

## 28<sup>th</sup> November 2021 – Morning Service

### Jesus is coming: What is your response? - Zechariah doubted

Rev Alan Combes

#### Advent Candle

We light this candle to remind us of Zechariah – who doubted God’s message of Good News. Lord Jesus you came as our shepherd to walk with us in the midst of our doubt - help us to follow your path as people of faith and hope.

As we light our advent candle - **Light of the world, shine on us.**

As we prepare for Christmas time - **Light of the world, shine on us.**

In this world of pain and darkness - **Light of the world, shine through us.**

To all the people who don’t know you - **Light of the world, shine through us.**

Jesus you are coming again - **Light of the world, light the way.**

In our service here today - **Light of the world, light the way.**

#### StF 185 – Sing we the King

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| 1) Sing we the King who is coming to reign;<br>Glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain!<br>Life and salvation his empire shall bring,<br>Joy to the nations when Jesus is King:              | 3) Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin;<br>Doubt shall not darken his witness within;<br>Hell has no terrors, and death has no sting;<br>Love is victorious when Jesus is King: |
| Ch) <i>Come let us sing: Praise to our King,<br/>Jesus our King, Jesus our King:<br/>This is our song, who to Jesus belong:<br/>Glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.</i>                       | 4) Kingdom of Christ, for your coming we pray;<br>Hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day<br>When this new song your creation shall sing:<br>Satan is vanquished, and Jesus is King:      |
| 2) All shall be well in his kingdom of peace;<br>Freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;<br>Justice and truth from his sceptre shall spring;<br>Wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King: |   |

Charles Silvester Horne CCL No. 515642

#### Prayer of Adoration (by Caryl Micklem)

Lord God, we adore you because you have come to us in the past. You have spoken to us in the Law of Israel. You have challenged us in the words of the prophets. You have shown us in Jesus what you are really like.

Lord God, we adore you because you still come to us now. You come to us through other people and their love and concern for us. You come to us through men and women who need our help. You come to us as we worship you with your people.

Lord God, we adore you because you will come to us at the end. You will be with us at the hour of death. You will still reign supreme when all human institutions fail. You will still be God when our history has run its course. We welcome you, the God who comes. Come to us now in the power of Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen**

#### Introduction to Advent series - how do people respond to Jesus?

Advent is a unique time of waiting and preparation for Christ’s coming at Christmas. To wait with expectation is to give space for God to speak to us afresh through these familiar stories.

This Advent some of our churches across the circuit will be following a series that explores individual stories of some of the prominent characters portrayed in the scripture events prior to Christ’s birth, looking at how they reacted to the news...

- Advent 1: Zechariah – doubted
- Advent 2: Mary – trusted
- Advent 3: Herod – feared
- Advent 4: Joseph - stood firm
- Christmas Day: Jesus – comes near... what is your response?

Christ's coming into the world evokes a whole range of human reactions. May we together pray that this Advent will encourage us to reflect on our own response to Christ through the lens of these rich events.

### **Song – Servant King we wait on you**

Servant King we wait on you,	Love that will not let us go,
Watching for that special day,	Born in humble human form,
When your glory will descend to us we pray.	May our hearts respond with faith, in you O Lord.

*Alan Combes CCL No. 515642*

### **Reading: Luke 1:5–23**

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

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 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. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 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. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 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." 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." 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. 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."

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 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. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

### **Meditation - Written by Nick Fawcett**

I didn't believe it was possible, not any longer, not after all those years of trying. There had been so many disappointments, so many false alarms, and we'd given up, ages ago. It still hurt occasionally, of course it did. We love children, both of us; and we'd have given anything to see that little crib occupied, that lovingly embroidered shawl wrapped around our little baby. We shouldn't have tempted fate - it was stupid, we know that now - but at the time we never anticipated any problems, and we just couldn't help looking forward, planning for the future: two bright-eyed young things with so much before us, or so we thought.

She used to cry, Elizabeth, after her hopes had been raised only to be dashed again. And although I'd try manfully to comfort her, assure her next time it would be different, all the while my heart was breaking as much as hers. But then she started to torture herself, feeling she'd failed me somehow, that it was all her fault, even God's punishment for some unrepented sin. I don't need to tell you she was wrong, but it was hard work making her see that - so much extra heartache before she finally accepted it was just one of those things.

But then I had this dream - at least I think that's what it was. I was in the temple and suddenly a man appeared telling me we were to have a child, ordained by God and consecrated to his service, so he said. Well, I dismissed it, of course; a cruel trick of the mind, that's what I thought, but the next thing I knew, there was Elizabeth, a look of wonder in her eyes, blurting out the news that she was expecting! Well, you could have knocked me down, you really could! I honestly thought she was having me on, that the strain had finally got to her. But I couldn't tell her - I'd been struck dumb since that dream of mine. So I just stood there, trying to humour her. I'm glad now I couldn't speak, pour scorn on the idea, for she was right.

