

Homily based on the readings from December 23, 2023 (Malachi 3.1-4, 23-24; Luke 1.57-66)

Our readings over the past few weeks have focused heavily on John the Baptist – as well they should. He is the forerunner of Christ, the herald of the Messiah, the *voice* preparing the way for the *Word*. *On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh*. Nevertheless, we would also do well to spend some time focusing on John's *parents* – on Saints Elizabeth and Zechariah.

I have heard Elizabeth and Zechariah described as two of the last characters from the Old Testament. On a literal level, of course, they are not introduced until the Gospel of Luke – but from a thematic perspective they definitely resemble figures from *Hebrew* Scripture. Consider their situation for a moment: an elderly couple, having dedicated their lives to the service of God, are granted a child through divine intervention. Our minds immediately go to Abraham and Sarah, but a better comparison is probably Elkanah and Hannah – the parents of

the Prophet Samuel (about whom we heard at Mass just yesterday). As you may recall, both Samuel and John the Baptist were conceived following a visit by one of their parents to a temple of the Lord. As adults, both prophets had contentious relationships with powerful and aggressive kings, and both were entrusted with the responsibility of publicly recognizing the Lord's Anointed. As for their parents, both Hannah – the mother of Samuel – and Zechariah – the father of John the Baptist – offered a lengthy prayer, a *canticle*, in thanksgiving for the miraculous gifts they had received.

The Canticle of Zechariah, also known as the *Benedictus*, immediately follows the passage we just heard from the Gospel of Luke. It begins with these words:

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;  
he has come to his people and set them free.  
He has raised up for us a mighty savior,  
born of the house of his servant David.

This canticle is an integral component of Morning Prayer, or *Lauds*, which is prayed daily in every monastic community around the world and by every member of the clergy – as well as by countless others.

After interacting with the Archangel Gabriel – and presumably with the Blessed Mother herself – Zechariah understood better than almost anyone else the imminent arrival of Jesus Christ. Moreover, after the birth of his own son, he was clearly *filled* with the Holy Spirit: “his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he *spoke* blessing God.”

Nevertheless, we can still perceive a certain *limitation* in Zechariah’s understanding of the coming Messiah. As one would expect, the language of his canticle echoes the prophecies of the Old Testament. For example, he rejoices that Christ will “save us from our enemies, from the hands of all who hate us” and that he will “set us free from the hands of our enemies, free to worship him without fear.” In other words, like most of his countrymen, he was awaiting a savior in the vein of Judas Maccabeus, who would expel the foreign invaders and ensure the continuation of sacred worship in the Temple.

As we all know, the Messiah who actually arrived was substantially different – simultaneously fulfilling and transcending the expectations of the Jewish people. He overcame the foreign invaders, not through force of arms but through converting their hearts. He perpetuated sacred worship, not by safeguarding the physical structure of the Temple, but by *becoming* the Temple himself.

As we rapidly approach the end of Advent, we should take a moment to reflect upon our personal preconceptions of Jesus Christ. We must not envision him as the fulfillment of our own wants and desires – based, for example, on our experiences as Americans living in the 21st century. On the “great and terrible day” when the Lord comes, we must be ready to receive him – not as we expect him to be, not as we want him to be – but as he truly is.