
KNAPHILL BAPTIST CHURCH

Bible Reading Notes December 2016



GOOD NEWS FOR ALL

[Looking at the Christmas Story in
Luke 1:1-2:40]

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GOOD NEWS FOR ALL

[Looking at the Christmas Story in Luke]

An ocean liner sailing for Australia late in December crossed the international date line during the night of December 24th. Next morning was December 26th. The passengers missed the day on which Christmas is celebrated, but they did not miss the celebrations for all that. Today millions of people are missing Christmas in another way. Everyone is so busy. We are often literally busy with the demands of jobs, families and commitments but we can also be busy in our minds giving ourselves little or no space to turn off our phones and devices and unwind mentally. On top of all this there is Christmas. You may be so busy with shopping, packing presents, or making other preparations that you will either lose sight of what Christmas is really all about, or even be too tired to enjoy Christmas when it comes and will miss entirely the true purpose of Christmas. Why not take a little time each day to sit quietly, open your Bible, and with the aid of these notes think again about those wonderful events surrounding that first Christmas and to reflect deeply about their meaning.

To get the best use out of these Bible Readings the suggestion is to set aside sufficient time each day to read the short passage for the day, and then the notes, and then to prayerfully ponder the key points and apply them to your own life and situation, and finally to use them as a springboard to intercede for others. Personal devotion is not merely an intellectual exercise. Certainly God gave us minds and expects us to use them, but above everything else we need to allow the Holy Spirit to minister to us Spirit to spirit so to speak. If that is to happen then we need to allow quality time for our daily devotions, not rush through them. We do not necessarily have to devote a lengthy time to them, but it does need to be quality time. To do this we need to firstly quieten our minds, to be still and know that he is God (Psalm 46:10). We need to deliberately un-busy our minds from the stresses and strains of life, put the Christmas preparations to one side and like Mary just sit at the feet of Jesus and learn from him (Luke 10:38-42).

CHRISTIAN CERTAINTY

Luke 1:1-4

Luke addresses his Gospel to '*Theophilus*' [v.3] which means 'lover of God' - probably a pseudonym for a prominent Roman citizen who was a God-fearer, a seeker, who did not want his real name to be known. He was not yet a Christian, although clearly very much drawn to Christ. He wanted to be really convinced before he was willing to 'come out' for Jesus! Theophilus was probably quite rich and had sponsored Luke to write this Gospel. Luke would have welcomed this because sponsorship meant that copies of the written record could be made and circulated and therefore lots of people (not just Theophilus) could read the Gospel.

Luke wrote the Gospel so that Theophilus (and others) '*may know the certainty of the things you have been taught*' [v.4]. Theophilus was familiar with the Good News - Luke tells us '*many*' had written before him [v.1]. Mark would have been one of the many because his Gospel is recognised as the earliest account we have. Mark's Gospel was, in reality, Peter's Gospel because although Mark's Gospel bears his name, he was really acting as Peter's amanuensis or secretary. In the same way Luke was not himself an eyewitness, but he had consulted others who were [v.2]. These eyewitnesses were not just any eyewitnesses but '*ministers of the word*' [v.2 *lit.*] i.e. those who preached the Gospel, those prominent in the work of Christ since the beginning. Moreover they were not just preachers of the word but '*servants of the word*' [v.2 NIV] i.e. not so much academic historians as those who knew and lived by the word they preached.

Theophilus chose Luke to research and write up the evidence because Luke was a medical man used to examining things in fine detail. Luke tells us here that he *has 'carefully investigated everything from the beginning'* [v.3]. His conclusion? Everything claimed by Christians about Jesus is true! Luke himself is utterly convinced, and he wants Theophilus (and others like him) to be equally convinced as well! How can we be convinced? Luke's conviction is that the evidence speaks for itself. Read the Gospel with an open mind, and you can come to no conclusion other than that Jesus is who he claimed to be; that he died and rose again and has power to transform and empower us, and claims our total allegiance.

Pray for yourself and for others that you and they may be utterly convinced about the truth of Jesus written in this Gospel account.

BLESSED BY GOD ... BUT

Luke 1:5-7

Luke dates his narrative from the reign of Herod the Great (37-4 BC). What he describes comes somewhere near the end of that reign. He tells us of Zechariah [v.5], a priest from the country, who took his turn in ministering in the Temple. There were many priests, but only one Temple, so they served on a roster [1 Chronicles 24:1-6]. The priests were divided into twenty-four divisions of which that of Abijah was the eighth [1 Chronicles 24:10]. Each division was on duty twice a year, for a week on each occasion. There were numerous priests in each division, and not enough sacred duties for them all, so for Zechariah to be chosen to serve was a great honour. Zechariah was also married to Elizabeth, a priest's daughter [v.5]. A priest was required to marry an Israelite virgin [Leviticus 21:14], but not necessarily one of a priestly family. To have a wife of priestly stock was a special blessing for a priest. The piety of this couple is brought out with the adjectives 'upright' and 'blameless' [v.6]. This means, of course, that they served God faithfully, not that they were sinless. In every way they were blessed by God ... *'But they had no children ... Elizabeth was barren and they were both well on in years'* [v.7].

For Zechariah and Elizabeth, their childless state was hard for them to understand. In those days people believed that God would bless his faithful servants by giving them children. Zechariah and Elizabeth had devoted their lives to the Lord ... and yet they felt unfulfilled. The thing they desired most - a child - had not been given to them. Moreover, they had settled for the fact that they would have to live with the disappointment. Luke mentions their age [v.7], probably to make clear that they expected no change in their situation. Zechariah may have been very old, for there was no retiring age for priests. One suspects that, for all their devotion, they were a couple who rarely smiled and who carried a sense of sadness around with them which they conveyed to others?

But God is never a disappointment! As we shall see God had not finished with Zechariah and Elizabeth. Moreover, God also always has our best interests at heart [see Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 8:28]. So if we feel *'blessed by God... but'* ... let us not give up too soon!

Pray that despite life's disappointments, we may give thanks for the blessings God has bestowed upon us.

FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH

Luke 2:39,40

Luke rounds off this part of his narrative with the return of Joseph and Mary to Nazareth - *'When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth'* [v.39]. Luke makes no reference to the visit of the Magi [Matthew 2:1-12] nor the flight into Egypt [see Matthew 2:13-15]. He simply speaks of the completion of the Law's requirements after which they returned into Galilee. We do not know if Luke did not know of these events, or if he knew of them but chose not to include them in his version of the story? What we do know is that Luke did not know everything about Jesus that can be known. *'God has yet more light and truth, to break forth from his Word'* says the old hymn (reflecting the words of John Robinson, leader of the Pilgrim Fathers, in a sermon as they set sail for America in 1620). The Lord speaks through the prophet Isaiah, *'Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.'* [Isaiah 43:18,19]. As we stand on the threshold of a new year we must resolve to cultivate that openness to God that welcomes fresh insight and new understanding.

Jesus' childhood is described briefly in terms of development: there was growth, physical, mental and spiritual - *'And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon him'* [v.40]. This reminds us of those wonderful words of John, concerning Jesus, with which he begins his Gospel - *'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth ... From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another (literally, 'grace to replace grace')'* [John 1:14,16]. As we stand on the threshold of a new year we must rejoice in the goodness of God ... and rely upon that continual supply of grace that will never let us down. As fast as we use up God's grace there is always more grace there to meet our every need!

Pray that God will lead us as individuals and as a church into those new things he has for us. Pray that those spiritually dry in our community and around us may experience the refreshing springs of the living water of Jesus welling up to eternal life [John 4:14].

WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?

