The first thing that is remarkable about the two readings today are their similarities. Samson’s mother, who is not named in the Old Testament reading from the Book of Judges, has a vision of an angel who tells her that she will conceive and bear a son even though she was considered barren. The son to be born, she was instructed, was not to drink wine or strong drink and eat nothing unclean. He was to be consecrated to God from the womb and this son, whose name was to be Samson, was to begin the deliverance of Israel. The Spirit of God was to stir within him and the Lord would bless him.

The archangel Gabriel’s message to Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, was that she was to bear a son even though she was advanced in age and was considered barren. The son to be born, John the Baptist, was not to drink wine or strong drink. He was to be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb and was to prepare the people of Israel to be fit for the coming of the Lord.

Both Samson and John are precursors of someone greater than themselves, so we should not be surprised that the language in both accounts is similar. Samson prepared the way for King David and John for Jesus. Samson was defeated through his sinful choices with Delilah. John was beheaded after King Herod was seduced into killing him by the scheming of his wife, Herodias.

Gabriel announced to Zechariah that his son was to help turn the hearts of fathers to their children. In a patriarchal society such as ancient Palestine, it is interesting to note Gabriel is directing fathers to act righteously toward their children. That John understood the message is clear because he also challenged the crowds to produce good fruits as evidence of their repentance and to share what they had with those who were in need. He also instructed tax collectors not to collect more than what was prescribed and for soldiers to act justly and to be satisfied with their wages.

So what is the message for us as we prepare ourselves in these last days before Christmas? What would John the Baptist instruct us to do? Or, for that matter, what would the Archangel Gabriel, the divine messenger, tell us to do? I can’t tell you. We are, each of us, our own unique experts on our spiritual journeys. What I can do is provoke us into thinking. What do we most avoid? Or whom? What matters most in our lives? How do we handle sickness? Are we afraid of death? Of life? To whom do we give bread and drink? When did we last welcome a stranger, give clothes to the naked? What prisons of mind, body or spirit have seen our face? The Church will survive hatred and heresy, sin and persecution. What imperils the Church is lukewarmness.

One thing is for certain; John the Baptist would certainly wake us up. He might even call a few names. But, hopefully, the end result is that we will all use this time to do our part in the building up of God’s kingdom on earth. Or, as my brother, an expert skier often said, “Don’t stop until the end of the run. You can always rest on the lift back up.”

Advent Blessings,

Fr. Kevin MacDonald, C.Ss.R.