

Luke 1:5-25, 57-66 Zechariah and the message of the angel

Introduction

This account of the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth contains a story with which most of us are very familiar. Yet it was a disturbing and uncomfortable time for them. Luke 1:18 hints at this problem in the account of Zechariah's words to the angel: *How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.* Later on in Luke 1:66 an insight is given into the thoughts of the wider community at the time: *Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, 'What then is this child [John the Baptist] going to be?'* (Luke 1:66). We live in a rapidly changing world that increasingly is a less than comfortable place for many people. We wonder where the changes will end –or if? As we get older and hopefully wiser we begin to see 'radical new ideas' come round again and it is salutary to remember that the advocates of some of the so-called new ideas or fashions had not been born when they were last in vogue! It is easy to withdraw into a private world that 'remembers' a time when things didn't really change all that much or that they were much easier to handle! Unfortunately such a time has never existed. There have always been issues with which each generation of people has had to grapple. However, what is true is that there are times of major cultural change when the form of society and its values that has existed for a number of generations or even several centuries begins to break down with no replacement in sight. The United Kingdom has had an explicitly Christian heritage of various forms easily for a millennium or more, including a social transformation in the later nineteenth century under the leadership of a small group of influential Christian men and women whose contributions today are often either forgotten or sidelined. Now in the last couple of decades the leaders of the various political parties are largely devoid of Christian principles, coming from backgrounds that have very little, if any, experience of faith and its practice and fail to grasp how integral our faith is to our everyday lives. As a result the highly secular elite who run our country increasingly cannot understand not only Christians but also people of other faiths as well in the contemporary world. The awful blunders in Kosovo, Iraq and now Syria are caused to a large degree by this problem. In a world where the number of atheists has declined by two-thirds over a century, but increased in most of the Western countries has led to a growing instability internationally and a sense of confusion as to where it will all end.

This is remarkably similar to the world of two thousand years ago when old ways, cultures, and in their case many of the old religions, were discredited leaving a large proportion of the population of the Roman Empire searching for a sense of meaning and purpose to their lives. An overall picture of life back then was anything but tranquil. Israel, part of the province of Syria –in Roman administrative terms, was at the periphery of empire, but not immune from an awareness of what was happening elsewhere. In this story we step back in time into a rural hamlet in southern Judea where an apparently elderly couple (probably in their forties!) were well-respected neighbours in a small community of private homes. There were no cars or televisions, stereos or nightclubs to disturb the peace – some may think it was an idyllic place to grow up? Unlikely –life was basic and hard, but for that time it would have been acceptable. Here are two respectable people, valued by their neighbours and local community. Was it possible that in their lives was deep sadness? Yes! Behind the public façade and the drawn curtains of their home this devout couple whose commitment to their faith in principle and practice was exemplary longed for a child

they appeared unable to have. The seasons of family festivities for them were overshadowed at times when other people were happy to celebrate with their children and grand-children. As we approach the Christmas season let us be sensitive to the couples who would have longed to have a child or children to observe opening their presents on Christmas day; or pleasures to share as they passed through the stages of infancy and then school years. Let us too remember those whose family circles have lost loved ones or whose relations live miles away and are unable to gather together as many of us are able to do. However in the lives of this couple something extraordinary was about to happen –for which I imagine they were no longer even praying for.

1. Zechariah's Devotion to God (Luke 1:5-7)

(a) **The Moral Context** (v6) Here was a couple whose trust in the Lord was exemplary; Verse 6 is an extraordinary statement: *6 Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.* This is God's report on them. They did not have the problems they faced because they had sinned in some way- exactly the opposite. Living for God does guarantee an easy life. We will still face the same problems in life as everyone else. (b) **The Social Context** (v5) *5 In the time of Herod king of Judea* That name in that generation amongst Jews conjured up the same kind of fear and revulsion as a Hitler or Stalin in the twentieth century. His reign was marked by terror; his brutality knew no limits; his eldest son and favourite wife were put to death on the grounds that the former might want to take the throne too early and the latter tempted to adultery, so although there was no evidence to suggest that either had entertained any such notions prevention was deemed always better than cure, leading the Roman Emperor of the day to remark that it was better to be Herod's pig than family member or courtier as your life expectancy was deemed potentially greater! This was a man who piled up the titles like Nicolae Ceausescu (1918-1989), the former President of Romania, adding 'the great' to his names on the official coinage. Peaceful happy Palestine, a sub-province of the Roman province of Syria, was a myth; many people had lost hope, just keeping their heads down -in such a context God was at work. (c) **The Religious Context** (v5) *there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.* In such a social context there were a small number of people whose faith had been maintained and example was an inspiration to other people. Praise God for Christian homes where biblical values are maintained and standards upheld. The bedrock of our society is marriage and the family in which children can be raised in a secure environment. Elizabeth was the daughter of a priest; Zechariah was a priest who served for a week at a time in the temple when his turn, that is his division of priests, one of twenty-four units of approximately a thousand men, came up on the rota came up once every twenty-four weeks. From 25-50 years old they served covering the various cleaning stewarding administrative as well as religious duties involved in running the Temple in Jerusalem. 700 of these men in each priestly division –once in a lifetime- would get the opportunity to go into the holy place and put the incense on the altar at the time of the 3pm prayer service. Zechariah was soon to experience the greatest day of his spiritual life as he had been given this honour. (d) **The Personal Context** (v7) *But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well on in years.* In that culture it was expected that couples would have children. It was shameful for a woman not to produce sons to carry on her husband's name. The one thing they both so earnestly had wanted –a son