Luke 2:36-38

To Simeon's prophecy Luke adds the thanksgiving of a prophetess named Anna, yet another representative of organized religion, - *'There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher ...' [v.36]*. The name *'Anna'* means *'grace'*, and it is God's grace that enables us to forsake religion for the reality of knowing God in Christ in a significant way [see *Ephesians 2:8-10*]. While many religious people failed to accept Jesus (because all they had was religion) [see *John 1:10,11*], this early recognition (both from Simeon and Anna) came from those who faithfully observed the requirements of their religion.

Nothing more is known of Anna than we read here. There had been no *'Prophet'* for hundreds of years, so it is noteworthy that God had raised up this Prophetess [v.36]. The Talmud recognized seven prophetesses only, so this was no ordinary distinction. Anna had been married for seven years and remained a widow [v.36b,37a]. It is not clear whether she was eighty-four years old or whether she had been a widow for that length of time. If the latter she would have been a very old lady indeed. *'Prophecy'* is more *'forth telling'* than *'fore-telling'*. How wonderful to know that God was still speaking through Anna even at her great age!

Luke tells us that Anna *'never left the Temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying' [v.37]*. Anna may have had quarters within the Temple precincts but more probably this means she was constantly at worship - *'she never missed a service'* (Morris). Fasting and prayer, practices which could be performed by individuals quite apart from corporate worship, point to a disciplined life. How important is worship and prayer to us?

Luke also tells us that Anna came up to Joseph and Mary and thanked God, presumably for sending his Messiah - *'she gave thanks to God and spoke (prophetically?) about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem' [v.38]*. Luke gives no indication of the content of Anna's thanksgiving, nor her prophetic comments other than that it concerned *'the redemption of Jerusalem'* which is another way of referring to the deliverance to be effected by the Messiah. And its all by grace - God's unmerited favour to sinners like us.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.

ENTERING THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD

Luke 1:8-10

There were many priests and not enough sacred duties for them all, so lots were cast to see who would perform each function. The offering of incense was regarded as a great privilege [v.9]. A priest could not offer incense more than once in his entire lifetime, and some priests never did receive the privilege. So the time when Zechariah offered the incense was the most important moment in his whole life. Luke does not say whether he offered at the morning or evening sacrifice. In either case he would go into the holy place with other priests, but they would retire, leaving him alone. When the signal was given he would offer the incense. The other worshippers waited outside in the outer court until the priest discharged this duty [v.10]. On the Day of Atonement the priest who went into the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifice had a rope tied round his leg in case he died (presumably from a heart attack?) whilst in there (then they could pull him out without daring to enter themselves).

How different all this is for us as Christians. The Writer to the Hebrews tells us that because of all that Jesus has done for us, we can come boldly and with confidence, into the Lord's presence - *'Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God ... Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need' [Hebrews 4:14-16 see also Hebrews 10:19-22a]*.

And yet it would be wrong to say that we have nothing to learn from Zechariah here about how to come into the presence of the Lord. The freedom we have in Christ to come boldly into God's presence has sadly meant that some treat God as *'the all-matey rather than the Almighty'*. The Writer to the Hebrews also tells us that *'it is an awesome thing to fall into the hands of the living God' [Hebrews 10:31]*. As we have seen in our recent study of Acts chapter two that everyone in the Church in Jerusalem was *'filled with awe'* in the presence of God in the midst of them [Acts 2:43]. We, ourselves, need to live in the paradox of being free to come into the presence of the Lord and yet coming *'taking our shoes from our feet' [see Exodus 3:5]*, so to speak, conscious that when we come into the presence of the Lord we are on holy ground.

Pray that we will know that awe and reverence in our approach to God whilst at the same rejoice in the freedom and accessibility to God that Jesus made possible for us.

JOY AND DELIGHT

Luke 1:11-17

Whilst Zechariah was praying in the inner sanctuary (and the people were praying) *'an angel of the Lord appeared to him'* [v.11]. Luke gives us no description of the angel. He simply tells us that the heavenly visitor stood on *'the right side of the altar of incense'* [v.11]. The angel first reassured Zechariah - *'Do not be afraid'* and then he went on, *'your prayer is heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son'* [v.13]. The tense seems to indicate a specific prayer, rather than habitual prayer but it would be wrong to assume that Zechariah was actually praying for the gift of a child whilst in prayer in the inner sanctuary. This would have been a misuse of his priestly office. It is more likely that he prayed for the redemption of Israel but God in his goodness also answered the deeper prayer of Zechariah's heart. This is born out by the fact that Zechariah and Elizabeth were to have not only a child but a son, and that the child's name was to be *'John'* [v.13], i.e. *'The Lord is gracious'*.

In a poetic passage the angel speaks first of the joy that would come to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and many others, at the birth of the child, and then of the destiny the boy would fulfil. That Zechariah and Elizabeth would have *'joy and delight'* [v.14] was only to be expected. But this child would be *'great in the sight the Lord'* [v.15], so that others would be happy as well. He would abstain from *'wine or strong drink'*, and rather be *'filled with the Holy Spirit'* [v.15, see also *Ephesians 5:18*]. Like the Prophet Elijah, he would so minister in the power of God that through him many would come *'back to the Lord'* [v.16]. Supremely, however, despite the power of his own ministry, he was to be no more than a forerunner, one who would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, one who would *'make ready a people prepared for the Lord'* [v.17].

God always has our best interests at heart. It is true that *'in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose'* [Romans 8:28]. God, however, never just wants to bless us but (as with Zechariah and Elizabeth and the birth of their son John) also to use us to further his purposes, to bring glory to his name and blessing to others. This is where the real *'joy and delight'* comes from!

Pray that we may know the joy and utter delight in being an instrument that God uses to bless others and bring glory to his name.

NUNC DIMITTIS

Luke 2:27b-35

This little song is known by its opening words in Latin, *Nunc Dimittis*. Luke tells us *'When his parents brought in the child Jesus ... Simeon took him in his arms and praised God'* [v.27,28]. Simeon is ready to die peacefully now that he has seen God's salvation, i.e. the Baby through whom God would in time bring salvation - *'Now release your servant peacefully, Master, in accordance with your word'* [v.29 lit]. Simeon's language is of the freeing of a slave and he clearly sees death as a release from a long task. If he was an old man, Simeon may have been waiting for the coming of God's Messiah, the Christ, for many, many years. Paul could say towards the end of his life, *'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the Faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that Day - and not only me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing'* [2 Timothy 4:7,8]. Do we face death as positively, confidently, as Simeon and Paul?

Simeon goes on to show that this salvation is not for any one nation but for all - *'my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'* [v.30-32]. The wonderful truth of the Gospel is *'whosoever will may come'* [see John 3:16,17].

Luke goes on to say that this salvation will not be without great cost! Joseph and Mary *'marvelled'* [v.33] that Simeon knew all this about Jesus ... but Simeon had not finished. Salvation will be purchased at heavy cost and Simeon somberly records this - *'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many ... to be a sign ... spoken against ... the thoughts of many hearts revealed ... a sword will pierce you own soul too'* [v.35]. Amazingly the Gospel will actually divide people - some will accept and other reject the Good News, some will be raised up and others brought down by it! Men and women will actually speak against the very Gospel that could save them ... and everything centres in the Cross! The sword that will pierce Mary's soul is the death of Jesus. His suffering will not leave her untouched ... nor us! Simeon's final words tell us that we cannot ultimately be neutral. When we see Christ on the Cross, our reaction shows on which side we stand! On which side *do* you stand?

Pray that you will be enabled to take your stand for Jesus today.

