

Freedom in Christ

DO NOT BE AFRAID

It's the most common command in the Bible "Do not be afraid!" But, right now, as we look at the state of the world many people, perhaps many of us, are afraid. Many fear what might happen in the future, many are fearing that they may lose their jobs – some already have. Many fear that they won't have enough money to survive – now and when pension time comes around. Many people live in fear because of their health or that their health will fail. Many fear being left alone, or being alone or being lonely. Many of us fear losing our freedom – to get about, to make choices, to be in control. Many fear death, and yet the most common command in the Bible is "Do not be afraid!"

In the stories that we read at this time of Christmas we find the same words coming through: "Do not be afraid!" Luke begins his account of the story, not with Jesus himself, but with Zechariah and this account is gripping in its humanness. Zechariah was a priest who was a devout Jew; he performed his duties with great devotion to God. He would come to the Temple when it was the turn of his division to perform the regular Temple liturgy. Afterwards he would return home to the Judean hills and his role of teacher and leader in the local community.

As Luke records, he and Elisabeth were childless and this was a great burden to a devout, God fearing couple. In a culture where children were considered to be a sign of God's blessing, childlessness had difficult implications. In fact, childless women were mocked. But by the time we meet Zechariah and Elisabeth they are well past childbearing age. This is a very human story – an older couple living a devout life. No doubt both Zechariah and Elisabeth had – probably in the past by the time we meet them – prayed that God would bless them with a child. But it had not happened. Perhaps because we know the end of the story, and perhaps

because we live in a different age and culture, we probably don't look at the issue of childlessness the way they did.

We must be careful not to make the same mistake – that is – to look at things in our lives that happen, or don't happen as evidence of either sin, or the presence or absence of God with us. Some of us know what disappointment is like. Some of us know what it feels like when it appears that God has abandoned us. Perhaps that is our experience now at this moment. If these two older, devout people can teach us something about this kind of experience in life, perhaps it's that they didn't succumb to bitterness. When they would have wrestled most with what God was, or was not doing, they could very easily have allowed bitterness to take its hold.

Hard times are not always self – explanatory and we cannot always see or understand what God is doing, but we can, as Zechariah and Elisabeth must have done, learn to rely on God. There are times in this life, especially when circumstances are difficult, that we can feel God has forgotten us. Perhaps that was true for Zechariah and Elisabeth, so when an angel appears to Zechariah it is the last thing on Zechariah's mind and the last thing he is expecting. And the first thing the angel says is “ Do not be afraid!”

“In the time of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elisabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children because Elisabeth was barren; and they were both well on in years. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife

Elisabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John.” Luke 1 v 5-13.

Perhaps in saying: “Do not be afraid”, the angel is saying – “Zechariah, God has not forgotten you and he has not abandoned you”. And then he tells Zechariah: “your prayer has been heard!” This begs the question – whose prayer is being answered? Presumably Zechariah and Elisabeth had stopped praying for a child now that they are well on in years. And the text tells us that while Zechariah was inside the Temple burning incense, the people were outside praying. What were they praying for? Well the most likely answer is that they were praying for the deliverance of Israel from her enemies. The answer is that God in his grace and mercy was answering both prayers – Zechariah’s and Elisabeth’s and the prayer of the people. John the Baptist was to be the messenger for the Saviour who was to come and who would deliver his people. Neither Zechariah and Elisabeth, nor God’s people had been forgotten or abandoned. God was at work where they could not see, in ways that would take them by surprise and when they least expected it.

Answers to prayer often come at times when we are least expecting and in ways that we had never imagined. And for Zechariah and Elisabeth the joy of a son later than they would have hoped, was probably greater than it otherwise would have been.

Friends, it is possible that trust and dependence on God can lead to fulfilment in ways we could not even have considered otherwise. Sometimes a roadblock is not a dead end, but a fresh turn in the road. Here again we see that God is quite capable of timing that is simply beyond our understanding. And so he says: “Do not be afraid!”

When the angel Gabriel goes to Mary to tell her of the baby she will bear, he says the same words: “Do not be afraid!” But Mary had much to be afraid of didn’t she? Her question to Gabriel: “How can this be since I am a virgin?” perhaps reveals what was going on in her mind. What other questions went through her mind? How many times did the angels words go through her mind during her pregnancy?

I want to ask the ladies a question! If you had to endure a pregnancy like Mary did, coming in the way it did, trying to explain it to family and friends while trying to honour your, yet to be, husband - and if you had to give birth in a borrowed, make shift home, with no proper bed or equipment or medical staff to help you, and when your baby was born, place him in the only thing available as a cot, a feeding trough for the animals, do you think you might be afraid?

Mary was being asked to bear a child as a virgin without being married and in making the response she does, she is likely to become the object of much doubt and ridicule. But even in these most challenging circumstances she chooses to let God work through her as he will, because she knows that she has “found favour” with God – i.e. he has poured out his grace on her, which means that God is with her – whatever happens.

Matthew records that the same words were spoken to Joseph: “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” (1v 20) Joseph – staring in the face of a scandal. Joseph – staring down the barrel of a shattered reputation. Mathew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man who would do the right thing, so he would quietly divorce Mary so as not to disgrace her and not heap ridicule on himself. But the angel tells him not to be afraid! For Joseph this is really not how things should be! This is not the way to be a husband, and certainly not the way to be a father. He feels the weight and responsibility of being the head of the family. Joseph is suddenly having his future plans shattered by a situation that seems way beyond his control, and Joseph has to decide how he is going to respond to his dilemma. When Joseph is able to see things from a different perspective, and see that God is at work in the mess, he is able to fully play his part in the story that is unfolding. God was powerfully at work and he need not be afraid.

This Christmas story shows that God is the God of surprise. He does not always work in the way we think he will or how we want him to, and very often when he does surprise us it only seems to make our circumstances a whole lot more difficult. But, whenever and wherever and however God is at work, he promises to be with us. He bestows his grace and favour on ordinary people. We do not need to have an inferiority complex and wonder why God has abandoned us at

the most difficult or troublesome times in life, because he has promised to be with us – indeed that is the very meaning of his name and the very reason he came. He will take whatever limitations we bring to him and meet us where we are.

And it is not possible that the God who risked so much to give us his Son, who managed to arrange such difficult circumstances for his birth and yet bring about something so beautiful, so powerful and so extraordinary, Is it not possible that this God who promised to be with us and do life with us and meet us in the mess.... and who said “Do not be afraid”... Is it not possible that whatever your circumstances, and in whatever your fear, that he could be at work in you and through you to bring about something beautiful, powerful and quite extraordinary? And is it possible that he would speak these words to you today: “Do not be afraid!” Oh.... I think so!!

Because he is the God who longs for you to live in the freedom that this little baby, wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger would go on to win for people just like you! Amen.