



GRAY'S  
INN

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Sermon preached in Chapel on Sunday July 21<sup>st</sup> 2019

## **"Giving Voice"**

Isaiah 40: 1-11 & Luke 1: 5-20 & 57-64

You may like to remember this as the Laryngitis Sermon!

This last month has seen a number of Saints' days. Here in Chapel we have observed St Peter and St Thomas. In addition to those from the early days of the Church last week saw the feast day of Bernard Mizeki, honoured in Zimbabwe as one of their first "saints", martyred for his faith in 1896. But today is our last chance to catch up on someone remembered during this last month not for his death but for his birth: the Birth of John the Baptist.

We heard the story in our Second Lesson, where the main character was his father, Zechariah. Unlike Mary, on hearing of the birth of John's cousin, Jesus, Zechariah refused to accept the angel's message. He doesn't believe that Elizabeth his wife can conceive. He doesn't believe that his son will be the beginning of something new, announcing the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. And so he finds himself unable to speak, he is struck dumb. If you've ever been on a few days' silent Retreat you will know the frustration of trying to get someone to pass the salt or more important, the wine. Pregnant Elizabeth has to put up with it for the next five months!

So this sermon is about losing your voice, and then maybe finding it again. It's about people losing and finding their voice in many different ways. In summary, it's about Worship, about Populism, and about our own selves.

So first, Worship. What are the voices we are hearing this morning? There is the voice of the Preacher, hopefully loud and clear. A bishop was visiting a parish and the verger cautioned him in the vestry beforehand: "You'll have to speak up, my Lord. The agnostics here are terrible".

Festive Mattins always brings out the best from our choir. But there is a difference between performance and worship. In worship we offer our best, but not as performer to audience. Rather, we join our voices with those of a much greater community, that "multitude which no man can number" praising God around his throne. At the end of the service I often pray with the choir that God will give us grace that one day we may join our voices with the angels in heaven. So worship joins us with the worldwide Church today, but also with those who have gone before. And on this Picnic Sunday some of our guests will be particularly conscious of "those whom we love and see no longer".

Such connections, our belonging together in the "communion of saints", transcend time and place. But they also focus our attention and our responsibility on this particular time and place, this Chapel in the life of this Inn. This building, or what has previously stood on this site, has echoed with God's praise since at least the year 1315. Their voices are also all around us this morning.

But we cannot take it for granted that all of this will continue. At this time we here face particular challenges as to the future: the secularist ideology is growing, the pattern of life at the Inn is changing, especially on Sundays. And (according to research published this week) within the age cohort of most of our students, only 1% now identify as Church of England. There are serious questions about the future, and who will support the worship of this Chapel.

In the Biblical story Zechariah gets his voice back when the baby is born and he announces that the child is not to be named after him but is to be called "John". And then, as if to make up for lost time, he raises his voice and proclaims what we have come to call the Benedictus. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel" – "for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them".

Luke's Gospel, which records all of this, is full of left-behind people finding their voice. There's Mary, the mother of Jesus, and what we call the Magnificat. There's Simeon, waiting in the Temple, and the Nunc Dimittis: "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace..." And here's Zechariah, praising God that a new day is coming, "the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace".

And it is John, his son John, who will prepare the way. He will be like the one whom we heard the prophet Isaiah foretell: it's a Voice again, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God".

When he grew up John, who became known as John the Baptizer, took on this task with relish. The people who came to see him got it full in the face. When they asked to be baptised, he told them what they needed to do. Justice, or you might say Economics, was to be at the centre. He told them: if you have two shirts, share with one who has none, and the same with food. He told soldiers, don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely. And when tax collectors, those despised and irreligious people, turned up John welcomed them, as Jesus would go on and do, but he also told them to change their ways and stop acting unjustly.

So, moving to our second point, finding a voice, and giving a voice to the voiceless, is very much at the centre of the Gospel. What might that say to our society at this time? It's often said that Populism should be welcomed because it does just that. And in some sense it's true. Here in the UK, in communities where traditional industries have now gone, in left-behind places like seaside towns, amongst people who have worked hard but now feel forgotten, their left-behind voices have been raised. And even more so in Middle America, and the rust-belt States.

But will those now seeking to take advantage of that protest bring us any nearer to the Kingdom of God? If, as some say, we are facing another economic crisis, who will pay the price? Will it be those who have caused the crisis? Or will it be Austerity again, like last time when the poor had to bail out the Bankers?

And what would John the Baptizer, let alone Jesus himself, say about Trump's America, where anything, now even overt racism, is justified in bringing about his short-term populist goals? There, and here, we need to hear the Voice crying into this wilderness: make straight your paths.

We might also hear David Gauke, the Lord Chancellor, who will almost certainly leave office this week. His last-minute proposals to reform the legal system, especially over short-term sentencing, will be lost. But we might remember what he has said in condemning *"a willingness by politicians to say what they think the public want to hear, and a willingness by large parts of the public to believe what they are told by populist politicians"*.

Raising our voices in worship together.

Giving a genuine voice to the voiceless in society.

And thirdly, finally, what we might hear God saying to us, personally, this morning. When Zachariah got his voice back it was to praise God for what he had originally heard but mocked and refused to take seriously. He had come to realise that God, far from being a distant force who had deserted his people or at least forgotten them, God was near and wanting to save them.

And so, in the words of the Benedictus again, this time from the Prayer Book, "through the tender mercy of our God... the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace".

The 17<sup>th</sup> century poet John Mason [writer of the final hymn] takes us back to where we started, the worship of God in which, in one sense, we are a very small cog and certainly unworthy. And yet, as Zachariah realised, and as his son John proclaimed about the coming Jesus, we matter because we matter to God. We dare to raise our voice, and God hears. God listens. The God who is like "a sea without a shore, a sun without a sphere, [whose] time is now and evermore, whose place is everywhere".