



The Benedictus (The Song of Zechariah) Luke 1 68-79

This Sunday the lectionary, instead of a psalm, gives us one of the three canticles found near the beginning of Luke's gospel. Today, we have a beautiful poetic passage known as *The Canticle of Zechariah*, *The Song of Zechariah*, or simply *The Benedictus* — taken from the first word of the Canticle in Latin ("Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel", "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel").

The Benedictus was introduced by Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century and continues to be said or sung as part of the morning worship liturgy in churches today. Maybe one reason why it was said every morning in monasteries was because there would be a time of 'great silence' between Compline and Matins. The Benedictus is a reminder that we, like Zachariah, John the Baptist's father, can break our nightly silence with praise as these were the first words spoken by him after he insisted that his new born son's name was John. He had been unable to speak throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy because he had doubted the message brought to him by an angel. He had not trusted in God's promises.

The canticle is in two parts. The first part is a song of praise and thanksgiving to God for his past promises to save his people. It speaks about the hope for the salvation of the people of Israel. God is sending a Saviour who belongs to the house of David, fulfilling his Old Testament promise and that, through the forgiveness of sins, people will no longer be enslaved to fear and hatred but will be able to live fully as God's people. Like Luke's audience, for us today these words are not only reminders of the great tradition we are part of, but also a reminder that Jesus is the powerful fulfilment of these promises.

The second part is addressed to his baby son telling him that he will prepare the way for this Saviour so that all people can find their way through the "darkness and the shadow of death" and be guided along those paths that lead to light and peace. It is really a prayer that speaks to our own hope for a better way, a way of peace desperately needed in our world today. A peace that is not just about a feeling of wellbeing but about good relationships locally and internationally where nobody lives in fear, and where everyone follows ways which bring healing, hope, trust, light and life. It starts with us as individuals becoming peacemakers in our own families, between friends and within our own community. Believing and trusting that God who brought His people out of the shadows in the past will do so again and peace and justice will ultimately rule.

Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, who has come to his people and set them free.

He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour, born of the house of his servant David.

Through his holy prophets God promised of old to save us from our enemies, from the hands of all that hate us,

To show mercy to our ancestors, and to remember his holy covenant.

This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham: to set us free from the hands of our enemies,

Free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life

And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,

To give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of all their sins.

In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us,

To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

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