

St German's Cathedral, Advent 3, 17th December 2023

Readings: Isaiah 61: 1- 4; 8-end; John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Elizabeth's Story

I'm an old woman now – and I thought I was old then! What a lot has happened in the last 30 years. Back then my life was one of sadness. Yes, I had a very kind, thoughtful and loving husband, but we had no children – not for want of trying! Every time I saw children playing, it was like a stab in the heart. Going to the synagogue was a trial. I went to the synagogue every Saturday, sitting with the women and children, hoping one day I'd have my own family. I asked the advice of my friends, even embarrassingly, talked to the local doctor. But nothing. Each month I'd feel my sorrow reinforced.

My husband, Zechariah, was a priest. Twice a year he had to go into Jerusalem for a couple of weeks to take his turn at the temple. It was hard work – dealing with all the sacrifices, and the crowds. Each day one of the priests was chosen, by drawing lots, to go into the Holy of Holies and burn incense. It's an incredible honour to be there, in the presence of God.

He told me all about it later. When he got into that special room, there was already someone in there, standing right by the incense altar. That just wasn't right! He was supposed to be the only one there. But it was no man – it was an angel. And he wasn't expecting any old priest, he was expecting my husband, Zechariah. You can imagine how frightened Zec was. He was frozen to the spot. He didn't know what to say. But the angel introduced himself – it was Gabriel! And he told Zec that I was going to have a baby who would be called John. He told him that John would be a joy and a delight to us and many would rejoice with us at his birth.

But that wasn't all. John was going to bring all of Israel back to following God. He would have the power and spirit of Elijah and would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his birth. Because he was going to be so special he wouldn't be able to drink any alcohol. He was going to prepare people for the Lord.

Well, you can imagine Zec's reaction! He couldn't believe his ears. I think he thought he was going doo-lally. He asked Gabriel how he could believe such a thing. I don't think Gabriel was impressed. He struck him dumb – literally – and said he wouldn't speak again until the child was born.

Somewhat disorientated Zec went back out to the people. They were restless, wondering why he'd taken so long. And when he tried to speak, he just couldn't. They realised he'd had some kind of a vision. Well, he had to stay for the rest of the fortnight and just had to get used to not being able to speak.

It was difficult when he tried to tell me what had happened. Sign language is helpful to a certain extent, but the wax tablet helped a lot. And sure enough, soon I fell pregnant. What a joy after all those years.

Then another strange thing happened. I was about six months gone when there was a knock at my door and my young cousin Mary was standing there. John did a double somersault inside me as though he was trying to tell me something. And I had this overwhelming senses of something

supernatural. I found myself greeting Mary with a knowledge that she too was pregnant and that her son was going to be even more important than mine. I became a prophet!

All that was so long ago – even though it seems like yesterday. Mary went home. John was born. All my relatives wanted to call him Zechariah. I told them his name was John. They offered the wax tablet to Zec who wrote “His name is John” – and suddenly he could talk again, just as the angel had promised. That was when we heard the whole story. And Zec became a prophet too. He said “And you my child will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him.”

John did bring us joy and delight. There was certainly rejoicing from all at his birth. He did stay away from alcohol. And there was something extra special about him as we watched him grow. It was clear that the Lord was with him. He was a bit of a loner. He spent quite a lot of time in the synagogue. He was always careful with money. And you should have seen his clothes! All he wanted to wear was extremely rough tunics made from camel hair. And his diet – locusts and honey, all foraged for. We didn’t see much of him for a while.

And then the grapevine was buzzing with news. John had started preaching down by the Jordan. You know it’s always been important to be clean and we’ve been taught to bathe at particular times and for different reasons, but always as a symbol of purification. But John used the idea to begin a new ritual, based on the idea of cleansing – it was called baptism. His chant was: “Repent, and be baptised!” And you should have seen the crowds. John didn’t mince his words. He told them that if they had two tunics, they should give one to someone who didn’t have any – and the same with food. He even told the tax collectors to only collect what they were required to, and the soldiers not to extort money, not to accuse people falsely and to be content with their pay!

And you should have heard what people were saying about him. It was clear that he was a prophet, but some thought he was the Messiah – the one we’ve been expecting for so long. But he called himself the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

And my prophecy turned out to be true. It was Mary’s child, Jesus, who was the Lord. And John directed people to him. Most people would find it hard to be eclipsed by someone else but John said “He must increase, and I must decrease.”

Mind, he still didn’t mince his words. And they landed him in trouble. He didn’t stick to encouraging people to follow good general principles. He publicly criticised the King for marrying his sister-in-law. As you can imagine, Herodias, the new wife, was not impressed. She was out to get him. She managed to get Herod, her husband, to put him in prison but even there he was like a thorn in her flesh. We’d hoped and prayed that he’d be released. He had a hard time there. I think he was depressed. I remember that he sent some of his disciples to see Jesus and ask him whether he was indeed the Messiah. Jesus had a soft spot for John. He told the men to go back to John in prison and tell him all the things they had seen – the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, lepers being cured, the deaf hearing. Even the dead being brought back to life. And Good news being preached to the poor. As they were leaving they heard Jesus address the crowd, telling them that John was more than a prophet; he was the one sent as a messenger to prepare the way of the Lord. He even said that no-one had ever been born who was greater than John. That’s some tribute!

But it all ended so badly. Last year Herod laid on an amazing banquet for his birthday, inviting all the wealthy and influential people. His stepdaughter was invited to dance for the assembly. She's a very good dancer, but too sexy for my liking. She wowed everyone. Herod was mad enough to offer her a reward of anything she would like – up to half of his kingdom. That silly child went away to discuss the possibilities with her mother. Herodias grasped the opportunity, telling Salome to ask for my John's head on a platter. Herod was too embarrassed to back down on his sworn promise to give her whatever she wanted, so he ordered John's head to be cut off and brought in. Just like that. No time to try and change his mind, or for any of us to say goodbye.

No mother should have to cope with such a dreadful thing. I still can hardly bear to think about it. My wonderful son. He'd made a difference to so many people's lives. But his life was hard. No wife, no children, often sleeping out under the stars. No grandchildren for me.

And yet, what a life! What a privilege to be his mother. How extraordinary that Gabriel came to tell us what would happen. And it did – just as he'd said. I've seen Jesus a number of times – the boys used to play together sometimes when they were children. He came to see me after John's death. Of course I don't go out much these days. But I still hear the local gossip. Just like John, Jesus seems to upset the religious folk. I think it's because he's real. What you see is what you get. He speaks plainly. But I do wonder what will happen to him. If he really is the Messiah, then I don't see how he's going to overthrow the Romans. But there's a real vibrancy to his homilies. He isn't bound by tradition, but he really honours God. Calls him Father. He talks about the Kingdom. Calls us to love our enemies and forgive people even if they keep on harming us. The people love him, but the authorities don't. I wonder what the future holds for him. I hope Mary never has to go through what I have.

Rosemary Clarke