SENSITIVE TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

Luke 2:25-27a

We think of Simeon as old, although there is no evidence apart from his cheerful readiness to die to support this [v.26,29]. Simeon was a common name and we really know nothing about him, despite attempts to identify him as a priest or an important citizen. He was significant, nonetheless. Simeon was an upright man - Luke tells us he was '*righteous and devout*' [v.25a]. The word '*Righteous*' here suggests that Simeon behaved well towards people, whilst the word '*devout*' literally means 'careful about religious duties'. Luke also tells us that Simeon was a very positive man, blessed with the ability to constantly look up. He tells us that Simeon was '*waiting for the consolation of Israel*' [v.25b] which is just another way of saying that he was waiting for the promised Messiah. The Jews expected this to be preceded by a time of great suffering, so that when Messiah did eventually come he would certainly bring comfort. Here then are three things that should surely characterise every Christian - doing the right thing by others, maintaining our devotional life and relationship with God, inspiring others by always looking to the Lord!

Luke also tells us what Simeon's secret was! He tells us that '*the Holy Spirit was upon (Simeon)*' [v.25c], by which he means on him continually. In Old Testament times we read of the Holy Spirit coming upon people on special occasions, and departing from them again (e.g. Samson, Saul etc.), and a continuing presence was very rare. Simeon's endowment was clearly something special, and as such a foreshadowing of the post-Pentecost filling with the Spirit [see Acts 2:4; Ephesians 5:18]. Moreover, Simeon was very sensitive to the Holy Spirit. Luke tells us the Holy Spirit had indicated to Simeon in some way not specified that he would see the Messiah, '*the Lord's Christ*', before his death [v.26]. In fulfilment of that promise the Holy Spirit led Simeon into the temple at the same time as Joseph and Mary [v.27]. Simeon was '*in the Spirit*' [see Revelation 1:10] which includes '*inspired by the Spirit*' but also indicates something more - a special sensitivity. We live this side of that first Christmas, Easter, Pentecost. To be '*continually filled with the Spirit*' [Ephesians 5:18] is the Christian's birthright [see Acts 2:38,39]. We should be, can be, every bit '*in the Spirit*', led by the Spirit, sensitive to the Spirit, as Simeon was!

Pray that we will be a positive people, sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

HOW CAN THIS BE?

Luke 1:18

There is a character in one of C S Lewis' *Narnia* stories called the Marshwiggle. He is always negative about everything. Whatever the situation he always sees the dark side. Whatever the potential, he only ever sees the problems. He is the kind of person who says, 'Behind every silver lining there is a dark cloud!' Sadly we not only meet such people in everyday life, we also meet them in the church. It might be a problem if such people are in the leadership of a church as there is the danger is that the church could be held back from fulfilling the plans and purposes of God because of the sin of unbelief!

Zechariah was a marshwiggle! Luke tells us here that even when the archangel Gabriel [see v.19] appeared to him and told Zechariah that his and Elizabeth's prayers had been answered and that they were to have a son ... Zechariah refused point blank to believe the angel - '*How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years*' [v.18]. Zechariah's question is identical with that asked by Abraham centuries before [see Genesis 15:8], but it is asked in a different spirit. Abraham asked the question with eyes wide with amazement, in wonder at the grace, power and ability of God to work miracles! Zechariah asked the question with a scowl and a frown suggesting that God is stupid! In effect Zechariah demanded a sign from God before he will believe. Gideon and Hezekiah, it is true, asked for signs [see Judges 6:36-39; 2 Kings 20:8], but again they asked in a very different spirit. Zechariah speaks from unbelief as he reminds the angel that both he and his wife are old! The '*I*' is emphatic here in Greek [v.18] - babies are not born to people like them!

Sometimes we pride ourselves in being 'rational'. Before we are prepared to step out, to move forward, in any direction, every 'i' has to be dotted, and every 't' crossed. Every call of God to us to step out in faith is met with a 'but'. We call this 'wisdom', 'being sensible' and, if opposing some faith venture in church life, we call it 'careful stewardship' or 'not misusing God's finances etc.' It may be, however, that God sees our response as 'sin'! The Writer to the Hebrews tells us that '*without faith it is impossible to please God*' [Hebrews 11:6]. As John Wimber suggests, Faith is spelt R.I.S.K.

Pray that whatever God calls us to as individuals and as a church that our response will not be 'marshwigglish' but full of obedient faith.

DOUBT DISPELLED

Luke 1:19,20

Challenging God can be a dangerous thing! Zechariah demanded a sign from God before he would believe ... and he got more than he bargained for! Luke tells us here that the angelic messenger from God responded to Zechariah's emphatic negative *'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years'* [v.18] with an emphatic *'I'* of his own - *'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and tell you this good news'* [v.19]. The angelic messenger discloses his name. He is no ordinary angel (if you can describe angels as ordinary?). He is none other than *'Gabriel'* (which means 'man of God') one of the leading Archangels, and his normal place is 'in the presence of God'. Zechariah was left in no doubt about the importance of his informant. How foolish he must have suddenly felt. Zechariah, himself, could only cautiously enter the presence of God in the Temple once in his lifetime, and this only because he was the chosen priest for the day. And now he found himself in the presence of an Archangel whose normal place was to stand in the presence of God! What is more, Zechariah had had the audacity to verbally abuse this Archangel and worse ... mock the will of Almighty God!?

And yet Gabriel was sent by God to bring good news to the old priest - Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers had been answered. No longer would they feel shame or disgrace. They were to have a child, and not just a child but a son. and not just a son, but one who was to be special - the forerunner of the Promised Messiah himself! This was not just good news, it was great news! Luke emphasizes the point by employing a verb later to be used characteristically for preaching the good news of the gospel. Whatever God puts before us, no matter how great the challenge or mind blowing the vision, it is always designed with our best interests at heart.

To reject God's word is serious and has its consequences. Zechariah got his sign all right, though not the kind he wanted. He would be silent, quite unable to speak until such time as Gabriel's words were fulfilled. [v.20]. Gabriel leaves no room for uncertainty. What God has said will come to pass. We need to learn to be silent when God speaks, not just after! We need to learn to hear God ... and trust God more than we do.

Pray that every day we will be open to the voice of God speaking to us even if that word is challenging and stretches our faith.

CONSECRATED TO THE LORD

Luke 2:22-24

Two quite separate ceremonies are involved here - the presentation of the child, and the purification of the mother - although Luke has run together the purification of the mother and the 'redemption' of her child here.

Jewish Law required that after the birth of a male child his mother was regarded as 'unclean' for seven days and had to remain at home for a further thirty-three days, after which on the fortieth day a purification sacrifice had to be offered [see Leviticus 12:1-8]. This could only be done at Jerusalem [v.23]. Although Luke refers to *'their purification'* [v.22], it was only Mary (and possibly Joseph) and not their child that needed to be purified. This is important because Jesus was not *'born sinful'* [Psalm 51:5], i.e. inflicted with original sin like the rest of us (a reason for the necessity of the virgin birth?), nor did he ever sin [see Hebrews 4:15]. And because Jesus was the sinless Son of God, who went to the cross for sinful people like us, he could become our Saviour! For her purification the mother had to offer either a lamb and a dove or pigeon, or (if she was too poor) a second dove or pigeon sufficed instead of a lamb. Mary's offering was the less expensive one [v.24] - a deliberate reference to the humble status of Joseph and Mary [see Luke 1:46-55]. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for us, however, was the most costly sacrifice of all [see John 3:16,17]!

The presentation of the baby follows from the fact that *'Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord'* [v.23]. The Law required that a firstborn child had to be 'redeemed'. All firstborn creatures were regarded as consecrated to God. This was expressed by sacrificing first-born animals and by making a payment of five shekels in lieu of children when they were a month old [see Exodus 13:1-16; Numbers 18:14 -16]. The Law did not require the presence of the child at the Temple for this purpose, but Jesus was present because Mary seems also to have made a special offering of her child to God for his service [v.22], just as Hannah had given Samuel to God at the Tabernacle [see 1 Samuel 1:11,21-28]. As Baptist-Christians we do not believe Infant Baptism to be as Biblically valid as Believers' Baptism ... but we do take Infant Dedication or Infant Presentation (and the consequences) as seriously as we should?

