

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Services on 20th December 2009

Luke 1:57-80 - "Benedictus!"

In God's eyes these are extraordinary, mind-boggling events. The birth of a couple of babies gets massive coverage, before, during and after the event. Everyone is buzzing with the news and more importantly God thinks it is headline news: the angels of heaven are busy reporting it.

I commented that in most cases births are relegated to page 27 or later in a newspaper. And the births column isn't exactly one which everyone reads from start to finish. In most case it will be family members who already know about one particular birth, but who want to see the family name in print and cut it out for the scrapbook...

But this is big news and I want to focus on three of the surprises here.

1) A surprising look outwards vv57-66.

It's often a helpful exercise to ask ourselves as we read the Bible, 'who is the writer focussing on?' – or 'is he putting the spotlight on his drama where we would put it if we were the ones directing it?'

Here in the Birth of John the Baptist, truth is stranger than fiction. The focus by **Luke** is not where we would place it. We might focus on Zechariah or Elizabeth – they've been the focus in the story up to now, with Zechariah being struck dumb and Elizabeth feeling her baby leap in her womb when Mary visited her. Or maybe the focus of attention, we think, should be on the baby John – since clearly he is destined to be an amazing human being. He in fact only warrants one verse of narrative – the last verse of our passage.

Instead Luke's interest is on the friends and neighbours and relatives. That's true at the birth in verses 57-8:

⁵⁷When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

It's also true when the circumcision party happens. If I read from verse 59

⁵⁹On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah,

(They were shaping up to name him!) ⁶⁰but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

Again it's the neighbours who pipe up: ***⁶¹They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."***

(So they stand for the countless generations since whose answer to change is the one thing which never changes: 'We've never done it that way before – that can't be right').

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."** Gift of God's mercy, that means.

Then looks what happens when Zechariah's temporary dumbness is healed. The neighbours are at it again. ⁶⁴**Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God.** ⁶⁵**The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things.**
⁶⁶**Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.**

You see even before the baby had said its first word, everyone was talking about him.

They even had a sense that God was rolling up his sleeves again (that's another way of understanding the phrase which says the Lord's hand was with him). God is taking action through this little baby boy.

It was clear to everyone that this wasn't just a happy ending story for two elderly Israelites. He was of course God's gift of mercy to them but it was much bigger than that – the shockwaves were going to be felt around the world.

I wonder if we have really appreciated that the news of God's mercy isn't just for us alone – it is intended to have a much bigger audience; God's rescue plan should make everyone sit up and take notice. Our Christmas services are a good opportunity for us to bring the message to everyone's attention.

A second surprise: it's in verses 67-75. **It's a surprising look backwards.**

Because Zechariah sees what few others did – that all the hopes of the Old Testament are at last being fulfilled. As he thinks about the amazing circumstances of this baby's birth – he bursts forth in God-inspired praise.

'This is the moment we have been waiting for; this is the climax of history... God's people have been looking through the mist for this day for thousands of years – well now the mist has cleared...' **'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.'**

It's worth remembering that up to this point Zechariah has been marked by unbelief – hence his dumbness. As soon as it becomes clear that he has accepted the message, then his mouth is opened.

And this isn't just a proud father blowing his own trumpet and cheering his wife on for a job well done. Luke leaves no doubt as to the explanation: he tells us that in much the same way that God was speaking through the angel, God was speaking here: he attributes the poem to Zechariah being full of the Spirit and he calls it prophecy. ⁶⁷**His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:**

That only serves to confirm the importance of these words and how out of the ordinary they were... Because the voice of prophecy had been silent for four hundred years.

Not a squeak from God for all that time – it was a time of unparalleled darkness – you might say dumbness. And the miracle which happens to Zechariah is, if you like, a visual aid for everyone... Even though for ages there's been not a whisper from God – he's been dumb and silent – it's as if God is reaching for the megaphone.

Now his Spirit is speaking again, making it clear that behind the birth of this child, God is at work in a rescue plan which has its start way back in Israel's past history. ⁶⁸**"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.**

So for his look backwards, Zechariah draws on the Old Testament Scriptures. He looks back first to David in 69-71

⁶⁹**He has raised up a horn^[a] 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—**

Do you remember how when David offered to build God a house, God said 'No: I'll build you a house, a lasting dynasty – there'll be a king descended from you who will have your throne for ever'.

And he uses the image of a horn of salvation to describe that king from David's line. When a rhino charges you, the thing I guess you worry about is the horn – because at the moment of impact all the strength of the animal is focussed in that horn. And Zechariah predicts a king in whom all God's mighty strength to save will be focussed. That's David's son - and all God's enemies had better look out.

