

LUKE 1:5-25
WAITING – THE STORY OF ZECHARIAH

Waiting – it's the theme all through the story, people waiting for something to happen, or for something that might happen, of hopes and aspirations that might yet be fulfilled; later you get the sense that this waiting is over and that their deepest hopes in God are fulfilled, their prayers answered.

Zechariah is waiting: at the beginning he is waiting for his turn to be the priest in the temple. There were so many priests in his time that each one only got to serve in the temple for one week in their entire life. He is waiting for his once-in-a-lifetime service in the temple and what will that be like and how will it be for him. Then he's there, serving at the altar of incense and the incense is symbolic of the prayers of the people which as priest he is offering on their behalf. So while the people are outside, Zechariah is inside taking all of their prayers, their hopes into the presence of God. He has been waiting for this day for all of his life and there at altar surely he brings his own prayers to God in a way that he had never been able to do before.

Elizabeth has been waiting – all her life she has been waiting for a child. But it has never happened and she is childless and must have reconciled herself by now to the fact that she was never going to have that privilege. A childless couple in Israel in those days bore a sense of disgrace; God would bless His faithful servants by giving them children. Yet Luke tells us over and over again that Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people, faithful people, upright! Elizabeth was waiting, but surely there was a disappointment in her heart that this 'disgrace', as she saw it, would hang over her head like a cloud for ever.

The people are waiting – outside the temple; "why is he taking so long? He's been in there a long time; he should have been out by now!" They are waiting for him to come out because when the priest came out from the presence of God surely he would bless the people with grace and mercy from God. Then he comes out: think "charades" for a moment – how do you describe seeing an angel just using your hands? He has no voice; that has been taken away from him and so the people realise that something strange has happened. The people are waiting for Zechariah to bless them in God's name and that is perhaps reflective of a deeper sense of waiting amongst some in Israel, waiting for God to send His blessing on them in a new way in the coming of the Messiah.

Zechariah had this encounter with Gabriel, the angel and messenger of God. "*Do not...*" (1:13) What was his prayer? Was his prayer for a son? That Elizabeth will have a child in her old age? Is this the prayer that God had heard? Or was Zechariah's prayer a bigger prayer, for the redemption of Israel, for the salvation of his people and that God had heard this prayer and that God's answer to this prayer was to give Zechariah and Elizabeth a son? Whatever Zechariah prayed, God heard him and the answer to his prayer would be a son called John. John will "*be a delight...*" (1:14) and most of all he will "*make ready...*" (1:17) It is an extraordinary event, an encounter with an angel as Zechariah went about his ordinary business and we can well understand his question – "*how can...*" (1:18) He is imagining what Elizabeth will say when he goes home and over supper he tells her that she's going to have a son! There might not be much sympathy for him and his cranky message? "Are you teasing me? Why do you make me feel worse? Don't be so stupid, you silly old fool!" Can't you hear it? So Gabriel gives him a

sign – no voice! Till the day John is born and Zechariah writes “His name is John”, Zechariah can’t speak; on that great day, his voice comes back!

There’s more waiting – for a baby! The promise is supernatural but the baby isn’t! So five months later Elizabeth conceives and 9 months after that John is born. Incidentally, almost a year after Gabriel came to Zechariah, he came to Mary to promise her an even greater Son; His name is Jesus. When the waiting is over, Zechariah rejoices in the words of the song we call the ‘Benedictus’ after its first word in Latin; this is the second of three hymns that rejoice in the goodness and grace of God in this part of the Bible story. Zechariah rejoices that God has come to save His people, that God has shown mercy and has rescued them from their enemies, that God has remembered His covenant promises and has blessed His people. That blessing will begin through Zechariah’s son, a prophet who will prepare the way for God to come; this will be the dawning of a new day and light will come into the world in a new way when God comes to bless the world. Zechariah rejoices that his son will play a part in that blessing from God and writes it all in the past tense as if it had already happened – it is as good as done! He rejoices in the grace and glory of God coming into the world.