Pray that we will make an offering of ourselves to God.

HE WAS NAMED JESUS

Luke 2:21

Luke's store of information about the baby Jesus is greater than that in any of the other Gospels. Here he tells us that *'On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived' [v.21]*. Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day in accordance with Jewish law [see *Genesis 17:12*]. Luke puts no emphasis on the circumcision and in fact does not even say explicitly that it took place. His emphasis is on the naming of the child with the name given by the angel. God's purpose is to be seen in the name.

Matthew tells us that the angel not only appeared to Mary prior to her conception, but also to Joseph following her conception [see *Matthew 1:18-25*]. In part, this was because Joseph did not initially understand what was happening and thought that Mary had been unfaithful to him and therefore resolved to divorce her quietly. Like many of us Joseph needed a dose of special grace in order to be able to cope with the situation he found himself in. When the angel appeared to Joseph he told Joseph that the child Mary was to bear was a unique child ... and announced that he was to have two names, both of which would underline and affirm his uniqueness. They were to call him *'Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins' [Matthew 1:21]*, and the people (at least all those who came to know him as Saviour) would call him *'Immanuel ... God with us' [Matthew 1:23]*. In order to save us from the power and penalty of our sin, the bondage of Satan, the corruption of selfishness and lack of significant purpose in life, it was necessary for God himself to intervene in the affairs of the creation he had brought into being but which had rejected him and gone its own way. This he decisively did in the person of his only begotten Son. As Paul tells us, *'When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law (the law of sin and death, not just the Law of Moses), that we might receive adoption as God's children. Because you are his children, he sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, Abba, Father. So you are no longer slaves (to sin, death, Satan, circumstances etc.), but God's children; and since you are his children, he has made you also heirs (heirs of God)' [Galatians 4:4]*.

Thank God for Jesus!

NOTHING MORE TO SAY

Luke 1:21,22

It did not take long to offer the incense and the priests normally came out quickly from the holy place (lest they be punished for their presumption in delaying in the presence of God). The ordinary people had no way of knowing what was keeping Zechariah so long beyond the normal time, and they wondered at his delay in the inner sanctuary [v.21]. When Zechariah eventually came out he should have joined the other officiating priests in pronouncing the benediction ... but he was incapable of uttering a single sound leave alone a blessing! By making signs and remaining dumb Zechariah made it evident that something extraordinary had happened in the sanctuary. The people did not know exactly what it was that had happened, but they concluded that *'he had seen a vision' [v.22]*.

Zechariah's silence was a result of the judgment of God against him because of his sin of unbelief [v.20]. God forbid that we should be struck dumb because of our refusal to believe God or walk in his ways! There is, however, another kind of silence which is the fruit of faith. It comes from a genuine experience of knowing God in a personal way ... an experience which leaves us with literally nothing more to say! It can be worrying when Christians are too verbose, have too much to say on everything, have opinions on every subject and are always quick to let others know them! Perhaps we need to recognise how easily we can be like that? Of course we ought *'always to be prepared to give the reason for the hope that (we) have' [1 Peter 3:15]*, but that is a different matter to being a Christians who always has an opinion on everything ... and lets everyone know it. The reason why it is worrying is because one of the signs of being close to God is that we have less to say than normal as a result. The Writer to the Hebrews tells us that *'it is an awesome thing to fall into the hands of the living God' [Hebrews 10:31]*. Some people seem to carry a sense of the presence of God with them. And what these people *do* have to say, however, is usually worth hearing because they *'speak the very words of God' [1 Peter 4:11]*.

Pray that we will be the kind of people who spend time in the presence of God and, from the resultant stillness of our hearts and minds, speak words that are the very words of God that people will be able to hear.

THE LORD HAS DONE THIS FOR ME

Luke 1:23-25

Zechariah remained at the Temple until the end of his week of service, then went home [v.23]. Why did he take so long to return home with the 'good news' [v.19]? Was it because he was driven by an 'oughtness' which meant that he had to see out his term of duty? Was it because he was so embarrassed having failed so badly that he could not face his wife? Or was it because he was so 'gob smacked' by all that had happened that he was literally 'stopped in his tracks' by the reality of God? The only valid reason is the latter. I suspect this was the reason because the experience clearly changed Zechariah's attitude. Luke tells us 'After this ... Elizabeth became pregnant' [v.24a] thus confirming the truth of what Gabriel had said. May God deliver us from 'oughtness' (I *ought* to do this, I *ought* to do that), and from the embarrassment of failure (If we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, see 1 John 1:9). But may God give us an overwhelming sense of his reality and power so we are 'gob smacked' by God!

What a contrast between Zechariah and Elizabeth in their initial reaction to the revelation of God! Whereas Zechariah (despite his claims to be a true believer) met the good news with cynicism and unbelief, Elizabeth received the good news with joy and wonder, giving glory to God - '*The Lord has done this for me ... In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people*' [v.25]. Childlessness was usually considered a punishment from God, and Elizabeth had evidently had to put up with reproaches from people who did not recognise her piety [v.6]. Now she would know this no more. It is not clear why Elizabeth hid herself away for 'five months' after conceiving [v.24b]. During this time her pregnancy would not have been noticeable and it may be that she did not want to be seen until it was obvious to all that the Lord had '*shown his favour*' and '*taken away (her) disgrace*' [see Genesis 30:23]. Personally, I believe that it was because Elizabeth herself was equally 'gob smacked' at the blessing and grace of God shown towards them both ... and could do no other than be quiet being 'lost in wonder, love and praise'. Why is it that women in the church can be so much more godly, sensitive, faithful and responsive than men? O that men would be more like them!

Pray for us as a church that we would all be as godly, sensitive, faithful and responsive as Elizabeth.

SPREAD THE WORD

Luke 22:16-20

Luke tells us that, following the angelic visitation, the shepherds hurried to see for themselves if all that the angles had said was indeed true [v.16a]. It is not easy to convey in English the sense of urgency imparted by the Greek. Literally the shepherds roused each other - '*Come on! Let's go!*' And when they got to Bethlehem they found all as the angel had said - they '*found Mary and Joseph, and the baby ... lying in a manger*' [v.16b]. Would we have the same urgency to seek to know the Son of God for ourselves, to test out the truth of God's word in personal experience?

Not content with coming to Christ themselves, these shepherds wanted to share the good news with as many other people as possible! Luke tells us that '*When they had seen (Jesus), they spread the word concerning (him) ... and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said*' [v.17,18]. Although these shepherds were considered unreliable and were not allowed to give testimony in the law courts, this did not stop them sharing the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus, with others. We may not think very much of ourselves, we may think that we are not very good at talking to others about Jesus, we may think that we are not clever enough to answer all the questions etc., but these shepherds teach us that if we have found Jesus for ourselves then we *do* have something real to share ... and people will be amazed at what we have to share because '*the Gospel is still the power of God for the salvation of all who believe*' [Romans 1:16].

Luke contrasts the enthusiasm to share the Good News of the shepherds, with the quieter contemplative reaction of Mary - '*But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart*' [v.19]. This is not a contradiction of the shepherds. Paradoxically, coming to know Jesus for ourselves fills us both with an inner sense of wonder at what God has done (and done for us) in Christ which stops us in our tracks and yet at the same time drives us out to tell others because we know that others need to know who Jesus is and what he can do for them! Luke rounds off the story with the return of the shepherds, full of praise to God '*for the news they had heard and the sight that had confirmed it*' [v.20 Rieu].

Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Come let us adore him!

PEACE WITH GOD?

Luke 2:13-15

Luke tells us that when the angelic messenger had concluded his message there suddenly appeared with him a multitude of other angels praising God - *'Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God' [v.13]*. They are called a host. i.e. an 'army' ... paradoxically an army that announces peace!

