

Title: The Coming Together (Part 1 of 3) – Luke 1v5-25

Purpose: To consider how Zechariah fluffed his big moment – the importance of faith and the danger of scepticism.

INTRODUCTION

Now it may be this morning that as we were reading that passage from Luke's gospel chapter 1 – that one with the angel and Zechariah – that you were saying to yourself – “Well here we are again – it's Christmas time and we are dusting off, one more time, the old-old stories.”

And of course, it is especially around this time that we tend to look at them – but not exclusively.

Yet we need to recognise that familiarity should *not* mean that we cannot learn anything new and that God is *not* able to speak to us in just as powerful a way as He might through a more obscure and less stereotyped passage.

Speaking personally

Speaking personally, I know that I can say that I have learned some fresh things this year by looking at these well-worn passages.

I think it is perhaps worth saying that I do not dredge up an old sermon and simply dust it off and put in a few new stories or funny illustrations.

No my policy is to, wherever possible, write fresh sermons and usually without any recourse to what I may have preached the last time.

Q. I wonder what hit you?

Q. I wonder what hit you when you listened to the passage for this morning?

Excluding the supernatural aspects for a moment: the angels and the predictions –there are some quite startling things to this opening story in Luke's gospel:

- The FIRST is the fact that up and till this very point – there has been a period of TOTAL PROPHETIC BLACK OUT or RADIO SILENCE for no less than FOUR HUNDRED LONG YEARS – some 20 generations have come and gone and not a single prophet in sight.

Josephus, the Jewish historian writing about various Jewish historical writing over the 400 years says:
“From Artaxerxes to our times a complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit, with the earlier records, **because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets.**” (Against Apion 1:41)”

The Jewish Talmud puts it this way: “After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi had died, **the Holy Spirit departed from Israel** (*Yoma* 98).”

So this was a very shocking moment that Luke's gospel opens with.

- The **SECOND** thing that might not be immediately apparent to you is something that particularly relates to Zechariah.

To put it in a modern & a secular idiom – you might say that this was the day that Zechariah “won the lottery!!”

Let me just fill you in a little bit in regard to the priesthood:

Every direct descendant of Aaron was automatically a priest. Now what this meant was that for ordinary purposes there were far too many priests. So what they did was to divide up the total number of priests into 24 divisions. (This was something that David put in place).

Now it was only at the 3 annual festivals of **Passover, Feast of Weeks** and the **Feast of Tabernacles** that all of the priests were needed.

So for the rest of the time **each priestly division worked 2 periods of one week each per year** and so very understandably every priest looked forward for the whole year to the week when they would get to be in service.

Now there were something like **20,000 priests and so approximately 1,000 priests per division** and the particular task of being able to burn the incense at the altar for either the morning or evening sacrifice was ***** THE MOST IMPORTANT TASK THAT YOU COULD BE CHOSEN TO DO *****

If that was not enough - afterwards you would come out to officially give the Aaronic blessing from **Numbers 6 verses 24-26** “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”.

All the gathered people would be eagerly waiting there for you to come out and bless their prayers.

So to be chosen by lot for this task signalled that this was the greatest day of your life as a priest had arrived. Should the lot fall on you for this task, the lot would never again be allowed to be yours.

So I can imagine, if Zechariah kept a daily personal diary, that at the top of the page he might have written – “The greatest day of my life has finally arrived!” – Little did he really know how true that was going to be.

Herod compared to Zechariah

Now Luke's account opens with a King and a couple – and they **could not be more different**.

The king was a **TERRIBLE TYRANT – King Herod the Great** – (he was the one who was so jealous about guarding his Kingship that he had all the babies in Bethlehem area killed who were 2 years and under!)

Over against this king was this **PRIESTLY COUPLE – Zechariah and Elizabeth**, and as **Verse 6** says: **“Both of them were upright in the sight of God.”**

Blighted and blessed

Now looking at this couple, we come to see that they were both BLESSED and BLIGHTED:

- it was part of the Law of Moses, especially concerning priests, that they need to marry a women within the confines of the tribes of Israel.

