

LUKE 1:57-80
AWESOME

What strikes you about these Bible stories? The stories we tell at Advent, in the weeks before Christmas – what strikes you about them? “I’ve read them all before; I’ve heard them before; we know them so well” – the danger in that reaction is that nothing strikes us about these stories; familiarity breeds, if not contempt, then certainly a tendency to skip over them or not to listen. “It all happened so long ago and in faraway places; it is not relevant to us and our world” – can be a valid impression that many people have about the Bible as whole that it comes from a different culture and we struggle to see how it touches our life, and our world. “These stories are so strange as to be unreal; these people are not part of the real world” – this is an impression that many people have, because of the element of the supernatural in the stories: the angels, the miracles etc don’t resonate with the world we inhabit and so all is strange and unreal. “Wow! Amazing! See what God has done for us!” – is that ever your reaction? Let’s see today how it might be!

It seemed good to complete the story that we’ve begun over these Advent Sundays. It is the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and their son John. John is promised as the forerunner to the Messiah, the One sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord to his people. His father Zechariah was a priest and while he was serving in his once-in-a-lifetime week in the Temple, the angel came to visit him to tell him that his wife Elizabeth would have a son. Zechariah laughed; they were “*Well on in years*” and thoughts of having children were well-passed! It still hurt for Elizabeth; there was some disgrace for her in being childless. It is hardly surprising then, that Zechariah should find it difficult to take the angel’s word for it. “*How can...*” (1:18) There would be a sign: Zechariah would not be able to speak until the day when all of this comes true; the people waiting outside know something strange has happened.

Elizabeth conceives. We’re told only two more things about these months. First of all, she spends 5 months in seclusion; she kept herself hidden away for some reason; perhaps she’d put up with so much from people round about her because she had no children that she wanted to keep this to herself for as long as she could. Then, secondly, Mary came to visit. Mary who is herself newly pregnant went to visit her relative. When the two women met, it was more than a family reunion. There is something else going on in this meeting; the Spirit of God is there, and by the prompting of the Spirit Elizabeth recognises Mary’s special place in God’s purposes and at same time her baby recognises something of the specialness of Mary’s child! “*When Elizabeth ...*” (1:41,44) Before he’s even born, John is pointing to Jesus as the Special One, as the Messiah sent from God. It was to be his life’s work!

“*When it...*” (1:57f) There is nothing unusual in that. Elizabeth’s son is born and the family, her friends, the village, the community share in her joy. We presume that Elizabeth is well-known in her village and that her family, friends and neighbours would know her situation and would have been sharing something of that experience with her. I’m not sure if ante-natal classes were held then, but there would be other ways in which people would share Elizabeth’s joy and the anxiety of her pregnancy. They share her joy when her son is born; it is a perfectly natural reaction of the community; there is nothing unusual in that. Equally there is nothing out of the way in describing this as God’s mercy: God’s favour, God’s compassion have been shown to Elizabeth in the gift of a child and there’s more to that than she knows yet! All of this is the perfectly normal, natural

reaction to the birth of a child. The same thing happens in our world under most circumstances when a child is born.

Then comes the naming time: *“On the...” (1:59f)* We enter the culture and custom of the time; the child is named and circumcised. We’re not quite sure why we have this sense of the community going to name him Zechariah; perhaps that’s just what they assumed, that he would be called Zechariah after his dad. But Elizabeth is sure; John is the name for her son. Zechariah’s opinion is sought: *“He asked ...” (1:63)* This is the simple choice of a name for his son, but it is so full of faith. It brings the story that began with Gabriel in the temple to an end; the angel promised Zechariah he would have a son and the son would be called John and Gabriel spoke of how he would be great in the sight of the Lord as well as bringing joy and delight to his parents. Zechariah has had at least 9 months to consider his reaction to that promise, to reconsider his sceptical *“How can...” (1:18)* and to see that God is at work in this situation. So his declaration *“His name is John”* is full of faith and faithfulness learned over these 9 months; he has seen what God can do and has seen the promise be fulfilled and his faith is strengthened, rekindled. *“Immediately...” (1:64)*

We then see community reaction; there are three of them:

