

LUKE 1:68-79
“TO SHINE ON THOSE LIVING IN DARKNESS”

What did you find yourself thinking about this week? How to stay warm when weather outside is nasty, wet, cold? The state of the world economy? Or more likely how much money you have to buy food for this week and do you have enough to buy Christmas presents for everyone on your list? What will your pension be like in few years time? Or how to keep a two-year old occupied for the whole day? When is the baby's next feed due? Or maybe you were wondering which TV programme to watch last night? Was it a choice between *Strictly* and the *X-Factor*? Maybe your thoughts have been full of health issues, your own or someone else's, and you've been wondering how you or they will be or how to cope with being ill and taking medication? Maybe you've been thinking about work – how can I cope with a difficult situation, a difficult person at work? How can I enjoy the work I do? What will I have for my lunch? We think about all kinds of things, most of them fairly ordinary and mundane, but these are often the things that concern us.

I wonder what Zechariah thought about all day? His wife had just had a baby, so perhaps his mind was full of concerns for her and for his baby son – how will we cope, as older parents? I hope Elizabeth keeps well. I hope John grows up well! He was a priest and must have had some religious duties in Israel – perhaps his mind was taken up with doing his job well, with some duty or other that he had to perform on Tuesday or on the Sabbath? There were times when Zechariah's mind turned to bigger issues, just as there is for us; we can tell that from his song. There are times when our minds are concerned for world peace: we watch pictures from Syria and we pray for the peace of that nation or the world. There are occasions when our minds full of meaning-of-life-type questions, questions of faith and what we believe; questions of life and how we live. These are not everyday questions, but they come up from time to time and we consider them and sometimes shelve them; sometimes we put them to one side, sometimes we determine to answer them!

Zechariah had nine months to think about meaning-of-life questions, faith questions. He had been silent for nine months; the angel had taken away his voice for nine months when he expressed his doubts about Elizabeth's pregnancy! He had plenty of time to think when he was unable to speak! When John the Baptist was born, Zechariah was given his voice back and now he uses it to express what he had learned. The Benedictus is the second hymn of Luke's gospel; its name comes from its first word in the Latin version. It is full of big themes; full of meaning-of-life themes. Here is Zechariah looking at the world and telling us what he thinks; and more than that, telling us what God has shown him as he has considered these big themes for the last nine months. It comes pouring out in this song of praise to God on the birth of his son!

This is a song about what God will do. It is in two parts: the first part is about what God will do, that God will bring salvation to the world; the second part is all about the work that John will do to announce this good news. We'll see more of that in a moment. There is one curious feature of this song: none of this had happened yet; all of it is in the future; John has just been born and the story of Bethlehem, Jesus and Christmas is six months away. Yet, the song is written in the past tense! It is as if it had already happened; it is as good as done in Zechariah's mind. God has promised and so it will be. His song looks forward to the coming of Jesus and to the ministry of John, ministries that will lie 30 years into the future, yet in his mind, in his heart, God has already done all of this; God

is faithful! There was a time when Zechariah wasn't sure and for expressing these doubts he lost his voice for 9 months; now he sees, he is persuaded, and faith and hope burn brightly in his heart and mind. We love him for it.

Part 1 – Here is Jesus! *“Praise be...” (1:68)* God has come. That's how big this story is; it is the coming of God into our world. Immanuel – God with us, as we were singing a moment ago. The surroundings don't seem to match, but in the stable Jesus was born, the Son of God, the Lord, the Son of the Most High God! We need to keep reminding ourselves of that; when Jesus came, the living God came into our world, He became flesh and blood and lived in our world. Zechariah's song is more about what Jesus will do when He comes and there are lots of words that build up a picture: *redeemed, horn of salvation, to show mercy, to rescue us* – Jesus has come to rescue us. Some people read this as a political thing, that Zechariah sees God setting Israel free from Roman occupation and political oppression; but it is bigger than that; it is about God rescuing us from our sin and from death, setting us free with the gifts of forgiveness and mercy. The *horn of salvation* is a picture of strength and power: a strong Saviour has come who is able to do all of these things and much more besides, a strong Saviour who is able to rescue and redeem His people.

