

Luke 1:68-79
Jesus – the story of Advent

*'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and redeemed his people.
69 He has raised up a horn 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 –
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.

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

Zechariah was having the day of his life. He was a priest; there were lots of priests in Israel, so they drew lots to see which of them would get to serve in the Temple; the lot fell to Zechariah and for the one time in his life, he got to serve in the Temple and put the incense on the altar. He took the prayers of the people into the presence of God, while the people stood outside. He was an old man by this stage; his wife Elizabeth was also old; they were care-worn, having carried the stigma of childlessness all the way through their married life. He had dreamed about this day in the Temple, and it was about to get even more surprising. An angel appeared beside him; angels make people scared, and Zechariah was no exception. "Don't be afraid" says the angel Gabriel – well that's easier said than done. "Your prayer has been heard" – which prayer? The prayer for a child, or the prayer for the salvation of Israel? "Elizabeth will bear you a son – call him John!" Really? At our age? Zechariah is caught in that awkward place between hope and believing – he wants to hope, but it is beyond belief! He comes out of the temple unable to speak – how do you describe an encounter with an angel using just your hands?

This is the beginning of the Advent story, with an old couple doing what they normally do every day. It starts with the promise that they will have a son to be called John; we know him better as John the Baptist, the voice preparing the way for the King, for Messiah. The story starts with a man who can't quite believe what he is seeing and hearing; Zechariah sees the

angel and hears the promise, but it's so amazing that he's not sure. Yet, this is the beginning of the story of Advent, the coming of Jesus into the world. Jesus is not mentioned by name, but He is all over and all through the story.

Later Zechariah has a song – our Bible reading this morning is Zechariah's song, called the *Benedictus* from its first word. It is a song of praise for what God is about to do. It has one of these Bible peculiarities about it: much of it is in the past tense - "this is what God has done" "*He has come... He has redeemed... He has raised up a horn of salvation*" (verse 68,69) – while actually describing what is just about to happen. It is written in the past tense because Zechariah is now certain that God's promise will come true; it is as good as done! Zechariah praises God for two things: first of all he praises God for the salvation that He is about to bring and secondly, he praises God for the part his boy, John will play in that salvation.

"He has come and has redeemed His people." (verse 68) This is the heart of Advent: God is coming to save the world. From where Zechariah stands, that is still to happen, and he looks forward to God coming to save His people. From our point of view, we look back to the time when God did come, when Jesus came to complete that promise. Our Advent is a look back to God's coming, to Jesus being born in Bethlehem, born to be the Saviour of the world. We are looking at the same events as Zechariah, but from different viewpoints: for him these events are still to happen; for us we are telling again an old story that is full of grace to save us and to save the world. It is a story full of great ideas: forgiveness, rescue, salvation. It is a story moved by mercy – God loves the world and so He forgives, rescues and saves us. Zechariah's son, John, is the voice paving the way, preparing the people, for the coming of the Saviour, pointing people to Jesus; John goes before; he prepares the way; he lets the people know that Jesus is coming.

These great ideas are still what the world needs to hear. Take the great idea of forgiveness, for example. What happens when we get things wrong? Or when we make mistakes? Our conscience kicks in and reminds us that we're wrong and we have to live with that; conscience is part of being human; we have the capacity to make choices, but conscience points out to us that we've made wrong choices. Along with conscience comes a sense of guilt, that somehow we have failed and it weighs on our hearts and minds and for some that sense of failure is a black cloud that fills their minds and destroys any sense of self-esteem. It also drives a wedge between us and our God. Forgiveness changes all of that; when God forgives us He treats us as if we've done nothing wrong; the slate is wiped clean, the relationship is restored, the weight is lifted and we are free. Jesus died that we might be forgiven. Forgiveness is ours as we repent and turn away from sin.

Messiah is like the coming of a new day, the rising sun, the Dayspring. Lots of people hate winter; you get up in the dark, you go to bed in the dark; it can almost be dark all day; they find it very oppressive; they live for the dawn, for daylight, for the sun to shine. The Bible uses the picture of darkness to speak of the oppressiveness of sin. Jesus' coming is a new day; dawn has come; the sun has risen, and everything has changed. His coming is a new day for the world, a new day for our lives; a new day has come in the love that God has for us. The

dawn opens up a new day, breaks the darkness and brings light; Jesus opens a new day for the world, breaks the darkness in our hearts and minds and brings light, and grace and peace.

Advent is a season full of great ideas. It is a season of hope when we tell the story of God coming into the world in Jesus and the good things that Jesus came to do. Telling that story is a way of bringing hope to a tired and broken world. We look at the world and we see all sorts of problems and issues: Covid, some of the political issues that remain unresolved, people behaving badly. We wonder where the hope is that we need to help us and give us strength to deal with a difficult, troubled world, or where is the hope that we can offer the world in its brokenness and trouble. The hope that we have and the hope that we offer, is to be found in Jesus. He has come to bring hope to the world; He is the hope that will transform the world just as the dawn transforms night into day.

We find ourselves in the place that Zechariah stood, that place between hope and believing. That's where Zechariah stood. He's having the day of his life that just got a whole lot bigger and ultimately better. I'm not sure that we'd describe Advent 2021 as the days of our lives, but we too celebrate because Jesus has come and has saved us. A new day has dawned for the world. Another new day will dawn because Advent reminds us that Jesus will come again to the world, the Saviour and King, and when He comes the next time, He will bring a whole new world with Him; the King of Glory creates a new heaven and a new earth and everything will be made new. Advent – the season of hope centred firmly in Jesus. We know that Advent is about hope and we want to have that hope in our hearts. But we're not always sure – can we believe a story that has angels in it? "God" coming into the world – how easy is that to handle? Yet, it is these supernatural elements that fill the story with its power. The eternal God breaks into our world, to come and live amongst us. We have hope in our hearts, but we still struggle to understand, to grasp the story. We believe, but we want to believe more.