This angelic host begin by speaking of the glory to God, a necessary preliminary to real peace on earth - *'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace ...'* [v.14a]. Before there can be any real peace on earth, women and men need to individually find 'peace with God' [Romans 5:1]. Although the Bible suggests that *'wars and rumours of wars' [Matthew 24:6]* are a sign of the end times, statistically there have always been wars and today there are more wars being fought around the world than ever before. The reality is that we will never change the world until we change the hearts of individual women and men. People will never recognise their need for peace with God, leave alone seek for peace with God, unless they recognise God for who he is - the Almighty, the Lord of Glory!

The angelic host continue by speaking of the Good News, the Gospel, as being a message of *'peace, goodwill toward men [and women]'* [v.14b KJV]. There are problems of both text and translation in the expression *'among men and women with whom he is pleased'* (more literally *'among men and women of (his) good pleasure'*). The angels are *not* saying that God will bring peace to all people, irrespective of whether they commit their lives to Christ or not, but rather they are saying that God will bring peace *'for men (and women) on whom his favour rests'* (NEB). The emphasis here is on God, not men and women. It is those whom God chooses, rather than those who choose God, of whom the angels speak. *'Peace'*, here, means peace between God and people, the healing of the estrangement caused by human evil. But we will never know that peace unless we turn to God in Christ [see *John 14:27*]. But where does that desire, that motivation, to turn to God in Christ come from? It comes from God himself who, through the Holy Spirit, convicts us of our sin and convinces us of our need [see *John 16:7-11*]. Do you know peace with God?

Pray that we will know the peace of God and peace with God this Christmas, as will all who turn to God in Christ.

HIGHLY FAVOURED BY GOD

Luke 1:26-28

Luke tells us that in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, the angel Gabriel was sent with another message, this time to a young woman, a relative of Elizabeth, who lived in the town of Nazareth in Galilee [v.26]. We should not think of a Nazareth as a bustling metropolis. It is called a city, because Greek has no word for a 'town' and the alternative is 'village'. What strikes me here is the fact that miracles can happen, angels can be entertained unaware, in very ordinary places. Here an Archangel (with a message from God) visited a young girl, in an ordinary home, in a small town ... and as far as we know only Mary recognised him. God is at work amongst us in amazing ways! He often has something significant to communicate to us! But are we always aware of his presence, hearing what he has to say?

Luke tells us that the young girl, to whom the angelic messenger came from God, was named was Mary. She was a virgin *'pledged to be married'* to a man named Joseph' [v.27]. The actual word is *'betrothed'* - a state much more binding among the Jews of that day than is an engagement with us. It was a solemn undertaking to marry, so that divorce was necessary to break it. This did not mean that Mary and Joseph 'lived together'. Devout Jews observed a high moral code which ruled out sex before marriage. They also took their marriage vows seriously. God himself considers 'fornication' (i.e. any kind of premarital sex) to be sin, and has a 'high view' of marriage. Whatever the world says, we Christians need to maintain high moral standards [see *1 Corinthians 6:18-20*].

Gabriel greeted Mary as the favoured one - favoured by God - *'Greetings to you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you'* [v.28]. At this stage, however, Gabriel does not make it clear *why* Mary is highly favoured of God nor exactly *what* the favour consisted of? *Why* may be hinted at in the fact that Mary obviously lived a pure and moral life (she was a virgin, v.27), and she had a humble and godly spirit [see v.38]. It would be wrong, however, for us to press this too far. We cannot earn the favour of God! We must never rule out free grace [see *Ephesians 2:8,9*]. With the benefit of hindsight we know what the exact 'favour' was to be [see v.31-33]. The real 'favour', however, is to know that *'The Lord is with (us)'* [v.28]!

Pray that you may the experience the grace and favour of God today.

DO NOT BE AFRAID!

Luke 1:29-33

Luke tells us that *'Mary was greatly troubled at (the angel's) words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be' [v.29]*. It is not clear what caused Mary to be greatly troubled. Was it fear at the sight of an angel (as with Zechariah)? Evidently in her modesty Mary did not understand why an Archangel should greet her in such exalted terms. Was it apprehension at what the nature of this 'favour' God was about to grant her would actually be? A right kind of apprehension in our dealings with God is a good thing. Whatever God calls us to do we need to be very aware of the privilege and responsibility entrusted to us, and of our total dependence on God. The Psalmist tells us that *'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' [Psalm 111:10]*, and the Writer to the Hebrews tells us that *'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' [Hebrews 10:31]*.

Whatever Mary's reasons for her apprehension, Gabriel reassures her, as he had done with Zechariah [v.13]. He tells Mary not to be afraid, for she has found favour with God - *'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God' [v.30]*. It is, of course, a complete misunderstanding to translate the Greek *'Hail Mary, full of grace'*, and understand the words (as Roman Catholics do) to mean that Mary would be a source of grace to other people. Gabriel is saying simply that God's favour rests on her.

Gabriel goes on to explain that Mary will conceive and bear a son [v.31]. The virgin birth of Jesus Christ is a distinctive Christian doctrine. It is important because it not only affirms the inspiration and authority of Scripture (*Isaiah 7:14* predicts the virgin birth), but underpins the true divinity and true humanity of Jesus in the one Person. Gabriel names the child *'Jesus'* (meaning 'The Lord is salvation') [v.31], and goes on to say Jesus will be *'great and will be called the Son of the Most High' [v.32]*. This sets him apart from all others and makes him Son of God in a special sense. Gabriel also speaks of Jesus as the recipient of the throne of his father David, and ruling not only over Israel but over all the kingdoms of this world [v.32a,33]. Here is no ordinary child but One who is Messiah, Saviour. One who is to establish not a temporal kingdom, an earthly realm, but God's kingly rule. All who truly trust in him need never be afraid!

Pray that whatever our apprehensions, we will trust in God and not fear as God comes to reassure us with the words 'Do not be afraid.'

GOOD NEWS FOR ALL

Luke 2:8-12

Luke tells us here that when Jesus was born *'there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night' [v.8]*. The strong probability is that these shepherds were pasturing flocks destined for the temple sacrifices. Flocks were supposed to be kept only in the wilderness and a rabbinic rule said that any animal found between Jerusalem and a spot near Bethlehem must be presumed to be a sacrificial victim. As a class, shepherds had a bad reputation. The nature of their calling kept them from observing the ceremonial law which meant so much to religious people. More regrettable was their unfortunate habit of confusing 'thine' with 'mine' as they moved about the country. They were considered unreliable and were not allowed to give testimony in the law courts. Nevertheless it was to such people that God first revealed the good news, the Gospel [v.10]. God is no respecter of persons. The good news was not revealed first to priests and Pharisees but to despised, even sinful, shepherds. This means that there is hope for even the most hopeless amongst us!

Luke goes on to tell us that *'An angel (literally 'messenger') of the Lord appeared to them' [v.9]*. The angel is not identified, but his appearance struck terror into the shepherds *as 'the splendour of the Lord blazed around them' (J B Phillips)*. The angel first reassured his hearers [v.10] and then went on to explain that he had come with good and joyful news (the verb translated *'bring . . . good news'* is later used characteristically of the good news of the Gospel) for everyone, everywhere, not just Jews. What is more this good news centres in a person not a religion - *'Today ... a Saviour has been born ... he is Christ the Lord' [v.11]*. The term *'Christ'* is Greek for 'Anointed one', and Messiah is our transliteration of a Hebrew term with a similar meaning. Anointing was for special service like that of a priest or a king. But the Jews expected that one day God would send a very special deliverer. He would be not simply 'an' anointed, but 'the' anointed, the Messiah. This is the One whom the angel announces. What is more, the angel tells the shepherds how they may recognise the Saviour - his is none other than the child born in a manger in Bethlehem [v.12]. Have we - have you - recognised just who Jesus truly is?