We live in world that sometimes has a curious attitude to Jesus. There is still a deep respect for the person of Jesus and for what people imagine that He stood for. There is respect and admiration for Him as a teacher: the values and standards that He taught are still held up as good, but still, don't ask us to put them into practice! The world is not prepared to write Him off just yet, but will hold Him at arms length – someone to respect and admire! Yet the bible's whole testimony to Jesus is not that He came as a great teacher to respect and admire, but that He came as Saviour in whom to place our trust, to believe and follow. The reason for His coming is to rescue and redeem the world and the climax of that work was at the cross. The proper response to Jesus, crucified and risen, is faith and hope. Faith is the key to open the door to a whole treasure-store of blessing that God has for us in Jesus; Zechariah saw that long before he even met Jesus and he rejoiced – *“Praise be...” (1:69)*

Part 2 – John the messenger: *“And you...” (1:76)* The Voice – Russell Watson was given that nickname! It became a TV reality show, first in the US and then here, a singing contest that some of you maybe watched. I have to say that 2000 years before, “the Voice” was already used. John the Baptist is “the Voice”. At the beginning of his ministry, he was causing a stir and people were asking him “who are you?” and his answer: *“A voice...” (Luke 3:4)* quoting Isaiah 40, alluding to Malachi chapter 3. Zechariah said: *“You my...” (1:76)* John's work is to point people to Jesus, to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, so that people are ready to meet Jesus and find salvation. His job: *“To give...” (1:77)* and the rest tells us what that salvation is: forgiveness, mercy, light in the darkness, and peace. All of these gifts and blessings God will give to His people in the coming of Jesus and John is pointing the way, John is the Voice telling people about what is to come. Jesus' coming is like day breaking after a long dark night; John is telling people that daybreak is just around the corner! John is not the Messiah; he is the Voice telling us about the Messiah.

I love the story of John. He's a real eccentric character and there is lots about him that I don't grasp, but his story is just so powerful. He has a good idea of what God has called him to do and what God has not called him to do; he is humble, yet faithful; he is gracious, yet strong; he is concerned that people find faith in Jesus, that they turn back

to God. How proud his dad must have been to see that his son would play a part in the great work that God was beginning to do; did Zechariah and Elizabeth live to see it? We don't know. Zechariah saw it on the day his son was born; he saw something of God's plan and was over the moon that his little boy would be a part of that! I love the story of John for another reason: he has piles to teach us about the church today!

The Church is the Voice; Christians are the Voice in our culture. Sometimes Christians and churches get all anxious and say "We've not saved anyone for a long time!" meaning that that we've not seen anyone become a Christian. It is not our job to save anyone; salvation is not in the Church; it is Jesus' job to save people; salvation is found in Jesus and by faith in Him. The Church's job, the Christian's job is to be the Voice, to tell people, to point people to Jesus; He is the Saviour. Being the Voice means at least 3 things:

- Telling the story: "*To give...*" (1:77) how can people know unless someone tells them the stories of Jesus? When some of us grew up, we could fairly well assume that most people in Scotland knew Bible stories; they knew the famous Bible names and for what reason they were famous. We can't assume that anymore. People we know, the people we meet, will only know about Jesus if we tell them. We teach our children, our grandchildren; we talk to our family, to our friends when they ask, when the opportunity arises. People won't gather the story by osmosis; they will only know about salvation if someone tells them; it is such a huge privilege!
- Walking alongside people: where do we meet people who are not Christians? People won't know about salvation if Christians live in a little Christian ghetto and the only people we meet are those who share the same faith. We need to understand what makes the community tick, what bothers your friends, what struggles your family has, what excites people. Then opportunities will arise to tell the story. This is what Jesus did: He came to live in our world; for 30 years He lived in Nazareth before He embarked on His ministry, part of the very fabric of His community and other people's lives. Then people will listen, will want to hear what we have to say because they know us and trust us.
- Being the right kind of people: "*this is...*" (*Philippians 1:9ff*) This prayer is simply full of the qualities that Christians and Churches should have in the manner that we live and behave: be loving, wise, pure, blameless; doing what is right and good. This is the whole foundation of the voice! People will hear what we say when they see people who look like Jesus. They need to see people who try to live by faith, even if we might not always succeed; to see people who love; who live good and Christ-like lives; people whose lives speak of quality through and through; it counts for more than we will ever know!

Here's something to think about this week, when you get a moment away from all the other things in your mind: God has come! These three words capture Christmas! Zechariah saw that and sang his heart out. God has come to save His people; daybreak is just around corner after the long, dark night of sin. God has come and John is the Voice telling people what this is all about. God has come: that is the glory of Christmas and we are the Voice for our world, to tell people, so that people know that salvation is in Jesus. Have we the courage to be voice? Are we walking with other people? What does our life say about us?