

This week we are WAITING.

We all know about waiting...

Waiting for Christmas!

For a partner; for a child; for a delivery; for results; for surgery; for answers; for peace....

What are you waiting for?

Our Isaiah reading is echoed in three of the Gospels. It would have been written over 600yrs before Christ's birth. And, what an example of waiting!!

This prophecy of John the Baptist preparing the way for the Messiah is very familiar.

But I want to concentrate on Zechariah.

Zechariah is old. His wife is barren and old too. So, this faithful couple are living with an underlying feeling of shame. And disappointed waiting. The culture in that time stigmatised those who were childless.

A recurring topic in scripture, Abraham and Sarah; Jacob and Rachel; Elkanah and Hannah; Isaac and Rebecca, and more.

Now for some background

King David had organised the priests into 24 divisions, and Abijah was the head of one of these priestly families. It is believed that there were 20 thousand priests in Christ's time!

That is why they used the lot system to determine who would get the enormous honour of serving in the temple in this way.

The lot to serve might fall to a priest only once in his lifetime.

For Zechariah, a Godly man, this was an enormous privilege, a once in a lifetime opportunity. Incense was burned in the temple twice daily, once in the morning and once in the afternoon.

To fully appreciate the enormous responsibility and honour, we will look at the ceremony in more detail. Please try and imagine it.

Before dawn hundreds of people gathered at the temple and would watch as the incense priest walked through the courts striking a gong like instrument.

At the sound, the Levites assembled and got ready to lead the people in songs of worship to God. Zechariah would have walked into the temple and entered the holy place flanked by the other two priests. One priest set the burning coals on the golden altar; the other arranged the incense, so it was ready to go. Then those 2 priests left the temple, and the incense priest was all alone in the Holy Place.

In front of him was the golden altar of incense, 18 inches square and 3 feet high.

On this small table lay burning coals with little wisps of smoke rising up, ready for the incense.

Behind the golden altar was a huge, thick curtain that hid the Holy of Holies, the most Holy Place, where no man could enter, except the High Priest once a year on the Day of Atonement.

The only light was provided by the golden lampstand.

When the praying people outside saw the other two priests walk out, they knew that the time to offer incense had come.

So, they bowed or knelt before the Lord and spread their hands in silent prayer for they knew that the incense priest was praying in that holy place, in the very presence of God for the entire nation. There was dead silence throughout the temple precincts for several minutes as Zechariah lingered in prayer.

The most important and solemn moment of his life.

The smoke drifting heavenward symbolised the prayers ascending to God's throne.

Please do look at the beginning of chapter 8 of Revelation which talks of this, and chapter 5v8.

The ritual, ensured that this was recognised as most important.

It does make me wonder if we really appreciate the freedom we have now after Christ's sacrifice; when the curtain was torn from top to bottom. It broke the barrier between all men and God.

We can experience the presence of God anytime, anyplace. We do not have to go through this rigmarole when we pray.

Have we lost sight of the astonishing mercy of God? And the privilege we take for granted.

Anyway, back to Zechariah, in the holy place, probably shaking but performing this important task. I am sure he prayed for the nation, release from the oppression of the romans; for the messiah to come and save them; but I wonder if he added other personal prayers. We don't know, but he probably had his eyes shut.

Did he hear the angel arrive? Did he sense the presence of another?

He was certainly filled with fear.

All the recorded appearances of angels in scripture tell us the first thing angels say is, 'do not be afraid!'

These beings, created by God to serve and worship, be messengers and fight Satan (Lucifer) and his armies, must be awesome, terrifying creatures. Beautiful and glorious.

Angel Gabriel is one of the most prominent angels mentioned in scripture.

His name in Hebrew means, 'God's hero'. He is primarily God's messenger of mercy and promise and appears four times in the Bible, and always bearing good news.

Angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that his prayer has been heard!

This is a surprise to him.

We do not know when he last prayed for a son.

I suspect it was quite a few years before.

At their great age they must have given up hope for a child.

After many years of passionate prayer they had become resigned to their situation and given up believing God for so much more.

But this is an example of 'nothing is impossible for God'.

We, too, doubt the love and care of God for us. But he always loves and His care never stops.

Zechariah must have been mystified by this proclamation..

And his 2 for 1 answer to prayer

A child AND the Messiah.

John would be a Nazarite, specially consecrated to God like Samson was supposed to be. He would be an Old Testament like prophet.

His name meant God is gracious; God shows mercy.

Zechariah's mystified doubt silenced him. This was all too good to be true and he didn't want the disappointment. He looked at the circumstances first, and what God could do last. Its tempting to think this is illogical..But if God is real, there is nothing illogical about putting circumstances before God. He was unable to share the great news and joy because of his understandable disbelief. He had to do more waiting.

Many years ago, I heard a Joyce Meyer talk on the radio and what she said really links with this talk.

Someone was talking to her about persistent prayer for a partner and how this prayer was not being answered. She was giving up hope.

Joyce questioned this girl' 'are you living expecting an answer?

Are you sleeping in the middle of the bed or to one side ?

Is there a space for another car in your drive?

The action of living in expectation by acting day by day with hope is an active prayer in itself.

What a challenge.

We, like Zechariah, do not want the disappointment, the let down, the sadness.

If God has promised, then we need to trust.

Persist in praying. Wait patiently...Ha!

That does require so much mercy from the holy spirit to aid us in the wait.
I have heard some reports of prayer going on for decades for a spouse to come to know and accept God in their lives. And it has happened. Eventually.
These encouraging and hope filled stories need to be remembered and talked about.
I need to hear them again and again. They help me to not give up. To keep praying.
To keep hoping. To keep waiting.

What are you waiting for?

Father, when we lose our patience, and hope,
keep us persistent in prayer, hopeful and patient.
May we live each day praising as we wait in expectation.
In Jesus name
Amen