



Luke 1:8–10

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

Reflection

I once read an article about a career fire-fighter who was nearing retirement. He'd been a fireman for almost forty years. And never once fought a fire. Never once. I almost couldn't imagine it. Imagine the training, the drills, the self-discipline, lifting weights and going for 10 kilometre runs several times a week, always on the ready; and after forty years never fighting a blaze. This particular fireman worked at a major airport so I guess we can be thankful for that.

Being a priest in first century Judea was a bit like being this fireman. They had one of the most important jobs in society, respected and revered by all. Selection was stringent, and they needed to be physically fit and able-bodied, as a large part of their job was the butchering of animals for

sacrifice. There were twenty-four divisions of priests, with as many as 1,000 priests per division, who serviced the Temple in Jerusalem, the heart and soul of the Jewish religion and culture. There could be no more important job, mediating between God and humankind in the Temple, the place where heaven and earth overlap, the very dwelling place of God on earth.

Four times a year devout Jews from right throughout the Mediterranean world would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. At each of these festivals (Passover, Pentecost, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Booths) as many as 24,000 priests would ensure the smooth operation of the Temple. This might seem like a huge number, but during Passover for example, historical records suggest that

the priests would be required to slaughter no fewer than 100,000 lambs within a period of a few hours. Other priestly duties included officiating at worship, burning incense, celebrating liturgy, accepting sacrifices and offerings, and hearing confessions.

For the rest of the year, priests would lead and teach in synagogues throughout Judea, with each division travelling to Jerusalem for two additional weeks to serve in the Temple. But here's how the priests were like our firefighter. Up to 1,000 priests would present themselves at the Temple each day. Lots would be cast, following the Old Testament tradition, a bit like drawing straws or rolling dice. Fifty-six people would be selected as God ordained the lots to fall and the remainder sent away.

Lots would be cast again to determine what roles the fifty-six would perform.

By far and away the most prestigious role was the burning of incense in the Holy Place within the Temple during one of the two daily worship services. This role fell to one person and that particular priest could only perform the duty once in their lifetime. Many priests, just like our firefighter, served their entire life and never had the honour. Which brings us to today's passage, from Luke 1:8–10,

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

Zechariah, holy and devout, and now getting on in years has travelled in from the hill country of Judea to serve with his fellow priests from the division of Abijah in the Temple. As many as one thousand of them turn up at daybreak. They take what is about to occur very seriously. They have prayed, consecrated themselves, fasted, confessed their sins before the Lord. The lots are cast to see whom God would choose to participate that day. Zechariah's heart lifts at the honour; he is one of the fifty-six. Four sets of lots are then cast to determine the participants in the daily services. The incense lot finally falls to Zechariah. He almost buckles at the knees.

Verse 8 again,

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

Zechariah is stunned. The incense lot after all these years has fallen to him. The once-in-a-lifetime honour of entering the sanctuary and burning incense to God in the Holy Place. He's speechless, his soul humbled before God at such an honour. A day that had started out like any other day going about the Lord's business has suddenly become the greatest day of his life. He joined the priesthood for this moment. How he had prayed and lived so that one

day he might be counted worthy of this honour. And yet as the years passed and Elizabeth failed to conceive his hopes had begun to fade with the disgrace that hung over his household. In ancient Judaism children were accounted a great blessing, and the opposite was true too. But today God had chosen him to perform the most privileged duty in all of Jerusalem.

The Temple in Jerusalem was huge, consisting of several courtyards in concentric rings, each next one standing in the middle of the previous, smaller and more exclusive. The outer courtyard, The Court of the Gentiles was open to all. Inside it the Court of Israel was open only to male Jews. Next the Court of Priests is where the sacrifices were performed. In the centre of the Court of Priests stood the

Holy Place where only one priest could enter, once in his lifetime, if he were fortunate enough to be chosen by God to burn incense at the table. And within the Holy Place stood the Holy of Holies containing sacred relics, and understood to house the presence of God. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and he only once a year on the holiest day of the year.

You can imagine Zechariah's emotional turmoil as the full force of what has just happened washes over him. The Living God, this day of all days, has honoured him above all in Jerusalem to be called into his presence. What can this mean? What will Elizabeth say? Will this finally lift the shame from our household and remove our disgrace? But no, this isn't about us, this is about serving my God. I cannot be-

lieve he would choose me to serve him in this way!

Think

As we reflect back over today's passage and the customs of the priesthood in Jesus' day it is hard not to compare the way they served and worshipped God with our own experience of church. Before the cross, the Temple was the meeting place between God and humankind. The punishment for sin is death, and sin can only be atoned for by blood, hence the sacrificial system and the priesthood who mediated God's forgiveness to humankind, enabling the possibility of relationship with him. But on the cross Jesus became the final, full and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of humankind. His blood washes away the

sins of all who put their faith in him. And his death brought the end of the sacrificial system and the Temple. Jesus ushered in a new age and a new and better way of relating to God. He became the new meeting place between God and humankind; we no longer encounter God through the Temple, but through Jesus. God now lives amongst his people not in the Temple but in human hearts by the power of his Holy Spirit.

Think

What we have in Jesus is so much better than what first century Jews had in the Temple, the Law and the sacrificial system; but where are our pilgrimages? Do we revere the church (which consists not of buildings but of sinners saved by grace) in the

same manner that these ancient Jews revered their temple and their priesthood? Each and every day by the power of the Holy Spirit we enjoy free access to God. The God who used to dwell exclusively in the Most Holy Place accessed only by the High Priest once a year now lives in the hearts of all believers! Yet how often are we weak at the knees at the privilege like Zechariah?

Pray

Pray today for renewed awe at the access we have to the Maker of Heaven and Earth through Jesus whose life was sacrificed and whose blood was shed for us. Pray that we would not simply be caught up in the routine of church but that we would be thrilled at the honour and privilege of be-

ing chosen by God to be part of his people through nothing we've done.