

## ARE YOU READY FOR CHRISTMAS?

David Hillson, Hope Church, 12 December 2010

### INTRODUCTION

Only 13 days to go until Christmas! Are you ready?!! It is important to be ready.

This is the third Sunday in Advent. Advent is a period of preparation for Christmas, time to reflect on what really happened, get ourselves ready to celebrate it properly.

[Gaudete Sunday – time to rejoice!]

One way to get ourselves ready for Christmas is to look at the events that preceded the first Christmas, see how people reacted to the news of what was to come, and use that to reflect on our own response to the Christmas event.

We'll do that by looking at two stories in Luke chapter 1, which start about 15 months before the first Christmas. These are the stories of an old man and a young woman, very different people but their stories show remarkable similarities.

### STORY 1, PART 1 – HOPELESS OLD MAN

Read Luke 1:5-25

**Facts.** What are the facts of Zechariah's situation?

- Old man, old barren wife, no heir, but serving God, both faithful and righteous

**Feelings.** How might Zechariah and Elizabeth have felt in this situation? [We don't know for sure, but use your imagination! Put yourself in their shoes.]

**The promise – how.** Zechariah goes into temple to burn incense – chosen by lot

Angel appears in Holy Place, at right side of altar of incense (represents continual prayer of God's people).

It's Gabriel (see v19), God's chief messenger, does all the important announcements. *Gabri-El* in Hebrew = mighty warrior of God = archangel.

**The promise – what.** Angel promises the impossible.

"Do not be afraid" – the opening words of every angel! Awesome beings.

"Your prayer has been heard" – Were Zechariah and Elizabeth still praying? Or are these their prayers from years ago? God remembers every prayer.

"Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son..." – not via another father, or by adoption, but natural conception and birth

"Call him John" – Hebrew equivalent *Jochanan* = favoured by Jehovah

"You will have joy and gladness" – understatement!

He will be dedicated to God, via the vow of the Nazarite, Numbers 6

He will fulfil last words of OT – Malachi 3:1, 4:5-6

### **Zechariah's reaction.**

When he first saw the angel (v12) he was troubled (*tarasso* = roiling waters = stirred up, agitated) and afraid.

When he heard the message (v18) he replied "How shall I know this?"

Understandable – I'm too old, she's too old, it's too late

But overtones of unbelief –

Greek *kata ti gnosomai touto* = Where's my evidence, prove it to me.

### **The consequences.**

Immediate result – Zechariah was struck dumb as punishment for his unbelief

**Reflection.** How do you respond to that story? How does it make you feel? Can you sympathise with Zechariah or not? Does it match anything in your experience?

## **STORY 2, PART 1 – HELPLESS YOUNG WOMAN**

Read Luke 1:26-38

**Facts.** What are the facts of Mary's situation?

- Engaged teenager, powerless, nobody in society
- A virgin – Greek *parthenos* = virgin. Was she really? Hebrew used in Isaiah 7:14 = *almah* = young lass. This word only used twice in OT, i.e. Is 7:14 and Gen 24:43 (Rebecca). Another Hebrew word is more commonly translated as virgin = *bethulah*
- But Mary confirms her virginity in v34, *andra ou ginosko* = I have not known a man sexually

**Feelings.** How might Mary have felt in this situation? [back to the imagination]

**The promise – how.** It's Gabriel again!

**The promise – what.** Gabriel promises the impossible

"Do not be afraid" – standard opening words again

"You have found favour with God" – Was she specially holy? Or chosen for a purpose?

"You will conceive in your womb and bear a son..." – natural conception and birth

"Call him Jesus" – Hebrew *Jehoshua* = Jehovah saves

"He will be great" = Gk *megas* = superlative in every way

Son of God, Son of David, reign without end – He will fulfil every messianic promise in the OT!

### **Mary's reaction.**

When she first saw the angel (v29) she was greatly troubled (*diatarasso*) – same reaction as Zechariah but stronger

When she heard the message (v34) she replied: “How shall this be?”

Also understandable – I'm too young, it's too soon

But underlying faith –

Greek *pos estai touto* = How can this happen?

(i.e. she assumes it will, just not sure how)

### **The consequences.**

Immediate result

- confirmation from Gabriel, referring to Elizabeth's pregnancy as proof – she was 6 months pregnant, so visible evidence, no doubt was possible (though Mary went to check immediately, v39-40, “Mary arose and went with haste...”)
- Mary - “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it happen to me just like you said”, Greek *doule* = slave, absolute submission and unquestioning obedience

[Poem “The Offer” by Mark Greene, Mary's response]

**Reflection.** How do you respond to that story? How does it make you feel? Can you sympathise with Mary or not? Does it match anything in your experience?

## **COMPARING THE STORIES**

Common themes and structure in two stories – compare text in columns

Both stories have a common structure, they start the same:

- Angel Gabriel visits, promises the impossible, using similar language

Very different reactions:

- Zechariah reacts with unbelief, Mary responds with faith

## **STORIES 1 & 2, PART 2**

But note the eventual consequence – both stories have same ending

- A baby is born: John (Luke 1:24-25, 57-66) and Jesus (Luke 2:1-7, 21)
- In line with God's promise and purpose, as a result of his miraculous intervention

God is sovereign, his word brings results, sometimes even despite our reactions

Read Isaiah 55:10-11

## HOW ABOUT US?

Following these two stories in Luke chapter 1, there are some questions for us to consider, especially as we approach Christmas:

- God has spoken in our world, and his message is for everyone, including you and me. (Maybe not through an angel!)
- What has God promised? What is the message of Christmas? God has intervened, got involved, not left us to sort out our own mess. Jesus has come into the world as saviour, to rescue and redeem everyone, including you and me.
- Think about how Zechariah and Mary responded to this message – and your own response. You are not too old/too young. God can speak to someone over 70, or to a teenager.
- The Christmas message is for each one of us. As we prepare for Christmas 2010, let's not disqualify ourselves from what God is saying, with unbelief like Zechariah. Let's respond in faith like Mary and say Yes to God.

## PRAYER



**Luke 1**

<b>ZECHARIAH'S STORY</b>	<b>MARY'S STORY</b>
<p>5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.</p> <p>8 Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, it fell to him by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense.</p>	<p>26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!"</p>
<p>12 And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.</p>	<p>29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.</p>
<p>13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth; 15 for he will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."</p>	<p>30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end."</p>
<p>18 And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."</p>	<p>34 And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?"</p>

<b>ZECHARIAH'S STORY</b>	<b>MARY'S STORY</b>
<p>19 And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news. 20 And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."</p>	<p>35 And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. 36 And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For with God nothing will be impossible."</p>
<p>21 And the people were waiting for Zechariah , and they wondered at his delay in the temple. 22 And when he came out, he could not speak to them, and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple; and he made signs to them and remained dumb. 23 And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 24 After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she hid herself, saying, 25 "Thus the Lord has done to me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men."</p>	<p>38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.</p>