

Sermon Given by

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At the 9am Service on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2009

### Luke 1:5-24 - "The forerunner"

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I wonder if you ever find yourself in the situation where someone from whom you haven't heard for along time gets in touch after a lengthy silence. It can be quite a daunting experience. You haven't heard from them for a while and then out of the blue the letter in the familiar writing falls onto the doormat and the postmark confirms what you are thinking: 'it's from x: I haven't heard from them in ages: I wonder why they are writing'.

Something similar happened to me the other day – when an old friend got in touch by phone, in the middle of a lunch party. We hadn't spoken in months, and with a house full of people we couldn't talk then, but it immediately set my mind spinning: 'why is he ringing up? And a sense of trepidation: will I want to hear what he has to say?'

At the start of Luke's gospel we are in a similar situation, only in this case **God** has been silent, which is much more serious. There has been no new word from God for four hundred years. No prophets to indicate that God is still committed to his people and that he will one day send a Messiah from the line of David.

And all the while no encouragement at all from Israel's situation: in fact if anything the country's situation seemed to imply God's **lack** of interest and involvement in his people's life. They were an occupied nation, under the thumb of a brutal power. How they would have loved to hear from God – but since the prophet Malachi, our first reading, which brought the Old Testament to an end, all they had had was 4 centuries of silence.

What would it be like when God finally broke the silence? Maybe that is a question you ask occasionally? Will it be all smiles, a welcome experience? Or will it be challenging, even uncomfortable?

Perhaps for us we have got used to the fact that we do not hear from God. We have excluded the possibility that he might have anything to say to us. Or maybe we believe in a God who speaks to us, but we sometimes wish he didn't: do you ever have a sense of trepidation about the whole exercise of reading the Bible? We surely should do, if we view it as a word from God to us...

Well let's see how it was in Luke chapter 1. There has been no communication from God for four hundred years and then we meet someone in Luke chapter 1 verse 5.

*<sup>5</sup>In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup>Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. <sup>7</sup>But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.*

It was immediately striking to me on reading those words this week how Luke loads his narrative with names and places and dates. He had told his reader in the preface in the first four verses of his book that he had written it as a historical account, carefully researched from eyewitnesses and archive material – and it shows. We cut into the long silence at a very specific point in history and a specific place. He zeroes in on one particular couple.

You might well feel that this couple in their personal lives were mirroring the sense of abandonment that the nation as a whole was feeling. After all, Zechariah was a priest – and together they had each taken care to marry within the priestly line. And more than that they were godly, and took the Bible seriously, *'observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly'*.

If ever there was a couple who we might expect to live under the smile of God it was this couple; but they had suffered the great sadness of childlessness and now they were at a point in life where they could not realistically expect that to change. It becomes clear that they had prayed, but God appeared not to be answering and the phone in heaven is off the hook. Or is it?

Our first heading today is this:

**God still speaks (v8-17):**

Let me begin by reading verses 8-10: *<sup>8</sup>Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup>And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.*

Clearly this is a moment of high drama. In one sense normal life was going on at the temple: because the morning and evening sacrifices happened every day.

Throughout the long silence, since **God's** voice fell silent the voice of **prayer** had still been heard and the priests had offered the incense on the gold altar of incense. It was business as usual.

But it was anything but life as normal for Zechariah. This was the pinnacle of his career as priest. There were at least eighteen thousand priests in his day – far more priests than there was work for them to do. Apart from the three great feasts, when all the priests were involved at the temple, they were on the rota for two slots of one week each year. And the one priest who did the incense offering for the daily sacrifice was chosen by lot... and that was it – they never did it again.

So this was a once in a lifetime privilege... Zechariah had won the lottery... But look at his reaction when God broke the silence in verse 11-12: *<sup>11</sup>Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.*

When God resumes direct communication with the human race it is an awesome moment. We are not told what the angel looks like; but it is pretty clear that he was fearsome. When angels appear in the Bible, their first words are almost always: 'Do not be afraid' –

presumably because invariably people **are** afraid, when they brush up against these divine emissaries.

On this occasion the reassurance was good news both personally and nationally. Let's read on from verse <sup>13</sup>*But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. (So the phone wasn't off the hook at all) Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. <sup>14</sup>He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>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."*

You see the good news personally for Zechariah and Elizabeth: he will be a joy and a delight to you; and good news nationally: many will rejoice in his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

It seems likely that given his age and his reaction subsequently, Zechariah had stopped praying about his personal situation, but clearly as a priest he was that very day praying about the national situation, asking God to change Israel's fortunes and to send the promised king and Messiah.

And the angel's message was God's direct answer. Verse 16 echoes very specifically the wording of Malachi Chapter 4, that a prophet like Elijah would come before the great Messenger or Messiah – with a job *'to make ready a people prepared for the Lord'*. For that to happen there would need to be a great turning back to the Lord, and a revival which spanned the generations, so that fathers and sons together got ready for God's king.

