

Luke 1 26-38

Sunday 20th December 2020

May I speak in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Please, do sit down.

So often when we read our Bibles, we come across a well-known passage and we may think to ourselves we know what it says and what it means, and it is often at that point of our certainty that the Holy Spirit leads us deeper and we discover things we did not know before.

The Angel Gabriel is mentioned in at least three places in the Bible, in the book of Daniel in ch 8 Gabriel interprets Daniels' vision for him, leaving Daniel "overcome" - so overcome that he takes to his bed for several days and when he eventually resumes his duties he continues to be "appalled" in Daniel's own words. At the sight of the Angel Gabriel, Daniel falls to the floor - his legs go from under him, he is so terrified. This is Daniel who can stand in front of hungry lions, remember.

Immediately before our gospel passage of today is the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Gabriel appears there, too.

Now Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were both righteous in the sight in God so their childlessness was not a punishment for any sin. Zechariah was a priest and as he was performing his priestly duties in the temple the Angel Gabriel appeared and told him that his prayer had been heard, and his wife Elizabeth would bear him a son. We are told that Zechariah was startled and gripped with fear, but that may

have been partly because he was in an empty part of the temple and suddenly someone is talking to him. Zechariah, and very possibly Elizabeth too, may have prayed for decades to have a child. And as the decades rolled by, I'm sure they gave up hope, they "came to terms with the situation." And, as the Bible tells us, they were both "very old" there must have been a point when they stopped praying to have a child, because Zechariah responds with angry cynicism and even when told what an important part his son will play for the Kingdom of God, Zechariah rounds on Gabriel, and, in essence, asks him "where were you 40 years ago?" Gabriel himself has a very impressive angelic hissy fit at this point. He says, " I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

Now we are not told this in the text, but I imagine that God thought to Himself, umm, teaching moment, at the way Gabriel responded to Zechariah's logical doubt. He and his wife were old, they were past it, they were very old, they were very past it - and Zechariah wasn't thinking "miracle" he was thinking "not humanly possible." But then we read that it was after the now dumb-struck Zechariah returned home that Elizabeth conceived, so the miracle was that it was humanly possible, after all.

The Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and says "Hello, highly favoured" and Mary is deeply troubled and wonders what this greeting means. There was something in Gabriel's body language or

tone of voice that led Mary to suspect he was being sarcastic ! But Gabriel re-assures her that she is, genuinely, highly favoured, and is going to give birth to the Messiah. And echoing Zechariah's doubts, Mary asks "how will this be?" because it is not humanly possible to conceive by yourself. In contrast to how Gabriel responded to Zechariah's doubts, in talking with Mary, he has become self-less. He doesn't mention his name, his rank, his task: instead Gabriel talks about the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High. His parting sentence is "For no word from God will ever fail." That's quite a change in six short months.

Mary's response is something we have heard every Christmas, at least once, maybe our entire lives, but have we ever understood? Just maybe,

we would be struck dumb like Zechariah or have our legs give way underneath us like Daniel, because Mary's unhesitating acceptance was awesome. It changed the history of the world. It destroyed Mary's reputation, being single and pregnant. Her family would be convinced she had acted in an immoral fashion, there was, after all, no other explanation. Any attempt Mary may have made to clear her name would have had her labelled as a liar, or insane. She ran a very real risk of being stoned to death for adultery. Mary says "May your word to me be fulfilled" and Gabriel vanishes, leaving her feeling sick and alone. Mary, too, is self-less. She knows God has a specific task for her alone to fulfil. She knows what her holy Son is to be called, and that His kingdom will never end. The Angel Gabriel makes no promises to Mary regarding things we consider important if not vital

today - financial support, emotional support, physical comfort, a stress-free environment, health, wealth, happiness, the list is endless. If we are not very careful with our television viewing habits, we can hear messages from tele-evangelists convincing us that everything WE want, God will supply - just name it and claim it. If our prayers aren't being answered quickly enough - that's our fault; we have unconfessed sin in our lives.

We would be better off switching off the telly and opening our Bibles, because we can see from Luke that Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people in good standing with God, and they were childless from the beginning of their marriage until they were very old, one Jewish text has Zechariah at 99 y o and Elizabeth at 88 y o when John was born. Mary brought our Saviour into the world, which was glorious, but from the wagging tongues at the start of her pregnancy to standing at the foot of the cross as Jesus died, none of it was easy.

We are believing a lie if we think that our lives will be easy if we are obeying God, and that experiencing any difficulties is evidence of sin. Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy ch 2, v 3-4 "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him."

It is at this very time of year that we get most entangled in civilian pursuits, the frantic buying of extra food and wine and gifts and more gifts in case we have forgotten anyone. The only important person we are likely to forget is Our Saviour Himself. Heavenly Father, help us to remember.

Amen.