

*Comfort, Comfort my people, says the Lord*

*Luke 1:57-66 and Isaiah 40:1-11*

Today is the feast observing the birth of John, who later came to be known as the Baptist. This week is also called Refugee Week, set-aside to think about the plight of millions of refugees and migrants across the world. In that light let us spend few minutes reflecting on the passage.

Luke's gospel not only tells the story of John's birth, he also captures the story of two other people, Elizabeth and Zachariah. Elizabeth and Zachariah had a very respectful lineage; both were descendants of Aaron. They were faithful and carried out their duties with utmost care. However Elizabeth was elderly and had never had children. At that time, being barren would have been considered a reproach to Elizabeth. Elizabeth and Zachariah would have certainly experienced social shaming, being prominent members of their society. It would have been a personal source of grief to Elizabeth. But God changed all that. Her reputation as a woman who was barren changed to one who had a miraculous birth in old age. Yahweh's mercy was demonstrated in removing the stigma of Elizabeth's barrenness. As in many families, a family feud develops regarding the new baby's name; neighbours and relatives wanted this baby boy to have his father's name, keeping family tradition. But Elizabeth puts her foot down by saying that he will be called John, *Johannes*, which means 'Yahweh has been merciful.' While all this is happening Zachariah is dumbfound and could not speak a word since his encounter with the angel Gabriel. Finally he concurs with Elizabeth to name the baby John. Through his naming and circumcision John becomes the bridge between the prophets of the Old Testament and first in a long line of Christian witness to Jesus. The central idea of this narrative is to share the emotional and social wilderness experience of Elizabeth and Zachariah and how God redeemed them through the birth of John, who will prepare the way for the lord. *Benedictus*, (the Song of Zachariah) which follows this narrative, Luke makes his intention clear to tell the world that all people shall experience this mercy, across and beyond Judea. This theological



motif of the wilderness experience and redemptive nature of Gods' mercy resonates with our Old Testament passage from Isaiah. Crucially John is cast in the same prophetic tradition.

The prophecy of Isaiah, besides being part of a famous composition, is specifically addressed to people who were still experiencing exile. These poetic words calls for comforting those people who are hurting in pain, and demands that they prepare the way for the lord, who is coming to redeem them. This powerful redemption



will be delivered, while God raises the lowly valley, humbles the mountain, and levels the rough and uneven ground. Isaiah describes God by emphasizing God's compassion, care and loyalty for God's people. The God, portrayed by Isaiah, is one who hears the cry of the oppressed, who tends his flock like a shepherd, and gathers the lambs in his arms, and carries them close to his heart; and he gently leads those that have young. At the heart of Isaiah's prophecy is the very act of speaking this word of comfort, which transforms reality. The exiles, and we who would hear this

word with them, are invited to reimagine the world on the basis of this proclaimed, prophetic vision. Isaiah develops an alternative vision, a vision that does not confirm to the dominant power of the day, but pays attention to the people drowning in the wilderness of exile. This vision is not only about the redemptive love of God but focuses on the agency of those who can become the channel of that redemption for the exiled.

The wilderness experience of Elizabeth and Zachariah stands firmly in the experience of their ancestors, who were migrants and exiles for a long period in their history. They were colonised, taken as slaves, wandered around as refugees, dehumanised, exploited, became vulnerable, voiceless and marginalised. They were seen as polluting, defiling and treated like pests needing to be exterminated. Now the two passages we heard today suggests that it is on behalf of this group of people that God chooses to intervene and to protect, to give them hope and lead them out of the wilderness.

The experience of migrants today in our world is not very different. “We need a mass cleansing, street by street, piazza by piazza, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. We need to purify our streets”, this xenophobic and racist statement made by Matteo Salvini, the Deputy Prime Minister of Italy, epitomises the general trend in Europe and Americas. I am sure many of you followed the news about the dreadful situation due to the zero tolerance immigration policy in the United States. This country is not far behind with its hostile environment policy and the appalling treatment of Windrush generation.

Like Elizabeth and Zachariah, people, individuals, who are refugees and migrants, go through the personal journeys of wilderness. Like the people of Israel, many communities go through communal journeys of wilderness. What they need the



most is the hope of comfort during their journey through the wilderness. Today in our world, the complexities of the migrant and refugee experience is not confined only to those fleeing their home, due to war, conflict and

famine, but many in our midst, go through the same wilderness experience, in our churches, in the form of sexism, homophobia, racism, bigotry and xenophobia, often treated like pests that need to be exterminated.

Now, where do you see God at work? How is God calling us as a church to work?

Walter Brueggemann observes “I believe we are now at a point when the church has got to recover its nerve and its energy and its courage and its freedom” (*Sojourners Lecture, June 15, 2018*). Just like the prophets, much before Karl Marx, we need to engage in social analysis by dynamically engaging with the scripture. Hannah Arendt, a philosopher, speaking from her own experience of holocaust commented decades ago, “The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion, but that they no longer belonged to any community whatsoever”. (Hanna Arendt, *The Origins of*

*Totalitarianism*, p295, 1994). When people lose a sense of community, they run the danger of being expelled from humanity itself. Well, the new what is coming!

It is in this context we are called to embody the God, portrayed by Isaiah, the one who hears the cry of the oppressed, the one who tends his flock like a shepherd, and gathers the lambs in his arms, and carries them close to his heart; and the one who gently leads those that have young. We need to embody the God of Elizabeth and Zachariah, so that people in our midst,

particularly, who are dehumanised and exploited and have been in the wilderness can say that they have experienced the mercy of God. Isaiah, Elizabeth, Zachariah and John, they all call us to reimagine an alternative



reality that offers hope and comfort to those who are hurting. We cannot let our prophetic vocation disappear due to our cocooning mind-set, cynicism and indifference. Standing in the tradition of John the Baptist, let us speak up like prophets and urge our churches and its leaders to stand up for justice, love and compassion, instead of the blast of divine anger, judgement and hell fire. May we carry the message of comfort and hope to the most vulnerable, and assure them the enduring reliability of God so that they may have life, life in all its fullness.

Comfort, comfort, my people, says the Lord God. Amen

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24 June 2018, The birth of John the Baptist.