

Zechariah's song

Luke 1v 57-79

Can you believe it? Only 13 sleeps 'til Christmas Day. Anyone not got their letter off to Santa yet? Cutting it fine.

I like the comment from one lady who said, 'I don't have an advent calendar this year, so I'm just opening cupboard doors and eating whatever's in there. We are already on our **third advent candle**. It was the candle that represents God's love we lit this morning.

Advent reminds us that Christmas is not simply a birth, but a coming and this coming although hidden from many, was not a complete secret. No one was left completely in the dark. In fact throughout the scriptures, it's as if candles of light were lit to let us know someone was coming, and not just one or two lights, in fact there are over 400 mentions. We've called this before 'joining the dots.' Not just taking a verse here and one there, but seeing how they all connect.

Those of us familiar with the traditional 9 lessons and carols, will recall that the first light is lit as early as **Gen 3 v15**. It's the first reading. We are introduced for the first time to what John Lennox calls 'the seed project.' There is someone -some seed, some offspring of the woman and God tells the serpent, '**He** (referring to this person) **will crush your head.**'

Only a few chapters later another light goes on. It's the call of Abram in **Gen 12** and after promises about making him into a great nation, we read, '**and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.**'

That's us. We are in the story as early as Genesis 12. We are not Jews but it's here where we came into God's plan.

Moses lights our way further when he mentions a prophet who was to come. Deut. 18v15 '**The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.**

Throughout the Psalms and then the prophets these Messianic lights keep shining. Isaiah predicts the Messiah's birth in chapters 7-9 almost 800 years before the event. Look out for these references in any carol services you attend.

We also know Micah was the go-to prophet when Herod the Great tried to find out where his rival had been born. The chief priests and teachers of the law all fell for it. They got their day out at Herod the Great's palace and when he asked them, 'Guys where is the Christ to be born? They bleated out, 'In Bethlehem in Judea' (Matthew 2) and then they quoted Micah 5.

Beware of someone who feels the need to call himself 'The Great.'

In fact, if you have footnotes in your Bible, just open at Matthew and you'll see in the first few pages, quotes from Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, Jeremiah and Psalms.

All these references help us to link the Old and the New Testaments.

That's why the woman at the well in John 4v 25 said, 'I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. How did she know?

Her Hebrew Bible -our Old Testament. Great twist in that story is that He was standing right in front of her.

We have the great story of Elizabeth and Zechariah this morning.

Now you either get musicals or you don't. It is a bit of a shock when you see someone walking down the street and next thing they are bursting into song. 'Oh what a beautiful morning!' (Curly McClain in Oklahoma for you Philistines!)

But look, these early chapters of Luke are just like a musical. People are bursting into song, left, right and centre.

Chpt 1 v42 **Elizabeth's song**. Literally it is the baby in her womb, who kicks it all off. John leaps for joy within his mother's womb at the approach of Jesus in his mother's womb. Elizabeth is in her sixth month. (Isn't it interesting that only Dr. Luke gives us all these baby details.)

Chpt 1 v 46-55 **Mary's song** The Magnificat

Chpt 1 v67-79 **Zechariah's song** Benedictus (first word praise)

Chpt 2 v13-14 **The angel's song** Gloria in Excelsis Deo (glory to God in the highest)

Chpt 2 29-32 **Simeon's song** The Nunc Dimittis

Why the Latin names? (apart from Elizabeth) The Vulgate was an early 5th century translation of the Bible into Latin by Jerome and these terms have stayed with us.

(Oh my Latin teacher Edith Bell would have a heart attack if she heard me here.) Met her recently at Coleman's.

William Tyndale was martyred in 1536 for translating the Latin Vulgate into English. And you thought that people were picky about only using the Authorised Version? At that time, only the educated clergy knew Latin. You came to the service and didn't understand a word. William Tyndale remarked that with his English translation, even the boy behind the plough could understand.

We need to take stock here of how we are using this freedom, brought to us at such a cost.

Let's look at the background to our reading. Zechariah was a priest and his name was drawn out by lot to minister in the temple. The crowd watches him as he disappears within the golden doors of the Holy Place to burn incense on the altar. But this day was like no other....an angel was standing at the right side of the altar. (chapter 1v11)

He and Elizabeth's old prayer for a child was now being answered. But they had given up on that a long time ago. Had the angel come 40 years before-he would have been welcome, but frankly he has come too late.

You'll have heard of Michael the archangel, (Dan 12, Rev. 12) but this is Gabriel who reminded Zechariah in v.19 **'I stand in the presence of God.'** Same Gabriel who would visit Mary in v.26. He was so ticked off by this display of unbelief that he struck Zechariah dumb and v.62 implies his hearing was affected as well.

Imagine the worshippers surprise, when a long overdue Zechariah appeared but couldn't get the Aaronic blessing to dismiss them, out of his mouth. Had he had a stroke? He started making signs, but as this was probably his first attempt at sign language it wasn't going well. Eventually they work out that he has seen a vision.

Zechariah had to finish out his week of service in the temple and then head home. Can you imagine? He had been answering for years those condescending questions. You have no children? But now that he is going to be a father, he can't tell anyone!

In that ancient society it was assumed (wrongly) that barrenness was a withdrawal of God's blessing. That's why when his wife Elizabeth became pregnant, she said, **'How kind the Lord is! He has taken away my disgrace of having no children.'** v. 25

In many ways Zechariah's silence is a picture of the nation of Israel. Due to their disobedience and failure to keep God's covenants, they had been exiled and though they returned to their land, the voice of a prophet had not been heard in 400 years.