However, that said, it was especially desirable and blessed to be able to be married to a daughter of a priest, to marry one who was themselves in the lineage of Aaron, the first high priest.

So this was definitely a great blessing – and just thinking about this practically – it really is a great blessing for Christian people, when they get married to be united ***NOT MERELY*** to a fellow-believer (that is indicated a couple of times in the NT). ***BUT MORE THAN THAT*** to be united to a fellow-believer who is **ON THE SAME PAGE AS YOU**.

Q. Now what do I mean by that? Well what I mean is that the person you marry is not an immature believer when you are very mature OR that you are very unevenly matched when it comes to your passion for God. (So one partner is committed, is always sold-out for the Lord, is constantly seeking to move on with God – while the other person is **SIMPLY NOT!**).

It is a blessing of **UNTOLD IMPORTANCE**, at a spiritual level – to be **ON THE SAME PAGE**.

- However, despite this lifelong blessing, they had what had been to this point a marriage-long curse in the form of childlessness – **“Elizabeth was barren”** as **Verse 7** tells us.

It was really just another variant on what we might call the **JOB FACTOR**. Job was that righteous man in the OT who he allowed (for his own purposes) to undergo great suffering and great personal loss. If you know the story, all his friends come along and initially show him some sympathy but after about a week or so that gives way and they start to basically say to him, again and again, God blesses those who are truly upright and so if you have patent trouble in your life, there can only really be one explanation and that is that you have unrighteousness in your life.

The solution is easy – repent, become righteous once more and God will in his time restore you.

This was the thinking and so childlessness in OT days was always seen as a disgrace. God was in some way not pleased with you.

This explains why in **Verse 25** we read: **“The Lord has done this for me,”** she said. **“In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.”**

The moment arrives

Well, this is the BIG MOMENT: Verse 10 "...when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside."

It might be easy to just assume that Zechariah was simply going to do something akin to what high church clergy do today with all their "Smells & Bells" but actually this was the climax to a complete service of sacrifice.

We don't know whether this was the morning offering of the sacrificial lamb (taking place around dawn) or whether the mid-afternoon one done at 3pm – however a spotless lamb had been sacrificed and prepared, and now lots were cast for 4 different roles and the 3rd lot cast was the all-important one and that fell to Zechariah.

So upon a particular signal being sound Zechariah would go from the court of the priests into the Holy Place accompanied by two people – these were fellow priests who had received the first and second lots and they were given the privilege to assist him by carrying in golden bowls the coals for the altar of incense and also the incense to be used on the altar.

Now once these two assistants had placed the coals and the incense in place, they would then retire and Zechariah would be present alone in the Holy Place just outside the Holy of Holies.

Now he would take the incense and place upon the red-hot coals on the altar and the sweet-smelling incense would climb up to God.

Just imagine what would be going through his mind:

- perhaps he was thinking: "FINALLY! – My day has come! I was seriously wondering if it ever would."

You see Zechariah would have become active as a priest at the age of around 30 – and given that we know, from Verse 7, that they were "both well on in years" – it seems he has already had an **entire career** waiting for this moment to arrive.

- it might be he was thinking of the other blessing that had never come his way – the blessing of children. And maybe at that moment, he thought back to the countless prayers that he and his wife would have prayed over one of the single biggest concerns that they had had.

Maybe he was thinking to himself – "Lord I am so privileged to do this – to be that 1 priest out of the 20,000, who is standing alone in the Holy Place send up incense before the LORD God Almighty".

I guess he must have relished those few PRECIOUS PRECIOUS MOMENTS.

- It is just possible that in that short moment alone – perhaps his whole life was passing by in his mind.

And he began to speculate which blessing he would have chosen if he had been given a choice: - 1) to be chosen by lot OR 2) to be given a child.

