

Texts: Luke 1: 57-79

Sunday 15th December 2019

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Over the first two weeks of Advent we've taken the time to dig into the early chapters of the Christmas story as we find it in Luke, with a focus on Zechariah and Elizabeth, then Mary and Joseph, and we've seen within the story the invitation God issued to them and to us. In both those divine encounters, the invitation from God came privately and it came via the angel Gabriel.

But in our reading today, this final portion of the Christmas story before the birth of Jesus, we read that 'Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied' (Luke 1:67), and the song that follows...

is the first recorded prophecy, given by God via human messenger, for 400 years. The last prophet in the Old Testament was a man called Malachi, and then the next words of prophecy don't come until John is born. **That's 400 years of silence**, 400 years of wondering: where are you God? Are you there? Do you still care?

Silence is a hard reality. I came across some words from a former colleague of mine this week, **she posted them online**:
“Silence is unnerving. Believe me, I've been there. How do we wait? What do we say? When will this vortex of deafening quiet END?! Perplexed and frustrated, angry and irritated, we could easily shake our fists at this silent [God]. **We itch to be doing** something, to be making progress, to in some way be climbing our way out of this darkness.”

(Hannah Montgomery, 11th December 2019,

<http://24-7scotland.com/silence-is-not-absence>)

Silence is a hard reality, and God's people had lived with it for 400 years. I wonder if any of us feel like God is silent in our lives just now, and if so, I wonder how that makes you feel? **Hannah continues her story:**

“This time last year it was a cold, grey day and I sat across from my [counsellor], grappling with my understanding of God. Winter was hard for me last year, and I wanted answers. Wise, insightful, and extremely patient...she looked me in the face and gently admonished me. ***‘Do not confuse silence with absence. He is still here.’*** That sentence has reverberated around my brain for the last year. Silence and absence, two very different things... Not inevitable bedfellows after all, but two distinct entities, in which God occupies the former and not the latter.”

‘Do not confuse silence with absence. He is still here.’ It is a truth that God was going to prove very powerfully in the Christmas story and in our reading today, for today we receive another invitation from God, an invitation to be real about our doubts and questions, and in the midst of our wrestling to know the God of the Christmas story and how knowing this God can change our lives. So, who is this God? If He be silent, but not absent, what is He like?

As you read our passage today the dominant theme is of God’s faithfulness, particularly in Zechariah’s powerful song. It begins with these words: ‘Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.’ (v68) So, this God who is silent but present, who is faithful, He is the Lord, the God of Israel.

This means that He is not just any god, nor a god of our making or choosing – He is the Lord, the God of Israel.

That can be difficult to hear in our culture today, because we like choice, we like to have a choice and for other people to have a choice. But the contention of Scripture, the claim of Christmas, is that the God of all, reveals Himself in the wonder of Christmas, in that particular story.

So, if we want to find God amid the silence, then it's to the Lord, the God of Israel, the God as revealed in Old and New Testaments that we must turn. To turn elsewhere, to look in other places for the God who feels silent but is still present, well those other places are not the way to find Him, for He is the Lord, the God of Israel, and it is to His Word that we must turn.

Zechariah's prophecy reveals that this God, the Lord, the God of Israel, has 'come to His people' – He is not a distant God, He is not uncaring, but He is, as we read in other portions of the Christmas story, He is Immanuel, God with us, God beside us, God so close that He is nearer than the air we breathe.

And this God has come to redeem His people. Now, redeem and redemption are not words we use in everyday conversation, but they are tied in to what God promised, to what God promised of the Messiah, that coming King who would set the world aright. Of this coming King, this Messiah, the prophet Isaiah foretold: 'The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me...to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners...' (Isa. 61:1)

These very themes are picked up by Zechariah, who under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, again prophesies that someone will come who will bring freedom, rescue and light for those who are held captive and live in darkness. What this captivity and darkness entail is described later in Zechariah's song, in verses 77-79 where we see that this setting free, this salvation, comes about by dealing with our greatest problems, **problems that we cannot solve on our own: the problem of sin (v77), the problem of darkness – in ourselves and in our world – (v79), and the problem of death.**

So, the claim of the Christmas story is that someone will come who will bring forgiveness of sin, who will bring light to darkness, who will bring freedom from death – all because God is faithful, He has not forgotten us,...

He comes close. He may seem silent but He is not absent – He sees us as we truly are and He knows the great need we have of His intervention.

For who of us here, does not feel or know the effects of sin, and of darkness, and of death? Loved ones lost, broken relationships, circumstances that are beyond imagination, and a darkness within each of us that we struggle over daily. Friends, we all need redemption, and in faithfulness God draws close, ready to offer the very thing we cannot achieve for ourselves: redemption, forgiveness, freedom, light, hope.

He offers this to you and I today, He offers this because He is also the God of 'mercy'. In Zechariah's prophecy, the Lord acts in 'mercy' both in verse 72 and 78, so mercy is

the motivation behind God's faithfulness. Now, the mercy of God is so much more than the tepid dictionary definition, it is so much more than pity or even compassion.

Because in the Old Testament, the word frequently used for 'mercy' is 'hesed' – and hesed speaks of the loyal, gracious, steadfast love of God. It is a love of more than just words, but of action. It is a love that keeps on loving even in the face of unfaithfulness.