Pray that we may always view people with hope and that they might recognize Jesus. With God no-one is considered without hope.

NO ROOM AT THE INN

Luke 2:5-7

Since Joseph was of the family of David he had to report at Bethlehem, called the city of David (though David is not recorded as having contact with it after he left it; similarly Jesus is never said to have visited it after his birth there). Mary's attendance [v.5] was probably not strictly necessary. Little is known of the regulations governing such a contingency, but the probability is that, even if she had property, Joseph's attendance would suffice. Perhaps Joseph did not care to leave her at Nazareth. She had been with Elizabeth for three months after her pregnancy began [1:56] and we have no way of knowing how much later the wedding took place. To have remained behind may have exposed her to calumny. Luke refers to Mary as his betrothed perhaps because, although they were married the marriage was not yet consummated [see Matthew 1:24,25].

Luke describes the birth of God's Son very simply - *'While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and (Mary) wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn' [v.6,7].* 'Swaddling cloths' [KJV] are long strips which could wrap the child round and round. That Mary wrapped the child herself points to a lonely birth. That he was laid in a manger has traditionally been taken to mean that Jesus was born in a stable. He may have been. But it is also possible that the birth took place in a very poor home where the animals shared the same roof as the family. A tradition going back to Justin says it occurred in a cave and this could be right. Some have thought that the birth took place in the open air (possibly the courtyard of the inn), that being where a manger would likely be. We cannot be sure. We know only that everything points to poverty, obscurity and even rejection. There was no place for them in the inn. Joseph may have left his journey too late. Or the innkeeper may not have wished to have them. Another possibility is that the word does not mean inn here, but a room in a house. It had been meant for Joseph and Mary, but was occupied by others by the time they arrived. There may have been no room at the inn for Jesus ... but is there room in our hearts - your heart - for Jesus today?

Pray that we make room for Jesus in our hearts this Christmas, throughout the year and for all time... into eternity.

HOW WILL THIS BE?

Luke 1:34

Where Zechariah had been disbelieving [v.18], Mary was amazed - *'How will this be ... since I am a virgin?' [v.34].* Mary was soon to be married, so there seems no insuperable difficulty in the thought of her bearing a son. Some interpreters (largely Roman Catholic) hold that the question implies that Mary had made a vow to perpetually remain a virgin. But (a) this reads something into the text (and into other passages also, for we read of brothers of Jesus), and (b) there seems no reason for her to get married if she planned to remain a virgin. The reality is that Mary understood Gabriel to mean that she would immediately become pregnant without having sexual intercourse with a man (and artificial insemination had not yet been invented). She didn't doubt for a moment that it would happen ... she just didn't know how God was going to do it! It was mind blowing!

Fortunately since the conception of Jesus, the *'only begotten Son' of God [John 3:16]* was a unique event, God will never face any of us with the same dilemma. Nevertheless, he does call us, individually and corporately, to respond positively to equally challenging tasks. This is not new - God has consistently done this in the past [see *Hebrews 11*] - and is still doing so today. This may be to individually take a step of faith that leads to commitment to Christ, or baptism and church membership, or to commit to some area of service. It may be, as a church, to step out in a faith venture in response to God's call to minister to this community. Often, such ventures seem initially (to us at least) impossible - they blow our minds!

But maybe we need our minds blowing! Our natural minds are affected by sin and, as a result, we can be *'so earthly minded that we are no heavenly use'*. In Isaiah God tells us *'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts' [Isaiah 55:8,9].* This is why we need to experience *'the renewal of our minds' [Romans 12:2].* So when God calls us to such 'impossible' ventures, how do we respond? Do we say 'No way!' like Zechariah ... or 'Wow, Lord, let's go for it!', like Mary?

Pray that God will call us as individuals and as a church to a 'mind blowing' venture of faith.

NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

Luke 1:35-37

God is so good that when we come to him with genuine questions he doesn't leave us in the dark but always gives us an answer that will satisfy us. He doesn't always give us the whole picture ... oftentimes the whole picture is beyond our limited comprehension (if we knew everything we would be God ourselves). But he does always give us enough light to satisfy us (unless we are stropky, argumentative types who are never satisfied?). Here we see that God took Mary's question, '*How can this be?*' [v.34] seriously. Speaking with reverent reserve Gabriel tells Mary that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and that the power of the Most High will '*overshadow*' her [v.35]. This delicate expression rules out crude ideas of a 'mating' of the Holy Spirit with Mary. Gabriel makes it clear that the conception will be the result of a divine activity. Because of this the child to be born would be holy, '*the Son of God*' [v.35].

Evidently Mary had not heard of Elizabeth's experience, even though they were related. Gabriel now informs her that it is the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy [v.36]. Mary would have known the story of Abraham and Sarah [see *Genesis 18:14*] but here was a similar miracle right in her own family. If God could enable someone like Elizabeth (well past the normal years for childbearing) to get pregnant, then Mary can see that '*Nothing is impossible with God*' [v.37]. How could Mary get pregnant without having sexual intercourse ... and bear the unique, only begotten Son of God? '*It is not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts*' [Zechariah 4:6].

When we are faced, individually or corporately, with (what is to us) equally challenging matters, let us realise that even though *we* cannot, *God* can! Whatever God calls us to... he will give us the strength to go through with it. Whatever God calls us to as a church, he will provide what we need! All we have to do is to say, 'Yes!' to God ... and take just one step in the right direction.

Pray that we may hear the message of the angel that nothing is indeed impossible with God. May we see with the eyes of faith that whatever we need he is more than able and willing to provide and meet that need however impossible it seems to us.

THE HOUSE AND LINE OF DAVID

Luke 2:1-4

Luke is the only Gospel writer who relates his narrative to dates in world history. He tells us here that the birth of Jesus took place '*In those days (when) Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world*' [v.1]. Caesar Augustus, the first and probably greatest of the Roman Emperors ruled between 31 BC and AD 14. He replaced the republic with an imperial form of government, expanded the empire to include the entire Mediterranean world, established the famous *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace), and ushered in a golden age of Roman literature and architecture. Although there is no record of any law of Augustus that a universal census be held, he did re-organise Roman administration, and there are records of censuses held in a number of places. The evidence seems best satisfied if we understand the decree of which Luke writes, not as a formal law, but as an administrative direction which set the whole process in motion and had its effect in distant Judea. It was not, of course, necessary for Luke to mention the point (none of the other Gospel writers do), but it seems to be part of his plan to set his story in the secular context, and to declare God as Lord of history. God used the decree of a pagan emperor, carried through by a local governor, Quirinius [v.2], and making it necessary for Joseph and his very pregnant wife to return to Joseph's home town [v.3], to fulfil the prophecy that the Messiah, the Saviour would be born in Bethlehem [see *Micah 5:2*].

Since Joseph was of the family of David he had to report at Bethlehem, called the city of David because '*he belonged to the house and line of David*' [v.4]. This is a very important phrase because it had been foretold, and was widely understood, that the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, would also be of the house and line of David [see *Isaiah 11:1f. etc.*]. The fact that Joseph was not the natural father of Jesus does not negate the genealogical line because Joseph was the *legal* father of Jesus. Luke, however, does go on to suggest [see *Luke 3:23-38*] that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was *also* of the house and line of David! We must be eternally grateful for Luke's attention to detail. Whichever way we turn the message is the same - Jesus truly is the Messiah, the Saviour!

Pray that in the midst of our secular world that the message of Jesus, Messiah and Saviour, will be heard and received this Christmas.