The Old Testament had ended on a note of warning: 'if this prophet figure comes, Israel had better listen or', said God, 'I will strike the land with a curse'.

And now the angel says, 'God is speaking again: What Malachi predicted is happening: Hello... Are you listening?! Is it going to be a curse or blessing?' Because God is still speaking...

I wonder whether our understanding of God is basically that he is silent – which conveniently leaves us free to think of him exactly what we want; or that God is a God of revelation; we cannot know him by ourselves but he is not hiding: he makes himself known. In normal circumstances that means for us though the pages of Scripture. Does the way you relate to your Bible reveal that you believe in A God of revelation: that God still speaks?

On to a second point about God... God still intervenes.

### **God still intervenes**

This of course is what Zechariah questions in verse 18 <sup>18</sup>*Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."*

'How can I be sure of this?' Zechariah asked: well, he had plenty of warrant for being sure of exactly this kind of birth. In the case of Abraham, the founding father of Israel, it had been

exactly the same... God promised a child to a man and a woman well past it. And God had done it.

Of course it was biologically beyond human possibility. But the message of the angel had come from heaven, not from hospital.

It was not to do with medical possibilities, except that the God who set up the laws of medicine could intervene and suspend the normal running of those laws, if he chose to do so.

He is the God who still intervenes. And that is what the angel stresses in his rebuke to Zechariah. <sup>19</sup>*The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news."* <sup>20</sup>*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."* <sup>21</sup>*Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.* <sup>22</sup>*When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.*

It is very telling that the angel uses the word for 'good news' for the first time at this time. As we have already seen, the birth of this baby will be good news for Zechariah and Elisabeth.

But the good news for them is of course part of **THE** good news; because their baby will be the fore-runner of an even more amazing birth story, when Jesus Christ is born.

And that is what makes Zechariah's unbelief so serious – such that he was struck dumb until the child was actually born. His next priestly duty to perform that day as he came out of the temple was supposed to be to pronounce the priestly blessing on the people; The Lord bless you and keep you, the lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you his peace.

But if he would not believe the message of God, then how could he pronounce the blessing of God. A priest who cannot accept the possibility of divine intervention in his own life cannot be a messenger of God's intervention in the life of the nation. If God's good news to Zechariah about a baby boy is under question, then **the** good news itself is at stake – if he can't create new life in an aging body, he can't renew the nation – let alone one day raise Jesus Christ from the dead after three days in the tomb.

So the fact that God does intervene is taught to Zechariah in a very painful way. He is struck dumb – and for a long time – nine months.

It's a little parable of the tragic condition of the nation with no prophets for four hundred years. Everyone is supposed to look at the dumb-struck Zechariah and learn the lesson. God is still intervening – and we better be ready for him to send first John then Jesus, or the intervention we face will be a curse not a blessing.

Now the significant thing to say is that Zechariah was not a bad person. Far from it; he was godly and blameless. And yet in an unguarded moment he instinctively took up a god-less attitude and assumed that God would not intervene: despite the fact that an angel was eyeballing him that very moment telling him God was going to act.

Furthermore he was in the middle of a religious ritual which was praying for God to intervene.

It's a reminder that since the fall, everyone of us, even the most spiritual, are likely to fall into unbelief – and religion is no guarantee against that. We can walk away from church having had our Bibles open and moments after that, we can be practical atheists: living as if God wasn't there and he wasn't involved.

I think we sometimes assume that our unbelief is a product of the fact we live in a scientific age. We understand the scientific processes of cause and effect and they leave no place for God for us – We don't need the supernatural – as one rationalist put it: 'we have no need of that hypothesis'.

We assume that an unscientific age believed easily because it's science that has made it impossible for us to believe. And Zechariah tells us that is not so; unbelief was as much a problem for him as it is for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – it is a human problem, that we all tend to lapse into unbelief.

The lesson for us here is that God still intervenes... and we better believe it.

But there is a third lesson about God here which is good news.

### **God is still gracious**

Let's look briefly at verses 23-25 for that. <sup>23</sup>*When his time of service was completed, he returned home.* <sup>24</sup>*After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.* <sup>25</sup>*"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."*

It is a lovely conclusion to the episode, that Zechariah's reluctance to believe God's promise did not overturn that promise. Elisabeth still conceived and despite her old age as the days and months passed it was clear that a healthy pregnancy was underway.

This is a hugely encouraging example of God's grace in action.

Grace which is sufficient to deal with human physical weakness – intervening in the aging process so that a baby was born to these elderly parents.

Grace which is sufficient to deal with human perversity and unbelief – because God could be depended on to keep his promises despite our reluctance to trust him.

Grace which is sufficient to overcome our sin, as our communion now demonstrates so perfectly.

God still speaks; God still intervenes and God is still gracious: 2000 years on from those amazing days in Israel. Let's thank him for that as we take bread and wine today.

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)