

## Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Trinity: The Feast of the Birth of John the Baptist

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> June 2018

Susan Peatfield, Reader

Good morning and greetings on this beautiful June day, the Festival of the Birth of John the Baptist and the traditional Midsummer Eve. And we have had heard some wonderful readings today but I am sure that you share with me a certain disappointment. Glorious words of calling, naming and consolation, but nary a mention of FISH! Clearly today is not to be the day for this particular preoccupation.

Instead another train of thought, current in our daily news and preoccupations emerges today. Thoughts about voices, silences, voices being silenced and finding our voices.

Firstly, voices: It is conventional to say that today we are bombarded with information, news, stories—true and fake – from all the many media voices in our lives, in our hands. Switching our phones to silent does not stop these voices or make it any easier to decide which are true, but can offer some respite from their insistence. Interestingly enough though there is some suggestion that most people put their devices on silent to avoid phone calls and messages from people they know, rather than to block less personal news feeds and tweets. Another sermon there along with the fish.

Secondly, silences: This month has been a time of remembering the anniversaries of terror attacks and tragedies last year. From Westminster to London Bridge, Manchester to Grenfell to Finsbury Park this remembering has been marked by a minute's silence on each occasion. A silent echo of the act of remembrance for the dead of two world wars each November? or an acknowledgement that sometimes there is nothing to say?

And thirdly, voices being silenced: In other places, most notably in universities, a trend in “unplatforming” has developed. It means not giving a platform – opportunity to speak - to those whose views are at odds with perceptions of acceptable content. A minefield and a counter-productive one perhaps, as those silenced voices have often been very loud in their protestations.

So voices and silences and silenced voices and Luke's great retelling of the birth of John the Baptist. The voices and silences of the passage we heard today are the result of earlier actions and reactions in the life of the family of John the Baptist. John's mother, Elizabeth, in her later years has found that beyond hope against hope she is finally expecting a child. Even though she is the wife of an important man in Jewish society – a Temple priest - she has been excluded because of what Luke calls earlier in chapter one of his Gospel, the “disgrace” of her childlessness. Women's status in this society was very low, redeemed only a little by giving birth to sons. We heard today that when Elizabeth gives birth to John her neighbours and relatives “rejoiced with her”. Hidden in that little phrase are all the years they shunned her. Elizabeth was a woman without a voice.

Zechariah, John's father, does not receive the news of the gift of a child so openly. In fact when Gabriel tells him that God has heard their prayer Zechariah reminds Gabriel that they are too old. Because of this Zechariah has the power of speech taken from him. Perhaps because his words of doubt must not rob Elizabeth of her joy. Perhaps because Zechariah must learn again the language of God's love. Either way, Zechariah becomes a man without a voice.

John came into a world of silence. Not just his mother's former barrenness, nor his father's lack of speech, but a world where the voice of a prophet had not been heard for 400 years. This 400 years of silence began with the warning that closed the Old Testament in the book of Malachi: “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.” It

ends with the birth of this baby boy who will break the silence and speak to prepare the world for God's Word. John is the voice crying in the wilderness of our world.

In our passage then many lives and tongues are set free. Elizabeth silenced by her sex and her circumstances speaks out to give her child the name he has been given by God. Johanan – John – “gift of God”, Zechariah still unable to speak writes the truth instead. “His name is John.” And as he writes his power of speech returns and overflows into that mighty song of praise the Benedictus “Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who has come to his people and set them free.” It is with Zechariah's voice that we join our voices day by day at Morning Prayer.

And John. John grows up prepared by God to prepare his people for His only begotten son and the fulfilment of the voices of all of the prophets - His redemption of our poor broken world. John is born to be both herald and sign-post to Jesus. Born to walk by the river Jordan that day and declare “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

In the end John is silenced, beheaded at the whim of a dancing girl, but not before his message is heard by a world desperate for the consolation he has pointed too. New life and meaning and relationship with God in Christ.

What the world of Elizabeth, Zechariah and John longed for – though many might not have recognised their need – was the transforming love of God. What the world of you and me and Manchester and Grenfell and Google and Facebook, university campuses and student unions longs for though many might not recognise their need - is the transforming love of God. Voices crying in the wilderness of our world and pointing men, women and children to Christ.

Where is my voice in this? Perhaps I am Elizabeth and need to pray for the confidence to tell my story of how Christ's love has transformed my life, as Margaret encouraged <sup>to</sup> in her sermon last week. Perhaps I am Zechariah and need to put things right with God in my own life before I can truly share with others. Perhaps none of us can be another John the Baptist, but we can each of us pray that when the opportunity to point others to Christ comes, our voices do not fail us.

I am going to end with one last silence. I believe that it reaches deep into all our silences and releases all our voices. It is not in the Gospel but in a hymn writer's imagining of the Gospel and of the places John and Jesus knew. It is the third verse of Dear Lord and Father of Mankind.

O, Sabbath rest by Galilee  
O, calm of hills above,  
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee,  
The silence of eternity,  
Interpreted by love.

Lord, may we be your interpreters in our world and may our voices speak only ever of your love. Amen