

According to some traditions, today, Advent Sunday, is the beginning of the Church year! What a wonderful way to begin our **faith year**, celebrating the birth of a very special child.

There is something about the Christmas story, which is both familiar and not so familiar; familiar because we seem to know the outline of the story: Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, Bethlehem, Shepherds and the fields, the wise men and their gifts, but there is much of the story with which we are not so familiar: what happened before *Mary and Joseph*, and after the shepherds, and the wise men?

Our focus this year is, ***The Journeys to the Manger***. On the face of it, the Christmas narrative is full of helter-skelter, of people busy travelling from place to place. Reading the story this year, I had a deeper sense of God's hand, that all this travel was absolutely necessary and needed, in order for the right people, to be in the right place, at the right time! This is the only way God works!

The Christmas story does not begin at the manger, nor when the Angel visited Mary with **THE** news!

Matthew gives us a helpful clue, taking us back, up Jesus' family tree, generation by generation, back to the first human, Adam. Christmas was birthed in the heart of God back then, when He had to make arrangements to take back into His custody, the most valuable possession stolen from Him, that too by clever deception. To the thief who master-minded the deception and the theft, God said with utmost urgency, *The offspring of the woman whom you deceived, will strike your fatal blow.*

The generations that followed were a motley crew of imperfect men and women. Abraham was a coward who would not believe God's promise. Jacob the cheat, struggled with everybody. Joseph was an immature and arrogant teen. Moses was an impatient murderer who could not wait for God. Gideon, the cowardly idol-worshipper. Samson, a womanising

drunk; David, a power abusing adulterer; Solomon, a wise man who not very wise; Hezekiah, the reforming king who could not quite go far enough. And the list goes on, and on.

God could have chosen "*better*" people to be part of His plan, but He always chooses people with two character traits: those willing to trust Him and those willing to follow Him. Some people endure a long journey to the point when they can trust God and obey Him, others have a shorter journey. But we all journey in our relationship with God.

And finally, in that line from Adam, a very young Jewish girl, from a very small village, in a very remote corner, of a very great empire, gives birth to a Son who will deal that fatal blow to the thief who stole God's most valuable possession, you and I!

I love history because history is full of energy. It is, after all, the story of the journey of the human race. It contains a lot of human action and expresses the full range of human emotion, but we forget to commend the historian, the ones who research the facts, separate it from unsubstantiated truth, eliminates fake news and make the narrative coherent for us to understand.

This is why I love the gospel of Luke. Luke was a learned man, a physician and medical Doctor. Luke was committed to historical accuracy, and God gives him the spirit of discernment to see the hand of God in history.

We start our journey in the first chapter of Luke. He very helpfully, places a date-stamp the event: ***In the days of Herod...*** who ruled Israel from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C., the first Jewish king to sit on the throne after 580 years, but not the type of King God wanted for His people. Herod was a puppet King, a *vassal* king put there by the authority of mighty Rome, to do everything he could, to satisfy the Roman appetite for the good life. Those were dark days in Israel.

In the midst of that darkness and corruption, Luke introduces us to a simple, faithful couple, an elderly priest and his wife, who lived lives pleasing to God. They were both of the tribe of Aaron, born and raised in homes of priestly families who served the temple in Jerusalem. They had been given very special names by their parents. The boy was named by his parents, Zechariah ("*Yahweh* remembers"), and the girl was named by her parents, Elizabeth ("the oath of God"). As we unpack the story of this precious couple, we shall see how God uses the names of people to describe what He will achieve.

Their marriage was seen as a double blessing from God to their families, but soon it became evident, they could not have children. Despite the social humiliation and shame in that culture at that time, Luke describes them as spiritually beautiful, in a right relationship with God, a right relationship with one another, and a right relationship with the community.

As a male member of the tribe of Aaron, Zechariah was entitled to offer sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. The problem was, over thousands of years, the descendants of Aaron had multiplied into the thousands, they had to cast lots to decide which priest would be permitted to officiate and give an offering.

Luke picks up the story when, after a lifetime of waiting, Zechariah's lot is drawn and he enters the Temple at the "*hour of incense*" and stands at the altar in front of the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. There were two daily prayer offerings: one at dawn to start the day of worship, and the same at night, to close the day. Aromatic spices were placed on the coals of the altar, and the smoke arising from it, was a powerful and beautiful **symbol** of the prayers of Israel rising to God.

