

Sunday School Notes 24 November 2019: At last God sends a message (Luke 1: 5-25)

So Nehemiah and the people rebuilt Jerusalem. But sadly, even though the Jews had been punished by exile and had known the joy of getting their land back, many of them didn't really stay close to God. Some chose to follow the 'new gods' worshipped by the people who had come into their land while they were away in exile. Others became 'legalistic', paying more attention to obeying what they saw as religious laws than to knowing God. These "religious" people became the leaders in the temple.

So for about 400 years the people didn't get any new messages from God. They weren't listening for them; they didn't want them and God was largely neglected.

Then an amazing thing happened: God spoke!

One day, an obscure priest by the name of Zechariah saw an angel! He is described in Luke's gospel as one who tried to live as God directed. On this particular day it was his once-in-a-lifetime duty to go into the holiest part of the temple and offer prayers on behalf of the people.

This Holy of Holies was so special that no ordinary person ever went there and not even the priests could go into the area unless selected to do so. Zechariah knew what he must do – what incense to offer, what prayers to say. He understood that he would be in the presence of God there.

When he went into the Holy of Holies, the devout people prayed outside. Gradually though it dawned on them that Zechariah was taking rather long! I imagine they began to murmur and maybe even to think of calling for help. And then Zechariah came out – but he was unable to speak. All he could do was gesture!

The people worked out that he must have seen a vision. Zechariah must have confirmed it in writing, perhaps even telling them a bit about it. But once his duty was over he went home to his wife in their small town. Luke must have heard the story from someone and wrote it down for us.

While Zechariah was praying, an angel had appeared next to the altar of incense. We can understand why Zechariah experienced tremendous fear. But the angel comforted him and gave him a message, similar to ones given to Abraham and to Hannah many centuries earlier. Zechariah and Elizabeth were to have a child, a boy. At long last their prayers would be answered. Joy and gladness would overwhelm them in their old age. What is more this boy, John, would be greatly used by God to turn people around so that they could get ready to know God. God was at work!

I imagine that seeing the angel, hearing the announcement of a baby's birth and then hearing of his role for God would be a bit much for any of us. And it certainly was for Zechariah! He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He challenged the angel and asked for a sign that this would happen.

And he got one: Zechariah was struck dumb until the baby arrived nine months later. This probably also meant that news of the vision got around more quickly and may even have enabled John later to get an audience – God thinks long-term too. This affliction only disappeared when he confirmed at the child's dedication that his name was to be John, as the angel had commanded.

We know nothing of how he told Elizabeth. We know nothing more of their story. But God was putting his plan into action. This wasn't just a message from God to his people – God was preparing them for the fact that he was coming to earth to live among them so that we could see him as he really is. He was coming in deep love – so loving that he was coming to die for his world. Yet this miracle began with one man trying to do his job and two people trying to live according to God's laws.

That is all God asks of us – not perfection, not fame, not 100% exam passes. Just obedient love.

1 December: Messages to Mary and Joseph

8 December: The plan comes together! God is there for rich and poor, for ruler and worker, for male and female, for Jew and Gentile. For us!