



The Parish of Peasedown St John

Luke 1:8-20 - Believing the impossible

Passage, Talk Notes and Questions

Please feel free to take these talk notes home with you and you may wish to find some time during this week to consider the questions below.

1. Talk Passage – Luke 1:8-20

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 worshippers 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." 19 The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 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."

2. Talk Notes

2.1 Introduction

- Just outside our passage in Luke 1:5-7 we read: *'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. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.'*
- We learn that Zechariah was a priest, Elizabeth was barren, they were both 'very old,' but they were good church folk, probably like most of us here today: *'Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly'* Luke 1:6
- But Zechariah had developed three bad habits which some of us may have developed too:
 - i) He came to church in autopilot mode
 - ii) His prayer life was wooden
 - iii) He certainly did not believe in a God who could make the impossible, possible.

2.2 Zechariah went to church on 'religious autopilot'

- How many of us do things on autopilot? How many of us like routines?
- We are all creatures of habit. Zechariah too is a creature of habit. It is his turn to come in and perform the regular temple liturgy and on this occasion verse 9 *'he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.'*
- How many of us operate on 'religious autopilot'?
- And what about us, in the 21st Century? Haven't we done an equally good job of perfecting religion? How many of us know the words of the communion liturgy off by heart? How many of us say them without thinking about them? How many of us know

when to stand up and sit down. How many of our church services are run on autopilot?

- Why are we here this morning? Are we here because of habit? Are we here because we feel that by being here week by week we can earn our ticket to heaven? Or are we here because that is what our parents did and so we continue with that tradition?
- Zechariah had gone to the temple on 'religious autopilot.'
- He had not gone to the temple to meet with God and yet God sent Gabriel to speak directly to Zechariah.

2.3 Zechariah's prayer life – *"Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.* Luke 1:13

- Zechariah and Elizabeth clearly have a prayer life but appear not to believe in the power of prayer.
- They do not appear to be waiting expectantly on God for an answer to their prayer.
- How many of us pray to God but deep down in our hearts we do not expect an answer
- Like Zechariah, how many of us have given up on a God who likes to make the impossible, possible?
- Prayer is meant to be ongoing conversation between two close friends but many of us it has become mechanical, monotonous and repetitive.

2.4 Zechariah does not believe in a God of miracles – *"How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."* Luke 1:18

- Zechariah doubts God ability to perform miracles.
- Do we believe in a God of miracles? Do we believe that God performs miracles today. Do we believe in a God that can make the impossible, possible? Do we believe in a supernatural God that performs supernatural acts?
- I guess many of us have heard about God performing miracles and some of us have seen God do these things. But are we believing or sceptical? Do we trust someone when they say they have been healed or do we think that it is all psychological?
- Zechariah was struck dumb for questioning God's supernatural abilities *'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.'* (Luke 1:20) Zechariah could not speak for nine months until his and Elizabeth's miracle child was born, but when he did speak again it was to give his son the name John and then he goes on to praise God in song 'filled with the Holy Spirit.

2.5 Conclusion

- The most encouraging part of Zechariah's story is that despite the fact that he worked on 'religious autopilot' and despite the fact that he doubted God's supernatural abilities, God still loves Zechariah and Elizabeth and wants the very best for them.
- Many of us may well be sitting here and thinking we are a bit like Zechariah.
- My hope and prayer is that it does not take God to strike you dumb for nine months to wake you up to the fact that he loves you and wants the very best for you. Jesus said *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.* (Matthew 7:7-8)

3. Questions to consider at home

- 1) Are set rituals and liturgies good or bad?
- 2) Should we encourage greater variety in our church services?
- 3) What is wrong with Zechariah's prayer life?
- 4) A friend tells you one day that she went to a church service where someone was healed of their deafness – how would you react?
- 5) What do we learn about angels from this passage?



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