STRONG IN SPIRIT

Luke 1:80

Luke describes John the Baptist's upbringing very briefly - *'And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel' [v.80]*. There were in the desert a Jewish sect called the Essenes who brought up other people's children, and possibly John's aged parents died or were not able to bring up John themselves, so he may have been brought up by such a sect. This is very hypothetical, but many things about John would be explained if he had in fact been brought up by some such desert sect ... and had broken away from it in adult life. G B Caird reminds us that the wilderness was 'the traditional home of prophetic inspiration'. By describing John the Baptist's upbringing so succinctly Luke probably means us to see John as a true prophet right from the beginning. As the Apostle John tells us, with reference to John the Baptist - *'there was a man sent from God' [John 1:6]*. Prophecy is not so much 'foretelling' as 'forth-telling' and God still speaks today with a prophetic voice. This is usually, though not exclusively, through those he has set in the Church to lead the Church [see *Ephesians 4:11*]. The word 'apostle' literally means 'sent one' and a 'prophet' is primarily a preacher not a soothsayer. We need to hear and submit to God's 'now word' when it comes to us through whomsoever God chooses to use.

What Luke does tell us here about John the Baptist is that he not only grew physically and mentally, but was *'strong in spirit' [v.80]*. The reference is not to the Holy Spirit (although he surely had a hand in it) but to John's human spirit, or character. John grew spiritually, into a strong, holy, godly character. Watchman Nee, in his book *The Normal Christian Worker*, says that it is not enough for us as Christians to have gifts (natural or spiritual), we have to develop character. The most gifted of us will ultimately fail, and even do damage, if we do not develop strong, holy, godly Christian character to go with our gifting. We read of the kind of characteristics we are to develop (with the Holy Spirit's help) in *Galatians 5:22,23* - *'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control'*. How do we develop such characteristics? We need humility, understanding of and obedience to God's Word, and an openness to the Holy Spirit!

Pray that God might develop a strong, holy, godly character in us so that the fruit of the Spirit will be produced in our lives.

THE LORD'S SERVANT

Luke 1:38

It is said that you can tell more about a person from their reactions than their actions! How do we react when God challenges us, individually or corporately, to take something particular on board? How do we respond when God calls us to commitment to Christ, or baptism and Church Membership, or to a particular area of service, or to step out in faith as a church? Some people make the excuse of saying that they can't be sure that it is the will of God. For others, knowing the will of God is not the problem ... doing it is another matter! Mary's response is one of quiet submission to the will of God - *'I am the Lord's servant ... May it be to me as you have said' [v.38]*. 'Servant' here literally means 'slave-girl'. It expresses complete obedience. The slave-girl could not but do the will of her Master. This is reinforced with *'May it be to me as you have said'*. We tend to take this as a most natural thing and miss Mary's quiet heroism. She was not yet married to Joseph. His reaction to her pregnancy might have been expected to be a strong one and Matthew tells us that he did in fact think of divorcing her [*Matthew 1:19f*]. Again, while the death penalty for adultery [*Deuteronomy 2:23f.*] does not seem to have been carried out often, it was still in force. Mary could not be sure that she would not suffer, perhaps even die. But she recognized the will of God and accepted it.

Paul tells us that, because Jesus died and rose again for us, we no longer belong to ourselves - *'You are not your own ... you were bought with a price' [1 Corinthians 6:19,20]*, and goes on to exhort us to therefore to submit our lives totally to the Lord - *'Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God' [Romans 12:1]*. The problem is that, although we pay lip service to this concept of true submission to God, we jump on and off the altar when it suits us. The reality is that when we see the knife and the flame approaching we get back off the altar and 'do a runner'? What is God calling you (us) to at this specific moment? Whatever it is, it won't be as demanding as that which he called Mary to (even though it may feel like it). What is our response? Are we running away? Or can we say with Mary, *'I am the Lord's servant ... May it be to me as you have said' [v.38]*.

Pray that we may live our lives in full surrender and true submission to God even if it feels (and is) sacrificial, costly and demanding. May it be to us as God has said.

FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Luke 1:39-45

Mary lost no time in paying a visit to her kinswoman. She set out almost immediately after the angel's visit. *'The hill country of Judea'* [v.39] makes it clear that Zechariah and Elizabeth were country folk. When Mary entered their home and greeted Elizabeth *'the baby leaped in Elizabeth's womb'* [v.41] Movements of the foetus are not, of course, uncommon but here was something exceptional. The reason Elizabeth's baby *'leapt for joy'* [v.44] in her womb was because (even though a foetus) he recognised that he was in the presence of the Messiah (also a foetus) and his mother. Whatever else this may say to us, it challenges the concept of easy abortion and says that we must treat the unborn child as a human being.

Elizabeth was simultaneously *'filled with the Holy Spirit'* [v.41] and under his inspiration shouted out in affirmation of both the Messiah yet to be born, and the privileged position of his mother - *'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear'* [v.42]. Elizabeth goes on to express amazement that Mary should visit her - *'Why am I so favoured, that the mother of our Lord should come to me?'* [v.43] and the use of the title *'my Lord'* shows that Elizabeth recognized that Mary's child would be the Messiah [see *Psalms 110:1*]. The fact that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit therefore enabled her to both discern the heart, mind, and will of God, and to openly and clearly affirm that! To be filled with the Spirit [see *Acts 2:4; Ephesians 5:18*] is not an optional extra in the Christian life! We too need to be able to discern the will of God and affirm it [see *Romans 12:2b*]

We should not miss the absence of all jealousy in Elizabeth's attitude to Mary. The older woman, who had received such a signal blessing from the Lord, might well have tried to guard her position jealously. But in genuine humility she recognized the greater blessing God had given to Mary - *'Why am I so favoured, that the mother of our Lord should come to me?'* [v.43]. Humility, esteeming others as better than ourselves [see *Philippians 2:3*], is another hallmark of what it really means to be filled with the Spirit! Are you filled with the Holy Spirit? Are we a Spirit-filled church?

Pray that God will fill you with the Holy Spirit afresh today and fill us as a church together.

PROPHET OF GOD

Luke 1:76-79

We might have expected that Zechariah's song would be all about his little boy, but he surprised us by beginning with the Messiah whom God was about to send [v.68-75]. In a sense, we should not be surprised about this because Luke tells us that Zechariah's words were inspired by the Holy Spirit [v.67] and the Holy Spirit loves to exalt Jesus [see *John 16:13-15*]. How much attention do we draw to ourselves and how much do we point people to Jesus?

Zechariah was, nonetheless, very pleased about John, and in this second part of his song he prophesies the child's future. He addresses John directly, and says that he will be called *'the prophet of the Most High'* [v.76a]. There had been no prophet among the Jews for centuries, so here we have a statement of mind-blowing proportions. Something of eternal significance was in the process of happening. John would represent a radical departure from the 'jog along way of religion and life' that had become customary. Not only was John to be a prophet, but he was to prepare the Lord's way. He would be forerunner to the Messiah - *'you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him'* [v.76b]. Specifically John would tell people about the coming of *'salvation'* in *'the forgiveness of their sins'* [v.77]. John would not save people. No man could. But he would call people to repentance and tell them about One who could save them.

Zechariah concludes his song by dwelling on the coming salvation. It will come through God's *'tender mercy'* [v.78a]. The compassion of God is a constant theme of the New Testament. The old priest goes on to speak of salvation in terms of light [v.78b,79]. The contrast between light and darkness is a natural one, but none the less powerful for all that [see *Isaiah 60:1-3*]. The concluding note is that of peace [v.79b], that peace of God that calms our hearts and makes us strong to live for God. It *'does not mean merely freedom from trouble; it means all that makes for a [person's] highest good'* (William Barclay).

Pray that in the busyness of life you will experience the peace of God that calms your heart (and mind) and makes you strong. May you enter into the 'highest good' that God has for you.

