



Parish of Finchampstead and California

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

27 APRIL - 2 MAY 2020

INTRODUCTION

This week's Bible passages are taken from the NT readings set for Morning Prayer each day. It seems strange so soon after Easter to return to Luke's pre-Christmas accounts, but this is the beginning of a series reading through the whole Gospel which lasts until August. The Thoughts that follow the day's reading are based on the verses in bold.

MONDAY - Luke 1:1-25

¹ Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³ I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

⁵ 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 a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³ But 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. ¹⁴ **You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for 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. ¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ With 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.'** ¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' ¹⁹ The 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. ²⁰ But 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.'

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²² When he did come out, he could not 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. ²³ When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵ 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

Thought for the day

Luke's is the only Gospel to start with an explanation of why it was written and how it had been researched (v1-4). Then he takes us back deep into the OT with Zechariah and Elizabeth, both through lineage and by reminding us of Abraham and Sarah, and the child of their old age. Angels as God's messengers make their appearance, emphasising events of significance (as at the end of the Gospel at Resurrection and Ascension) and Zechariah receives the message that he is to be the father of a latter-day Elijah (v13-17). While we perhaps think of Elijah as one of the great host of OT prophets, Zechariah would have known him as the prophet, the one who was carried into heaven in a chariot of fire, not dying in the normal way, the one who would return in God's own time. And this was to be his son John who, just like Elisha in the OT, would receive the spirit and power of Elijah (see 2 Kings 2:1-18). In what ways are we, as followers of Jesus, called to be prophets in the world?

TUESDAY - Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one; The Lord is with you.' ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² **He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.**' ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵ The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸ Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Thought for the day

The conception accounts of John and Jesus run in parallel, sometimes converging, sometimes contrasting. Elizabeth was past normal child-bearing age, Mary had barely reached it. The description of her child's destiny (v32-33) was even more remarkable than John's. But Mary's initial reaction, like Zechariah's, ignored that and focused on the practicalities - 'How can this be?' So the angel explained how God's power would do what was necessary and Mary consented - 'Let it be with me according to your word.' Probably most of us will never have an angel's visit, but God often has messages for individual Christians. It's up to us whether we listen, and up to us whether, like Mary, we respond.

WEDNESDAY - Luke 1:57-80

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for

joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ **He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.**

⁵² **He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;**

⁵³ **he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.**

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Thought for the day

The two accounts converge here with the older woman Elizabeth being submissive towards the younger one Mary, prefiguring the relationship between John and Jesus. Then Mary declares her great song of praise, the Magnificat, with more than an echo of Hannah's song when she handed over her son Samuel to God's service (1 Samuel 2:1-10). In verses 51-53, the Magnificat becomes counter-cultural, if not subversive: the proud, the powerful, the rich are all brought down, the lowly and the hungry lifted up. Jesus made the same point often enough (for example in the blessings and woes - Luke 6:20-26) and Paul also (see 1 Corinthians 1:26-29). It would be good to think that our experience with coronavirus might make us less tolerant of injustices and inequality in our world.

THURSDAY - Luke 1:57-80

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' ⁶¹ They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ **Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.** ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸ 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'
⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he
appeared publicly to Israel.

Thought for the day

Just like Mary's, Zechariah's song of praise is full of OT quotes and allusions. In the later verses (76-79) he addresses his new-born son, describing the way in which he will witness to the people and prepare the way for the Lord. I wonder how I would react to regaining my ability to speak after nine months. I'm full of admiration for Zechariah who moved directly from silence to praising God. Presumably he then reverted to a more normal mode of conversation. Are we too reticent about praising God and thanking him for all the good things he has done for us?

FRIDAY - St Philip and St James - James 1:1-12

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

² My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,
³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; ⁴ and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

⁵ If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. ⁶ But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; ^{7, 8} for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

⁹ Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, ¹⁰ and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

¹² Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Thought for the day

Do you remember the occasion right at the beginning of his reign when Solomon had a dream in which God invited him to ask for whatever he wanted? Solomon asked for the wisdom of a discerning heart. God was so pleased with his request that he gave him also the riches and honour he might have asked for but didn't. Wisdom is still under-rated in our world and yet I suspect we all appreciate it when we come across it. But right at the

beginning of his letter James writes that it's something that followers of Jesus ought to aspire to. Not only that, but those who ask in faith will receive it from God, as Solomon did.

SATURDAY - Luke 2:21-40

²¹ After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.

²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law,

²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles

and for glory to your people Israel.'

³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Thought for the day

When this passage is read as the Gospel for the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple (Candlemas), it always comes as something of a surprise to discover that Mary and Joseph were amazed at what was being said about Jesus' future. It's as if all that had gone before in Luke's Gospel, let alone in Matthew's, has already been forgotten. But surely that can't really be the case. Perhaps it was the extension of the salvation message to the Gentiles that struck them so forcibly. Or maybe it anticipates the bitter-sweet words that Simeon utters in verses 33-35. In many countries, Christians know what it is to be 'opposed' by persecution and for their souls and bodies to be as if pierced by a sword.