 1:41), and her child leapt in her womb. So, when her child came to be born, she kept her faith in the divine vision delivered by the angel, and emphatically kept to her promise to call her son, 'John'.

Zechariah's silence is often conveyed as a punishment for his lack of faith. But I don't see it that way. I see it as a gift. This lifelong priest from an exalted class had been given a chance to still his too-ready, too-presumptuous tongue in order to re-engage his mind, heart, and soul toward God. He was given time to feed his interior life- to rediscover and resubmerge himself into the fathomless depth of faith that first called to him- and thus prepare for the new life about to be thrust into his care. He is called to be a witness to the extraordinary occurring in the lives of the ordinary around him. He saw Elizabeth's faithfulness, and through Elizabeth, he must have listened to Mary's faithfulness to God's call, expressed by her words of the Magnificat.

Inspired by Elizabeth's and Mary's faith, it is little wonder then that when Zechariah finally found his voice in this passage it was a renewed voice which was true to the vision of God. It was a free voice offering up praise. The fruit of his contemplation was a prayer and it began with, 'Blessed be the God of Israel' (Luke 1:68). A prayer that became known as the Benedictus.

So, it can be easy to lose sight of the divine purpose that God has for us, both as individuals and as a Church, by being consumed by the banality of busyness. But St Paul wrote that we can be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:2), and it is therefore necessary sometimes to take that time out to listen to God's voice, and thereby discern God's purpose for us in his theodrama. This Christmas, let us allow ourselves to be refreshed in our prayer, to keep our eyes on the divine vision that God has for us as the Church. When we are prayerful, we may hear that divine voice whispering to us, calling us to extraordinary things.

All my blessings for this advent and upcoming Christmas
Rev'd Dr Tom Ruston

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