

This Christmas we are exploring the significance of two words "Fear not!", repeated several times in the Christmas story. Last Sunday we discovered why God, throughout human history, uses this two-word phrase, is the result of the admission made by the first human, "I heard your presence in the Garden **and I was afraid**!"

God's presence can indeed be frightening. Face-to-face with the ONE person who is perfection personified, it is natural to feel being judged, because we do not measure up to Him. We must realise, however, God is not in the business of judging people. We *imagine* God to dish-out the severest form of judgement/punishment we can conjure up in our human minds, because we have no idea, how perfect love is expressed. We *imagine*, God wants us to measure up to His standard of perfection, realise we cannot, and therefore assume we will be judged and punished when we don't measure up to Him.

To our admission of our abject failure to obey a simple instruction, of all the trees in all of creation, leave these two trees alone, because the fruit of these two trees is not yet ripe (the to eat these fruits has not come) God's response is not, "I will punish you", nor "I will leave you to the consequences". God's response is an expression of perfect love, "Do not be afraid, I am here with you now, and I will always be with you. Fear not!"

The event of Christmas, the coming of God as His Son, is the apex, the climax of God's expression of love, "Fear not! Here I am with you, now!"

When we looked at the life of Zechariah and Elisabeth last Sunday, there was one small sentence at the end of that narrative, which speaks volumes. We often gloss over small sentences and sections we consider insignificant, and miss out understanding the complete picture.

After Zechariah returns home and his wife Elisabeth conceived, Luke tells us, "for five months, she (Elisabeth) kept herself hidden, saying *This is what the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me with grace, to take away the disgrace of childlessness, imposed on me*".

Almost every translation I looked at, conveyed the same sense, *People looked down on me as a person cursed, because I cannot have a child.*

It has become our human nature to condemn and stigmatise people based on social norms **we create**. In Hebrew society at the time of Jesus' birth, to be childless was a sign of sin present. Society, not God, made the rule which said, the reason a woman is unable to have a child after marriage was because of sin, present in the life of the husband or wife, invariably the wife. In reality, Zechariah and Elisabeth were childless because in God's Sovereign time, the time for them to have a child had yet not come.

In his description, "But they had no child because Elisabeth was barren... (7)", Luke is explaining the reason for them being childless was, a gynaecological problem. Hebrew society may have looked on a couple without children as being punished by God for sin, this was not how God viewed the matter of childlessness.

I came across a translation from one of the Aramaic dialects which Jesus spoke, which reads, "And it happened after those days when Zechariah had returned home after his service in the Temple, [that] his wife Elisabeth became pregnant, and she hid herself for five months (fearing the taunts of society) saying, *This is what the Lord God did for me in the days He poured His grace upon me, as He **healed** my barrenness before all humankind (He **cured** me of my shortcoming as seen by all humanity), which*

confirms Luke's prognosis that Elisabeth's inability to have a child was indeed a gynaecological problem.

As we progress through Christmas, let's bear in mind a very important principle: anything God does, is by our standards, a miracle. Everything God does, is by our standards, nothing short of a miracle. This becomes evident and apparent as we follow the narrative of Christ's birth.

Moving on from the stigma placed by society on a couple who supposedly could not conceive and have a child, to the dishonour of an unmarried woman having a child!

Mary and Joseph were no different than thousands of other couples at the time. When he was sufficiently qualified as a carpenter, able to earn a decent living, Joseph would have expressed his desire to get married and settle down; he would have informed his father of his desire to have the young lady Mary as his wife and an engagement ceremony would have taken place, to which both families and several prominent members in the community would have been invited.

From then on, Mary stayed at her parents' home learning the skills and routines of being a wife and a mother, learning to be the perfect partner to her husband, while Joseph would busy himself to construct their home. Joseph's father would have supervised the building and construction, and it would be his decision to declare the house, as a home fit for a bride, the signal for Joseph to fetch his bride and bring her into their home.

So, you can imagine the shock Mary would have experienced when the Angel Gabriel set himself before her, whilst she was still living with her parents.