And lo and behold when Jesus does show up he doesn't settle for defeating the tin pot smaller enemies – like Rome. He was to go for the big one, the Archenemy, the devil – in his life as the victory over evil was demonstrated in exorcisms and in his death as he took our sin on himself and so robbed the devil of his great weapon against us. The devil cannot take us to hell with himself, if we are trusting in Jesus Christ, Great David's greater son.

Then Zechariah looks back even further to Abraham in the next few verses. What God is doing now in the birth of this baby is as follows:

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 fear**
⁷⁵**in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.**

In other words, 'this baby born – John – is God remembering his promise to Abraham. When God makes a promise, he keeps it. However long it is in coming, it is as good as done.

God's plan can't be overthrown and my baby boy's birth – and more specially his cousin in a few months time, is the proof of it'.

I love the way verse 74 and 5 describe God's purpose for our lives: it's a beautiful description, isn't it? What God wants for you and for me is what he wants for everyone – that we should be able **to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.**

And that plan for my little life has to be seen in the backdrop of a much bigger plan, a plan on a massive scale – the plan of the ages in which God chose one man, Abraham.

It all started with a promise to him; then God gave him a family and that family grew over many years into 12 tribes. Then, in a process of hundreds of years, it was a nation and out of that nation came in the fullness of time in that people's darkest days, when the promise was all but forgotten, came 2 babies which were to change the course of history, because through them God's rescue was brought to human beings.

Zechariah had the faith to read history like that. Do we? Because however long ago this happened, this is not ancient history. It is simply that God's timescale is rather different from our own. The Bible says that for God 'a thousand years is as one day and one day is as a thousand years'.

I know I have mentioned before one Newspaper headline in Scotland the day after the sinking of the Titanic which reported the calamity as follows: 'Glasgow man lost at sea'.

It's a telling example of the way we always tend to view things from our perspective. But that is me-ology, not the-ology. Our friends may say that in a world of Xboxes and online shopping, the rusty old antique of Christianity has no relevance to life.

How much better to have a God who is much, much bigger than my little life... A plan that embraced Abraham nearly 2000 years before Christ can certainly embrace us 2000 years after Christ. Does it not humble you and encourage you to think that when God hand-picked Abraham from the moon-worshippers on the desert plains of modern-day Iraq – he had you and me in mind? It was because he wanted us **to serve him without fear in righteousness and holiness before him all our days.**

When God made that sling-stone whiz through the air and inflict a fatal injury on the massive brute Goliath, it wasn't just a rescue for Israel; he had you and me in mind. He doesn't want us to be crippled with fear, dreading whatever calamity we worry is just round the corner. He doesn't want us bowing down to serve the substitute gods of career or Hollywood romance which wreck families and ruin lives. And in David he was taking all the steps necessary, ultimately, to rescue us. Doesn't that humble and encourage you? It does me – much more than any small-scale domestic deity of my own devising.

**⁶⁸"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed his people.**

Well the last verses bring us one final surprise – a surprising look onwards as Zechariah looks at his baby boy and spells out God's job description for him. And as he speaks about his Son's future, all the attention is focussed not on John but on Jesus. Let me read vv 76-79

**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,
⁷⁷to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
⁷⁹to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."**

So John is to be a prophet, but he is a spokesman of the Most High, Jesus, King of Kings. He's like those Middle Eastern heralds who go on before their king **'to prepare the way for him'** – clearing obstacles, flattening bumps, filling in potholes, mending bridges, so the king can make his journey unhindered and so all his loyal subjects are waiting for him, celebrating the wonderful things he gives.

Look at all the wonderful things John has to proclaim as gifts of **Jesus'** kingdom. – 'the knowledge of salvation', 'the forgiveness of sins', 'the mercy of God', 'the rising sun' after darkness and death, a pathway through life that brings peace.

It's striking how clearly Zechariah saw this. How easy it would have been to focus on John's ministry in and of himself – after all, his birth was remarkable. What proud father if he's been longing for a child for ages talks more about a baby down the road that still isn't born. Unless – that child has the future in his hands – and our future.

Verse 80 is a rather low-key end to the chapter, isn't it? **And the child grew up and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.** But it makes the point that we have to look onward to the one who comes after John. To look onward, from Advent to Christmas, to the birth of the next baby and all that Jesus achieved, to which John the Baptist could only point.

Cue Luke Chapter 2 verse 1: **In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world....** Please, look onwards from John and do not miss out on the sequel!

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.)