- 1) *“the neighbours...” (1:65)* our old friend ‘the fear of the Lord’ comes upon the people, full of reverence and wonder at something out of this world! They are taken aback at what they had witnessed, and it left them speechless for a time, perhaps; they knew that they were in the presence of greatness and the presence of God.
- 2) *“throughout...” (1:65)* This was a great talking-point in the village and in the other villages around about. “Have you heard...what happened to Zechariah? Elizabeth had her baby! He is called John!” - that might seem like gossip, but it is also telling the story of the grace and mercy of God at work in their world.
- 3) They recognised something of God in all this. *“Everyone...” (1:66)* That last sentence is Luke’s comment at the end of the story, that the Lord was with John. The people’s awe and the people telling the story is based on some kind of recognition at least that they see God at work in their village, in their world. Because of what they have seen, they are filled with awe and wonder and reverence; because of what they have seen, they talk about it and tell the story so that others will know.

I find these reactions to the mercy, compassion, favour and intervention of God fascinating and I wonder where we find them in our world. Let’s turn them round and look at them in reverse order. They are all connected.

We live with such a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world that I wonder if we’d recognise God at work in our world. The world we live in is shaped by all things material, money and possessions for example; equally our understanding of the world is shaped by the explanations of how things work. “I have gifts and skills because I have worked hard to learn and develop them; I have a nice house with lots of fine possessions because I have worked hard to achieve a great deal and these are the fruits of my labours; the world in which we live is a fascinating place and here is the process by which it has arrived at its present condition”. Now, none of that is false, but it is a view of world that recognises nothing of God. It is centred on and shaped by the material and the pragmatic. Something of this has infected the Church as well, in the sense that we’re sometimes slow to recognise the work of God amongst us and instead we try to find other explanations for the blessings we enjoy. Financial prosperity is put down to people’s generosity, which it is indeed true, but is also down to the faithfulness of God

who inspires His people to give. We don't always recognise God at work in our world when we should. If the people of faith are slow, then how can we blame people who have no faith when they push God aside.

What have we got to talk about? People talked about the mercy of God upon Elizabeth. If we're slow to recognise God at work in our world in mercy and compassion, what have we got to talk about? We spoke last week about the messenger-ministry of the Church in the world, in the community. Messenger ministry means a Church that is ready to tell people about the mercy, grace and favour of God in the world today, about the blessings of God. That does not mean that we only talk about spiritual things; how to put people off! We need to be able to talk about other things: sometimes it is good to talk about football; we need to talk about the things that bother people in their everyday lives because these things bother us too. But the Church has more to offer; the Church has a view of life and the world that is shaped by God and His grace; a view of life in which God is involved and active; Immanuel means God with us, amongst us, in us. We need to talk about that! This is so important in a world that is so often shaped by material and pragmatic things, to lift people's eyes to see God in the world. That's what Jesus came to do: God came to live in the world, to share in our world, to transform the world. It still matters that we tell people that story.

How do we react to these stories? To these events? Are we filled with awe? Or is this a familiar story in which nothing takes us by surprise? That may be, but this is not just about surprise, this is a sense of how big the story is. It is a magnificent story, a story to lift the spirits, to make the heart sing. Zechariah's heart sang and he wrote his song, full of what God has done to save His people. God is full of mercy, compassion and grace; God who has favoured His people; God who has kept His covenant promises; God who has completed the promises he had made hundreds of years before; God who has rescued His people from their enemies, from their sins, from everything that enslaved them; God who has set His people free. This is the awe of the gospel; it is still awe-inspiring stuff! God has done all of this for us and for our world. The gospel is still full of God's blessing, favour, mercy, compassion and grace; how could the eternal God do all of this for us? How could the Son of God come into our world to be the Saviour? It is awe-inspiring stuff! Is this enough to make our hearts sing, our spirits soar, to catch our breath? Or have we lost that sense of wonder and awe in a sceptical, cynical age?

Zechariah and Elizabeth loved their son; they are delighted to have him; they called him John. He would be great, a prophet, the forerunner to the Messiah. The mercy of God is at work to bless Elizabeth and more to bless Israel in all that John would become and Jesus would fulfil. The people have eyes to see the mercy of God; they recognise that they are in the presence of greatness and of God. They are filled with awe; they talk about God's grace; they recognise that God's hand is at work. Have we lost that? In our world, are our eyes closed to the work God is doing, to the mercy and grace of God? Are our hearts unresponsive? Have we lost the awe and wonder of the gospel? Have we nothing to talk about to the world, no grace to share? There is so much to learn! God give us eyes to see and hearts to be filled with awe!