

Advent Sunday

Luke 1 v 5-25

Context:

This Sunday we begin our journey through the season of Advent as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the promised Messiah. Though there is usually only a single page in our Bible separating the end of the book of Malachi and the beginning of the book of Matthew, the time span between the two books, which end the Old Testament and begin the New Testament, is around 400 years. History books show that lots happened during that period, but nothing about those years is included in our Bible because God didn't speak to His people Israel at all through those 400 years, no prophets were sent, God went silent for four long centuries. As generations came and went, the remnant of Israel, who had returned to the Promised Land with so much hope from exile in Babylon, longed, prayed and waited in expectancy for God to fulfil His ancient promises to send the Messiah, restore His people, and redeem the world. Then, suddenly, the silence is broken, God becomes active and starts to speak again, and it all begins with an old couple from the village Ein Karem, not far from Jerusalem.

Observation:

1. At what time does this account begin according to the beginning of v 5?
2. Who are we introduced to in the rest of v 5 and what do they have in common, apart from being married to each other?
3. What was good in their lives and what was not so good according to v 6-7?
4. What once-in-a-lifetime privilege was Zechariah chosen for in v 8-9?
5. Who appeared to him as he performed his priestly duty in v 11 (see also the beginning of v 19)?
6. What was his initial reaction in v 12?
7. What good news does he hear in v 13?
8. Why would this be a source of joy and delight, not only to Zechariah and Elizabeth, but many others too (v 14-15a)?
9. What was the child to abstain from and for how long, and who would he be filled with and from when (v 15b)?
10. What would his mission be according to v 16-17?
11. What was Zechariah's response to this message (v 18)?

12. Why should he have believed the message according to v 19 and consequently what punishment would he receive and why according to v 20?
13. What was going on outside the temple whilst Zechariah was in conversation inside according to v 21 (see also v 10)?
14. How did they realise what had happened to Zechariah (v 22)?
15. What did he do after his time of service was completed (v 23)?
16. What happened next and what was Elizabeth's reaction (v 24-25)?

Meaning:

1. How do you think the society in which Zechariah and Elizabeth lived would have reconciled the contrast between the description of them in v 5-6 and their plight described in v 7? - see also Elizabeth's words in v 25.
2. How do you think Zechariah would have been feeling and what would he have been thinking when the lot fell to him for the once-in-a-lifetime honour of burning incense in the temple (v 8-10)?
3. Why do you think he was so afraid in v 12?
4. The subject of the priestly prayer as they offered incense on the altar was for God to send the Messiah and fulfil his ancient promises. In light of this, and looking at the words of the angel in v 13, what do you think Zechariah had been praying for as he offered the incense?
5. Looking at Numbers 6 v 1-21, what is the significance of Gabriel's words in v 15? (Can you think of any other people in the Bible who took a Nazirite vow like this, either life-long or temporary – look here for clues: Judges 13 v 2-5, 1 Samuel 1 v 11, Acts 18 v 18, Acts 21 v 23.
6. How do Malachi 3 v 1-2 and 4 v 5-6 help us understand the child's mission as outlined by Gabriel in v 16-17. How did John the Baptist's ministry fulfil these prophetic words?
7. Why do you think Zechariah was so reluctant to believe Gabriel's message (v 18)? Can you think of any other examples from the Bible of people who initially doubted God's word when they first heard it?
8. What do you think was the symbolic significance of Zechariah's punishment (v 20)?
9. Why do you think Elizabeth hid herself away for 5 months after she had conceived (v 24) even though she was clearly full of praise for what God had done for her (v 25)?

Application:

1. It is clear from the Bible that God always does things on time – **His time**. So, what could be some of the reasons for the 400 year wait for God to fulfil His ancient promises from the end of Malachi to the birth of John the Baptist?
2. How does this story inspire and encourage your prayer life?
3. Do you ever doubt God's promises or have difficulty believing He will fulfil them? What can you do in such circumstances?

Pray:

- Thank God that He always keeps His promises.
- Pray for grace to believe and trust in Him as we wait for Him to act and speak.