

## ***SERMON ~ BIBLE READING: LUKE 1:57-80***

### **PROPHECY GIVEN**

As we saw last week, Zechariah didn't have a problem with Gabriel's message that the "forerunner of the Messiah" was soon to be born, but he did have a problem with Gabriel's message that he and Elizabeth would be the parents of this child. His response was disappointingly lacking in faith: "Do you expect me to believe that Elizabeth and I are going to have a baby? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman."

"I am Gabriel, the sentinel of God," the angel continued, "sent especially to bring you this glad news. But because you won't believe me, you will be unable to say a word until the day of your son's birth" His disappointing lack of faith literally rendered him speechless.

Today's reading finds Zechariah's speech being restored – it happened at the circumcision ceremony – and today's reading also finds Zechariah bursting into song – a song which elaborates on how the birth of his son John relates to the birth of the promised Saviour.

The language of Zechariah's prophecy is thoroughly soaked in Old Testament references. For example, the use of the word 'redeem' – "the God of Israel...has visited and redeemed his people" – compares the new event to God's saving of his people from Egypt and shows that John's birth heralds a new exodus – an escape or delivery from sin; or take the 'horn of salvation' – it's a phrase reminiscent of the psalms of David; while there are allusions to the covenant, that special relationship between God and his people, and echoes of prophetic writings from Isaiah and Malachi.

### **PROPHECY FULFILLED**

Luke now goes on to show how the prophecies of Zechariah: 'You, my child, will be called "Prophet of the Highest," because you will go ahead of the Lord to prepare his ways and present the offer of salvation to his people, the forgiveness of their sins'; and the prophecies of Gabriel: "He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God. He will herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened sceptics – he'll get the people ready for God"; and the prophecies of Isaiah 'Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting, "Clear the way through the wilderness for the LORD! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God! Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills. Straighten the curves,

and smooth out the rough places. Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. The LORD has spoken!”<sup>4</sup>; and the prophecies of Malachi: “Look! I’m sending my messenger on ahead to clear the way for me” – how all these prophecies were fulfilled in John. Just look at his spiritual stature and challenging public ministry; just look at his uncompromising preaching which called the people to repent and turn back to God, preparing the way spiritually for the coming of Jesus; just look at his prophetic courage in being prepared to stand up against the authorities, even though it resulted in imprisonment and death by beheading. So it’s no surprise to find Jesus himself calling John the Baptist, the greatest man who had lived. “No one in history,” Jesus said, “surpasses John the Baptist.”

### **THE CHALLENGE FOR US**

So how can we – like John – live uncompromisingly for God in a way that directs people today to Jesus? For example, are we too easily swayed by peer pressure in areas of materialism or lifestyle choices? Are we afraid of being unpopular and so fail to speak out when we see dishonesty? Are we so wrapped up in our own lives that we can’t spare any energy for speaking out on issues of injustice in our society? Do we crowd our schedules with so many activities that there’s no time to stop and meditate on what God wants us to be doing? God fulfils his promises. He wants us to be confident about that and in that confidence to fulfil our godly promise and potential and live uncompromisingly for him.

### **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

1. ‘John appears as the boundary between the two testaments, the old and the new... Thus he represents times past and is the herald of the new era to come.’ (St Augustine)
2. Poet William Drummond (1565-1649) called John the Baptist ‘the last and greatest Herald of Heaven’s King’.
3. You’ll get a much better result from painting a wall if you have first prepared well – by stripping off or rubbing down any old paint, sanding the surface to make it smooth, and filling any indentations or cracks. John’s call to repentance prepared the way for Jesus.

## ***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. In what terms does Zechariah's song describe a new phase of God's plan of salvation?
2. 'The light from heaven is about to break upon us' sang Zechariah (Luke 1:78 NLT). How would you explain to a not-yet-believer how this came true?
3. Zechariah sang of a God who keeps his promises (Luke 1:70). Share how God has kept promises in your life.