REDEEMER AND SAVIOUR

Luke 1:67-75

Zechariah's joy overflows in an inspired song (known as the *Benedictus* from its opening word in Latin). Some see the song as primarily political with an emphasis on the overcoming of Israel's enemies [v.71-74], but the reality is that Zechariah's song is religious rather than political. Luke tells us here that Zechariah's words were the result of the Holy Spirit coming upon him - 'Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied' [v.67]. Zechariah's words are words of prophecy, words which express God's revelation. One scholar (F W Farrar) speaks of it as '*the last Prophecy of the Old Dispensation, and the first of the New*'. Our God, the God of the Bible, is a God who speaks. He is not a God who has only spoken in the past, but One who speaks in the present [see *Hebrews 1:1,2*]. What is God's 'now word' to us today?

Zechariah begins his song by praising God for visiting and redeeming his people - '*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people*' [v.68] - and because '*he has raised up a horn of salvation for us*' [v.69a]. The horn was a symbol of strength (as with the horn of a bull), so that '*a horn of salvation*' means '*a mighty salvation*' or '*a strong Saviour*' (Moffatt). The reference to the fact this Saviour comes from '*the house of his servant David*' [v.69b] shows that Zechariah is speaking of the Messiah. The reference to God's '*holy prophets*' [v.70] stresses the divine purpose. God is working out his plan - a plan that begins and ends in eternity and which covers the whole of human history. A plan in which the pivotal point is the Incarnation, the Advent of Christ as Redeemer and Saviour, and which (as far as human history goes) will culminate in the Second Advent. As A C Ainger puts it in the opening line of the hymn - '*God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year*'.

The salvation the Messiah will bring is spoken of first as deliverance [v.71], then as 'mercy' [v.72a], and then in terms of a covenant with Abraham [v.72b] in which all true believers share because it is a faith based covenant [see *Galatians 3:6-9*]. God will keep his side of the bargain, but we have to keep ours and serve the Lord in '*holiness*' (we belong to God), and '*righteousness*' (living as God's people should) all our days [v.74,75].

Pray that God will keep you strong and true, serving the Lord in holiness and righteousness everyday.

MAGNIFICAT

Luke 1:46-55

Mary's song (called the *Magnificat* from its opening word in the Latin translation) is an outburst of praise largely in Old Testament language. Her song begins with an expression of praise - '*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour*' [v.46,47a]. '*Glorifies*' here denotes a habitual act - Mary just can't stop magnifying the Lord. The reference here to '*God my Saviour*' shows that Mary recognized her need - she was a sinner like other people - and herein we find part of the cause of her rejoicing. God has raised her up from insignificance to blessing, the '*Mighty One*' is at work in her life [v.47b-49].

From thankfulness for what God has done for her Mary turns to his wider activities - God has been at work in her life but also elsewhere [v.50-55]. **God is a merciful God** - '*His mercy extends to those who fear him*' [v.50]. In every generation his mercy (occurring five times in this chapter) is certain for those who '*reverence*' him (better translation than '*fear*').

God is an active God - '*He has performed mighty deeds*' [v.51a]. Mary may be looking back to specific occasions in the past when God has done the things she mentions, or she may be referring to acts still future but which have begun to be realized - looking forward in a spirit of prophecy and counting what God will do as so certain that it can be spoken of as accomplished (this is frequent in the Old Testament prophets).

God is a lateral thinker [v.51b-53 see *Isaiah 55:8,9*]. This section of the Song tells of a complete reversal of human values. It is not the proud or mighty or rich who have the last word. Indeed, through his Messiah, God is about to overthrow all these. There is a revolutionary note about filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty. In the ancient world it was accepted that the rich would be well cared for. Poor people must expect to be hungry. But Mary sings of a God who is not bound by what people do. He turns human attitudes and orders of society upside down

God helps those who name his Name [v.54,55]. Mary sings of God's help for his people. God's action in the Messiah is not so much completely new as a continuation of his mercy to Abraham. As Paul tells us, '*If God ... who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things*' [Romans 8:32].

Pray that today God will put a song of praise in your heart.

THE GREAT MERCY OF GOD

Luke 1:56-58

Luke tells us that Mary's visit to Elizabeth lasted about three months [v.56], after which she went home. He may simply be finishing this part of Mary's story before returning to Elizabeth, although it seems more likely that he means that Mary left before John was born. There would then be (as we see in the next verse), much excitement and many visitors and Mary, in her condition, might not wish to be there for that. What is good, however, is that the two women - one young, the other old - spent quality time together encouraging one another, sharing together, worshipping and praying together. We live in days when there is so much division within the church along ageist lines. Some churches have a Traditional Service on a Sunday for the elderly, followed by a Family Service for those with children, and then have Youth Church in the evening for the teens and twenties. While this is not wrong, how much better when young and old (and every other peer group in the church) fellowship together, really care for each other, communicate with each other, support each other and bond wherever possible.

As the angel had prophesied, Elizabeth's child was a boy [v.57]. The birth was clearly of widespread interest among the mother's family and friends, and many of them came to share in her joy. Luke describes the happy event in terms of the Lord's mercy, a topic that runs through these opening chapters - *'(Elizabeth's) neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy' [v.58]*. 'Mercy' and 'joy' are two of the great words of the Christian Faith. 'Mercy' here means 'the outward manifestation of pity; it assumes need on the part of the one who receives it, and resources adequate to meet the need on the part of the One who shows it'. 'Joy' is 'the sense of absolute delight that comes from knowing that our lives are in the hand of God'. This kind of joy (as against mere emotion or excitement) stems from experiencing God's mercy. How wonderful to know that although poverty stricken and incapable in and of ourselves, God's heart is towards all those who trust in him ... and that his resources are more than adequate to meet our needs and deal with our problems! How good too, that her neighbours caught something of Elizabeth's blessing and joy - it has been rightly said that 'real Christianity is better caught than taught'!

Pray that we may be infectious Christians.

FAITH AND FREEDOM

Luke 1:59-66

According to Jewish Law, a male child should be circumcised on the eighth day of his life [Genesis 17:12; Leviticus 12:3]. In the Old Testament the name was normally given at birth, but by New Testament times the custom of naming the child at circumcision had apparently developed. It is curious that the neighbours and relations try to name the child, as that was the privilege of the parents ... probably they simply took it for granted that the boy would be named 'Zechariah' after his father [v.59]. Elizabeth decisively rejected the idea - *'No! He is to be called John' [v.60]*. The word 'No' here is emphatic. Elizabeth was not 'wearing the trousers' here by breaking the cultural custom of the day and speaking before her husband. Despite Zechariah's impediment, he and Elizabeth would have discussed the name of their son fully during the period of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Elizabeth's firm statement, spoken because she was the one with the voice, was on behalf of them both.

When the neighbours and relations questioned this [v.61] it was as much against Elizabeth breaking custom as the fact that 'John' was not a family name. Getting nowhere with Elizabeth they appealed to Zechariah [v.62]. It is curious that they made signs to him. Did they forget that the old priest could hear ... or had Zechariah been struck deaf as well as dumb (the word describing his ailment can mean 'deaf and dumb'). His response, when they gave him a writing tablet (a board covered with wax), was definite [v.63]. He did not say as had Elizabeth, that the child *would be* called John but *'His name is John!'* [v.63]. The angel had already named the boy and now Zechariah accepted that as an accomplished fact. What a difference between the man who cynically questioned the word of God ... and the man who now boldly affirms the word of God. You can feel the difference, the new authority he had found as he had allowed the Holy Spirit to do a deeper work in him. The result was an immediate end to Zechariah's dumbness - *'Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God' [v.64]*. And what an effect Zechariah's witness now had on those around him - his neighbours were *'all filled with awe' [v.63]* and everybody who heard about what had happened *'wondered about it' [v.66]* and started asking deep questions!

Pray that God the Holy Spirit might do that deeper work in us so that those around us start asking the deep questions.