Gabriel himself is awestruck by the task given him. He is standing face-to-face with this special woman, and cannot hold back his excitement. He almost blurts out in whispered tones, his own greeting, *Peace be with you, full of grace, the Lord God is with you. Blessed are you among women.*

The only other reference I could find, where a person is referred to as receiving God's unmerited favour (grace) was Noah, *Noah found favour **and grace** in the eyes of the Lord.*¹ Mary, like Noah, was chosen by God to give birth to One, through whom a new generation who would enjoy a fresh relationship with God, not because she (like Noah) had done anything to merit being chosen, but because it pleased God to choose them.

So, on hearing Gabriel's personal greeting, Mary is really troubled and tried to discern what kind of greeting this might be. *Who is this person? Why is he saying what he is saying? What does he want from me? Why is he here? and, What will he do to me?*

You can almost imagine Gabriel snapping out from his personal feeling of being awestruck by Mary, clearing his throat to deliver God's message to this young lady.

Sensing Mary's fright, Gabriel is compelled to start his message with the words, "Fear Not!", then to say, "for you have found favour with God. You will be mother to the promised Saviour of Israel, who will be the Saviour of all humankind."

It was Gabriel's duty to convince her, that God is at work in her, to accomplish His plan of salvation. Mary's response, *How can this be, as I am unmarried?* is not to question God's ability to do the impossible. She is

¹ Genesis 6:8

not asking as Zechariah did, *How will I know God will do this?* Mary asks, *Will God do this, even though I am unmarried?*

Gabriel then informs her, cousin Elisabeth, who was ridiculed by the public as being unable to have a child, is pregnant, ***for nothing is impossible with God!*** God is an expert on miracles. Everything He does is to us, a miracle!

Joseph has a slightly different problem. Matthew tells us, *before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit²*. Joseph has been informed, not by Mary, but by someone close to her, *she has been found to be with child*. Imagine his shock. All kinds of thoughts would have swirled through his mind. Joseph might well have gone through the grief cycle, starting with shock and denial, followed by anger and anxiety, then depression and guilt (a feeling being alone and isolated) and finally a sense of detached resignation. We are told he was an honourable man who did not want Mary to be put to shame, and wanted to quietly divorce her. Matthew tells us, *as he considered these things³ all the options open to him*, an angel appeared to him in a dream saying, "Fear not! Do not be fearful of the consequences, and take Mary as your wife!"

Its almost a "*duh*" moment. You have considered all the options Joseph, except the most obvious one: take her into the home you have prepared for her, and live as husband and wife, for this is what society is expecting you to do!

God addresses each individual according to their circumstances and situation in life. To Mary He says, *Fear not! I am working in you, and through you I will accomplish my purpose of saving the human race from destruction.*

² Matthew 1:18

³ Matthew 1:20

To Joseph God says, *Don't let the fear of society rule your thoughts. You are a just and honourable man, do not be afraid, be bold to do what is right in My sight, and in the sight of society: take Mary home now, as your wife.*

In a world which has build a culture of self-satisfaction first, a world of people who think first about themselves, Mary showed a shining example of what it means to put God first in our lives: *I am ready to be mother to the Son of God, if it is God's plan. So may it be to me as you have said.*

Joseph demonstrates an uplifting example of surrender, to be a part of God's plan, when his whole being says something appears to be wrong. God speaks to each one of us today, addressing our fears and concerns. We may think we have the intelligence and the resources to handle the problems life throws at us, but we do not have God's vision of history.

At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of the Christ-child, *Emmanuel*, God is now with us! *Fear Not!*, he says to us. His parting counsel to us some thirty years later, Jesus summarises the Christmas message, *In the world you have tribulation and distress and suffering, but be strong in courage [be confident, be undaunted, be filled with joy]; I have overcome the world."* [*My conquest over death is accomplished, My victory is abiding.*]⁴

When your resources are stretched thin and you feel unable to handle the stresses and strains of life, and the demands society makes on you, *fear not; take heart! The Christ of Christmas has overcome the world, and His victory is forever!*

AMEN

⁴ John 16:33