

LUKE 1.5-25, 57-67: ZECHARIAH: THE MAN SURPRISED BY GOD

[Chelmsford: 9 December 2012]

Some people are childless by choice – indeed, to my surprise I discovered this week that some 20% of women in the USA are in that category. But not Zechariah: he was not childless by choice. He wanted a child – he dreamt of a child – but gradually the dream disappeared. With the passing of the years it seemed no longer an option.

I guess that Zechariah would have identified with another would-be father, whose dream was not to be. Listen to this poem by Matthew Wanner *as he reflects on his childlessness*:-

Oh how I have dreamed,
for years allowed to grow.
A face, a smile, a love,
that one day I would know.
Choices have been pondered,
to make this world your own.
The name, rules, and school,
to mold until you've grown.
Lessons carefully collected,
to help along the way.
Requirement that is no more,
on the shelf they'll forever stay.
Facing challenges with earnest,
a journey filled with strife.
Hoping to grant one gift,
the precious gift of life.
Alas the battle was lost,
this dream must be set free.
Leaving me only to grieve,
the person you will never be.
Farewell my sweet dream,
for I can no longer view.
A new one must be found,
a dream without you.

Zechariah too was a man whose dream of a family life seemed crushed.
Zechariah, whose name means 'God remembers', felt God had not remembered him.

For most people Zechariah does not belong to the Christmas story.
And yet in a strange way he does.
For the belated birth of his son in his old age marks the beginning of the Christmas story.
It marks the beginning of God's new initiative into human history.
Hence, immediately after his introductory prologue, Luke begins his gospel with the words:
"During the time when Herod was king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah"

(1.5).

So, let's look at this man who thought God had forgotten him – but to his surprise found the reverse was true

1. GODLINESS IS NO GUARANTEE OF HAPPINESS

In the first place we learn that Zechariah was "**a priest**", who traced his ancestry through Abijah, the second son of Samuel, and through Samuel back to Aaron (1.5).

In those days every direct descendant of Aaron was automatically a priest.

But for ordinary purposes, there were too many of them to serve in the temple - at time of Jesus there were somewhere between 18,000 - 20'000 priests in Palestine.

As a result only at the three main Jewish festivals of Passover, Pentecost, & Feast of Tabernacles were all the priests invited to serve. For the rest of the year each of the 12 "orders" or "divisions" of priests served just for one week twice a year.

It was almost like a religious form of the TA.

For the rest of the year Zechariah would have had an ordinary job of work.

His wife Elizabeth "**also belonged to a priestly family**" (v5)

A priest could only marry a woman of absolutely pure Jewish blood - mixed marriages were out.

But Zechariah went one better - he married someone who was a priest's daughter

Indeed, her name suggests that she was named after Elizabeth, the wife of Aaron.

But not only did they both have a good religious pedigree, they were both good people

Luke tells us (1.6) "**They both lived good lives in God's sight and obeyed fully all the Lord's laws and commands**". And yet godliness was no guarantee of happiness.

For in spite of their deep commitment to God, "**they had no children**" (v7).

For many couples this would be a cause of real sadness - but even more so in 1C Jewish society. The Rabbis used to say that there were seven categories of people were excommunicated from God: the first two such people were = "*A Jew who has no wife, or a Jew who has a wife and no child*". Singleness and childlessness were often viewed as signs of God's judgment upon a person.

Indeed, childlessness was even regarded as a valid ground for a man to divorce his wife..

Yes, in those days the woman was always blamed for failing to produce a child.

Notice how Luke says: "**But they had no children, because Elizabeth could not have any**".

Needless to say, fertility clinics for men were unknown!

To be fair, Luke also notes that both Elizabeth and Zechariah "**were very old**". They were both well and truly past having kids.

But the key point I make to make is that in spite of who they were and the kind of life they lived, God had not blessed them with children.

The reality is that godliness is no guarantee of happiness – going God's way does not guarantee that we shall receive all that we want in this life.

I think this is an important point to make: for in some Christian circles there is an assumption that if you are a Christian, then God will bless you with health, wealth, and happiness. Indeed, some preachers maintain that if you will only support their ministry and God will double whatever you give them.

