

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Zechariah's Writing Tablet

The birth of John the Baptist is simply written out of the traditional stories of wonder-births in the Old Testament. You can find all its features there: a man and woman who think they're disabled from parenthood, the message of an angel, the promise of a super-boy (they're all boys, I'm afraid), some description of his future qualities, and his vocation to do something huge. Frequently too there are the doubts of the parents, and the various disastrous mistakes they stray into through their disbelief. Human beings find it hard to trust divine promises, and always think God needs a few helping hands. This is as true of Abraham as it is of us, so let us acknowledge our weak faith, in perfect imitation of "the father of all who believe".

Dumbstruck

If we had a Saturday Evening Mass instead of a Sunday Evening one (and how happy that would make at least one member of the parish!) we would have the chance to read the Vigil gospel of Zechariah's angelic vision in the Holy of Holies. I should imagine he was open to such an experience; this was a once-in-a-lifetime moment; indeed, many priests never were chosen to enter the Holy of Holies on this annual day of atonement. Luke's gospel lets us into his mind. On this day of days he is praying about the great sorrow of his life: childlessness. That in itself is very touching; an old man, who might have been expected to have bitten the bullet long ago and turned his mind to other things, is still fixated on the idea that his life has been unblest in this vital Jewish quality, of passing on the promise of God to a new generation. The angel says: *Your prayer has been heard*. Zechariah's doubting response is understandable, but very unfortunate. We're allowed to be cautious towards each other, but no-one should dare to question the august voice of an archangel speaking in the heart of the Temple! Gabriel is stern, and awards Zechariah an impressive punishment: he is struck dumb, and - on this great and culminating day of his priesthood - he is unable to pronounce the Blessing of Aaron over Israel, which is the whole reason for his being there.

Disablement

Zechariah had failed to become a father, and now he has failed as a priest. The state in

which he returns to the hills can only be imagined. Yet the amazing thing happens, and Elizabeth finds herself pregnant. With her husband speechless, she decides to enjoy the experience by herself. Her expectancy is unfolded in secret, and unshared by anyone, until - again by angelic annunciation - it is revealed to Mary: *your kinswoman Elizabeth is in her sixth month: for nothing is impossible to God*. Mary sets off as quickly as she could to discover whether what the angel said could possibly be true; and the meeting of the two women is enshrined in the *Hail, Mary* and the *Magnificat*.

His Name Is John

- meaning, *God has been gracious*. Zechariah's humble act in inscribing his son's divinely-given name on a tablet marks the end of his punishment, and suddenly he is enabled - not to speak, but to *sing* his great canticle, the voice of the Church's morning praise throughout the centuries: the *Benedictus*. This whole mysterious episode involving speech is deeper than at first we realise. The child who is born will one day define himself as *a Voice crying in the wilderness*. St Augustine remarked that a *voice* is a fine thing, but useless without a *word*; and the use of the one requires the coming of the other. John is to be the voice; Jesus is the Word he announces. What our Gospel says is that the same goes for Zechariah. When he doubts the word of the angel, he loses the power of his voice. When he writes down the angel's word, his own voice is restored to him.

Use Your Voice

St James wrote sardonically of the tongue as the instrument of evil. Today we see it ennobled as the instrument of truth and joy. God has given us a voice, and people who will listen to our words. We must use this privilege in obedience to Christ, the Word of God. He showed us how great the power of a human voice can be, speaking to us words that come from God. Like Zechariah, we need a lot of help before we rise to Christian greatness. But as he helplessly scribbles his obedience, his tongue is loosened, and he gives the Church its morning hymn. We can take the Gospel so much to heart, that we become speakers to each other of the Word of Life. May it be so.

Fr Philip