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Returning from our trip to India on 22 November, I picked up a copy of The Telegraph of the previous day and saw an article titled, "**The top 12 toys for Christmas 2018 revealed**", which read (*I summarise*)

"If you've been wondering what to buy for the children in your life this Christmas, then wonder no more.

"... the ultimate toys of 2018 have finally been revealed today by the DreamToys organisation.... made up of retailers (The Entertainer, Hamleys, Selfridges, Smyths Toys and Toymaster) industry experts and buying groups. Basically, they know what they're talking about.

"It is a huge honour each year to unveil the DreamToys top twelve list," said Gary Grant (Chairman). "We have a fantastic range of toys this year to suit every budget, three quarters ... under £50, representing real value for money."

So what's on the list?

At the top of the list is **Barbie's Ultimate Kitchen** (and we wonder why people continue to stereotype gender!) and 12th on the list is **Poopsie Surprise Unicorn**. *"... the word 'Poopsie' in its name means it'll be an instant hit with kids. Add to that the fact this unicorn is actually a slime machine and the glittering goo comes out when she is placed on her potty and you can imagine the squeals of laughter it will inspire. Gross and cute at the same time."*

What cost will the NHS bear in the future, I wondered, treating a generation of maladjusted and confused children, whose "goo" does not glitter!

Christmas of course, is not all about glitter, snow and sleigh bells, and songs like, *Driving home for Christmas!*

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Every year, reading the Christmas story reveals its rich depth of meaning. Like all good stories, it has many layers to help us understand what is going on and why.

This year, reading Luke and Mathew's accounts of the birth of Jesus, it struck me, every bit of their narrative points us to **WORSHIP**.

We are really not prepared for this, because over centuries, we have misunderstood worship; we are stuck in Church and society's narrative of Christmas.

The starting point in **WORSHIP** is to understand whom we worship and why; if we don't, we end up doing the wrong things, sometimes for the right reasons.

Doctor Luke, who by profession was a systematic and methodical person, and a good investigator, starts by locking in the time and place of what is about to happen: the scene is set to the time when Herod was king of Judea (a common title for Kings, like **Pharaoh** in Egypt).

Luke then identifies the division within the tribe of Aaron and the Levites, the Abijah division, whose responsibility it was to serve at the Temple during the time Jesus was born, and Zechariah's name was drawn by "lot", to burn incense in the Holy of Holies.¹

Luke describes Zechariah and his wife Elisabeth as *"righteous before God, walking blamelessly in **all** the commands and statues of the Lord"* (1:6).

It is an interesting description for this couple.

To be righteous **before** God means, **God** could not find fault in the way they conducted their lives.

¹ see Exodus 30:1-9; Numbers 3:10; compare Numbers 16 and Hebrews 5:4

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Too often, in the Name of God and acting on God's behalf, **we** set up rules and regulations, systems of monitoring and supervising and directing peoples' lives, and **we** judge people on our standards and benchmarks.

We are told, Zechariah and Elisabeth "*walked blamelessly in all the commands and statutes of the Lord*"; they took God's laws seriously. They recognised that in order to be a people known as **Holy**, the only One they should learn to please is Almighty, Eternal God Himself.

Being "advanced in years", probably around 65-75 years old, people **were** talking about them. *They have no children! I wonder why God has not given them children?! Is it a generational curse? From his side of the family or hers? Or could it be that they themselves have done something we don't know about, and God has expressed His displeasure by not giving them children!*

We can be so cruel, acting as judge, jury and hangman at the same time. Ignoring peoples' feelings, community and society can destroy lives. *Fake news* does a lot of damage, and the increase in vile and violent, physical and online bullying, is symptomatic of this.

The human heart needs to be very careful and consciously watchful, not to play God.

So! What has this to do with **worship**?

Our world tell us that worship is the act of performing rites and rituals, and showing our devotion for a deity. Our natural tendency would then be to read Luke's account of the life of Zechariah and Elisabeth and pick out the fact, they **DID** all the right things to please God, and God was pleased with what they **DID**.

To believe this, is to totally misunderstand God!

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Christian worship is not about **doing** things to please God.

Let's go back into history and see what we find. Around 800 BC, God speaking to the people of Israel through the prophet the prophet Isaiah says, *"What makes you think I want all your sacrifices? I am sick of your burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened cattle. I get no pleasure from the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to worship me, who asked you to parade through my courts with all your ceremony? Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts; the incense of your offerings disgusts me! As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath and your special days for fasting, they are all sinful and false. I want no more of your pious meetings".*²

Two hundred years before that, around 1000 BC, David then King learned an important lesson in life. He prayed, *You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*³ (*broken* = surrendered; i.e. my will is broken and surrendered to God).

Twenty years or so before David made that prayerful declaration, the Prophet Samuel said, *"What is more pleasing to the Lord: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, or your obedience to His voice? Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams."*⁴

Christian worship is about choosing to live by God's standards and laws, about delighting in the person of God, and about feeling privileged and honoured that Creator God, the Author of life, chooses to want a relationship with you, and invites you into **His** life. This is **true** worship.

² Isaiah 1:11-13

³ Psalm 51:16-17

⁴ 1 Samuel 15:22

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Zechariah and Elisabeth did exactly that: they chose to be “*righteous before God, walking blamelessly in **all** the commands and statutes of the Lord*”; that God would be pleased with their lives because they **chose** to walk blamelessly in **all** the commands and laws of God.

The world is full of people living in this **awesome silence**, going about their lives in silent, joyful worship of God. They don't talk about it, they don't discuss which laws are relevant in our age; in their relationship with Eternal, Life-sustaining God, they know what God wants of them, and they live in obedience.

Even when we make a mistake, as Zechariah did by questioning the Angel Gabriel, *How can I be sure, what you said will happen, because **human evidence** points to the fact both my wife and I cannot conceive a child (1:18)*, God is gracious and merciful; He knows, in your heart, you are surrendered to God's plan, as Zechariah was.

For nine months, Zechariah was unable to speak, but when his son was born, and he declared the name of the child to be John, just as the Angel Gabriel told him he should, Zechariah vocal chords are released and he bursts into praise of God, unable to contain himself, such was his desire to worship God.⁵

The lives of two ordinary people, Zechariah and Elisabeth, living in the hill country of Judea, is typical of how most people across the world live their lives, surrendered to God and His plan, worshipping Him in **Awesome Silence**.

⁵ Luke 1:67-79

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In closing, let's not make the mistake of believing, living a quiet life in obedience to God, in the hills of Botley and Cumnor, or in the backwaters of Eynsham, or in the back woods of Tubney, has no impact on others.

When God did the impossible through Zechariah and Elisabeth, and their neighbours witnessed God's miracle, a sense of awe overcame them, and all who heard about what had happened, talked about it *"through all the hill country of Judea... and kept wondering in their hearts and minds, who is this special child? What is he destined for?"* (1:65-66)

As we start our Advent journey this year, let's recognise the power of worship in **awesome silence**. We all are part of a global and timeless congregation who worship in **awesome silence**, invited into a relationship with God. True worship takes place in the presence of God, where our doubts and fears, however expressed, are not judged, but give way to even greater worship!

Join me now in prayer, thanking God for the timeless testimony of the lives of Zechariah and Elisabeth. **AMEN.**