Well of course it is just pure speculation as to whether he was speculating about this or not.

The angel appears

So now, all of a sudden we have the totally unexpected appearance of Gabriel, the angel who comes bringing a startling message:

(Verse 11-17) “Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 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.

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

Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 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.”

A question – Q. Which prayer?

Of course this does beg an interesting question – “your prayer has been heard”:

Q. Which prayer?

- his prayer that it would be, finally, his turn to be chosen by lot OR
- his & Elizabeth’s prayer that they would, finally, have a child (preferably a son to take up the priest’s mantle after him)

Now the simple answer is – “we don’t know – it doesn’t say”.

However, I have to say that the immediately following statement to do with Elizabeth bearing a son – does give weight to the second option.

Now don’t you think that is amazing that we pray and maybe we even stick at praying BUT EVENTUALLY – we grow tired of praying and not seeing – but you know what – God does not get tired.

With God there is no such thing as PRAYER DECAY only PRAYER DELAY – very likely, the first time that Zechariah knelt with his wife to talk to him about this matter of barrenness – God says:

“YES – SURE THING – I WILL GIVE YOU A CHILD – I’LL EVEN GIVE YOU A SON – AND I’M GOING TO MAKE IT A MIRACLE!! SO I’VE SCHEDULED IT IN WITH MY PLANS AND THAT WILL HAPPEN IN 40 YEARS TIME!!!!”

It certainly is an encouragement to keep praying and not give up.

THE BIG ISSUE

It is at this point that I want to come to what you might call the BIG ISSUE of the passage – the one that I particularly want to highlight this morning.

And it all comes to the foreground in the response that Zechariah gives to the angel. It is there at **Verse 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.”

The word in the Greek text which the **NIV** translates as “SURE” is really the word for “KNOW” – so as the **NRSV** has it:

(NRSV) “....**How will I know that this is so?...**”

Basically what Zechariah is saying is that he needs some sort of evidence by which he will be able to be sure, by which he will be able, beyond reasonable doubt to believe that what the angel is saying is in fact true.

How bad?

Now I wonder: Q. How bad or unreasonable is what Zechariah says?

After all he does explain his situation to the angel: **“I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”**

And perhaps thinking back across the OT you can think of other occasions where people have asked either for a sign or for some sort of assurance:

- Take Abram there in **Genesis 15**, God told him that he was going to have a son and many offspring and that he would have possession of the land and then we read in **Verse 8**:
“But Abram said, “O Sovereign Lord, **how can I know** that I will gain possession of it?”
It sounds rather similar – but here’s the thing – just two verses earlier we read:
(Genesis 15 verse 6) “Abram **believed the Lord**, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”
So we know that Abram is speaking here *not* in a context of doubt and scepticism.
- Take Gideon – he’s another one isn’t he – his fleece that he asked for not once but twice.
A very similar sounding situation where he also gets visited by an angel of God and told amazing things and then he says in **Judges chapter 6 verses 36-38** “Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said.” And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water.”
So surely this warrants the same treatment? BUT if you check it out a bit more we see that Gideon, at this point, has already carried out a number of acts of faith and is really now just requesting that God build up his faith further. So it is much more along the lines of that man in the NT who says to Jesus **“I do believe, help my unbelief.”**

So: Q. How bad or unreasonable is what Zechariah says?

Well I think that the reply of the angel nails it pretty nicely:

Verse 19-20 “The angel answered, “I am **Gabriel**. (And by the way, that name in Hebrew means “Mighty one of God” **OR** “Mighty is God” – So that should perhaps have been a hint to Zechariah ***NOT*** to say such an unbelieving thing)

I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to 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.”

You see Zechariah really fluffed big time on this big day all because he took with him a heart of unbelief towards the tremendous good news that was delivered to him.

