

Zechariah's Hopes

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on Dec 3rd, 2023 - (Luke 1: 67-79)

My name is Zechariah. Lately I have been feeling my age – grey hairs are appearing; I have a middle age spread and am starting to lose my hair. I am a priest and want to tell you a little of what happened to me recently.

I live in the hills, but found myself down in Jerusalem. You see it was my turn to light the incense and offer prayers in the holy of holies in the temple – a once in a lifetime opportunity. My wife, Elizabeth, is also from a priestly family so she understood why I had to go.

We have been married for many years and are fairly happy, the only thing that caused grief and shame was that we were childless. We are devout, but we did feel like we were missing some of God's blessings.

So, I was standing in the holiest of part of the temple calling on God to be present with me. Well, I got a pretty big shock, something that took me nine months to come to terms with. I travelled home and reflected what had happened, it was the most significant event in my life up to that point. I couldn't really speak of it for months.

Let me explain briefly what happened – there I was praying the prayer we all prayed when we lit the incense – 'May the God of mercy come into the sanctuary and accept with pleasure the sacrifice of his people'.¹

What a shock, there I was praying for God to be made present and lo and behold I am greeted by the angel Gabriel, what's more he told me that in our old age, Elizabeth and I would have a child, the one thing we had hoped for, for so many years, but had now given up on – perhaps I was hallucinating – who in their right mind could believe that. I am afraid my doubts took over and despite all my training in religious matters I found it all a bit fanciful. He told me even more – more about what this child would accomplish and even what name we should call him – John, now that wasn't even a family name – tradition dictated the child should carry my name.

I went back home, and one thing led to another and then we found out Elizabeth was pregnant. We both kept a low profile for a number of months – guess we wanted to get used to the idea of a child, guess we wanted to ensure nothing went wrong before we told others. Then it got to a stage when we couldn't hide it anymore. I went about my job quietly and in the next few months told Elizabeth of my experience in Jerusalem. I told her about the angel Gabriel, about the prediction and calling the child John.

The nine or ten months passed by fairly uneventfully, except of course for the visit by Elizabeth's cousin Mary. Mary had to travel for a few days to come and stay with us, then she stayed for more than three months. She too was in the family way, but as she was young and unmarried, we provided a bit of sanctuary for her – a place to hide, a chance to get away from the gossip and scandal.

Funny though she had had a similar experience to me – a visit from the angel Gabriel. She reacted differently to me, even shamed me a bit, you see she didn't doubt what the

¹ *The Good News According to Luke by Eduard Schweizer, SPCK, London 1984.*

angel said, he accepted all he said, accepted that her child would play a very important role in God's plan for the world. Me, well I still was having a hard time believing it all.

A while after Mary left, our baby was born. Then eight days later we were in the temple as is the custom to name the child – can you imagine the response from all the family, relatives and neighbours when we said his name was John, not Zechariah as they expected. They asked me to confirm that Elizabeth was right, I did. I was so proud of Elizabeth, she hadn't forgotten what the angel asked, what a faithful woman! They were all astounded. As for me well, I found my words again and then broke out into song.

It was as though all my thinking over these past months had all collided into one long thought/poem/song. I couldn't hold back, I took the baby John in my arms, and spoke directly to him but I was also speaking to the community.

I spoke to him about his role and my hopes – he would be a prophet, he would go before the Lord to prepare the way, he would preach salvation for the forgiveness of sins, he would help usher in the reign of God, where mercy and love and light and peace and justice would reign. I reminded those gathered around about how God had promised to look favourably on the people and redeem them, to show mercy and bring peace to the earth. These were the hopes I had based my whole life on.

I am so proud of all John achieved, as he grew, he took his role seriously, living in the wilderness like a monk, preaching a baptism of repentance and he did prepare the way for Mary's baby Jesus – funny how it all worked out.

Our children seem to live out our hopes, God's presence in both John and Jesus taught the world about peace, about ways of living peacefully, showing mercy and being reconciled. That's what both John and Jesus worked and gave their lives for.

This whole experience taught me to hope, it reminded me of God's promise that we will not be abandoned, and that God desires us to live in love and peaceably with each other. It reminded me that God is merciful, after all Elizabeth and I were given a child, which not only filled a hole in our lives but gave a gift to the whole world.

It is a funny world; a world where devout men like me are visited by angels and yet have doubts and struggle to believe. and then holds a little child in his arms and begins to see all his hopes can come to fruition. Peace and liberation for the people – might be just around the corner.

Let's watch and wait for God's liberating love to be made real before our very eyes.
Amen.