

## Sermon Transcript 4/12/22 (SC)

### Luke 1:57-80 - The Benedictus

Generally speaking, using labels to talk about one another in church life is unhelpful. But I am happy to use them of myself. To give you some context this morning, I come from the evangelical tradition. My experience of church through my childhood and teens, was in churches that put great emphasis on spontaneity of worship and extemporary prayer. And that was and is a wonderful inheritance to draw upon. And it wasn't really until I started to train for ordination that I began to become familiar with some of the ancient prayers of the church that Christians around the world have been reciting for centuries. Our New Testament reading, Zechariah's prayer the Benedictus, is one of these prayers.

Back at the vicar factory, where I was training, we would gather each morning at 8:15, just before the working day began, and we would say Morning Prayer together, a short service, which almost always included the Benedictus. Now, in all honesty, I didn't have the best attendance record at Morning Prayer, but when I did go, I always made sure to sit right at the front, next to the principal, so he knew I was there. But of course, what I hadn't taken into account with this plan, is that in sitting next to the principal when I was there, meant he definitely noticed as well, when I wasn't there!

But nonetheless. Something must have gone in, because during the early days of the pandemic, when I was having to learn about ZOOM and video editing, and staying up on Saturday night until 4am to upload services to Youtube, when I was too tired and too distracted to really focus on prayer, the Benedictus somehow took over. The Lord's Prayer, and the Benedictus, got me through the pandemic. They were resources that through frequent repetition had been locked away in the vault of my memory, and took over.

It sounds like a silly question to ask, but what are the prayers you pray when your own words fail you? What is your spiritual 'impulse response'? I didn't realise it, but for me, it turns out to be this one, the Benedictus.

Now when I became conscious of this, I began to reflect, "well why has the church turned to this prayer through the centuries, why do Christians recite the prayer of an older gentleman on the brink of parenthood?" And what I want to do now is to share my own reflections on this which I grappled with during the various lockdowns.

And there are 2 points I wish to make this morning: Connectedness and Calling. Zechariah's sense of connectedness, and the calling placed on the life of the infant John.

So let's remind ourselves of the context in which the priest Zechariah prayed this prayer. We are told that Zechariah had been chosen by lot to enter the holy space of the Jerusalem temple, to offer incense. And even though he was a priest, and his life revolved around the various duties of the temple, this was a function that was performed once a year, so it was a great distinction for Zechariah. And as he was praying, he had a vision, where the angel Gabriel told him he and his wife Elizabeth were to have a child. Now because Zechariah challenged the words of the angel, he was struck, and unable to speak until the child was born. And after the birth of the child, the Benedictus, is virtually the first thing old Zechariah says.

And one of the things we notice, is that to pray the Benedictus, is to retell the story of an entire people. We might pray this individually, but it is not individualistic. It is a prayerful retelling of the Old Testament, and of all God's dealings with his people. This is a prayer which dynamically connects us to God's bigger picture.

*Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel,  
Who has come to his people and set them free.  
He has raised up for us a mighty saviour,  
Born of the house of his servant David.  
Through his holy prophets God promised of old,  
To set us free from our enemies, from the hands of all that hate us.  
To show mercy to our ancestors, and to remember his Holy covenant,  
This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham.*

One of the great cultural shocks of the last 5 years in this country, is that the illusion of our security has been shaken. The pandemic, the effects of climate change, the war in Ukraine, and political incompetence in this country, has reminded us that the relative political stability of our country these past 70 years has been a privileged exception, and not the global norm.

What we need then, are prayers that are attuned to this, that look beyond the horizons of our recent comfort, that are much further reaching in scope, both in terms of history and geography. We need prayers that go deeper than our sense of comfort and apathy, prayers that connect us to something ancient, something holy. The Benedictus is that prayer: and in connecting us to the wider praying community around the world, throughout the centuries, we are reminded of something else important, no one culture, denomination or tradition has a monopoly of the Christian faith.

Zechariah's prayer connects us, where the story of the Old Testament, becomes our story, a shared story.

But that leads me to the second point. Why do Christians pray Zechariah's prayer? – when it focusses so much on the specific calling of his newborn son John the Baptist?

*And you child shall be called the prophet of the most high,  
For you shall go before the Lord to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness  
of all their sins. In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break  
upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our  
feet into the way of peace.*

This prayer connects us, but it also places a calling upon us.

We have talked about calling and vocation before. Some people have a very clear sense of vocation, others like myself, find it much harder to discern, and so turn to the wisdom of friends and family to test and refine that sense of calling. But we are called to the task of Christian witness.

But in the words of this prayer, we are speaking the prophetic vocation of John over ourselves. To pray this prayer, is to take up the mantle from John, and continue in the spirit of his prophetic ministry. It is to say, I share the same vocation which points to Christ in all things, where to quote the adult John the Baptist, "Christ must increase and I must decrease."

To pray this prayer is to pledge yourself to the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist, to point to Christ in all things. In that sense, where it says, "and you child shall be a prophet of the most high' is to say that about yourself, that it become my task and your task to "give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of all their sins."

Zechariah's prayer connects us and calls us. To pray this prayer is to be connected to something more stable than our culture, it is to be connected God's Kingdom, and it is to share in the prophetic calling of John, to point to Jesus Christ, this week, this advent, this Christmas and always.

§