

30 October 2022: Baby John (Luke 1)

There are lots of stories about what baby Moses and baby Samuel did when they grew up, but we are told nothing about their parents except their names. And most people won't even remember those!

Now we come to two baby boy cousins (born about 6 months apart) and here we are told a bit more about their parents. Because the births happened at about the same time, it is difficult to separate the stories so we shall mix them up a bit, just as Luke does. Luke always checked his facts and it is probable that he visited and talked to the mother of the younger buy. (The other mother was probably dead by the time Luke wrote his book.)

Luke starts with the story of the elder cousin

- We know that when he was born his Mum and Dad were quite old. Like Samuel's mother, Elizabeth was mocked in their village.
- We know that his mum and dad came from religious families and that they were God-fearing people who tried to live as God wanted them to do. (Luke 1:6)
- We know that the baby's father, Zachariah, was a priest and that when his team was on duty he would go and work in the great temple in Jerusalem.

And this is where Luke starts his story.

One time, Zachariah was chosen to do the most important duty of all; he was to enter the holiest part of the temple and to pray there for God's people. (Imagine how special Zechariah felt on that day – and how nervous he would have been. He probably washed a little more carefully than usual and made sure he was neatly dressed. After all he was going to talk to God in the Holy of Holies!) This was such a special task that nobody was ever asked to do it more than once. What is more, no-one else was ever allowed to be in that part of the temple with him. Some people say that just in case the chosen man fainted, a rope was tied around his ankle so he could be dragged out without anyone else having to go into the room.

Yet, suddenly as he was praying Zechariah became aware that he was not alone. There was someone standing next to the altar! Zechariah was terrified because he realized this must be a messenger from God, not a human being. And messengers from God didn't always bring good news; what was this man going to say to him?

The angel's first words were meant to calm him down: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah!" The fact that the angel knew who would not have calmed him down!

The angel went on to explain that God had heard his prayers for a son and that, even though Elizabeth was rather old to have a baby, she would fall pregnant and they would have a baby boy. This baby would have a special relationship with God and would link the NT events with the OT prophecies. The angel even told Zechariah to call his baby 'John'.

All the time the angel was speaking, it seems Zechariah was battling to come to grips with the fact that God had sent an angel to speak to him. He had been praying for God to bless his people and now it was happening – to him and Elizabeth and promised for the people of God – he wasn't sure that he believed this could be from God. He wanted some proof that this was really happening, something he could show others and show Elizabeth, his wife.

He had to be taught to trust God to answer his prayers. Therefore the sign the angel gave him was not very nice! He would be unable to speak until it was clear that God's will was being done! That was going to make his life more difficult, not easier!.

In fact his difficulties started as soon as he left the area. The people praying outside had been beginning to get worried about why he was in there for so long. And when he came out he couldn't tell them anything! All he could do was make signs. Imagine using sign language to say you had seen an angel! And when he finished his duty and went home to Elizabeth, he couldn't share the whole story with her. He could write things down, but we don't even know that she could read! And this dumbness lasted for over 9 months!

If we want to follow God, we must learn from this story to trust him.

Meanwhile God was showing that his plans often fit our hopes as well as his plans. Zechariah and Elizabeth had wanted a son – and God was giving them one; but at the same time God was going to work out his plans as well.