A child, at our time of life! I still marvel every day I see him, our wonderful little boy. And I know now never to lose hope for with God nothing is impossible. But there's an odd twist I have to mention, for though our baby brought us joy, more than words can ever express, somehow Elizabeth seemed even more excited by the birth of her cousin's boy - Jesus the name was - always claimed he was more of a miracle than John, though I can't think why. She's no nearer understanding this crazy world of ours than I, but when she looks at Jesus sometimes I get, this strange feeling it's in him, rather than John, that she's looking for an answer; he she hopes will one day make sense of it all.

### **Reading: Luke 1:57-66**

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

### **Prayer**

Living God, we do not understand all your ways or know all your thoughts. There is so much in our lives that troubles and confuses us - so much hurt and pain we cannot begin to make sense of. Yet we know that in Jesus you have shared our humanity, experiencing not just the good in it but the bad. You understand what it means to be hurt, to endure suffering, to face even death itself. As well as our joys you have shared our sorrows. Living God, we thank you for the assurance this gives us - that whatever we face you will be with us in it. **Amen**

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

## StF 169 – Come thou long expected Jesus

- 1) Come, thou long-expected Jesus,  
Born to set thy people free,  
From our fears and sins release us,  
Let us find our rest in thee.
- 2) Israel's strength and consolation,  
Hope of all the earth thou art,  
Dear desire of every nation,  
Joy of every longing heart.
- 3) Born thy people to deliver,  
Born a child and yet a king,  
Born to reign in us for ever,  
Now thy gracious kingdom bring.
- 4) By thine own eternal Spirit  
Rule in all our hearts alone;  
By thine all-sufficient merit  
Raise us to thy glorious throne.

Charles Wesley CCL No. 515642

## Reading: Exodus 3:1-14

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you.'"

## Reflection- Zechariah Doubted

The Elizabeth/Zechariah story is often missed as one of God's key preparatory events to the birth of Christ. They are a faithful couple – 'righteous before God' – but older and without children. One day Zechariah receives the privilege of entering the sanctuary of the Lord and an Angel appears and tells him that he and his wife will bear a son who will bring many to the Lord and prepare people to receive the Lord. And in the face of this amazing moment – Zechariah doubts... He trots out questions and uncertainties... 'how will this happen, how will I know, we are just too old!'

Let's be clear, doubt is OK, it can be a healthy response that tests and question the integrity of a situation. Doubt is common even amongst our own faith communities but it is not something we should fear, suppress or dismiss in ourselves or those we meet. The great servant Moses expressed doubt of God on many occasions – in particular at the burning bush, standing on Holy Ground, in the face of a calling from almighty God he looks for more and seeks further assurances.

Revd Moir in his sermon on doubt comments: *What I have come to value is a faith that is so rooted in the deep, deep love of God that it has no fear of asking difficult questions or rethinking attitudes or even of discovering wisdom in other traditions. Doubt is fine and a healthy part of an open trusting relationship with God who is big enough to listen to our awkward questions, hear our doubt, bring comfort and will not disappear because of it.*

Sadly some Christians seek to tackle doubt by trying to tie down exactly what the Christian faith is. We see many organisations that have their own very carefully defined statement of faith designed to differentiate themselves from another group who believe something almost exactly the same but different enough that boundary lines must be drawn. This is the language and process of fundamentalism. This narrowness of mind misses the point. God is beyond our understanding and definitions, there are many ways to read scripture and experience shows that doubt is not dispelled by statements of faith but by faith in action. As James 3:13 reminds us: *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*

So whilst doubt can be a good and healthy test I also sometimes wonder why God made Zechariah dumb for a while? Perhaps God sought to stop Zechariah spreading his doubt. As we know rumours and doubt can also be dangerous things. They can grow out of proportion and lead to terrible outcomes. For example in our current context those who deny Covid and doubt the importance of being vaccinated put themselves and those they love at huge risk. Whilst honest doubt is fine, aggressive doubt can be insidious, it damages trust, breaks relationships and divides communities. Zechariah asked God 'how will I know that this will be so?' The word he uses is the same Greek word used in John 1:10 *He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.* Its meaning is rooted in how will I 'realise/recognise/learn/understand' and so KNOW with confidence that what I am being told will happen? The meaning of this word bridges both the head and the heart.

