

## **Mattins Advent 3 2011**

There is something very curious about the first couple of chapters of Luke's Gospel. The story of the conception of John the Baptist, which we heard last week, is told over 24 verses while the story of the conception of Jesus takes only 21. When it comes to the birth narratives there is a similar disparity – John the Baptist's birth scene takes 22 verses while for Jesus there are just 20. Of course, quantity of words does not necessarily equate directly to importance. After all, The Ten Commandments consist of 300 words while the EU regulations on the export of duck eggs run to 26,900 words. Nevertheless there is no doubt that Luke gives a great deal of attention to John the Baptist and it raises the question why.

One of the principles behind successfully managing change is to give people information. And in describing the birth of John the Baptist Luke is giving us coded information and preparing us for change. To understand the code we have to go back to the Old Testament. When God made his covenant of love and friendship with Abraham and promised to bless his descendants it all began with two people at the end of their own resources. Abraham and Sarah were childless, unable to produce descendants, and yet from out of their helplessness

God gifted them a son. This gift marked the beginning of something new and wonderful in God's dealing with the world; a visible sign of his steadfast love and faithfulness.

And at the beginning of Luke's gospel history repeats itself. Zechariah and Elizabeth too were helpless and at the end of their own resources. And then they were gifted with a child called John. And Luke here wants us to use this information to make connections with the O.T saga of Abraham. God, he is saying, is about to do a new thing; He is going to make a *new* covenant of love and friendship with his people. But, this change is not something random or incomprehensible. It is part of the faithful, consistent love God showed to Abraham. So there is one reason why John is so important in Luke's account of salvation history.

A second principle behind the successful management of change is to give people time and space to adapt to something new. We heard last week how, when Zechariah questioned Gabriel's message, he was struck dumb. It is always assumed that Zechariah was being punished for his unbelief. But, the text never says that explicitly and I am not so sure. When something new is about to happen God often creates space for people to receive what he is going to do. In

the Old Testament the people of Israel travelled in the vast open space of the desert for 40 years until they were ready to receive God's promise. And I wonder if that is not what is happening here with Zechariah. He is being given the space of nine silent months in which to come to terms with a life-changing event and receive what God has promised him.

But, what has all this got to do with us and our own life of faith? Next Wednesday the church celebrates another John – John of the Cross – who was a Carmelite friar living in the turbulent world of 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain. John was a great poet and writer who still has much to say about the bewildering way in which God often seems to impact on our lives. John of the Cross had a fascination with the concept of night. Members of his community often saw him praying outside at night which, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was a time of stillness, silence and a spacious night sky.

And for John of the Cross night became a metaphor for the way God creates space in our lives so we might receive his love and gifts. John chose this metaphor because night is something beyond our control – it is not something over which we have power but something given. Also, before the age of electricity, night was a time when people didn't function as in

the day – there was a powerlessness and helplessness about the night. And for John this is a picture of the way God brings about change and new direction in our lives.

Night is the time when God touches our lives at the point where we feel helpless or at the end of our resources. Night refers to those times when life feels out of our control; when we feel bewildered and in the dark about what is happening to us and faith can seem empty. This might take the form of a bout of illness; or something that has gone badly wrong at work; or a relationship that has fallen apart. The experience feels dark and negative but, says John of the Cross, God can use all this to create inner space so that we might receive his hidden gifts – what Isaiah calls the treasures of darkness. That, I think, was what was happening to Zechariah and it is one way God helps us to change and let go of our own agenda and follow his.

John of the Cross begins one of his poems like this: “One dark night... I went out”. For John, as for Luke, the bewildering experiences of life are not meaningless. In God’s hands spiritual night can become the means by which we are led on to the next stage of our journey to a faithful, loving Father in heaven.

