

## Homily for the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Transferred)

June 1, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Zephaniah 3: 14–18a; Psalm 113; Luke 1:39–56\**

I first came across the name of C. Kavin Rowe, a professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School, in Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell Johnson’s book *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*.<sup>1</sup> Rowe had published an article on the meaning, for the evangelist we know as Luke, of the Greek words *kyrie*, Lord, and *soter*, savior, in Luke’s gospel and in his Acts of the Apostles.<sup>2</sup>

In his article, Rowe directs our attention to Elizabeth’s words to Mary in today’s gospel lesson, “And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”<sup>3</sup> But in Luke, before Gabriel had announced to Mary that she would be the mother of God’s son,<sup>4</sup> Gabriel had visited Zechariah to announce the birth of his son, John. Gabriel draws on the words of the prophet Malachi to speak about Zechariah’s son, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 198.

<sup>2</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, “Luke and the Trinity: An Essay in Ecclesial Biblical Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56 (2003), 1–26.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:43.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:31.

And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.”<sup>5</sup>

Luke uses *kyrios*, Lord, to translate the sacred name of the God of the Hebrews, Y-H-W-H. Rowe concludes his article with these words, “The trinitarian understanding of God is a response to the pressure exerted by the biblical text itself, as seen in the opening of Luke’s gospel, when read through the lens of the question of the identity of God.”<sup>6</sup>

I have three commentaries on Luke, only the earliest of the three, the 1981 commentary by the late Joseph Fitzmyer, even raises this issue. Fitzmyer, a very distinguished Jesuit scholar, though he came down on the side of Elizabeth’s word referring to Jesus, I suspect his work opened the door, as it were, for Rowe. Bradshaw and Johnson note that if Rowe is right about the translation, one sees devotion to Jesus’ mother as *Theotokos*, God-bearer, from before the time Luke wrote.<sup>7</sup>

In late April, I encountered Professor Rowe again. He had written an op-ed for a weekly Friday column in

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<sup>5</sup> Malachi 4:5–6.

<sup>6</sup> Rowe, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Bradshaw and Johnson, 198.

*The Wall Street Journal*, “Houses of Worship.” There’s a different writer every week. Rowe’s headline was, “Dying Gives Us a Chance to Confront Truth”—its subtitle, “Since my wife entered hospice, we’ve grown closer together and deeper in faith.”<sup>8</sup>

He began by saying that years ago he had “preached a sermon on death to a relatively young congregation.” An elderly couple wanted to talk. The wife said, “We’ve never heard a sermon on death here. We needed one. We’re old and we know what’s coming.”

Rowe referred to the practices around dying in the Middle Ages, *ars moriendi*—the art of dying. It was then a good thing to prepare to die, not to ignore its coming. The Latin called to mind something I remembered reading in the very first issue of Saint Mary’s first publication, a monthly called *The Arrow*—you can find it in the [online parish archives](#). On Friday night, October 30, 1891, *Bona Mors*—“Good Death”—met after Evening Prayer.<sup>9</sup> And on Saturday, October 31, the monthly Mass with this group was offered.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.wsj.com/articles/dying-gives-us-a-chance-to-confront-truth-11587682436?mod=itp\\_wsj&ru=yahoo](https://www.wsj.com/articles/dying-gives-us-a-chance-to-confront-truth-11587682436?mod=itp_wsj&ru=yahoo), (accessed 24 April 2020).

<sup>9</sup> In this inaugural issue, the name of the group was misspelled as “*Bon.*” It was missing its final “a” in print.

Rowe writes, “Time and habit provide the chance to live fully and—even at the last hour—become a mature human being, one who tells the truth.” He continues, “I know this first hand because my dying wife tells the truth. When she was referred to hospice some time ago, after a long and painful decline, she simply noted, ‘I don’t want to die. I want to finish raising our son.’ ”

He and his wife are practicing Christians. He writes, “Jesus teaches that the way to a full life is through facing death. That teaching holds up. My wife has not been healed and will never get better. But somehow we are on the path of life.” I close with his last words of what I would call a powerful sermon, “No sane person would ever give thanks for a pandemic. But if we take the chance it gives us to become truth-tellers, lovers and reconcilers, we may well wind up giving thanks for what we have become.”

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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