



## **Luke 1:16–17**

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.’

### **Reflection**

It's the year AD 60, or thereabouts, almost thirty years since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christianity is racing to the four corners of the Roman Empire. Hot persecution awaits at every turn but, as has long been said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. And the Christian church is growing. Even as the first generation begins to die out there is a great hunger amongst the second and the third to hear the good news of this Jesus of Nazareth. But the Apostles are being martyred, the eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus are growing old or have passed away. Soon there will be no-one left to speak firsthand of the life and teachings of Jesus. And so Luke, a medical doctor, scholar and the travelling companion of the Apostle Paul is commissioned by a wealthy Greek benefactor, Theophilus, to

set down on paper for all time a comprehensive eyewitness account of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. His two-volume work, Luke-Acts, was no doubt the product of several years of travel and research as he interviewed eyewitnesses, checked and cross-checked his sources and wrote his orderly account of the beginnings of Christianity.

And yet at the beginning of Luke's biography of Jesus Christ we find eighty long verses and the child is still not born. And in them, instead of a new religion that is tearing the world apart we find God at work in patterns familiar in the Old Testament: the casting of lots, a vision in the temple, a heavenly messenger, a promise, a sign and a childless couple. God is at work from within, not from outside, the institutions,

rituals, and practices of Judaism. Expectations build as the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth unfolds. The hearer is reminded of Old Testament greats: Abraham and Sarah having a child in their old age, of Rachel bearing Jacob two sons after years of being without child, and particularly of the births of Samson and Samuel. Something momentous is happening. But it is not a new thing. The new continues and fulfils the old. This story, Luke hints, is not a strange new thing, but instead takes its place within a long-standing sequence of God's plans and purposes. And the child to be born, who will be called John, will play a key role in God's fulfilment of all his promises in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup>

And so we re-join Zechariah today in the

<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke (Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching; Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1990)*, 23–26.

Holy Place in the inner sanctum of the Temple in Jerusalem. It is the greatest day of his life, chosen by God through the casting of lots to perform the priestly duty of lighting incense in the Holy Place, as his company of priests prepare the sacrifice and huge crowds of devout Jews and Gentile pray outside. Many priests were never chosen, and no priest could perform the rite more than once in their lifetime. But as if this wasn't enough for the elderly Zechariah, as that fragrant incense curled its way to the ceiling in the dimly lit room, we read last week from Luke 1:11–15,

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But

the angel said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were a childless couple in their later years who had not quite come to terms with the personal tragedy of infertility. Their devout and faithful lives were tinged with sadness. That awful word ‘barren’ hung over their household as a disgrace indicative of some secret

sin in a culture that viewed the inability to conceive as punishment from God. And yet God knew their hearts, and he loves to act in human stories such as these, and so the greatest day of Zechariah's life has just become far, far greater. Not only has God answered his righteous prayers at the altar for the redemption of Israel through the coming of God's Promised Messiah; our great and merciful God has chosen to save the world with the first step being to bring joy into their household. Their precious son will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will be set apart from birth, never taking wine or any other fermented drink but not as a priest like his father, even greater, he will be a prophet of the Lord filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born!

The angel's stunning pronouncement continues in today's passage from Luke 1:16–17,

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.'

As we'll see tomorrow this is all too much for Zechariah to take in. The greatest day of his life, a life defining religious experience, and then the fearsome appearance of an angel of the Lord; next, his heart's greatest desire, long given up on, is prom-

ised – a son! And his son will go on before the Lord, preparing the way for the promised Messiah!

With these words Luke joins the Old Testament and the New. The angel is quoting from the last two verses in the Old Testament, the last time God had spoken to his people almost 400 years ago. This long silence has now been broken in the words of the angel standing before him promising the fulfilment of God's final words in the Old Testament from Malachi 4:5–6

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;

John the Baptist, their son, will go on before Jesus in the spirit and power of Elijah, making ready a people prepared for the coming of the Saviour of the world.

## **Think & Pray**

With the time that remains today I'd love you to marvel at the way Luke weaves together the Old Testament and the New. This is the beginning of his Gospel. God is at work from within, not from outside, the institutions, rituals, and practices of Judaism fulfilling his ancient promises for the redemption of humankind. And as always God is at work in human stories, bringing about his plans and purposes by touching the lives of real people with real problems just like you and I.

And a special note to parents or prospective parents among today's listeners. As Zechariah and Elizabeth are promised the blessing of a child, a verse immediately follows for parents, verse 17,

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.'

Parents, are your hearts turned towards your children, preparing them for the coming of our Lord? In the Bible and in life children number amongst the greatest of blessings, and the highest calling of any

parent when it comes to our families is to raise our children in the Lord.

As you meditate over our passage and today's reflection please close in prayer as you feel led by the Holy Spirit.