– had never been possible. Under the Pharisaic prosperity theology at the time godly people were healthy and relatively prosperous materially; conversely no children or bad health indicated the presence of sin and failure. This theology was behind the question posed to Jesus by his disciples when they met a blind man, in the story recorded in John 9. They asked Jesus: *Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind? Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus (John 9:2).* Even if their neighbours never said such words, some of them deep down were thinking it. Life was overshadowed by this problem –let us remember that approximately one in seven couples today are unable to conceive a child naturally without some assistance. We all make assumptions about the lives of other people. Hurts can be hidden or buried –being gracious and sensitive with one another to enable our church to be a safe place for those in need of some compassion is important. Yet at the same time being willing and able to encourage one another to grow in our faith and understanding so that we can be released from the heartaches, pain and disappointments from that past that can prevent us from living the quality of life God intends for us in the present and future.

2. Zechariah's Doubts brought to God (Luke 1:8-25)

The highest of honours had come to Zechariah, the nearest equivalent in our culture for a boy may be scoring the winning goal in a Cup Final at Hampden Stadium. There was an incredible sense of privilege. Nothing else would have gone through his mind for days prior to this sacred moment –all thoughts concerning the sadness of their lack of children would have gone –at least for the moment - as he prepared his heart to undertake his calling. Twice a day incense was offered in the temple at the early morning and 3pm (evening) prayers. The committed believers in the Jerusalem area gathered after work for the 3pm prayer service. At a special time the gathering would be silent and the incense offered as the people of God sought God to redeem His people. Zechariah is the one priest allowed at that service beyond the huge curtain in the temple. His task would usually take only a short time as it had been for other priests on duty. But this occasion would be like no other one for this man of God for a number of reasons.

(a) **An Answer to Prayer** (v13) *your prayer has been heard. 11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.* It was a small remnant that was praying for the redemption of Israel for a Messiah who would save His people from their sins. The vast majority of Jews, even of believing Jews sought a political / military Messiah who would overthrow the Romans. Even as late as Acts 1:6 disciples of Jesus even after the resurrection were still asking: *Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?* By contrast Simeon and Anna mentioned in Luke 2 continued to be sensitive to the Old Testament, their Scriptures, recognising that the Messiah God spoke of was very different to the perceptions of ordinary imaginations in the land. Acts 2:38 Anna the elderly saint on hearing of the good news of the birth of Jesus: *gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.* What an extraordinary statement from the angel in v13. For year after year this couple had pleaded with God for a child and almost certainly now had given up accepting that God's will be done –now in old age they receive the answer for which they had longed. In your prayers for people's salvation, restoration

or personally for the right marriage partner or the ability to have children or whatever it is that is on your heart and yet for a considerable length of time there appears to have been no answer –take heart and encouragement from this story. Zecharias was undoubtedly shocked at this delayed blessing, from a human point of view, yet I suggest that this was a matter they had left before the Lord. There are times to pray when He gives us a burden to pray and times when there is no burden for a particular matter –sometimes –to leave it with the Lord.

