

# Zechariah and Elizabeth

Luke 1:5-25

2<sup>nd</sup> December 2007

Zechariah and Elizabeth were getting old. Like all couples they had hoped that by now they would not only be a couple but that they would be a family. It would be so great if God blessed them with a large family. I guess they had dreams of the large family table with several places laid out for them and all their offspring. And before they started on the feast at the table before them, they would offer thanks to God not only for the food but for the blessing he had poured out on them by way of the family that were sat around the table. How good it would be for God to find favour with them, that God might be pleased with them and so would grant them many children.

But at the table there were only two places, one for Zechariah and one for Elizabeth. There were no children at this table, only empty spaces. Neighbours and friends had all had children who were now growing into young men and women and would soon be starting families of their own. Perhaps others they knew of their age were already grandparents. The sound of children playing in their households for the second generation. But all was quiet in the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth. No patter of tiny feet, no one else at the table, no blessing from God.

Were this couple so Godless that God had decided not to allow them children? The neighbours seemed to think so. As Elizabeth walked around the neighbourhood she often saw people giving her a disapproving look, women would whisper as she went by. She knew what they were whispering about. Elizabeth was known as 'the barren one'. What had she done that God would disgrace her in this way? God has been gracious to us and has blessed us with many children, but he has withheld his blessing from this couple. The almighty sees this couple as unfit to bring up a family.

But in God's eyes this couple were very special. They were upright. They kept his commandments and tried to do what was right. A special couple that God could use in a very special way.

Zechariah was a priest. One of many priests that worked in the temple. In fact there were 24 teams of priests who took care of the various jobs that needed doing in the temple. Each team would work for one week, twice a year. Even with splitting the priests in to 24 teams there were still too many priests for the number of specific jobs that needed to be done. So they would draw lots to see who got the privilege to do each of the various special responsibilities. The burning of the incense was one such job and it was considered a great privilege

to do. A priest was only allowed to do this once in his lifetime and many priests never got the chance.

In this passage we see that Zechariah got his chance. This was a proud moment, the sort of thing you would put in your diary. A day to remember. If he could have, he would have had someone take his photo. So this was a very significant time in Zechariah's life perhaps the most important thing he had ever done.

While at the altar of incense Zechariah would have prayed. We are not told what his prayer was but we can make some guesses from the angel's words to him saying that his prayer had been heard and would be answered. 'You are going to have a son!' And so we jump to the conclusion that he must have prayed for a child. Well, perfectly reasonable given their circumstances but it is unlikely that he had prayed for a child at this time. This was a very important duty he was performing and the only chance he would ever have to do it so he would have taken his duty very seriously. He would have been completely focused on the job in hand and so it is much more likely that he would have prayed for Israel.

The Angel's response seen in that light is not so much to say that Zechariah and Elizabeth are going to have a child, but more that Israel's saviour is on the way. God was about to do something impossible. It was impossible for men and women to have a relationship with God, there had to be a mediator, Zechariah was one of them but God was making plans to change things. Something new was about to happen, something big. And to achieve this impossible thing God was going to use a number of impossible means. And just perhaps when people witnessed a number of impossible things happen then they might actually believe that God makes the impossible possible. God had a big plan. While Zechariah was performing the most important duty of his life, God sent the message that he was about to do the most important thing in human history. The event that the prophets had told them about long ago, the event that Israel were looking forward to, the event that Zechariah had prayed for. The wait was over, the time was finally here and all of this was going to start with Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Wow, what amazing words! Far from disgrace, rather God has kept them apart for the right time so as he could use them in this extraordinary way. They would have an involvement in preparing the way for the Messiah. The hope of Israel, the hope of the world was finally coming and Zechariah and Elizabeth were key people in God's plan.

Of course, Zechariah's response to this is scepticism. 'huh!, I don't see how that's going to happen some how. My wife is barren and we are both getting on a bit, I don't think there is much hope for us now do you?' so he says to the angel "How can I be sure of this?"

He gets a sharp reply. "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

Not quite the sign Zechariah was hoping for. Perhaps there's a wicked side to me because I find the next bit quite amusing. We are taken to the scene outside of the most holy place where the other priests are waiting for Zechariah to come out. It shouldn't have been a particularly long job so what was taking him so long? When Zechariah came out he would join the other priests in giving a benediction.

Now it's a shame we don't have the details of what happened because I imagine it would make good reading. But in my imagination (which is probably warped) I can see the other priests saying "what took you so long, we need to hurry up and give the benediction – some of us have families to go home to you know". But Zechariah, unable to speak, has to try to communicate to them in signs. And I just wonder how he did this. They obviously realised that something had happened so I imagine they would have tried to find out what it was. Is this the first recorded game of charades?

... three words... first word, fly... you were trying to swat a fly... no, not fly...

Well they weren't very good at the game (well I suppose this was the first time it had ever been played) but they did think that maybe he had seen a vision.

We are given no details but this event must have made quite an impact. I mean, he was silenced until the baby was born and at this point Elizabeth wasn't even pregnant yet. So we're talking at least nine months without being able to speak. Good job it was Zechariah and not Elizabeth wasn't it?

It seems odd doesn't it that Gabriel should be so hard on Zechariah for questioning him and yet if we skip forward in the story a little to verse 34 we see the same angel telling Mary that she is going to have a baby, she is going to give birth to the Messiah, the saviour of the world. And on the surface, Mary's response doesn't seem all that different. "How will this be since I am a virgin?" but the response of Gabriel couldn't be more different. To Mary he explains everything. So why the difference.

Well, when Mary was told the news she seemed to be in awe but she had a respondent heart. She couldn't understand how these things that the angel talked about were going to happen. They seemed impossible and yet she believed they would happen because God had said so. She accepted the word of God.

When Zechariah was told the news, he was sceptical. He couldn't work it out, it didn't add up and so he doubted the word of God. In essence he was rejecting the important message that the angel was bringing. The hope that not only would his and Elizabeth's disgrace be removed but also God was going to remove the disgrace of the world. The saviour was coming.

This Christmas how will you respond to that message? I'm nowhere near as qualified as Gabriel to give you a message and I'm certainly no angel but we do have one thing in common, we both work for God and we have both been entrusted in passing on the message of the good news. The good news is that this saviour wants to be your saviour. He came to take away your disgrace. All of those things you've done that you wish you hadn't, all of those things that you didn't do that you wish you had. Jesus came to take all of that from us so as we too can be blameless in the sight of God.

It is one of the wonders of the gospel, it is a mystery but how are you going to respond. Are you going to be like Zechariah and reject the good news saying 'I can't see how God could take away my sin, I can't see how God could ever see me as blameless'. Or are you going to be like Mary and say 'It doesn't make sense but I accept this tremendous gift from God'.

If you would like to know more of God's power in your life, if you would like to know him better then I urge you to find a quiet space and just ask God to come into your life, ask him to be your saviour. Maybe there is rubbish there from the past that needs to be got rid of. Perhaps you've never asked God into your life before. Perhaps you invited him into your life years ago and you used to have a really good relationship with God only now the relationship doesn't seem as good as it once was. Whatever your situation, just simply ask God to meet you again this Christmas. And whatever the situation, if you want someone to pray with you, I'd be delighted to and I know Richard and Sue would too.

Jesus says to us today.

"Here I am I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will eat with him and he with me"

Go on, open the door.