

Sunday morning December 23rd 2018 at CBC

Sermon outline: Luke 1:57-80

The birth of John the Baptist

On Sunday mornings over the last few weeks, we have been focussing our sermons on the gospel of Luke which is one of the two (out of the four) gospels which describe the events around the birth of Jesus.

This morning, we come to a birth narrative – not merely an announcement that a birth is going to happen, but actually the event itself. It is the birth of ... John. But shouldn't it be Jesus?

Readers of the gospel, such as ourselves, might be forgiven for asking, 'why do we need to know about John?'

To find the answer, let's ask what might appear to be a rather strange question. Does our country have any future certainty that God will keep a promise to us that he has previously made in our history?

[1] THE ABSENCE OF HOPE IN THE WORLD

When you think about that question, you realise that the answer is 'no'.

We have no collective understanding that God has ever intervened in our country in the past to promise us that a day will come when he will in some sense step personally into our history and lead us into better days.

And this has been true for every country in the world, except one. For it has been in Israel that God has been pleased to act uniquely, doing in that country's history things that have not

been done anywhere else. And those things have come to fruition in the events that our described in Luke's gospel, events that took place in Israel and which arose of out Israel's history and heritage. And unless we 'go' to Israel, as it were, we shall not understand the Christian message to which those events must lead us.

[2] THE PRESENCE OF HOPE FOR THE WORLD

So we turn from the absence of hope to the presence of hope. This hope arises from God and in the verses that we are considering this morning it is God, not John, who is the focus. If we are to find any solid hope in this world, it will come from God or it will not come at all.

[a] Hope comes from the God who plans

What happens here is part of a much bigger plan, a much wider picture. These events were happening as part of a plan instituted by God long ago. We can see how far back Zechariah locates God's plan. He refers to what God had promised 'long ago' [1.70] and more specifically he refers to Abraham [1.73] who every Jewish person recognised as the founder of their race. His story starts way back in Genesis 12.

We often try to interpret events in our lives, asking ourselves what God is doing. And frankly, the honest answer is that we simply do not know. We struggle with that, and our faith takes a dive. But there are certain events, in real and space and time, to which God has specifically and openly attached his name and purpose. And it is those events (where there is no doubt that God is at work) that are intended to strengthen our faith. It is to those events that we must look. And many of

them are to be found in the history of God's dealings with Israel and, thus, the events that unfold in Luke 1.

[b] Hope comes from the God who intervenes

This is really to underline a point we have already noted. The events being described in these verses are specifically said to have occurred by God's direct intervention.

[i] – the birth of John

This is a clear and direct intervention by God into the family life of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

[ii] – the naming of John

If family and cultural traditions had been followed – and that was the expectation of friends and neighbours – John would have been named after his father. But he was not! Both his father and mother insisted: "His name is John." This was God's specific instruction.

[c] Hope comes from the God who inspires

The moment Zechariah confirms his son's name he is freed from his affliction and he speaks, under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a word of prophecy such as had not been heard in Israel for 400 years.

Under the inspiration of the Spirit of God Zechariah rejoices in the fact that, in the birth of John, the Lord is fulfilling his promises made to Israel in the past. He promised that he would come to his people to save them and, crucially, *"enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days."* [1.74-75]

The Christian message that John would, in a certain sense, introduce into the world is uniquely inspired by God. It is not made up by fallen human beings. Zechariah could never have said the things he said on his own. God spoke through him; he was a true prophet.

[d] Hope comes from the God who forgives

Where is all this going?

John is to be in effect the last in the line of the OT prophets, and the bridge from the old covenant agreement that God made with Israel and the covenant that he made with Christian believers, Jews and Gentiles alike, who form what the apostle Paul called 'the Israel of God', the new covenant community.

The hallmark of this community is in verse 77. John's role will be to point his generation, and ultimately all generations, to the coming of the Lord in the person of Jesus Christ who will give his people (all those who come to believe in him) *"the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death to guide our feet into the path of peace."* [1.77-79]

The question raised by Zechariah's prophecy in the minds of all those who read it must surely be, 'Is this where I am? Can I identify with these things in my own heart?'

May the Lord enable us all to reach this point through faith in Christ!