Fast forward 9 months we read in v.57 **'Elizabeth gave birth to a son.'** 8 days later, v.59 Ceremony of circumcision you remember was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, but there was never any mention of a naming ceremony. It seems to have been added and made a tradition.

Name this child? The rabbis didn't even ask this. They assumed it was Zechariah like his old man! (no joke -he was!)

His mother said No it is John.....No come on you don't want John? (John means God is gracious.) No family member with that name and let's face it, this will be their only descendant. (We are beginning to get a strong hint that the religious leaders are starting to control people's lives. Thirty years later when John and Jesus begin their ministry, we remember there are rules in place for just about everything.)

Ask his dad v.63 Got a writing tablet -he'd given up on the sign language! It sounds really modern. It was a small wooden board covered with wax. You wrote with a wooden stylus on the wax) and what did he write? **'His name is John.'** I love this part. Elizabeth and I have already named him. It is John. Chapter 1v13 remember the angel said you are to give him this name. No messing about here from Zechariah. He is now taking God at his word.

Bingo. 'Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed and he began to speak, praising God.' V.64

Just as the angel had foretold, he had been silent those 9 months. Now 8 days later at the boy's circumcision, his obedience loosened his tongue and opened his ears.

Can you imagine the talk among the neighbours? We thought old Zechariah was going to be like that for life, but listen to him go. The family and friends undoubtedly heard Zacharias tell the whole story of what happened in the temple and the predictions concerning John's role as the forerunner of the Christ.

As a result, the gossip network around Judea must have lit up like a Christmas tree. Come 'ere! Wait 'til I tell you! There's more!

v.66 And that boy? What will he turn out to be? (Some things never change)

V66b is a great comment: **'For the hand of the Lord was surely upon him in a special way.'**

As so often happens, when God's children emerge from a period of discipline, their first words are to praise God. That's what we have in the next verses.

v.67 'Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and gave this prophecy:

You remember that earlier Zechariah when he came out of the temple was meant to give the people the Aaronic blessing -as a benediction but was struck dumb. He has had to wait nine months to give this new Benedictus as we call it. Fresh from the Holy Spirit.

Remember before this happened, Zechariah couldn't speak or hear properly and Elizabeth we are told in 1v24 was in seclusion for 5 months and then Mary came to stay for 3 months.)

If you want to know what Zechariah was doing during those long months of lockdown, look no further than this part.

His song is peppered with quotes from his Hebrew Bible.

The song is in 2 parts.

Part I v.68-75 He looks back over the years. It's addressed to the Israelite people about their long-cherished messianic hopes.

Look how it starts in v.68 **'Praise the Lord the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people.'**

Then he brings to mind some of the covenants God has with his people.

v.69 The promise of a mighty Saviour from the royal line of David. No human king quite like David. (Jews still speak of him today in revered tones) but the promise of a greater King than David is here.

v.70 He remembers the prophets long ago.

v.72/73 we have the covenant with Abraham. The one God swore by an oath!

As if we didn't know it, we have a faithful God who keeps his promises.

Part 2 v.76-79 He looks forward. Zechariah praises God for his own little lad. Look what he says in v.76. **‘You will be called the prophet of the Most High because you will prepare the way for the Lord.’**

Wait a minute. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both from priestly families but John was not to follow in dad’s footsteps. He was to be a prophet. There hadn’t been a prophet for 400 years.

At this part you realise Zechariah has perfect clarity. He understands that the cry of his little son has broken the 400 year silence. He gets it. It’s as if he is standing right now, like a bridge between these 2 parts. The link which pulls the Old and New Covenant together.

You can literally smell the joy in this song.

You my little son are the one who prepares the way for the Lord. John you are going to be the man of Isaiah 40. (800 years before.) and Malachi 3 (400yrs) Of course the forerunner has his own prophecies throughout Scripture. He’s the Elijah like person who was foretold in Malachi 4.

And look at his message. V.77

‘You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins.’

If you want to prepare people for real freedom, you will have to talk to them about their sins, and tell them, ‘Those need forgiving.’ The greatest news there has ever been is that God forgives sin.

This is the one thing Christianity offers that no one else does. Forgiveness is not an easy thing. It is not just being let off. It has to be paid for and of course John was the first to point out, **‘Look the lamb of God.’**

Some people think God is like Santa Claus. ‘He’s making a list, And checking it twice. Gonna find out who’s naughty and nice.

It’s not the gospel. John would prepare the way by telling people to repent, to get ready for the King.

To Zechariah, this only meant one thing. The main event, the coming of the Messiah is at hand. In v.78, **‘the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us.’**

Another clear reference to the Messiah in Malachi 4. -and it’s just 6 months away. (remember Mary stayed with them for 3 months.)

It’s here that Zechariah and Elizabeth fade from the scene, and probably didn’t live to see their son John start his ministry. They are already very old. It will be 30 odd years from this when God will say to John, ‘It’s time.’ Luke 3 v2.

They never appear on our Christmas cards, and you’ll not find many verses in all of our carols about any of them.

No like so many others in Scripture, they humbly and faithfully play their part, in their place and in their time and in doing so are playing out a role that is so much bigger! What a challenge.

So what can we take into this week?

1. You can trust this book. Start your New Year resolutions early. 2022 To read the Bible in a year.
2. Do you remember when Scrooge woke up after the 3 ghosts visited him in Dickens, A Christmas carol. He looks out the window and shouts down to a boy, What’s today? Why Christmas Day! ‘I haven’t missed it. The spirits did it all in one night!’ Let’s make sure we don’t miss the opportunity to embrace Christ this Christmas.

‘You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins.’

May God help us so to do. Amen