

Dear Friends,

Luke 1: 11-25

Zechariah is carrying out his priestly duties. He is offering incense in the temple. He has prayed for God to come into the sanctuary but he doesn't expect God to actually appear and speak to him. But on this day, God does come through the angel Gabriel. When Zechariah sees Gabriel, he is terrified. It can be awesome when God touches our lives. It's not surprising that we react with fear. It is natural to tremble. It will be the same in the stories that follow, first for Mary and then for the shepherds. On each occasion people will be afraid and the first thing that God's messengers will say will be "Do not be afraid." God does not want you to be afraid. God does not want you to be frightened.

Gabriel then goes on to tell Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a son who will be called John. He is the one who will become John the Baptist. The angel continues by telling Zechariah what John will do. He will help people to turn to God and prepare them so that they are ready to belong to God. This is good news which will make people feel joyful. God does not want you to be afraid. God wants you to be happy. God wants you to rejoice and be glad.

Zechariah, however, cannot believe what he has been told, even though it has come from an angel. Perhaps, he does not dare to hope. His hopes have been raised so often in the past, only to be disappointed. The thought of more hope may be unbearable to him. It will only let him down again. There is however a consequence to his unbelief. He becomes unable to speak.

Belief matters. Jesus said, "Believe in God. Believe also in me." He believed in God, he believed in himself. He urges you to believe in God and to believe in yourself. When you lose that belief, you lose so much. Your spirit gets broken; you lose heart; you lose your voice. The angel however assures Zechariah that the loss is only temporary. His speech will return when the things of which he has been told take place and his belief comes back.

When Zechariah comes out of the sanctuary the worshippers are waiting for him. His job is to bless them. They look up expectantly. They wait for him to say the precious words. But he can't. He is unable to announce the blessing. They can see that something has happened. They realise that he has seen a vision.

And so, Luke's gospel begins in the temple, with a priest with a closed mouth, who is unable to speak the words of blessing. The gospel will end back in the temple, with the friends of Jesus, whose mouths will be open as they bless God. The final words of the gospel say that the disciples "Returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God." This will happen immediately after Jesus has blessed his friends as he ascends into heaven. The story of Jesus will take us from failure of blessing to fulness of blessing.

But all that's for later. For now, Zechariah goes home. It does not say how Elizabeth feels about having a silent husband. Maybe she quite enjoyed it. It might have been a bit of a relief, just for a while. Zechariah writes down what has happened. He may not believe but Elizabeth does. They embrace and kiss. They wonder if God might need any help in fulfilling the promise. They decide that it can't do any harm. Elizabeth becomes pregnant. Zechariah may be unable to speak, but Elizabeth has plenty to say and she knows who to thank. She says, "This is what the Lord has done for me".

May God come to you. May God give you the gift of faith, that you may find your voice, rise up and live; that you may turn from fear to joy; that you may know fullness of blessing.

God bless you,

Tony