

Bennochy church 27th November 2016

Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? I could stop there and just let you ponder that for a while and see what theology you come up with! So you can either think about that, or listen on. Which comes first, the prophecy, we read in Luke chapter one the prophecy, or as some describe it, the inspired praise of Zechariah, the father of John, or, the event being prophesied about? Which comes first? The answer is, both!

It seems to me that every prophecy in scripture has two functions. The first relates to the 'here and now' experience of the prophet. For example, in reading the 'signs of the times', he predicts, not the future, but the 'nations direction of travel'. If this path continues as it does, unchanged, then the most probably outcome will be, this. I am sure political observers' around the world are playing the prophecy game already, about the Donald Trump presidency or UK's life after Brexit. We do it all the time. We give it a different name. We call it 'putting the world to rights'.

The words in the mouth of Zechariah have within them the words of the prophet Malachi, and they also echo of the great prophet Isaiah. He is picking up on the idea of John the Baptist as being a new prophet, foretold in the words of the Old Testament. If most of this prophecy is not direct quotes, it is very Old Testament in its thinking. It has the thread of God's covenant relationship with Israel running through it. God has

saved his people from slavery in the past, and he will save his people again. That is God's promise and he will not fail.

"The LORD Almighty answers, "I will send my messenger to prepare the way for me. Then the Lord you are looking for will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger you long to see will come and proclaim my covenant." (Malachi 3:1)

The original context of these words is probably far more general, maybe a time of disillusionment after the exilic return to Jerusalem. The prophecies of old had not yet been fulfilled, and a fresh word of hope is offered by God, saying he will send his messenger to prepare the way of the Lord. What is also interesting here, is a play on words. Malachi actually means, 'my messenger'. Was he talking about himself?

The people of Jesus day were waiting. Their great hope was in the promised Messiah of God, who would save his people. For some, it would literally be salvation and freedom from the Roman empire. So what we find in Luke, is a reinterpretation of the prophecy. Take these words out of their original context, and they are now applied into a new situation. The experience of Zechariah and the birth of his son, John, who will be the baptiser of Jesus. Out from the desert, will come the man who will proclaim the new Exodus of the people of God. You have here, in this real life event, a birth, seen as the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy. It would be easy to stop there, but the layering of prophecy is not that simple.

What about the writer of Luke, looking back over the events that have just happened, in the life of Jesus, many years after his crucifixion, and using his knowledge of the Old Testament, he picks up the ancient prophecy of Malachi, puts it into the mouth of Zechariah, and applies it to John the Baptist. He is allowed to do that. They did it all the time. Jesus did it. He used Old Testament words, and applied them to himself.

Think of the encounter between Moses and God at the burning bush, where God said his name was 'I am'. How did Jesus describe himself in John's gospel, "*I am the way the truth and the life.*" "I am....". Seven times he says, *I am*. He is saying, his name, is God's name.

Prophecy is often read back and applied to the present, not the future, and before we know it, the story of Jesus is now inextricably tied into the words of the ancient texts of Israel. It was important for the writers to do that. What was prophesied, has once again, been fulfilled. In Jesus Christ, there is the promised hope of God's Messiah. In a very real sense, the power of prophecy, never ends.

And this is where the story gets even more complicated. At Christmas we retell the story of God entering the world. An event that has already taken place, but the promise does not end there. The story is not yet complete. The journey continues. Scripture says, Christ shall return once more.

I have no idea what that means. But in this mystery there is something about a Kingdom not yet complete. We who live now, are to be ready, to be prepared, for a the Kingdom of God not yet fulfilled. It is our hope that the world to come will be better than the world as is. As the Hebrews would say, a world of *shalom*. To be at one with, God, creation, other people and ourselves. But that hope begins now.

Is this truly what we wait for? Is that not our hope? Not the repetition of a nativity story, that event is past, but a better world for today and for tomorrow. And that is not going happen, unless everyone, including ourselves, play our part.

In a very real sense, the miracle of the Kingdom of God is in our hands. To wait, is to act. Christ has shown the way. In the spirit of his life, we have an example to follow and a Kingdom to build.

Let us sing glory to God as the angels did. Let us follow the light of Christ and bring to him, our gifts and our lives. And may our waiting be ever on the move, pilgrims for God, followers of Christ and spirit led. Amen.