I suppose, this story is somewhat set into a broader context when we see the somewhat parallel story of another appearance of Gabriel, this time to Mary and the reaction that she gives to the even more unbelievable news that she is going to be the first and the last person in history to have a baby without the involvement of a human father.

All Mary says in response is “How will this be... since I am a virgin?” – Mary is simply saying – well what is going to be the mechanism for this thing that you have told me.

Zechariah’s punishment

I want to look for a moment at Zechariah’s punishment.

Verse 20 “...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.”

It says that he will be silent – he is going to become a mute until everything is fulfilled.

One thing that is intriguing is that when the day comes for him to have his tongue loosed, we read in Luke 1 verse 62 that: “... they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.”.

The word used in the Greek regarding his inability to speak (kophos) is one that can mean either dumb, deaf or deaf & dumb – so it is just possible that he was more restricted than it initially appears.

However, either way, what we see is that Zechariah – due to his lack of faith – is excluded from full participation in what God is doing – it is though God is putting him in a corner for a while – and he was certainly missing out in all the wonderful experience of things.

Now it is true that he was made blind – nevertheless, it is when you verbalise the great things that God has done and is doing that the wonder of them comes home to you all the more.

This is one of the wonderful things about giving your testimony and opening your mouth to tell of all that God is doing.

God justice tempered by mercy

Now before we give too much focus on God’s act of judgment and justice against Zechariah we really ought to notice that it is tempered by grace.

How wonderful to see that it is just for a time, yes a significant time, but still just for a time that Zechariah will have to bear the consequences of his sin. It will be an important lesson for him for the future – the next time he thinks of NOT HAVING EXPLICIT TRUST AND FAITH IN GOD.

A story with a happy ending

We ought to be clear that this story is one that does have a happy ending and for Zechariah he shows that he has very much learned his lesson.

When people make signs to him to find out what the child's name should be – he is in no two mind (Verse 63) “His name is John.”

And it is then that we get that tremendous prophecy from Zechariah's lips which starts with the words “Praise be to God” (What in Latin Bible was ‘Benedictus’).

CONCLUSION

Q. So what do we learn?

Q. What are the lessons for us this morning?

Well let me give you FIVE “sub-lessons” first:

- **FIRST** – Spiritual compatibility is vital in Christian marriage – Zechariah and Elizabeth were well matched.
- **SECOND** – The fact that man's extremity (his point of difficulty) is frequently God's opportunity. Yes it was hard that they were childless BUT this was no barrier to God doing amazing things.
- **THIRD** – Paying attention to the Law of God is not immaterial. Zechariah and his wife were upright, observing all the commandments and regulations blamelessly. We should not think that all that matters is our reputation – NO – it is our righteousness that God is concerned about- our functional obedience to everything he has said.
- **FOURTH** – In prayer God's DELAYS are not God's DENIALS.
- **FIFTH** – This whole wonderful incident comes in the context of a worship service and is during the communal time of prayer, that this amazing announcement is delivered.

Prayer is not just FOR THE MANY – but it is also BY THE MANY.

Q. The main lesson – what does that seem to be?

Well certainly the most surprising aspect of this passage is *NOT* the astounding news that Zechariah is presented with BUT rather the very jarring lack of faith with which Zechariah responds.

His very name – ZECHARIAH – actually means: **“The LORD has remembered”** and exactly at the moment when God remembers him and gives him **BOTH** his **life-long ambition to offer the incense AND ALSO** his **life-long prayer for a child – ALL HE CAN SAY IS:**

“How can I really know this!!!”

And maybe as we stand here this morning on the very THRESHOLD of another Christmas perhaps our faith is a little tired and worn like old Zechariah.

Perhaps you, like him, are asking for more evidence when God has already given you plenty – yet you still maintain your need for more PROOF. Well, let us all pray this morning that this Christmas will not be one that we FLUFF in such a catastrophic way as Zechariah – but let us embrace it fully with great rejoicing and enter into it with a fully-fledged faith.

AMEN.