

## **A Man at Peace: Zechariah**

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church December 5th, 2001 – Luke 1)

Zechariah is an aging priest. His experience leading up to the first Christmas in the midst of the first Advent is pretty unique.

He lived in the hills but goes down to Jerusalem, as it was his turn, to light the incense and offer prayers in the holy of holies at the temple- a once in a lifetime opportunity. His wife Elizabeth is also from a priestly family, so she understood, why he had to go and attend to this.

Their life together was pretty content. They had been married for many years. One thing though caused them grief and even shame. They were childless. They were a devout couple but the blessing of children in particular alluded them and it seemed they had missed out on that blessing.

So, Zechariah is in the temple about to perform the most significant priestly act of his life, he is standing in the holy place, calling on God to be present.

And he gets a shock that would take him more than nine months to get over, to come to terms with. He returns home and keeps silent as he reflects on that experience. An experience that would have instilled both fear and awe.

He was in the temple praying the prayer they all prayed when lighting the incense – May the God of mercy come into the sanctuary and accept with pleasure the sacrifice of the people.<sup>1</sup>

So, there he was, praying that God might be made present and lo and behold he is greeted by the angel Gabriel. There's more, he is told that he and his wife would get what they had always hoped and prayed for – a child in their old age. Perhaps he thought he was hallucinating as who in their right mind could believe that! Perhaps doubt took hold, his religious training hadn't prepared him for this, it all sounded a bit fanciful. There was more, he was told what this child would accomplish and also told what the child was to be called – John, not a family name, not part of the tradition.

Back home one thing led to another and Lizzie becomes pregnant. They kept a low profile for a while – I guess it took a while to get used to the idea, guess they wanted to make sure all was okay before they told people. Eventually they couldn't keep the secret any longer. Zechariah kept 'mum' but probably told Lizzie about what had happened in Jerusalem, what the angel had told him, the prediction and what to call the child.

The next nine or so months were fairly uneventful, expect for the visit of Lizzie's cousin Mary who came to stay for about three months. Mary too had found herself in the family way, her situation was a bit worse though – young and unmarried. Suspect she came to Lizzie to escape the innuendo and gossip, to escape the scandal.

Mary's experience mirrored that of Zechariah's – a visit from the angel Gabriel, surprising news about a baby who would play a significant role in God's plan. Zechariah took months to accept all this, Mary accepted God's plan immediately.

---

<sup>1</sup> From Schweizer's commentary on Luke

The baby is born and the couple find themselves in the temple, as was the custom, to name the child. The community expect the child to be named after his father, guess the community was now speechless, when Lizzie said it would be John. Zechariah confirms this by writing the name John on a tablet and then breaks his silence and breaks out in song. All his thinking culminates in a song of praise as he cradles John in his arms. Speaking or singing both to the baby and to the community – he tells him he would be a prophet, he would prepare the way for the Messiah, would preach salvation for the forgiveness of sins and would usher in the reign of God – a reign of love and light and peace and justice. He then reminded those gathered that God would look upon his people with mercy and bring them peace.

John grew up and took his role seriously. He lived in the wilderness, lived like a monk, preached about baptism and prepared the way for Jesus. He upset the apple cart and died too young.

Zechariah speaks of peace, that in Jesus God brings peace, shows new ways of having peace and would be called the Prince of peace.

Peace – we need peace, peace in ourselves, in our homes, in our communities, in our world especially in places like Myanmar and the Middle East where violence abounds.

Peace – quiet, calmness, stillness, serenity, freedom from conflict, tranquillity, harmony.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says peace is possible when adversaries imagine themselves as being friends. Peace is a splendid and priceless goal and God shows us that it is possible because of forgiveness.<sup>2</sup>

John and Jesus both lived their lives for this and ultimately gave their lives for this. Hoped and lived for a world where people choose peace and not conflict, where people choose forgiveness, where people choose to be friends, where people choose to respect others, where people choose to love. This is at the heart of Christmas.

God desires us to love and live in peace.

In John God gives the world a gift, the gift of preparing us for the way in which God will interact with his people. A reminder that God will liberate the people.

Christmas is full of surprising moments. Here we find a devout man visited by an angel who struggles to believe what will happen and who when he gazes in the face of a small child can only respond in praise. And we have two women who are at opposite end of their lives and find themselves with child and can only respond with joy.

Zechariah sees in the faces of two little children God's desire for peace and liberation for all people.

So let us strive for peace. Let us strive for love. Let's stive to be friends with all people, and as we do, watch and wait for God's liberating love to be made real before our very eyes. That is the meaning of Christmas. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> Archbishop Desmond Tutu