

Zechariah's encounter with the Angel

'During the rule of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest assigned service in the regiment of Abijah. His name was Zechariah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron. Her name was Elizabeth. Together they lived honourably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God. But they were childless because Elizabeth could never conceive, and now they were quite old. It so happened that as Zechariah was carrying out his priestly duties before God, working the shift assigned to his regiment, it came his one turn in life to enter the sanctuary of God and burn incense. The congregation



The Annunciation of the Angel to Zachariah, William Blake, 1799/1800. The Metropolitan Museum of Art - Public Domain

was gathered and praying outside the Temple at the hour of the incense offering. Unannounced, an angel of God appeared just to the right of the altar of incense. Zechariah was paralysed in fear. But the angel reassured him, "Don't fear, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you — many will delight in his birth. He'll achieve great stature with God. "He'll drink neither wine nor beer. He'll be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he leaves his mother's womb. He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God. He will herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics—he'll get the people ready for God." Zechariah said to the angel, "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman." But the angel said, "I am Gabriel, the sentinel of God, sent especially to bring you this glad news. But because you won't believe me, you'll be unable to say a word until the day of your son's birth. Every word I've spoken to you will come true on time—God's time." Meanwhile, the congregation waiting for Zechariah was getting restless, wondering what was keeping him so long in the sanctuary. When he came out and couldn't speak, they knew he had seen a vision. He continued speechless and had to use sign language with the people. When the course of his priestly assignment was completed, he went back home. It wasn't long before his wife, Elizabeth, conceived. She went off by herself for five months, relishing her pregnancy. "So, this is how God acts to remedy my unfortunate condition!" she said.' (Luke 1:5-25)

A Reflection

'Your prayers have been heard'

In the burning of incense to offer the prayers of the people, alongside the sacrificed animals, Zechariah's long awaited prayer is answered. What an extraordinary encounter. Zechariah in his older age was chosen by lot that day, for the first time in his life, to go into the holy temple and offer incense. In the smell and smoke of the incense an angel appeared.

God was working his purposes out.

400 years since the last word from God was spoken through the prophet Malachi, the angel came to announce not only were Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers being answered, but the words of God through Malachi were being fulfilled. God had told the people through Malachi that he would send a messenger to prepare the way for the Lord. And today the angel announced that this was now about to take place. 400 years of silence from God and today, the first announcement that God hadn't abandoned his people. Not only were Zechariah's prayers heard but also the prayers of the people.

God was working His purposes out.

I wonder how it feels for you when you pray but it doesn't seem your prayers are answered. When you lift things to God and it seems like He's not heard. When you are alongside someone suffering but your prayers don't seem to make any difference. What do you do. Waiting is hard, especially when we can't do anything about it. Zechariah and Elizabeth had never been able to conceive, it brought shame to them as a couple, and there was nothing they could do. But yet we see time and time again that God *is* working his purposes out. He hears our prayers. We cannot understand or see the workings, or even have control over the timing. Sometimes it won't happen in our lifetime on earth. But the angel's message to all of us in the temple that day was clear....God is working his purposes out, your prayers have been heard.

Can you receive that message afresh today? Even if there are difficult and trying circumstances? When it all makes no sense? In the haze of the incense of the heavenly encounter God is speaking to us all...



Your prayers have been heard. God is working His purposes out.

A Prayer

Lord God, as the coming of Christ was first made known to Zechariah, we pray for Christ's coming afresh in our hearts this Advent.

As Zechariah's prayers for a longed awaited son were answered, help me to trust that you have heard my prayers even when I don't understand how they will be answered.

Replace any doubts I have with faith, so I can wait patiently for You to work Your purposes out, in Your way and in Your time.

Amen