

The season of Christmas brings with it, wonderful anecdotes, especially those relating to children. I recently read this anecdote for the first time, but gather its not new.

A teacher asked her class of young children, "What would you like for Christmas?"

Every hand in the room shot up. As the teacher progressed across the classroom taking children's responses in turn, one little girl in the back row said, "I want what my Mummy wants".

"And what does your mummy want?", asked the teacher.

"She says she wants four animals for Christmas" came the reply.

The teacher asked, "Really! And which four animals would that be?"

Without batting an eyelid, little girl recited, "A mink on my back, a jaguar in the garage, a tiger in the bedroom and a donkey to pay for it all!"

When the teacher recovered, the little girl was heard saying, "My Daddy said, If you wanted animals, you should have married a zoo-keeper!"

What do you want for Christmas?

2,100 years ago, a couple, then old in years, wanted and prayed for a child all their married life. We don't know how long that was, but if you were to assume they were married according to Jewish social custom when he would have been 20, you would not be wrong to assume they they might have been praying for a child for more than 40 years. Let's find out more about this couple.

At the time when Zechariah the priest was serving in the Temple, 400 years had past since the Hebrew people had heard from God. The last prophet, Malachi's message from God to His people was a wake-up call to renew their covenant with God. God was faithful in looking after them through the long period of exile, but they were not faithful in honouring God: there was corruption in the priesthood, abuse of the disadvantaged, and the people did not honour God with their tithes. As a result, worship was ritualistic and without life. Worship was more about

performing rituals and observing traditions, than about meeting God in His Temple and honouring Him for His faithful love, and serving His will in the community.

Luke makes a special effort to inform us that, unlike many in the priesthood at that time, Zechariah and his wife Elisabeth were “both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of *the Lord God*”¹, note, not “*the Law*”.

On this day, it was Zechariah’s turn to burn incense in the inner Temple. It was once in a lifetime event for a priest. The incense was a special blend of five spices, which when burned, the smoke rose straight up from the fire, towards the heavens, for use in the Temple only, at set times; any personal use of this specially blended incense, would result in severe consequences. The priest would take burning coals from the altar of sacrifice in the Temple court, to the altar of incense inside the Temple, and there, deposit prepared incense **ON** the burning coal.

This ritual was rich in symbolism. On this occasion, the symbolism of burning incense, represented the prayers of people who are in a covenant relationship with God. This specially prepared incense, set apart the Hebrew people from other nations and tribes, **NOT** because they were chosen by God and set apart, rather they were to be special people who themselves, chose to worship Almighty God, Creator of the Heavens and the earth, in whom is life and life eternal, who also created man and woman. This is the God to whom people **chose** to pray, and the smoke from the specially prepared incense **symbolised** their prayer wafting up to God.

Thousands of years prior, David pleaded before God, “Let my prayer be set forth **AS** incense before you”².

¹ Luke 1:6

² Psalm 141:2

We must appreciate the effort Luke makes in his writing to give us details. He inform us, "the whole multitude of people were praying outside *at the hour* of incense."³

This background is important to understand what is happening and what happens next. Zechariah is alone in the most holiest place a human being can enter, and there an angel of the Lord appeared, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. Luke very politely says, "Zechariah was troubled and fear fell upon him". If Luke were writing today, he might have described Zechariah's state as follows, "Zechariah was frightened out of his wits. So frightened was he, that he stood paralysed in fear, too afraid to breathe, and so afraid as not to even move his eyes." Zechariah believed he was going to die, because the presence of the angel of God, was as good as the presence of God Himself.

The angel's first words were, very naturally, "Fear not!" Do not fear my presence. There is no reason to be afraid.

The angel's comfort is more powerful than Michael Winner's expressive counsel, "Calm down, my dear", and nowhere near as David Cameron's foot-in-mouth smirk in the House of Commons when he told Labour front-bencher Angela Eagle to "Calm down, dear!"

The Angel standing in front of Zechariah that day, wasted neither time, nor words. "Do not be afraid, for your prayer has been heard..." The man pouring special, Holy incense on burning coals, symbolising the rising of the prayers of the people in the courtyard outside, is being told, "**YOUR** prayer has been heard..." and is about to be answered.

The first lesson we learned was that prayer is Holy, because in prayer we address a Holy God. The second lesson we learn from Zechariah's life is that God hears **ALL** prayer. I find it fascinating that the angel from God referred to Zechariah's prayer in the singular. A simple calculation tells us, the number of time he would have prayed for a child, would have been in excess of 14,600, which is once a day for 40

³ Luke 1:10

years (40 x 365). But the angel says, God has heard your **prayer** (singular). What we pray for and the sincerity with which we pray, is far more important, than how many times we pray!

Jesus tells us a parable to reinforce this very point. A poor and desperate widow appealed to “a judge who did not fear God and had no respect for man”, for justice and protection from her adversary. The judge kept fobbing her off, but she kept coming back to him, pleading and begging for **the law** (not the judge) to protect her from those who were trying to take advantage over her, and finally the judge gives her justice because the widow “will be an intolerable annoyance and she will wear me out”⁴.

The key to the parable is in the first and last sentence, the bookends which hold the parable’s meaning.

The parable starts with the words, “Now Jesus was telling the disciples a parable to make the point that at all times they ought to pray and not give up and lose heart”, and the final sentence says, “When the Son of Man comes, will He find this kind of persistent faith on the earth?” The quality of prayer is defined by “persistent faith”. Do you believe, God **WILL** answer your prayer, because He is able?

God invites us into a covenant relationship, in which He reminds us, praying at all times, not giving up and not losing heart, because He is able to answer prayer.

We learn from the angel’s words that Zechariah had one prayer before God, prayed with persistent faith, but we learn from Zechariah’s response, that he had given up believing God would answer his prayer. “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years”. I don’t need to explain the second half of Zechariah’s statement, but his question is astounding!

A man appointed and anointed by God to serve Him in a coveted position in the Temple, who has fervently prayed asking God to bless them with **A** child (they are not asking for much, just one child), has probably given up, not on God, but that

⁴ Luke 18:1-8

his prayer will not be answered, because the reality of physical age made it impossible to have a child. Looking at his age and his wife's advanced years, Zechariah was convinced it was not God's intention to grant them the blessing of a child, but they enjoyed many other blessing from God.

I hear this from a good friend whom I have known for a long time: I know God is good and He can do miracles, but the practicalities of my life are such, that nobody can do anything to help me. He is right about one thing: as long as we are focussed on the realities of life and the practicalities of living, no human person can help us. We look at the evidence around us, and resign ourselves to the fact, we must live in this misery, because our condition is beyond a human being's ability to help us.

The important lesson Zechariah learned that day is a lesson we must learn, miracles, which is the natural actions of God, and practical human actions are like oil and water, they will never mix, so don't even try. We either make all possible human effort and take all practical steps to solve our own problems, or we trust God by praying at all times and not losing heart.

We don't pray to God so that He will change His mind. We pray to God so that *we* will change and accept His will, and as we change, our situation can change.

The angel said to Zechariah, "Fear Not! Your prayer has been heard and is about to be answered!" i.e. the time is now for you to get what you have fervently and faithfully prayed for, because it is now time for God to accomplish His plans.

Never, ever give up on prayer! Fear not! Your prayer is being answered!

AMEN