



Luke 1:18–20

18 Zechariah asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.’ 19 The angel said to him, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.’

Reflection

After four hundred years of silence the voice of God has been heard again by his people Israel. The last words of the Old Testament were spoken by the prophet Malachi as he was carried along by the Holy Spirit. Four hundred years earlier he closed the Old Testament with this promise from God.

5 'See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; Mal 4:5–6

And for Luke the last promise of the Old

Testament is inextricably linked with the first promise of the New, spoken by the angel Gabriel to Zechariah. Through Malachi, God promised that Elijah would return. Through Gabriel, God announces the imminent fulfilment of this promise in John the Baptist. Yesterday Gabriel spoke these words about John,

16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’

And so in the first chapter of his Gospel

Luke seamlessly joins the Old and New Testaments; because the Bible is just one book, and that book is all about Jesus Christ, in whom all the promises of God find their yes and Amen (2 Cor 1:20).

Four hundred years is a long time to wait, a long time for God to be silent. And in that time many had fallen away but there was a small remnant of Jewish people who had remained faithful. And after four hundred years of silence God chose to speak to a faithful couple from this remnant, Zechariah and Elizabeth. It's no co-incidence that Zechariah means 'the Lord remembers' and Elizabeth 'My God is an oath' – because our Lord always remembers and his promises never fail. And so God chose to speak to this faithful couple who still trusted in God's promises even though they'd

suffered one of the greatest disappointments that could befall a Jewish family: they had no children.

But even a faithful couple can have a bad day, which brings us to today's passage from Luke 1:18–20. It's the greatest day of Zechariah's life, the highpoint of his career as a priest, having been chosen by lot for the once-in-a-life-time opportunity of burning incense in the inner sanctum of the Temple. If this wasn't enough, the angel Gabriel has appeared, last time he came to earth was in Daniel's day, and he brings the first words from God in four hundred years. And if that wasn't enough, those words not only announce the coming of the Saviour of the world, but also demonstrate the lavish kindness of our wonderful God who bends to include the

prayers and petitions of ordinary individuals in his grand plans of salvation – in this case, the salvation of the world would begin with Elizabeth falling pregnant in her old age with a son who would prepare the way for this Messiah! But even a faithful couple can have a bad day, Luke 1:18–20, Zechariah processing all that the angel has said,

18 Zechariah asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.’ 19 The angel said to him, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe

my words, which will come true at their appointed time.'

Some people say that there is no humour in the Bible. But I beg to differ. This is a comic scene. Picture the scene. Zechariah is about as devout as they come. He's standing right next to the most holy place in all the earth, a place that he believes with all his heart contains the very presence of God. A warrior-messenger from God has appeared supernaturally before him; Gabriel who last spoke to the great prophet Daniel has come back to earth to speak with him. God breaks his four-hundred-year silence to speak to Zechariah! The Messiah is coming, the passionate hope and expectation of every zealous Jew will imminently be fulfilled, and thrown into the bargain (because God in his infinite mer-

cy delights in touching individual lives) will be a son for Zechariah and Elizabeth. And the all-too-human response of Zechariah's heart?

‘Would you mind giving me a little proof?’

Verse 18,

‘How can I be sure of this?’

In the greatest moment of Zechariah's religious life – a moment of unbelief. ‘Can you give me some proof? Just a little sign so I can be sure of this’. Gabriel's response speaks volumes. Zechariah began, ‘I am an old man’ to try and justify his doubt, Gabriel replies in contrast,

I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God ... and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

Zechariah should have known better. He should have remembered the wonderful births of Isaac, Samson, and Samuel in old times; sons given to faithful older couples well passed childbearing years. He should have remembered that what God has done once, he can do again, and that with him nothing is impossible. Instead, Zechariah asks Gabriel for a sign. And Gabriel gives him one,

you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their

appointed time.'

Gabriel gives Zechariah a sign so that he will remember his moment of unbelief, and learn from it; nine months of silence, watching on in wordless expectation as God fulfils his promise, his son growing in Elizabeth's womb.

Think

I love this little passage of Scripture, this comic encounter between Zechariah and Gabriel, this all-too human story of puzzlement, half-faith and dogged devotion to duty. I love it because it reminds me that God regularly works through ordinary people, doing what they normally do; people who with a mixture of half-faith and devotion live their lives ready for whatever

God has in mind. God works through ordinary people who turn their hearts towards him and offer their lives over to him. He works even and especially through their weaknesses. Luke will emphasize this to us, showing us again and again God at work through the normal avenues of life in a believing community.¹

Have you turned your heart towards God and offered your life over to him? Are you standing ready for whatever he has in mind even amidst your disappointments and struggles as did Zechariah and Elizabeth? Are you praying expectantly for him to work through the normal avenues of your life at church?

And yet as we reflect over our passage to-

¹ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (Great Britain), 2014), 6–8.

day we also need to be on guard against the sin of unbelief. We all succumb to it now and again. But failing to believe and put our trust in God's promises is a sin. Zechariah's punishment was nine months of silence. For the Israelites in the Old Testament it was forty years of wandering in the desert and even Moses was denied entrance into the Promised Land for doubting God. At the beginning of a Gospel centred on faith that God could raise Jesus from the dead Zechariah's sin is serious, and unbelief is serious for us too. Zechariah didn't believe that God could bring life from an old woman's womb; and yet the heart of the gospel message is that God will one day bring the dead back to life.

Pray

And so thank God today that the needs, hopes and fears of ordinary people are not forgotten in God's larger story. And that he involves us who give our lives over to him in his great plans, so often through the normal avenues of Christian life together. But also pray earnestly for greater faith. Pray like that impassioned father pleading with Jesus for his son in Mark chapter 9 who said,

‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’

And take great comfort in Jesus' words to him,

‘Everything is possible for one who believes.’