

**Texts: Luke 1:5-25**

**Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> December 2019**

**Brightons Parish Church**

**Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.**

**How are you approaching Advent this year? Are you someone who is suddenly thinking: “Advent!?! How did it become Advent already! I’ve only got 24 days to get the shopping done now!?!” Is that you?**

**Or, are you a “Advent’s here, sigh, same old, same old” – is that you? Or, do you approach Advent in some other way?**

**Why not take half a minute to turn to your neighbour and share how you feel at the beginning of this Advent season? (PAUSE)**

**As I was saying to the children and young people, I really do think Advent is a time of invitation, a time when God invites us deeper with. Part of my reasoning for this is that the accounts we read during this season – of Zechariah and Elizabeth, of Mary and Joseph – again and again these accounts show God inviting people into something that very first Christmas.**

**So, over these first three Sundays of Advent, we are going to look at God's invitation to the characters in Luke chapter 1, and through their experience see what God's invitation to us might be as well. In today's reading, I think there's an 'invitation to deeper relationship' and an 'invitation to respond'.**

**Let's begin with, 'invitation to deeper relationship'. Do you remember this box from January this year? Upon this box, I asked our young people to stick on labels which shared the words they would use to describe God. So, we have 'loving'...**

**Part of this past year of ministry, I think, has included a focus upon adding different words to all our boxes, including mine, so that the box we have God in – the box that defines His character and ways might expand and change.**

**In a similar way, what Luke shares here is not only retelling a nice story and it's not simply about God putting things in place for the promised Messiah, it's much more. For on every page of Scripture God always, always...**

**invites us to know His character and His ways. For Zechariah and Elizabeth part of the invitation to a deeper relationship was to know that God is a meticulous planner and that He is graciously powerful.**

**Their story, in Luke, begins at chapter 1 verse 5 and Luke shares some of their back-story. **We read today:****

**“In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.” (Luke 1:5)**

**Luke is being very specific here in naming Herod – he is trying to show that this is not just a nice made up story but rather it is rooted in history. This story features a couple who are both part of the priestly tribe of Levi.**

**Zechariah himself is a priest and at that time there were so many priests available that the tribe of Levi was divided into 24 divisions, each doing duty at the temple for one week, twice in the Jewish year, with the rest of their time spent elsewhere and in regular work. So, what is about to happen, happens on one of those rare occasions when Zechariah was serving at the temple.**

**We then hear **another part of their back-story:****

**“Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.”**

**(Luke 1:6)**

**This couple are described as ‘righteous’ and ‘blameless’, so a better couple you couldn’t imagine. Now, they aren’t perfect, because who is, but they did serve God faithfully. Yet we also hear that they are childless, and at this time, people understood that to mean they had displeased God, maybe because of sin, and so it was often seen as a disgrace upon the couple, especially the wife.**

**However, Luke wants us to understand that this is not the case here; that what we have here is a very faithful couple and yet they aren’t able to conceive – but it has nothing to do with them being in the wrong. Additionally, by saying that “they were both very old”, we’re to understand that they were so old that they (and others) did not expect the situation to change.**

**So, here is this couple, incredibly faithful, but with deep unfulfilled longings, and in their faithfulness, Zechariah reports for duty, **for we read:****

**“Once when Zechariah’s division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense”**

**(Luke 1:8-9)**

**The incense offering was made twice each day and the choice of the individual was decided by casting lots so that human will was circumvented, and the divine will could be ascertained. This was really important to the Jews because offering the incense was a great privilege for the chosen priest went into the Holy Place, that area once removed from the Most Holy Place.**

**What is more, a priest could never offer incense more than once in his entire life, and some priests never received the privilege. To have the opportunity was a great honour.**

**These are details Luke includes, not just to fill out a story, but to give us clues to something more – Luke wants us to see here that this seemingly random fall of the lot, to Zechariah, was something designed to set the stage for a fresh entry of God into this couple’s lives, for as we read next, **something incredible is going to happen:****

**“Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah...Your wife**

**Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord...” (Luke 1:11-15a)**

**Such good news for the couple – they will have a son – a son who will bring great joy to them and to others, and he is to have a special place in God’s plan, **for as we read** next:**

**“He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:16-17)**

**This child, John, is to be tasked with bringing back many of the people of Israel to God so that they are prepared for the coming Messiah. In a nutshell, John is to call people to repentance, he is to call them back to God and to God's ways, which was a characteristic of the prophets, like Elihah.**

**Now, this repentance isn't about being more religious, or nice, or giving lip service; no – this repentance will have a day to day impact, for family life will radically change, and all because people will have a firm commitment to a way of life that honours God and heeds His priorities, His wisdom.**

**In all of this, from verse 5 to verse 17, we are told not only a nice story, we are invited to see...**

**the meticulous planning of God, for God was guiding the events of history, so as to prepare the way for Jesus, and He did this because we are that valuable to Him.**

**The Apostle Paul reminds us that, “at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly...But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:6-8)**

