

SERMON ~ BIBLE READING: LUKE 1:5-25

The divine surprise

Luke underscores the way God's plan of salvation invades what has been called 'the heartland of Jewish piety'. Zechariah and Elizabeth's credentials are spotless; the timing of the angelic intervention is flawless – at the peak of Zechariah's career. The scene is set for a surprise of divine magnitude. Despite the obstacles, they will be parents to John – John the Baptist – the new Elijah, described as one of the 'twin agents of God's salvation' the forerunner of the Messiah

The human response: Zechariah's unbelief

Though Gabriel describes John's mission as changing 'disobedient minds to accept godly wisdom' – and remember what we were saying about wisdom a few weeks back: "Wisdom comes from a living relationship with the living God; wisdom calls for an obedient heart and a teachable spirit; wisdom is the ability to make the right moral choice in any given situation" – ironically Zechariah's response is disappointingly lacking in faith: "Do you expect me to believe this (that is, that Elizabeth and he are going to have a baby)? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman.". So Zechariah does not flinch at the awesome description of a son who will fulfil prophecy, but he stumbles over the prediction that Elizabeth will have a child.

The human response: Elizabeth's joy

Though Elizabeth has neither seen nor heard the divine messenger, all we hear of her response is happy acceptance: "Now at last the Lord has helped me. He has taken away my public disgrace." God has been gracious to her, as he was with Sarah and Rachel, and Elizabeth relishes her pregnancy.

The human response: Our response

And still today God is surprising people – he surprised me who was going to be a language teacher when he took me by surprise and called me to the ministry and he has surprised lots of people in Penicuik through courses like 'Alpha' and 'Christianity Explored' – I think they could echo these words of Michael Wenham, an Anglican vicar who has been through many unexpected changes in his life; but the most surprising, says Michael, was 'when I had an experience of the Holy Spirit which transformed my truth-based Christian faith into a new sort of relationship with Jesus Christ. I want to say that I know of no more completely satisfying and disturbing way of life than going with him. And I don't believe I've seen the last of God's surprises yet.'

So what is our response to the surprises of God that interrupt the routine of our lives? Do we demonstrate unbelief, or do we go with him and show a willing and trusting acceptance that what falls to us is part of a bigger picture – God's bigger picture? Zechariah learned the hard way that God is worthy of our trust. We should learn from his experience and that of his wife, Elizabeth.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Michael Wenham, vicar of Stanford-in-the-Vale, Oxfordshire, describes his life as touched by ‘the God of surprises’. There have been many unexpected changes in his life, not least being diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease. But most surprising, says Michael, was ‘when I had an experience of the Holy Spirit which transformed my truth-based Christian faith into a new sort of relationship with Jesus Christ. I want to say that I know of no more completely satisfying and disturbing way of life than going with him. And I don’t believe I’ve seen the last of God’s surprises yet.’

GOING DEEPER

Questions on the Bible passage and sermon for you to think about during the week, either on your own or in a small group:

1. How important do you think Zechariah and Elizabeth’s godly lifestyle (1:6) was in them being chosen to parent John?
2. Is the description of John’s mission (1:16, 17) appropriate for our mission as we prepare the way for Jesus in the lives of others?
3. To what extent are contemporary sentimentalised images of angels the product of a church with a distorted and sentimentalised image of itself?