



Allocutio



Presentata Curia 24th November 2011

Allocutio: The Baptist is heralded

I have decided to leave the Allocutios on the Eucharist till after Christmas. We are approaching Advent and so it will be of value to open our hearts to that mystery.

The events leading to the birth of Christ began 15 months before his birth when an elderly man went up to do his duty in the Temple. We are told that both he and his wife Elizabeth were righteous before the Lord. We are told that they were blameless in the way they obeyed God's Law; they were scrupulous in the way they observed God's law. In other words they were genuine holy people.

This holy priest of the Old Testament went to take his turn in duty before God by offering incense for the people. Incense represents the prayers of people going up to God. And poor Zechariah had a prayer too that he had been making for years and years. It was that his wife would have a child.

It is quite clear that this had left her very vulnerable. Elizabeth's words when she finally conceived show the pain she had been through: "It has pleased him to take away the humiliation I suffered among men". Because for a girl not to conceive was seen as something akin to a curse. To have children was a blessing. In days of no pensions to have children meant someone would look after you in old age. For the worker of the land it meant help to till and reap the crops and gather the food as you got older. Not to have a child was like blight on the crop. And so they saw it as a sign of an evil.

Yet the fidelity of this couple to God is remarkable. Perhaps Zechariah might have been tempted to seek another woman as Abraham did. But he remained faithful. And he kept his faith in God. For how many years? We are told they were getting on in years. I think she must have been in her late forties or even approaching fifty. And since girls married in those days in their mid teens we are talking about constant prayer for up to 30 years. Monica, please note!

And so Gabriel appears. Always when an angel appears he seems to cause an initial fear but then he allays the fears with those divine words, "Do not be afraid." The initial entry into the realm of God always causes some fear or anxiety because it is a place we are not used to. However our God is a God of peace and he always wants to allay our fears and calm us. As the psalm says, "Listen to the voice of the Lord, a voice that speaks of peace. Indeed Elijah to whom John the Baptist is compared learnt that lesson when he



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was in the cave, when God was not found in the storm or earthquake but in the gentle breeze.

Gabriel who represents God says, “Do not be afraid; God has heard your prayers and Elizabeth will conceive a son.” And great news for Zechariah, “He will be your joy and delight!” We can just imagine: redemption, vindication, hope that there is a future. And about this child there is a hint that being of God he will be a man of peace. He will be filled with that Holy Spirit of peace and help reconcile fathers and sons.

Then come the disconcerting moment. Zechariah asks what seems an innocent question: “How can I know this since I am an old man and my wife is also getting on in years?” And you do feel for poor Zechariah because he seems to get a harsh response. If he got that slap surely Mary should have got similar treatment when she asked how was this to come about since she was a virgin.

Well we could stretch our imaginations a bit and picture Gabriel back with God asking how he had done and God saying, “Well not bad although I wonder were you just a little too harsh on poor Zechariah. Now, I’ll tell you what. I ‘m going to send you down to a girl in Nazareth and don’t make the same mistake this time!”

But that is to trivialise it a bit. You can be sure that if that is in the Gospel it is there because Zechariah himself told it to Mary who pondered it in her heart and reported it on. Zechariah the holy man is saying that while his faith was strong it still lacked; maybe he had begun to lose hope. But there is more to it still.

God used this as another example of a happy fault. What I mean is that because he could not speak (in modern terms I wonder if he had had a mild stroke?) he was forced to keep quiet and to reflect. And out of all this reflection about what he and his wife had been through over the years, reflecting on the meaning too of the visit of the young girl from Nazareth who herself was pregnant with a child even more special, reflecting on his people’s history, once his speech returned Zechariah gave us one of the greatest prayers of the New Testament, so great that it is the parallel in the liturgy to the Magnificat, being the Canticle said each morning (note that!) in the Prayer of the Church: The Benedictus.

We forget that. The Benedictus is the prayer of the man who hesitated a moment in faith. He is now the man who has had his faith made even stronger.

And I often wonder if the later part of it does not apply to us all as it did to John the Baptist. Let us again think of those words, “As for you, little child, you will go ahead



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of the Lord to prepare his ways before him to make known to his people their salvation through the forgiveness of all their sins, the loving kindness of the heart of our God who visits us like the dawn from high. He will give light to those in darkness, those who dwell in the shadow of death and guide us into the way of peace.”

There it is again, that theme of peace. May God grant to us all the grace to be bearers of the divine peace to all we meet.

Amen.

Fr Paul Churchill