

Zechariah: Luke 1.57-69



Don't forget to go to our church website to experience the Advent Calendar online! You'll find a story, a song and a craft activity linked to today's TFTD. Just click on the link below:

<https://www.stphilipandstjames.co.uk/advent>

Today's TFTD comes from Robin:

Most people think that the things that happen to them are a mixture of things that their own actions have caused, things that are the result of the actions of others and things that happen at random; coincidences caused by some random working of the universe. Or if they think about it a bit more, they might conclude that the things that happen to them are the result of some kind of interplay between all three.

When these things are bad, people can then divide them into things that are their fault, things that are somebody else's fault and things that are nobody's fault. And again, if people think about it for any length of time, they might conclude that most bad things are a combination of these three.

What happens though when you believe in God? Because God is doing things in the world, isn't he? At the same time, God seems to have a lot to say about the things that human beings do. So living a life of faith means on the one hand getting our own actions right, trying to respond appropriately to God while at the same time keeping alive an awareness that God is doing things in the world that might render everything we do redundant in the final analysis.

Zechariah was chosen by lot to be the priest who entered the inner sanctum of the temple on the day he met the angel Gabriel. “So it was a coincidence, then!” is what the modern mind might say to hearing this story. The priest who entered the holy of holies was chosen at random! “Not so,” says the voice of the believer. Zechariah was chosen by lot which means that God chose to put him in the inner sanctum so that he would meet the angel Gabriel.

And bear in mind that it wasn't Zechariah's decision to become a priest in the first place – at least not in the way that the modern mind thinks that people choose to become priests. Zechariah was a priest because he was of the tribe of Levi, designated by God to be priests during the wanderings in the wilderness. So the decision to make Zechariah one of the people who was drawing lots to enter the inner sanctum was a decision made by God hundreds of years before.

So, when Zechariah found himself in conversation with the angel Gabriel in the inner sanctum of the temple he might have been thinking, “Gosh, what are the chances!” but I think it is more likely that he was thinking “So, this is what God has intended for me!”

And what was the task that God was entrusting to Zechariah? What was the next step in a journey that his ancestors had begun hundreds of years before? It was just a heads-up really. “Your wife is going to have a very special baby.” Zechariah was just the support act as it turned out. He was the messenger boy. Of course, fathers are important, I know that. But we can't deny the centrality of mothers to the miracle of birth. The big news was that Elizabeth's husband was going to be a Dad!

And at that moment Zechariah's faith let him down badly. Standing alone in the inner sanctum of the temple, facing a real live angel, Gabriel no less, Zechariah doubted that Elizabeth was up to the job because she was ‘advanced in years.’ He doubted that God could work his purpose out through his wife, because, because ... er ... she's too old! And for that he was struck dumb. “We shan't be hearing anything else from you!” was the reply of Gabriel.

Elizabeth wasn't allowed into the inner sanctum of course, being a woman. Women couldn't become priests. But now Elizabeth had been chosen to have this special baby. The Gospel speculates that she might have been chosen for her righteousness. Possibly her own ancestry played a part because the Gospel refers to that to. But what is most striking is the way Elizabeth is open to what God is doing, this new thing he is doing, in a way that eludes her husband. So for the next part of

the story, we get to hear Elizabeth speak, because her husband cannot. She is given a voice because her husband has had his taken away from him.

It is only when Zechariah signals that he is now supportive of what God is doing, by backing up what his wife says about the baby's name, John, that his tongue is loosed again. And once loosed, he is given some astonishing words to say.

Words that speak of God's action in history through the ages. Words that speak of what God will achieve through the life of his little baby boy. Words which we repeat every morning at morning prayer. Words which become our daily recommissioning as part of God's plan.

'And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

The Gospel records that the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel. That same spirit is at work in our lives also, as God works his purposes out through us.

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