Earlier in the service, we sang Isaac Watts' great hymn *Jesus shall reign where'er the sun...* and the fourth verse, *To Him shall endless prayers be*

made, and princes throng to crown His head; His Name like incense shall arise, with every morning sacrifice.¹

This is the picture of Zechariah, alone in the temple, placing the incense on the altar, praying for the deliverance of Israel, not only the physical deliverance from the tyranny of oppression, spiritual deliverance too.

Zechariah's prayer reminds us, we are all called to pray seriously for our nation, that God would reign supreme and sovereign over all people. When the priest prayed, "a great multitude" would gather outside the temple, prostrate on their faces in the outer court, praying **with** the priest who represented them in the Holy Place, praying for the health, well-being and security of their nation, and praying prayers of intercession on behalf of the people of Israel.

On this day, while offering incense, Zechariah feels the presence of a Holy being in the altar area and a chill runs down his spine; fear would have made it difficult to breathe. z

For 400 years, God's presence was not felt nor seen among his people, no prophetic word had been spoken since Malachi some 400 years prior. Now God sends an emissary to speak on his behalf.

Three things make this encounter very special:

1. God chose the Temple, when the priests had become politicised and worship was trivialised
2. God chose the time of day when the maximum number of people were present at the Temple.
3. God chose a simple, rustic priest who lived in the hill country, not the High Priest, one of the priestly elite, nor the religious upper crust of Jerusalem. He chose a faithful, praying man.

¹ Hymn 313 in Baptist Praise and Worship. baby Isaac Watts (1674-1748) based on Psalm 72

I have had experiences of God's supernatural presence, but not the kind Zechariah had on that day, but I have known fear, and I empathise with Zechariah, the fear he felt at that time.

"Your prayers have been answered", said the Holy Angel, *"Elisabeth your wife will bear you a son and you will name him John".* The Angel proceeds to tell him who this boy will grow up to be, and how God will use him, *"to make ready for the Lord, a people prepared".*

God puts in place, the first person in the final chapter of human history, the one who will announce and introduce the offspring of the woman who will strike the fatal blow to the thief who stole God's most precious possession.

The journey of the human race, which had slowed down, now picks up pace as God starts to make ready a people prepared for Him.

But human nature has not yet been fully redeemed The seed of doubt planted back in the garden, still lurks in the back of the human mind.

"How shall I know this will happen?" In other words, *"Give me a sign; proof that I can trust your word. Look at me; I am an old man and my wife is well beyond her child-bearing years! What you are saying does not make sense to me! I cannot see it happening!"*

How true it is of us all! God speaks as clear as daylight, and we have the temerity to doubt His word!

I love the Angel's response. In my mind's eye, I imagine the Angel speaking deliberately through clenched teeth. *"I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news."* You want proof? This is proof: *"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."*

God will not stop His plans because people doubt Him, His existence and His word. If God has decided to use you, He will! He will deal with your doubts, hesitation and suspicion, and leave you deal with the consequences, but He will use you!

Imagine poor Zechariah, unable even to say **Sorry** to the Angel Gabriel. Imagine him walking home after his duty at the Temple, thinking about how he will convey to his wife, God has answered their life-long prayer and they will have a child. Imagine using dumb charades, or even Pictionary to tell your wife, *Honey, God said its time, and He will bless us with a child, a son on top of that. Let's go! Let's not waste time!*

Zechariah was rendered speechless until his son was born. God was not going to have a man interrupt and spoil His plans because all he can see is the human point of view, which is always negative - all the man mind can see is what cannot happen. God, whose every action is a miracle, will make happen whatever He thinks necessary!

The green light is switched on. New life heralds gives new energy to the journey. Once we are committed to the journey, there is no turning back. The journey will have twists and turns along the way, there will be pitfalls and dangers, and there will times to relax and take in the scenery.

In each of our journeys, we will meet and interact with other on their journey, but don't let your doubts, your suspicion and your hesitation rub off on others, nor let someone else's doubts and suspicions rub off on you.

Trust the One who has completed the journey, Jesus your Christ. He will journey by your side, right to the end², into our Father's home, prepared for us.

AMEN.

² The final hymn sung at this service was "The journey of life may be easy may be hard... but with Christ at my side , I'll do battle as I ride, against the foe who would lead me astray" (No 542 in Baptist Praise and Worship)