This is a nonsense – it is not true – and it is certainly not the teaching of Jesus.

We do not become Christians because of what we can get out of this life – rather we become Christians because of what God has given us in Jesus.

2. *LIFE IS MORE THAN A GAME OF CHANCE*

One day life well and truly changed for Zechariah and Elizabeth
For, says Luke: “**According to the custom followed by the priests, he [Zechariah] was chosen to burn incense on the altar**” (1.9).

Offering the incense may not seem a big deal to you and me – but in those days it was regarded as a tremendous privilege.

In our terms it is a bit like a minister being chosen to preach before the Queen. Wow!

Let me elaborate on the significance of burning incense.

Today we burn incense only if we want to have a pleasant smell wafting through our homes. But for Zechariah and his fellow Jesus the burning of incense had special religious significance.

For the incense symbolized the prayers of the people.

Every morning and evening, when a sacrifice was made for the whole nation, a priest poured incense over live coals. The smell of the incense was thought to be pleasing to God - with the result that people thought that this would make him more receptive to their prayers.

Zechariah, in standing at the altar and offering the incense to God, was representing his nation before God – he was presenting before God the needs of the nation.

It really was a big deal. So much so that no priest was ever allowed to do this twice.

Zechariah and Elizabeth must have been over the moon.

How come Zechariah got this particular honour? Luke tells us: “**He was chosen by lot**” (1.9).

Again, we need to understand the significance of the process.

From our perspective, drawing lots involves chance.

But for the Jews this was a standard way of determining God’s will.

Indeed, a little later we find that when the apostles had to replace Judas, they appointed Matthias through the process of drawing lots (Acts 1.26).

Drawing lots was a process in which they believed God was active – he over-ruled the outcome.

As far as Zechariah was concerned, the day when he was chosen to offer incense was not a matter of luck – God was at work.

And confirmation that God was indeed at work in Zechariah’s life came in the form of an angel.

Luke tells us: “**An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right of the altar where the incense was burnt**” (1.11)

I confess I don't pretend to understand angels.

I don't understand how an angel can appear to a person – it is quite beyond my experience.

And yet, however unpalatable angels may be to the modern sceptical mind, they cannot simply be swept away because they are outside normal human experience.

In the words of one Bible commentator: *“Angels, predictions, miracles, are an intrinsic part of the gospel, because it concerns a supernatural break-in to our world... For such supernaturalism we must be prepared: Christianity is meaningless without it”* (Michael Wilcock, Message of Luke 40).

1.13: **“The angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You are to name him John’”.**

To what prayer does the angel refer?

It is often assumed from what follows, that the reference is to Zechariah's prayer for a child.

But would Zechariah have still been praying for a child? Even though he didn't have a GCSE in biology, he would have known the facts of life - old people just don't have children.

His incredulity on being told that Elizabeth was going to have a son hardly ties in with a man still longing and praying for a child.

Reason tells us that by that stage Zechariah and Elizabeth had long given up hope.

No, the particular tense of the Greek verb (aorist) which is found here, suggests that reference is being made to a prayer made on a specific occasion.

In this context almost certainly the occasion is when Zechariah presented the prayers of the nation at the time of the ritual burning of incense.

The prayer in question would have been a prayer for Israel to be set free from her enemies.

"Don't be afraid, for your prayer has been heard" - God is going to answer your prayer for the nation - and a sign of this is going to be the birth of your son.

The angel went on: **"You shall name him John"**.

The very name John is significant. It means *"God is gracious"*.

The implication here is that God is gracious not so much to the parents, but to the nation.

This explains why the angel says: **“He will be a great man in the Lord's sight... he will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go ahead of the Lord, strong and mighty like the prophet.... He will turn disobedient people back to the way of thinking of the righteous; he will get the Lord's people ready for him”** (1.16, 17).

I.e. their son John is going to be the forerunner of God's Messiah. The time is running out; God's countdown has begun; freedom is coming!

Here was a message to thrill any Jew's heart.

It would have thrilled Zechariah's heart - but he couldn't believe it.