The key for me is the Angel's response in v19 *"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you..."* which is itself a recasting of God's classic Old Testament response to Moses' doubt in Exodus 3:14 – *"I am who I am"*. We perhaps see that God's response to doubt is not restatement of the case, nor is it continued argument and the further presentation of facts or reasoning – God makes doubt powerfully and directly a matter of faith.

It's not uncommon that when people meet Jesus they doubt; 'who is this man, how is he relevant to me and my life?' Whilst we should always be prepared to take time to argue, define and explore the nature of salvation – perhaps we can also learn from how God responded to Zechariah and to Moses, with a more deep rooted statement about faith and the nature of God. As we enter Advent – a time of waiting for the coming of God in Christ – just like Zechariah, we carry with us our own doubts and uncertainties. And God say – that's OK. BUT much more than that, God says 'I am who I am' – eternal, magnificent, gracious, just and loving. I pray that we/you, may experience and know the presence of the living God in your daily life and so be able to set your doubts aside and be assured by grace through faith, that God is with us today and always. Amen

## **StF 682 – God of grace and God of glory**

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| 1) God of grace and God of glory,<br>On your people pour your power;<br>Crown your ancient church's story;<br>Bring her bud to glorious flower.<br>Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,<br>For the facing of this hour.             | 3) Lo, the hosts of evil round us<br>Scorn your Christ, assail his ways!<br>Fears and doubts too long have bound us;<br>Free our hearts to work and praise.<br>Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,<br>For the living of these days. |
| 2) Heal your children's warring madness;<br>Bend our pride to your control;<br>Shame our wanton, selfish gladness,<br>Rich in things and poor in soul.<br>Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,<br>Lest we miss your kingdom's goal. |  |

## Prayers of Intercession – Advent Sunday prayers by David Adam

As we begin another Church Year let us give thanks to God that he has made us, that he loves us and that he comes to us. O God, you are our Maker: you give us life, you give us love, you give us yourself. Help us to give our lives, our love and ourselves to you. Keep us alert and aware of your presence, that we may meet you each day and know that you come to us in grace and in love.

L: Come, Lord Jesus      **R: Come, our Saviour and our God**

Lord, as you come to your Church, help us to reveal your glory. Grant that we may show your grace and your goodness in our lives. We thank you for the grace and goodness revealed in Jesus Christ and that we are enriched in him. We remember churches that are struggling against the darkness of evil, of opposition, of apathy. We remember especially Christians who are being persecuted for their faith.

L: Come, Lord Jesus      **R: Come, our Saviour and our God**

As we pray for your world, we remember those who are seeking to bring peace and goodwill among all. We pray for those involved in war or the threat of war. We think of those caught up in earthquakes, famine or flood.

L: Come, Lord Jesus      **R: Come, our Saviour and our God**

Lord, let your presence be known in our homes and our actions. May people be thankful for us and our care of all that is around us. We pray that you will show yourself to us through our loved ones and friends.

L: Come, Lord Jesus      **R: Come, our Saviour and our God**

We remember all whose lives are darkened by pain and distress; all who are struggling with doubt and despair; all whose faith is shaken by what is happening around them. We pray for members of our community and friends who are ill at this time.

L: Come, Lord Jesus      **R: Come, our Saviour and our God**

God our Father, your grace has been given to us, in the gift of eternal life and in your abiding presence. We pray for all who are departed from us, for friends and loved ones in the fullness of your eternal kingdom. We rejoice with them in the gift of life and your love. Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

## StF 188 – There's a light upon the mountains

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| 1) There's a light upon the mountains,<br>and the day is at the spring,<br>When our eyes shall see the beauty<br>and the glory of the King;<br>Weary was our heart with waiting,<br>and the night-watch seemed so long;<br>But his triumph-day is breaking,<br>and we hail it with a song. | 3) He is breaking down the barriers,<br>he is casting up the way;<br>He is calling for his angels<br>to build up the gates of day:<br>But his angels here are human,<br>not the shining hosts above;<br>For the drum-beats of his army<br>are the heart-beats of our love.  |
| 2) There's a hush of expectation,<br>and a quiet in the air;<br>And the breath of God is moving<br>in the fervent breath of prayer:<br>For the suffering, dying Jesus<br>is the Christ upon the throne,<br>And the travail of our spirit<br>is the travail of his own.                     | 4) Hark! We hear a distant music,<br>and it comes with fuller swell;<br>'Tis the triumph-song of Jesus,<br>of our King, Immanuel:<br>Zion, go now forth to meet him;<br>and, my soul, be swift to bring<br>All your finest and your noblest<br>for the triumph of our King! |

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## Blessing

May we go into the world with the assurance of faith that Christ goes with us, that the Holy Spirit goes before us and within us. May God bless you and keep you and make his face to shine upon you and grant you peace. **Amen**