

Nativity of St. John the Baptist 2015

From Doubt to Trust

In deference to Father's Day, which we celebrated last Sunday, I'd like to spend a few moments this afternoon reflecting on Zechariah, the Father of John the Baptist. The thought I'd like to propose is a simple one: Zechariah models for us how to progress from doubt to trust in our relationship with the Lord.

This reflection will take us back a few chapters in the Gospel of Luke where we find Zechariah serving as high priest in the temple. While he was in the Holy of Holies, he encountered the Angel. It was Zechariah's "annunciation" moment but his annunciation didn't go quite as well as Mary's.

When angel told him that, despite her years, his wife Elizabeth would bear him a son, Zechariah asked the same question Mary posed when she was told that she would be the Mother of the Savior: "How can this be?" But here's the difference: Mary's question sprang from a heart that trusted that God's words to her would be fulfilled. She wanted to know how she could cooperate with God. Zechariah used similar words but asked a different question that runs more like this: "You've got to be kidding. My wife is too old!" With that, God imposed a nine month silence on Zechariah... and ironic way to get ready for the birth of the Messiah's herald.

I guess Elizabeth must have been pretty worried when returned home unable to speak. And Zechariah must have been pretty chagrined when he found out his wife really was pregnant. Yet, in God's grace this turned out to be a wonderful time in their lives, or so I would like to think. While John the Baptist took flesh in the womb of Elizabeth, a living, trusting, beautiful faith began to take root in the heart of Zechariah.

We see the results in today's Gospel. When John the Baptist was born, Zechariah signaled that the baby's name would be John, just as the angel had told him nine months earlier in the temple. This wasn't just a bid to regain his speech. This was a signal that he gained a newfound trust in God's promises. How can we tell? By the beautiful canticle of praise which Zechariah uttered, a song in which the father of the child blessed and praised God, a song in which Zechariah foretold the mission God had in mind for him: "You, my child, shall be called prophet of the Most High for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways..." It's the song of praise the Church offers God every morning in the Liturgy of the Hours.

Our Transformation

Well, you've heard it often enough. Pope Francis has called us to encounter the Lord, to allow the Lord to walk with us on our journey through life, and, along the way to transform us from humdrum, half-hearted Catholics who trust more in ourselves than God, to missionary disciples whose trusting faith attracts others to Christ and the Church. Pope Francis challenges you & me to undergo what he calls "a missionary conversion", and not only that, he challenges every institution and organization in the Church's life to undergo a similar conversion ... to be alive and attractive with a living, trusting faith, like Mary's, ready to cooperate with the God's providential plan, ready to cooperate with the God of surprises ... that includes the pleasant surprises and the ones that aren't so pleasant, at least by our reckoning.

So on this day, when we celebrate the feast of our Patron's birth, I'd suggest that we turn to Zechariah and ask his intercession. Let us ask him to pray for us so that the Holy Spirit may make greater inroads into our hearts and great inroads into the mission of the Order of Malta, so that our faith may grow in its capacity to trust in God's providence and in its capacity to love and serve the needs of others, especially the poor, the sick, and the vulnerable. May God bless us and keep us always in his love!