



Luke 1:26–28

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.’

Reflection

Luke began his Gospel so carefully. Most excellent Theophilus, I've completed my research, travelled far and wide, checked and cross checked my records and interviewed countless eyewitnesses to the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. It's now time for me to set it all down in an orderly historical account – Luke-Acts, the definitive eyewitness record of the beginnings of Christianity. Luke writes in historical narrative, setting down right from the beginning the historical record of the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. History, history, history Luke emphasizes in the introduction to his work and his style of writing. Which always makes me smile because as soon as he has so clearly established that this is an historical work Luke then turns to talk non-stop about angels and miracles.

It's six months since the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the Temple. He hasn't spoken a word since, by way of punishment for his unbelief, but I think also by way of blessing as he hasn't stopped beaming either; it now being very obvious to all that his wife is with child. And unable to speak, Zechariah's had plenty of time to seek God's forgiveness and think deeply over the wonderful implications of Gabriel's message. It had been more than five hundred years since Gabriel had come down to earth, yet now, just six months after appearing to Zechariah, Gabriel returns, as we read in today's passage from Luke 1:26–28,

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briel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

An historical record filled with angels! Gabriel throughout chapter 1. An unnamed angel of the Lord in chapter 2 followed by a great company of the heavenly hosts, hundreds of angels praising God together in one voice. Luke has a large place for angels as God's means of announcing, instructing, guiding and protecting his people.

In the Bible, angels are warrior-messengers from God that tend to fill two main

functions. Firstly, angels are messengers or heralds from God who announce important events. Secondly, angels minister to God's people during great trials (think of angels closing the mouths of the lions in the den in which Daniel was thrown, or angels tending to Jesus after fasting for forty days in wilderness and being tempted by Satan). And so with these two functions it's no surprise that at this time angels are much in evidence, announcing the birth of John and Jesus.

In today's passage Luke continues to follow Gabriel; only, his second visit in five hundred years could not be more different to his first. There could hardly be a greater contrast. From the Holy Place in the Temple of Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, to a small rural town in the far north.

From the holiest place on earth to the end of the earth. In John's gospel, when Nathaniel heard that Jesus came from Nazareth he couldn't help but exclaim,

46 'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?'

Even the wider region was on the nose, John 7:41,

Others said, 'He is the Messiah.'

Still others asked, 'How can the Messiah come from Galilee?'

From the most Holy Place on earth to some backwater town in the middle of nowhere. From Judea, the heartland of God's work throughout the centuries, to Galilee, a land

that was the subject of Jewish contempt because of its interracial population. From the Most Holy Place to the lowly home of Mary. And the contrast does not stop there. From Zechariah, a priest from the division of Abijah, to a poor country girl in her early teens. From unbelief in the Most Holy Place to astonishing faith in the most unlikely place. From being struck dumb for disobedience, and the removal of disgrace, to singing in praise at her pending disgrace. But more on this extraordinary contrast in the coming days.

Gabriel appears to Mary, a young rural villager, most likely in her early teens having grown up in a small town of even smaller regard. Verse 27,

27 to a virgin pledged to be married

to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

Following Deuteronomy, the Jewish marriage process in those days was a two-stage process. The initial stage of the engagement was called the betrothal. It involved a formal witnessed agreement to marry and a financial exchange of the bride price. Betrothals were binding, and from this point the woman was referred to as the man's wife. When Gabriel appeared to Mary she was pledged (or betrothed) to Joseph. But for once an angel does not begin with 'Don't be afraid' – instead, something far higher,

'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

The Greek here is filled to overflowing with the word grace. Highly favoured has the sense of receiving God's grace on the basis of his sovereign action. Mary is graced, filled with grace because the Lord is with her. Not a high priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, but an early teen country girl in the middle of nowhere is highly favoured by the living God.

Think

Let's stop here and consider both this contrast and what we've seen in the Gospel of Luke so far. Twice now through the angel Gabriel God has taken the initiative and broken into our world with grace and power. And who has he chosen to work through? An old couple and an unmarried girl. God has chosen to work through an

elderly couple beyond childbearing age and a teenage virgin from a small town in the middle of nowhere. In 2 Corinthians 4 Paul reminds us that God so often puts his treasure into jars of clay to show that his all-surpassing power is from God and not us. By no means is Paul demeaning jars of clay, normal people like Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary, you and I. Elizabeth, Zechariah and Mary may have been inconsequential in world terms but God loves those who are humble in Spirit. Even God's Son, as the King of Israel, the Promised One of all time, will be born of a humble, country maiden. And Jesus' humble origins will go on to set the tone for his whole ministry.

We as God's children should adopt a similar attitude of unpretentiousness. In our day and age we tend to expect God to

work through great people from great society blessed with every natural gifting. But God shows his greatness by working through anyone on the street who is willing to be used by him. Normal people like you and I. Because spiritual greatness is not a matter of social class, or financial means, or a masters level education; it's a function of the heart.

Pray

And so pray today for all those normal people who are quietly and assumedly doing great things for the kingdom of God. Pray for missionaries the world over, so often normal people, who've left normal lives to become heroes of our faith. Pray for the mums and Scripture teachers and friendly neighbours who've led more people to

Jesus than name preachers. Finally, pray for a humble faith like that of Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary; and a life open and willing to be used by God.