

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen +

My nephew Seth is sprouting hair and getting sweaty and grumpy now he is 15, but when he was maybe six, he had an engaging trick. When he got caught doing something bad, from chiselling my car door in an attempt to help wash it to stealing extra biscuits, he used to hide his head in his hands, bundle up in his jersey, close his eyes and say “Uncle John, Uncle John, you can't see me, I'm hiding!” And when I tapped him on the shoulder and said “hello, Seth” he would shut his eyes tighter, and say, fiercely “You can't see me! It's dark!”

It is a human impulse to hide from the truth, to hide from the rough corners and the bruises, and the bits of ourselves we would rather not see. To let in the light requires seeing our own smallness, our own need of grace, our own weariness. It is easier to stay hidden, with our secret sorrows, pet sins and dusty corners, and the favourite, fierce little things we say to ourselves. If she knew that, she wouldn't love me. I am old, and weary, and my time is over. I prayed, and prayed, for that thing I wanted with all my heart and God didn't answer me. I look around me, and I miss my children. Things aren't like they used to be, my country is broken, the temple I love is destroyed. I'm tired, and sad. I'm lonely, or in the dark. It's no use trying again. Why do I bother.

In today's gospel reading, we meet Zecharias, the priest on the verge of retirement, and his good, faithful and grieving wife Elizabeth. They are people grown old in doing good, old in longing for the Kingdom of God. Perhaps this year, perhaps next year, they have prayed and waited and loved and longed for the Kingdom of God—and they got little. They have done their duty and swept and tidied and prayed, and grieved—and yet they are “advanced in years, and barren”. And when the angel comes to Zecharias, he takes refuge in a dark corner: “How can this be? I am advanced in years”. This is what we say to God. I'm little. I'm old. I'm done. I'm tired. In my case, “I'm crippled, please send someone with functional leg muscles”. Perhaps you can even identify with Israel in our Old Testament reading, in their regret “we have been paid back double for what we have done”, we sit “in darkness, and in the shadow of death”

But both our readings continue. On this Baptist's Day, we hear again our Gospel sentence: "There was a man, sent from God, whose Name was John. He came to bear witness of the light". The dumb and stubborn mouth of Zecharias tells good news: The knowledge of wholeness, and salvation, for the forgiveness of our sins. The tender mercy of God, taps us on the shoulder, however stubborn and ungrateful we are, and calls us loved. The sunrise shall visit us from on high because of the tender mercy of our God. In the message of John the Baptist, we hear not the hectoring tone of a schoolmaster, or the nagging voice of past fears, and sins. Instead, we hear the loving tone of a Father, urging us to turn toward the light, scattering our fears, and rushing forward to meet us in His Son. "Comfort my people. The battle is over. Your iniquity is pardoned, your littleness touched by glory.

The glory of the Lord can be revealed in human beings, because God became a human being, and stopped an inch away from you, very close to your eyes. (Tap tap): Hello John.

And yet, it is still too easy to ignore the voice of conscience, the voice of grace, getting ready to burst forth. And remain in the dark. "You can't see me! I'm hiding"

One of the great graces of being a liturgical Christian is that the Bible makes me uncomfortable. I don't know whether you're holier than me, but it's easy to forget the slightly sharp bits, the bits that cut across my comfy life, and remind me of truths I'd rather forget.

And repentance, the ability to turn towards the sun, and let the light in, to turn away from excuses and false selves and temptations towards God's mercy, towards tenderness, towards the Dad who loves you and knows you, the God who met you in Jesus Christ, is a perennially unpopular message. It got John in terrible trouble. But here it is again in our liturgical year.

Turn around. Wake up. Live in what's real. Open your life to light. That's hard.

But you can do it. Christ does it for and in you. Break up the tough ground.

I have loved being in this parish. You have all been so very kind to me. And as I look around here, I see so many people who have grown old in doing good, in a fruitful and mellow maturity.

It will be the greatest privilege of my life at 5 o'clock tonight to put my hands where so many of you have worn a groove in piety, industry, faith hope and love, and hope to copy you, even a little.

But that very maturity means that all of us, from callow and unformed me to the centenarian in the Selwyn seniors, all of us, families and children, young and old, should never be deaf to the Baptist's cry, however often we hear it. Here it is, here it is again. Now, not tomorrow, bring yourself. Your real self. All of you, with flaws and sins and griefs and doubts attached. Now, in Howick, now, in your family, now in your own heart.

Kneel today at the altar of God. Offer him yourself.

And receive the comfort God offers us in Jesus Christ, His tenderness in the gift of the sacrament. Because when we receive that comfort, that strength, that renewal, even in the shadows and uncertainties, our feet are guided in the way of peace.

2 Then cleansed be every life from sin:
make straight the way for God within,
and let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.

3 We hail you as our Saviour, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward.
Without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

Christ offers us that grace again. Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, in your servant John Baptist you sent the herald of your Kingdom. Let us hear his message of repentance in our own hearts, and minds. Make us quick to turn to you for the help we need, quick to receive your Spirit working in the rough and dark places. Give to us the kindness and forgiveness we need to begin again.

For Christ's sake,
Amen.