There is something ordinary about this story. Zechariah and Elizabeth were ordinary people and I don’t mean to do them down by saying that. They would not stand out in a crowd; they are a couple “*well on in years*” (1:7), there is nothing particularly special about them. They are people of faith who were trying to live out that faith as best they could, reading and living by the word of God, they were pious. We live in different time and culture, but these are people with whom we can identify, people who are simply looking to get on with life; not everything has been good, there are times when life has given them a raw deal, but they still have hopes and prayers and still long for God to bless them. Is that not how we are? We are simply looking to live life well, to believe and to believe a little bit better; to live in God’s ways and to do that a little better each day, to be people of faith in a world that is sometimes good and sometimes gives us a raw deal.

There is something spectacular about this story, even supernatural. An encounter with an angel! It had never happened to Zechariah before and never would again! It is once in a lifetime. We can’t avoid these parts of the gospel and in fact they make the gospel what it really is. Angels, predictions, miracles, are part of the gospel because the gospel is all about the breaking-in to our ordinary world of the supernatural power and presence of God. Christianity is meaningless without this sense of the supernatural, God breaking in to our world with all His power and glory. It is so easy to focus on the ‘Aawww’ style of the Christmas story, a baby born in unusual circumstances, to people who were not finding life easy, and to forget that this is a story with huge, world-wide, eternal implications. The supernatural bits, the angels, the miracles, the promises remind us just how big this story is, that this is God breaking in to our world with all His grace, glory and power. To his credit Zechariah sees that and rejoices.

We are waiting. We’re waiting for Christmas and all that we’ll enjoy then and this season of Advent is about that kind of waiting. Advent leads us up to the celebration of Christmas and remembering that Christ was born for us. As I said earlier, our season of Advent reflects the waiting of Israel for the Messiah and so we look forward and there is anticipation and expectation in our hearts about Christmas. Their waiting stretched over generations; our waiting is a matter of days and weeks, but we try to capture something of that spirit. Advent does have another sense of waiting as well as the coming of Jesus to Bethlehem. We’re waiting for Jesus to come again to the world in power and glory. He

promised that He would come again to the world and that when He comes again He will bring with Him a new heaven and new earth, His kingdom will be completed and fulfilled and the glory and power of God will be seen unmistakably through the whole earth. We are still waiting.

Our waiting is full of faith. We believe the promises of God; perhaps we'd like to believe them more and for our faith to be stronger, but faith is at the heart of our celebration of Christmas and our waiting for Jesus. It is hard to keep focus on faith at this time of year when there seem to be so many other reasons for Christmas. Yet, if it is not full of faith, it is missing the most vital ingredient of all. Faith keeps our eye fixed on Jesus.

Our waiting is full of hope. Something good is going to happen! They say that Christmas is amongst the top three or four causes of stress, yet we still approach Christmas with the hope that it will be a good day, a family day and fun! Sometimes it matches these expectations, other times it doesn't. But Christmas is about hope coming to the world, light in the darkness of despair and frustration. The Christian's hope is fixed on Jesus, His birth, His death, His resurrection, His coming again, heaven. There is plenty in the world to cause us despair, since people never seem to learn. There is plenty in us to cause us despair, we never seem to learn, but we make the same mistakes over and over. Yet Jesus brings hope, the hope of transformation, the hope of forgiveness, the hope of His kingship, the hope of a better world.

Our waiting is full of grace. All of God's dealings with us are full of grace. It is by his grace that He even promised to send Jesus, His love to people that don't deserve to be loved. Grace meant that Zechariah was favoured with Gabriel's visit and with a son. Grace meant that Mary was favoured with being the mother of Jesus. Grace meant that Israel was favoured with the Messiah. Grace means that we are favoured by God's love being lavished upon us day after day in the name of Jesus.

Zechariah's waiting was rewarded. He saw his son, John; did he also see the Messiah, Jesus? At least, he understood what God was going, rescuing and saving His people. A new day was dawning, light was coming and he had a key part to play. An ordinary couple, "*well on in years*" with all their hopes and frustrations and disappointments. Yet God broke in to their world with His grace, and favoured them, and blessed them; their waiting was rewarded. God's grace has broken into our world in Jesus, and that grace can still break into our lives, to forgive, to guide, to strengthen us, to help us, to bless us. Our waiting, our faith, our hope – all of these qualities are rewarded in the blessing of God resting on us. Let our faith be stronger, our hope be deeper, and the grace of God be more lavish, this Advent season!