**The time was right, at roughly the age of 33, for Jesus to die, demonstrating God’s love for you and for me. But roughly 34 years before that point, the time was also right for God to fulfil His Old Testament promises and weave together the events of history so as to prepare the way for the Son of God, to come as a babe.**

**God did it all for love of you and love of me. We are told in John chapter 3: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:16-17)**

**There was no cross, no death of the promised Christ, the promised Messiah, without first the Son of God being sent from heaven to take the form of humanity as a babe. God did it all for love of you and love of me, and in that love, He put the pieces in place, for God is a meticulous planner, fulfilling His promises, and making a way for us to be saved, to have eternal life, by having a heart open, given over, prepared for, the Lord.**

**But Zechariah and Elizabeth's story** gives us a second facet to God's character, for He is revealed as graciously powerful. Earlier we **read these words**, but I deliberately skipped over a few words, which I've highlighted here: "the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John...'" (Luke 1:13)

'Your prayer has been heard.' That's what I skipped over. When we read those words, we all probably thought that the angel was referring to a prayer for a child, yes? That would be the most likely thought to have. But a few commentators highlight that the language here suggests a one-off prayer rather than a regular prayer, and also that it's unlikely such an honourable priest as Zechariah would bring a private concern at this special moment,...

**where for the first and last time of his life, he enters the Holy Place.**

**It's more likely then, that Zechariah prayed for Israel, for Israel's redemption, for that promised Messiah to come. What's startling, in that case, is God decides to answer both the spoken and unspoken prayer, both the prayer for Israel and the secret desire of Zechariah's heart. In His grace, God answers both of Zechariah's longings and so rightly, he and Elizabeth are to name the child "John", which means, "God is gracious", He gives generously, He gives beyond expectation, He gives unearned, unmerited gifts.**

**What is more, we see that God is not only gracious, but He is powerful - it's almost like God wants a challenge;...**

**I almost imagine God saying: “I’ll use a barren couple, but they’ll be really old, and I’ll only appear to them when the lot falls to Zechariah”. I mean, what are the odds?!**

**But God never makes a promise He can’t fulfil, God always delivers for He is able to fulfil any promise He makes, and He most powerfully showed that, not just through John, but through Jesus, that Christ-child, whose odds of fulfilling all of God’s promises concerning His birth were inconceivable, and yet He did, because that is our God, the God who is graciously powerful.**

**This grace and power were** also shown in the cross of Jesus where in generous, unearned, unmerited gift He gave His life for you and for me. But to die, as Paul said, “while we were still sinners” – while we were still...

telling God to get lost, to take a hike – to die even then, that is true grace, that is love.

But His death was not simply as a display of love so as to captivate our hearts, no, His death was to achieve something much more necessary and vital, for in the death of Jesus the power of God was at work, and so now as one hymn puts it:

**“No guilt in life (*sin is forgiven*),  
no fear in death (*an eternal home is secured*),**

**This is the power of Christ in me**

**From life's first cry to final breath,**

**Jesus commands my destiny**

**No power of hell, no scheme of man,**

**Can ever pluck me from His hand**

**Till He returns or calls me home**

**Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.”**

**(In Christ Alone by Keith Getty & Stuart Townend)**

**At the beginning of the Advent story, God reveals Himself as a meticulous planner full of grace and power. He extends an invitation to know this of Him; He extends it not only to Zechariah and Elizabeth, but to you and to me.**

**But this story also includes a second invitation, an invitation to respond, for in the remaining verses we read today there is a great contrast made between Zechariah and Elizabeth. We see someone who is closed and someone who is open to God's invitation, for we read: “Zechariah asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.’” (Lk. 1:18)**

To all intents and purposes, it seems a very reasonable question. But it belies the state of Zechariah's heart, for even confronted with the angel Gabriel, Zechariah responds in unbelief, He's closed off, He is unprepared for God to move in grace and power.

**In contrast, not one negative word** is said about Elizabeth. Maybe it is Luke's way of helping us see that she responded differently. Never once does she come across as bitter or forgetful, rather she is consistent in honouring God and of acknowledging the gracious hand of God, **for as she said at the end:** "The Lord has done this for me...In these days he has shown his favour (*his grace*) and taken away my disgrace among the people.'" (Luke 1:25)

**In the contrast of these two very real people, God issues an invitation: will we respond like Elizabeth or like Zechariah? Am I someone who has a soft and responsive heart towards God? Or am I someone whose faithfulness to tradition and to what I know, is closing me off to the possibilities of God, and keeping God in my box?**

**Now if you are like the latter, if you are a bit more like Zechariah, there's still good news – for just like Zechariah, God doesn't give up on you either! He might not grab your attention quite as dramatically, but if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, it will be possible to perceive the ways He is extending that invitation and awaiting your response, awaiting it even now.**

**Friends, as we begin Advent** and remember this portion of the Christmas story, please don't let it just wash over you, try to come to it afresh, notice the details of God's meticulous plan for the coming of His Son in love for you, and let His grace and power so captivate your heart that you respond to His invitation.

**May it be so. Let us pray.**