

Luke 1. 5-25, 39-45, 57-66, 67-80

You will know images of devoted Muslims making pilgrimage to the Hajj in Mecca. Each year, in the last month of the Islamic calendar, if they are able, Muslims are called to make the journey to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. As air flight has made the journey more accessible for millions of believers, the number has increased six times since the 1960s. This year there were nearly two million in Mecca for the five or six day observance., the highlight of which is a collective processing around the Kaaba, the black, cube-shaped physical centre of Islamic life. Each pilgrim's circling of the Kaaba is concluded with a kiss of the black stone of which the Kaaba is made.

It is difficult for us secularised, individualised, decentred moderns to imagine the commitment that would lead someone to make such a journey to this holy place and walk, together with hundreds of thousands of other pilgrims, around this sacred object as an act of devotion – both inner and outer devotion. Not only is the Hajj an individual journey but also a collective one; of solidarity, of focus, of attention, of anticipation.

Luke tells us that Zechariah enters the Holy of Holies to offer incense. The crowd watches and waits: in solidarity, collectively attentive, in anticipation. The place which is at the centre of the immense temple precinct in Jerusalem is, like the Kaaba is to modern Muslims, the heart of Jewish life. And Zechariah is the one chosen by lot at this time to enter this holy place and offer incense.

As priest, Zechariah is entitled to benefits as a result of his membership of the house of Levi. He receives a portion of the offerings which have been brought and the animals which have been sacrificed. The temple and its precinct are basically a giant abattoir. A place of excess, one in which the senses are assaulted in multiple ways: with sound of the chanting crowds, stalled animals, stock anticipating having their throats cut. The smell of incense, of animal waste, of warm, running blood, of barbecuing flesh. The sight of the milling of people and animals are an assault to the eyes. All of this taking place on the giant forecourt of the recently completed temple, the signature project of King Herod, constructed from white marble. And at the centre of this is the quite small structure of the Holy of Holies, coated with gold leaf. The glare of the surface in the Mediterranean sun, causes pilgrims to avert their gaze from this holy place.

Here, in the heart of all this Zechariah is given a vision: this son the old Elizabeth will bear will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. *¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before the Lord, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*

His name will be John, not Zechariah. This child will be an interruption, a break with the usual way of doing things.

John is fat and sated and serves at the centre of Jewish life. This son will be wild and wily and live on a subsistence diet – on the edge, on the margin of Jewish life. Ultimately John's ministry takes place is by the Jordan, on the edge – the Jordan is the threshold over which the slaves fleeing from Egypt cross to enter into being God's people. But in Zechariah's time they have forgotten

what it means to be God's people. It will be there on the margin where people will go to this yet-to-be-born son in order to turn toward God again.

you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people

As John is born and is brought on the eighth day to be circumcised and named it will be business as usual for Elizabeth and Zechariah's neighbours. We know how things will be; we know how things should be. The convention will be followed. He'll be called Zechariah, after his father. Small town expectations of how things should be.

I can't help but be struck between this dynamic of disruption in this beginning of Luke's gospel, and the place we find the church is in our time. Luke's gospel begins with a promise that the future will not be more of the same but a clarion call from the margins to a new way of being; the tradition seemingly fractured; there will be a return to the place where Israel's identity was sealed; in the wilderness.

It feels like the story of the church in our time: faithful, patient, devoted – but barren, infertile. We have been wealthy and sated by the benefits which have flowed to us because of the church's place in society. In many early settlements in Australia, land was granted to churches by the state. We thrived on the benefits of being the purity police, the keepers of the national conscience.

Did you sing revival hymns as a child? I can recall singing revival hymns for the Sunday School anniversary concert; all of us lined up in our Sunday best singing: revive us again. But it all seemed quite successful to me in my brimming-over, boomer Sunday school. I couldn't quite understand why we needed reviving; we seemed to be on the crest of a wave. But it proved to be barren.

If you were at the recent congregational meeting you will have heard me mention the fact there are six Uniting Church congregations adjacent to Highfield Rd which are merging into three. Three have decided to close and have approached other congregations to consider mergers. They are doing what contracting congregations have been doing for six decades now; amalgamating, in order that they may be able to continue to do what they have done in the past. The assumption, the motivation has been: the future will look like the past; must look like the past; can only look like the past. We all know stories of such situations.

Those from the church council who were charged with the dialogue with two adjoining congregations were a bit non-plussed about the lack of curiosity about the nature of the future; the lack of willingness to talk about seeking a direction which might be different to the past. There felt to be a barrenness to the conversations we had.

It is difficult to be in these seemingly barren times, when we feel like we're struck dumb. That pretty much whatever we say seems to be misunderstood; at the same time as people seem to want us to be there, as the church has been in the past. Don't dare close our church.

As I had been in ministry a few years, I began to appreciate the rhythm of the church year. It was as though each year the community cycled a bit deeper in their spiritual life together. That, although we observed the same seasons and festivals together, each year we went a little

deeper. Attentive together, waiting together, praying, reading and singing our faith together; and we savoured this richness through the seasons of our own lives.

In our anxiety about the future we can think our task is to save the church, at least preserve the church in its current form. But in our anxiety all our efforts can simply be solutions to the contraction. But we are not called to save the church, simply to be the church. As mother Theresa says: We are not called to be successful; simply faithful. As Zechariah and Elizabeth were. Maybe then as we are simply being the church, we will be disrupted and surprised by joy. And something new, inspired by the spirit, will come into being.

May God give us grace, that we may be his faithful people and by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high break upon us.

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