

Dreams, Poetry and Songs

Sermon for 23rd November 2008 (Christ the King)

Gospel Reading, Matthew 25: 31-end and Luke 1: 5-25 and 57-80

Having heard the gospel reading today, we had better wake up. There will be no excuses later. We need to seek the scriptures, interpret for ourselves;

Why?

To go there to be moved, to find meaning and purpose, to find our place and a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world, to find hope, to find God and to be changed. Let us begin by reading Luke 1: 5-25 and 57-80 (see page 4, below).

It's a very familiar story to us. We have heard so many times before. This is the time of year when we start to journey through Advent to Christmas. Advent, to prepare ourselves for the wonderful moment of Christ's birth. This is the time Creation has been waiting for, longing for, and all the scriptures of the Old Testament. Start to prepare in some way for this moment. We need to be careful that we don't miss it among the busy world preparations for Christmas. We do not want to inadvertently miss the significance of this wondrous moment for creation, for ourselves, for the world. Perhaps we need to afford ourselves the opportunity to stop, stare and ponder anew the scriptures as they acquaint us with characters like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary. Because in their stories, their reactions, and situations, there is something of each of us...Oh yes maybe we haven't thought of it like that. Here are these particular people, standing for us with the benefit of history on the brink of what is for us, the New Testament. The good news, the new covenant, but of course they do not know it – we do – it is our duty and our joy to allow ourselves to explore this extraordinary world, to look back to the Old Testament and look forward into scripture. To go there to be moved, to find meaning and purpose, to find our place and a deeper understanding of ourselves, the world, to find hope, to find God, to be changed.

So in front of you is the scripture, the gospel of Luke, it concerns today Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were both known for their personal holiness. Both came from priestly backgrounds. Zechariah from a priestly order, Elizabeth from a descendant of Aaron. We can imagine the conversations between them over the breakfast table!!!! But they also suffered the pain of not having children. In those days it was always considered the wife's fault. It was also seen as not having god's blessing. They were getting on in years and had most likely stopped praying for a child.

Here we are told, once when it was Zechariah's turn to serve in the temple as a priest – his section was on duty – chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood. He would enter the Sanctuary of the

Lord and offer incense. The whole assembly of the people would be waiting outside. But on this occasion Zechariah got more than he expected! He meets Gabriel, with a message that was to Zechariah both shocking and ludicrous. While Zechariah was having a debate with Gabriel, all the people were wondering where he was. Why was he taking so long?

Luke reminds us that it was a time when the temple at Jerusalem was still in place, and was indeed being built. In the time that Luke wrote this, the Romans had destroyed it. His words also link his narrative with the books of the prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah and Zephaniah. All these begin by locating the words of the prophets in the time of a particular king or kings. This is not some accident! The two opening chapters of Luke are full of Jewish scriptures. The characters we are concerned with today, knew these scriptures well, very well. We should explore them for ourselves too. The opening chapters are full of light and hope. Like a beacon of hope the Temple, a place where God is found and where God's will is done. The temple was a vast complex with courtyards for gentiles, women and men.

Zechariah had been chosen for the duty, a huge honour: He will enter the inner sanctuary, offer prayers of the people, then he will emerge to bless the crowd, with the ancient priestly blessing – 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 his countenance upon you and give you peace. This is to be found in Numbers 6: 24-26. Who said the Old Testament and the Book of Numbers was boring? Yet Zechariah's wildest dreams would not touch what awaited him inside the temple. His incomprehension is perfectly understandable. After all, they were both old and as we might say in this age 'past it'.

But the promise from Gabriel and Zechariah's response to it put him and Elizabeth in good company – if you remember back to Genesis and the ancestors of the people of Israel, it talks about four generations of one family. The first three have trouble with fertility. Remember Sarah and Abraham and eventually the birth of their son Isaac. Later in the story we learn of Isaac praying to God so that Rebekah, his wife, would have a child. Their son, Jacob, marries two women, Leah and Rachel. He marries Leah through a trick. Rachel the one he loves has no children. Then we learn of the birth of her son Joseph. Remember also the story of Eluma, the wife of Manoah, (read it if you don't know it). It is the funny and subversive tale of Samson's birth (Judges 13). And of course the wonderful story of Hannah (1 Samuel 1) who after years of childlessness has Samuel. There is plenty more we could say between the similarities but perhaps it is best to leave you to read and ponder.

So here we are, Zechariah is struck dumb. He will be unable to deliver the beautiful blessing to the crowd. He and Elizabeth have been waiting for this moment for a long time. For they have endured years of ridicule and the shame of being childless, as seen by the people of that time.

John is born and the rejoicing begins. Here an elderly couple have a newborn child. But the neighbours and relatives do not know the half of it! Next we are told it is time to name the baby. Elizabeth says he is to be called John. The neighbours disagree, (but what has it got to do with them anyway), and they start singing to Zechariah – we did not realise that he was deaf as well. However this does illustrate something of their marriage, as Elizabeth knows about his encounter with Gabriel. Well perhaps that makes him a better husband than Abraham – God tells Abraham they will have a son and he does not tell Sarah. She as you recall hears the news by overhearing the conversation between God and her husband, while she

is taking a break from washing up. Elizabeth knows exactly what her child should be named and also knows exactly why.

Now Zechariah is free from being 'deaf and dumb'. 'He is back'. He can hear, he can speak, he can sing. Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit speaks the beautiful prophesy – a poem we now know as the BENEDICTUS.

The miracle of birth has the ability to put us in touch with heaven. The infant John puts Zechariah in touch with the salvation God brings. His forgiveness, mercy, warm compassion, light, hope, truth and peace. In Isaiah 40: 3-5a we find a beautiful poem composed in the dark days of the exile in Babylonia, it speaks of Gods homecoming.

A voice cries out the wilderness.

Zechariah tells his tiny son that 'he will go before the Lord to prepare his ways'.

Let us pray we too make straight his ways.

AMEN

Acknowledgments:

The Christmas Stories – Trevor Denise

A Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels – IVP

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church – Cross and Livingston

Written by the Reverend Charmaine Sabey-Corkindale

LUKE 1 : 5 - 25

The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold

5 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.

6 Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.

7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,

9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.

14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,

15 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.

16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 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."

18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."