

Advent Compline 2025 The Annunciation to Zechariah Luke 1. 5-24

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I know that this will happen? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he returned to his home. ²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived.

Yesterday, the 8th December, the Church celebrated the conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary; not the conception of Jesus but of his mother. It may seem to us to be a strange thing to include in the Church's calendar. But the point is that the Incarnation of the Son of God was not random or haphazard; it was part of a pre-

ordained divine plan. From her conception, St Mary already had this unique vocation.

Over these two Tuesday evenings in Advent, we will reflect briefly on two other aspects of this plan of salvation from St Luke Chapter 1: tonight, the annunciation to Zechariah and next week the annunciation to Mary herself.

We don't give much attention to the annunciation of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. But Luke's narrative is important. His Gospel begins not with Jesus but with his cousin, and with John's parents. So, we read of this godly and elderly couple, Zechariah and Elisabeth. Zechariah was a priest and Elisabeth was from a priestly family. In Christianity, priesthood is about vocation – what we are called by God to be and to do; but in Judaism, it was a birth-right, the extended family of Aaron, the brother of Moses. Priests served in the Temple in Jerusalem, but there were so many of them, they only did their Temple duties occasionally; and even then, particular priestly functions were decided by drawing lots as there were so many priests.

We are told that Zechariah and Elisabeth were very devout – in fact, they were *blameless* in their keeping of the Jewish Law. But sadly, they had not been able to have a family and they were now both elderly.

Zechariah was on duty in Jerusalem, and, wonderfully, was chosen by lot to offer the daily incense offering. This once-in-a-life-time privilege was the greatest honour. The golden altar of incense stood in the Holy Place, the most sacred part of the Temple; so it was a great honour to offer this sacrifice. Of course, the hand of God was in that lottery; what some people see as chance, others see the hand of God. And when incense was offered, people gathered in the Temple to pray – it was a good time to pray as God would be pleased with this sweet-smelling aroma ascending to heaven. Suddenly, Zechariah receives a divine visitation, the angel of the Lord. This phrase appears in the Old Testament to denote very special divine revelations. Whatever Zechariah saw, and the angel is not described, this awesome presence terrified him. But as so often in Scripture, the angelic response is 'do not be afraid'. And the angel tells him that God has heard his prayers. Again, we are not told which prayers – perhaps for a son; perhaps for the coming of Messiah and the consolation of Israel. Nevertheless, he is informed that Elisabeth will bear him a son, but this son will not follow the custom of taking his father's name, but will be called John, which means 'God is gracious'. And John's birth will bring great gladness to many and he

will be great in God's sight. His life must be specially dedicated to God which meant he would never drink alcohol. And remarkably, the angel says that even before his birth he will be filled with Holy Spirit – if you like, 'intoxicated' with the Holy Spirit. And it gets even more remarkable – he will enable many Israelites to turn back to God, and he will come as the promised Elijah, because the final book of the Old Testament, the prophecy of Malachi said that God would send Elijah back to earth to prepare the way for God's great Day. In short, John's vocation is not to be a priest, but to prepare the way of the Lord.

But Zechariah is not convinced. The texts suggests that he thought his age and his wife's age would make this impossible. The angel now names himself – 'I am Gabriel; I stand in the presence of God himself. I came to you with good news'; and that is same word as gospel. This is gospel news. But now, because you have met me with unbelief, you will be struck dumb until all is fulfilled, which is surely will be. Zechariah's unbelief could not thwart divine providence.

Now the incense offering usually was quite brief, and the waiting crowds wondered why he was in the Holy Place so long. And when he emerged, when the people would have expected him to give the priestly blessing, he could not speak, and they discerned that he had seen a vision. And so, he returned to Elisabeth and his home.

And Elisabeth duly conceived in her old age and wondered why God has so graciously looked upon her. And the sequel – well in due course the child was born. And when it came to name him – the relatives and friends assumed that he would be called Zechariah, but Elisabeth said 'No, his name is John'. They were astonished and looked towards his mute father, and Zechariah asked for a writing tablet and wrote – 'His name is John'. And we're told that immediately his tongue was loosed, that Zechariah was then filled with the Holy Spirit, and he broke into praise, and Luke places on his lips the canticle we know as the Benedictus which we say each morning at Morning Prayer. Zechariah now obeyed the angel's instruction and so his speech was restored.

St Luke is therefore showing the pivotal role of St John the Baptist in preparing the way for the revealing of Messiah. But already there are contrasts; John's conception, though remarkable, was by human agency, Jesus' conception was supernatural; John will be filled with the Spirit, but Jesus is conceived by the Spirit; Zechariah did not believe the good news and so by being struck dumb was unable to speak the good

news until fulfilment; Mary believed the message of Gabriel and submitted herself to God's call; John was called to live and minister in the wilderness; Jesus would preach in the towns and villages and in Jerusalem itself.

Tonight, our prayer ascends to God like incense. We sit in this Temple and open ourselves to the divine Presence. We listen for God's voice. We rejoice that we too are chosen to be bearers of gospel news. We seek through our lives, our prayers, our love, to prepare the way of the Lord.