

Cathedral Mattins 16thth December 2018
Psalm 62.1-8; Isaiah 35.1-2 + 8-10; Luke 1.57-66

*May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen*

How long O Lord? How long will you hide your face from me? [Ps 13.1]
That is the cry of King David as he pleads for God's healing and wholeness. And it is a cry of the heart which many people, throughout history and today, have prayed, like a silent scream of pain. It has been the cry of the Jewish people time without number in their history, as they have waited for God's deliverance. But this cry, this longing, is of particular interest as it applies to children - long-awaited children who play a special role in God's great plan for human redemption. For in the silence, in the waiting, God's purposes are unfolding. *For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. [Ps 62.5]*

When God first made his covenant with his people, he promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. [Gen.15.5] But the years passed and Sarah's child-bearing years with them. And then, in their old age, Isaac was born, the covenant child; Isaac, in his turn, waited for fulfilment of God's promise, and at last his wife Rebekah gave birth to the twins Esau and Jacob. Rachel prayed in anguish for many years before Joseph was born – Joseph the dreamer, who would save his family from starvation and bring them to safety in Egypt, where they would grow from just one family into the

infant nation of Israel. Then there was Hannah, who prayed for so long for a child; her son Samuel served God all his life, and became the prophet who would anoint Israel's first King.

So I wonder whether Elizabeth thought about these events in her people's history as she bore the pain of childlessness - the bereavement of an empty cradle and the social stigma of a barren womb. For in those days, the gift of children was taken as a sign of God's blessing. So a long marriage with no children? Well, you know how people talk ...

Elizabeth and Zechariah had served God faithfully all their lives, but they were now very old. *How long, O Lord?* Perhaps it felt as though God was hiding his face from them. And God was silent. He had not spoken for 400 years – there had been no prophet since Malachi.

Why was God silent? Was he hiding his face from them? Could Elizabeth and Zechariah, could the Jewish people, still pray the psalm *For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him?*

To hope is to risk heartache. Hope admits to the vulnerability embedded in human life. Isaiah waited long in hope for God's promises. But like Isaiah, Zechariah and Elizabeth learned that the fulfilment of our hopes comes only as God's gift.

When the Angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah as he served in the Temple, he told Zechariah that his prayer had been heard. After so many years of longing, Elizabeth would bear a son, and they were to call him John. John would be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth, and

he would go before the Lord in the spirit of Elijah to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

But for all his piety, Zechariah was not, it seems, *prepared for the Lord*. He did not believe Gabriel's message, and in consequence Zechariah was struck dumb. I wonder what spiritual journey he made in his 9 months of silence. Perhaps he listened more to God. Perhaps he became *prepared for the Lord*.

Now Elizabeth and Zechariah are parents at last, and the time has come for their long-awaited baby to be circumcised at the Temple. Mary has been staying with them, so Elizabeth was not alone with her silent husband – she had a companion who understood and shared the experience of a miraculous pregnancy. This was God's provision of emotional and spiritual support for each other. Mary and Elizabeth knew that God, who had been silent for so long, had broken into their world, our world ...

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.

And Zechariah came to know this too. When he wrote on the tablet and obeyed Gabriel's command to call his son John, his tongue was set free, and his first words after 9 months of silence were words of praise to God. The neighbours in the hill country of Judea laid up in their hearts all that had happened - they began to realise that the supernatural events which had occurred portended some mighty action of God. John would be the last prophet before the Messiah.

John would come in the spirit of Elijah, as the herald of the Messiah. As the door to a new age swings open, John the Baptist is the hinge of that door. His message is repentance. God is coming to his people, but what are the obstacles to welcoming his coming? In Advent we think about repentance - making the Lord's paths straight. Repentance is the process of letting go of those things which make it impossible for us to receive what God longs to give us.

When Advent creates silent space for us to say how we have hoped and waited, and what longings we still hold dear, we discover the space growing within ourselves to welcome God's infinite gift of his intimate presence.

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.

The account of John's birth and his role as herald to the Messiah give us a window into a story that is not finally about us, but about God. No matter how early we put up the Christmas decorations, our hope lies in God's agenda, not our own. That was true in the hill country in Judea over 2000 years ago. Things are no different today.