(b) **A Reward for Faithfulness** (v13) *your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to give him the name John* The names of this couple are appropriate to this context: Zechariah: ‘The Lord remembers’ and Elizabeth: ‘My God is (the absolutely faithful one) an oath.’ God always has a long-term perspective in view. We live in an instant culture and many of us struggle with patience and waiting for things to progress. God is looking for Christians who are faithful persistent and keep on going for Him knowing that in His time He will reveal His guidance and direction to them. Proverbs 3:5-6: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths.*

(c) **Anxiety About God’s Plan** (v18) *How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.* It seems too good to be true. How much of the instruction he remembered when he went home and how much the Lord had to prompt him later we will never know. What is clear to this couple and to us as readers of God’s Word, this child would not be an ordinary child. His life was to be special amongst the people of God. (i) **The Pleasure** (vs14) *14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth* God wants us to have pleasure –real joy in serving Him. It is not meant to be deeply sad and solemn on all occasions –yet sometimes God’s people can make it appear so; others by contrast are so flippant and in danger of the opposite excess of recognising the awesomeness of God. There was rejoicing in heaven at the birth of John and God was in favour of a bit of pleasure on earth at his coming as well! (ii) **The Purpose** (vs 15-17) *15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.* Why the focus on these restrictions? After all this is hardly the diet of a baby? What was God trying to teach His people? Leviticus 10:9-10: *Then the Lord said to Aaron: You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the Tent of Meeting, or you will die. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You must distinguish between the holy and the profane, between the unclean and the clean.* John would be constantly filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb. Prior to Pentecost the people of God had limited empowerments from the Holy Spirit for particular tasks, but in the New Covenant era the Holy Spirit lives with us for ever. We could also in a limited sense see a hint here of the importance of the contribution of little people in our church family. They can engage in evangelism at home or with friends at school every bit as clearly as adults; they can point out sometimes more clearly than adults what God has to say to us –we can complicate things too much and on occasions need to ask for a child-like (not childish) praying spirit and humility before the Lord. What would John do? Here is a job description before his birth! *16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous— to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.* He was the forerunner of the long-awaited Messiah (iii) **The Problem** (v18) *18 Zechariah asked the angel, How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.* Lord I don’t need to remind you my wife and I are old enough to be grandparents? There are times when we can do things naturally and that time has passed. Lord how can what you have said come to pass?

Have you /Have I not been there also about a whole variety of matters? We need to acknowledge honestly our doubts before the Lord and lay them before Him –after all there is nothing impossible with God. The man of God lost the powers of speech for nine months but he in that strange way gained new insights into the power of God to accomplish what He had said He would do!

3. Zechariah's Delight in God (Luke 1:57-66)

57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. News of God's amazing answer to their prayers spread through the rural community in which they lived. The 'bush telegraph' that was still in good working order when I was growing up in rural Lancashire some years ago! Our witness is primarily through our lives. The opportunity to use words follows on from the credibility of a life that shows something of the likeness of our Lord and Saviour.

(a) Acceptance of the Name from God (vs59-64)*59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, 60 but his mother spoke up and said, No! He is to be called John. 61 They said to her, There is no-one among your relatives who has that name.62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. 63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, His name is John* first because Zechariah cannot speak the congregation at the synagogue ask Elizabeth for the name. In that culture the eldest son always had the same name as his father. The shock that resulted from her unexpected answer made them unwilling to accept her answer. Momentarily there is a pause in the service while someone dashes out for a writing tablet to offer to Zechariah. What he wrote was emphatic: *John is his name.* John means either: 'The Lord is merciful', or 'The graciousness of God'. The occasion began with a customary question to which all the people thought they knew the answer-what is he to be called? However more importantly the people went away with a question (v66) *Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, What then is this child going to be? For the Lord's hand was with him.* Have you put your faith in Jesus? Have you recognised that God has a plan and purpose for your time here on earth? Your life is not just your own. Each one of us needs to recognise and acknowledge our Creator and humbly recognise His Lordship over or past present and future.

(b) Obedience to the Purposes of God (vs67-80) Listen to Zechariah's words: *68Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come and **has** redeemed His people.69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David 70 (**as He said through His holy prophets of long ago**), 71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— 72 to show mercy to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, 73 the oath He swore to our father Abraham: 74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve Him without fear75 in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. 76And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him, 77 to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, 78 because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven 79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. Simeon the old man of God in the temple was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ (Luke 2:22-26) When he saw the baby and held Jesus in his arms. Simeon said: *Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You now dismiss Your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Your**

people Israel (Luke 2:29-32). God does not require necessarily great numbers on earth to carry out His will. He only requires sufficient people whose hearts are open to God and totally committed to seeing His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Our God is a God of surprises whose ways of carrying out His will on earth are often outside the expectations of His people. What this story teaches us is that God will always do what He has promised. The Bible gives us a glimpse of the bigger picture to make sense of the world and our place within it. God's amazing plan for the birth of John and later Jesus was one of the greatest miracles ever. This same God is at work today. He desires to work in your life and mine and may yet have blessed surprises in store for us as well, for the glory of His name, Amen.