And so, God comes, He comes in faithfulness, in hesed love and He does so 'to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham' (Lk. 1:72-73). These words of Zechariah remind us that God acts at Christmas to fulfil promises made to Abraham maybe 2000 years

before the coming of Jesus. What was it that God said to Abraham? Well over the summer **we read in Genesis 12 these words:**

“The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

**‘I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;**

**I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing...**

and *all peoples on earth*

***will be blessed through you.’”* (Gen. 12:1-3)**

Two thousand years have passed since these words were first said, but God does not forget one promise that He makes, and so God comes, in the Christmas story,

motivated by His tender mercy, His hesed love; God comes close, bringing redemption, bringing freedom, forgiveness and light to His people who wait amidst the darkness and silence. And amidst the darkness and the silence and the darkness, light now begins to dawn that very first Advent, for God comes to fulfil promises of blessing for the whole world.

This blessing is described by Zechariah as being guided 'into the path of peace' (Lk. 1:79). The word 'peace' here is not merely freedom from trouble, or a quiet life; it is rather all that makes for a person's highest good, it is every kind of strengthening and encouraging and provision that we might need. But it is described as a path, a journey, a process, which begins with forgiveness, and with light in our darkness, but which will one day lead us out of the shadow of death,...

and into all the fullness of the kingdom of God, the God who is faithful, who is faithful in hesed love, who brings redemption, who draws close, who speaks into the silence, into our doubts and our questions, through the Christmas story.

Friends, where do you need to know this God? Where do you need to know His faithfulness this Christmas time? Where do you need Him to draw close in hesed love? Where do you need His forgiveness, His light, His hope, His peace? The claim of the Christmas story is that this is who God is, and He issues His invitation to show you His faithfulness, His hesed love, His nearness once more, maybe especially in the times when we seems silent, because He though He may be silent, He is not absent.

Now, we've focused predominantly so far on Zechariah's song of praise, **but prior to that there is the incident where John is born and named.** It is the kind of incident that happens again and again in the early chapters of Luke – God will show His faithfulness and then we see the people's response. God comes to Zechariah and Elizabeth, He comes to Mary, and each faces a choice of how to respond to the faithfulness of God.

Two weeks ago, we saw the difference in response between Zechariah and Elizabeth, and this week we reach the birth of John, and the question is now, how will this couple respond this time to the faithfulness of God?

Well thankfully, Zechariah learns his lesson, he has grown in humility, he has grown in faith, and so when the time

comes to name the child, the wider family assume the child should be named after Zechariah, for that was the custom, to name after a parent, grandparent or relative.

As we might expect of her, Elizabeth speaks up – ‘No! He is to be called John.’ Likely, Zechariah has communicated this to Elizabeth using a writing tablet of clay or some form.

Understandably then, the wider family are uncertain about this decision, for it breaks with custom, and so they ask Zechariah. But he confirms the decision, he is faithful to God, and his tongue is set free once more, leading us into that song we’ve just thought about.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had received the faithfulness of God, and they respond with faithfulness to Him. It would have been a costly response – breaking with tradition,

disappointing people, appearing odd, maybe overly religious or even arrogant. But they understood that they were part of a bigger story now, that they had been called into the story of God's faithfulness to this world, and that as such, they were to show faithfulness to Him above all else.

There are times when God seems silent and then there are times when it seems God is tapping us on the shoulder and inviting us into one thing after another. **So, where might God be inviting you this Christmas to show faithfulness to Him? If we call ourselves Christian, if we call ourselves members of this congregation, then part of claiming that status is claiming that we are actually part of God's story today, part of God's faithfulness to this world today, and as such we are then all invited to respond – individually and collectively...**

So, where might God be inviting you, inviting us, to show faithfulness to Him this Christmas?

Based on our passage, I've noted down a few questions that came to mind for me so as to prompt some reflection upon this:

- **Firstly, Elizabeth said, 'No! He is to be called John.'** Zechariah and Elizabeth broke with tradition to be faithful to God. (Lk. 1:61) What traditions, customs, tastes, family expectations are we holding onto that God is inviting us to let go of? Part of God's redemption is to give us the right priorities and to show faithfulness to Him through adopting these.
- **Secondly, Zechariah's song speaks of God** enabling us 'to serve Him without fear...' (Lk. 1:74) Where do we fear people's reactions? Maybe in sharing our faith,

maybe in inviting someone to church, or even how people will react to an idea or a change or a request we make. Part of God's redemption is to set us free from fear, but to set us free to serve Him, because part of God's redemption is also to invite us into His story, to play our part, to give of ourselves in bringing blessing to this world. So, where is God inviting you to faithfully serve Him without fear?

- **Lastly, Zechariah's song speaks of God** enabling us 'to serve Him...in holiness and righteousness'. (Lk. 1:75) Where are we compromising the standards God has set for us? What habits, temptations, patterns of sin are we being invited to lay down in faithfulness to God? Part of God's redemption is setting us free from these so that we might faithfully walk in His ways and know the better things He has for us.

Friends, I realise I've thrown a lot of questions at you this morning, but it's questions that jump off the page for me, questions for you and for me to engage with. If it helps, get a copy of today's sermon, ask for a copy of it on CD, or download it off the website. But please, friends, engage with the questions that arise from this passage because **once again, God issues His invitation this Christmas.** In the times of silence, God issues an invitation to know His faithfulness, His hewed love, His nearness once more, that you might know His forgiveness, His light, His hope, His peace.

But He also issues an invitation to respond in faithfulness to His faithfulness. Because the Christmas story truly reveals that God is not absent, He is still there, He is still here. For God is Immanuel, God with us. He is faithful...

He is full of hesed love for you and for me, such that He sent His Son, to be born as a babe and to die on a cross. May we know this God this Advent season and respond to Him in faithfulness.

May it be so, let us pray.