Or rather, he couldn't believe that he & his wife were to have a part in God's new initiative:

"How shall I know if this is so? I am an old man and my wife is old too" (1.18).

God's response was to literally silence him. 1.20: **"Because you have not believed, you will be unable to speak; you will remain silent until the day my promise to you comes true"**.

As story later unfolds, it would appear that not only did he become mute, he also became deaf:

look at v62 where we read that people “**made signs**” to Zechariah, “**asking him what name he would like the boy to have.**”

If truth be told, I feel sorry for Zechariah.

He must have felt an idiot when came out of the sanctuary.

For normally at this point the priest as he came out of the sanctuary, would pronounce the traditional words of the Aaronic blessing: "**May the Lord bless you & take care of you; may the Lord be kind and gracious to you; may the Lord look on you with favour and give you peace.**" (Num 6.24-26). But Zechariah couldn't say a thing. How embarrassing!

But to go back to my main point. Life is not a game of chance.

God is working his purpose out in this world.

So when Zechariah does get his voice back, he launches into a prophecy – a prophecy which we traditionally call the ‘Benedictus’: “**Let us praise the Lord, the God of Israel! He has come to the help of his people and set them free. He has provided for us a mighty Saviour**” (1.68).

Yes God was at work in the birth of John – and God continues to be at work.

This is the message of Advent. God keeps his promises

History is not ‘one damn thing after another’. History is ‘his- story’.

Jesus who came as a baby, will one day return and wind up the whole historical process.

3. FAITH IS BELIEVING THAT GOD CAN WORK IN OUR LIVES

If the truth be told, it took time even for a godly man like Zechariah to become a true believer.

Like every good Jew Zechariah believed in God – but he had shut God up into a little box.

Although no doubt he believed that God had created the world in which live and that God had done mighty things in the history of Israel, he did not appreciate the extent to which God could be at work in his life.

But finally, the penny dropped.

No doubt it took time. But after nine months or so, there was no room for any more doubts.

And on the day of his son’s circumcision, when the child was due to be named, Zechariah finally gave expression to his faith.

These days choosing a name for a child is no easy task.

As a result most parents today buy at least one book of children's names, if not more, and then poured over them before making our choice.

But in 1C Jewish society the task was relatively simple.

It was expected that child would be named after the father - or at least after one of the close relatives.

There was consternation when Elizabeth declared: "**No! His name is John**" (1.60).

Zechariah was then consulted - although he still couldn't speak, he could write, and write he did:

"His name is John" (1.63).

"At that moment Zechariah was able to speak again, and he started praising God" (1.64)

Zechariah now accepted that he and his wife had a part to play in God's plan.

Zechariah now recognized that the birth of his son marked the taking of a new initiative by God.

Zechariah now at last believed that God could work in his life.

And at this point Zechariah becomes a model of faith to you and me.

For we too need to learn to believe that God can be at work in our lives too.

My mind goes to the words of Paul in Eph 3.20 where he says: God, "**by means of his power working in us is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for, or even think of**".

God can do amazing things. Our God is a God of surprises.

In the case of Zechariah, the Lord surprised him in a happy way.

He and Elizabeth finally had the child they had dreamed of.

[Although bearing in mind how eventually John lost his head for standing up to King Herod, you might wonder whether John proved to be the child of their dreams]

But sometimes our dreams are shattered.

Sometimes our lives appear to have no happy endings.

And we shout out to God: '*God, why can't we have children? Why did my sister have to die? Why did I have to lose my job?*'

We don't mind happy surprises - but disappointments are another matter.

And yet even in the midst of disappointment, God can be at work.

I think of the Apostle Paul, who three times asked the Lord to remove the so-called thorn in his flesh; but the Lord refused and said, "**My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak**" (2 Cor 12.9).

And to Paul's amazement that proved to be true – surprisingly, he discovered that God's unwanted answer to his prayer did him far more good in the long run than he could ever have believed.

The fact is that God can be at work in our lives – even when our prayers have not been answered.

So let me encourage you to believe – to believe that even in the disappointments of life, God can be at work. Our God is a God of surprises.