

Luke 1:1-25

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[0 : 00] It seems as if the whole point of Christmas has become not thinking about the point of Christmas.

! Christmas is about Santa Claus and presents and reindeer. David Cameron said a couple of years ago about Easter, the true meaning of Easter is family.

You might as well have said that in a Christmas message as well. Christmas decorations go up in September already and it's all about Santa Claus and reindeer and all of those things, isn't it? We made up stories for our enjoyment, but perhaps it's more sinister than that.

Perhaps those things and the tinsel and jolly songs and even the food under which our table is grown do more than that. They cause us to lose sight of what or who Christmas is really about.

[1 : 09] Now I know we're not quite in the season that the church calls the Advent season, officially about the four Sundays before Christmas. But I think if you look in the shops, they've been in their Advent season for a long time, haven't they?

And let's be honest, we might already be making plans for Christmas and buying presents. But are we so distracted by all of these things that the real reason for Christmas, the birth of Jesus, becomes just another element in a very disordered and jumbled and chaotic time of the year, as we hurtle towards Christmas.

A series of things that all form part of our idea of Christmas. And we seem to have lost our way in thinking about what it really is about.

There's a scene in the movie, *Love Actually*, where the daughter very excitedly tells her mother, we've received our parts in the nativity play. And her mum obviously asks her, oh so what part did you get?

And she says, the lobster. Second lobster. And her mum, knowing a bit about the story of Jesus' birth, was puzzled. There was more than one lobster present at the birth of Jesus.

[2 : 30] Duh! There have been many stories about and around the birth of the person of Jesus. Who exactly is this man who was born in Galilee in Palestine 2,000 years ago?

Now this author Luke, who wrote this gospel account that we've just read from, he was a doctor and a historian, and he wanted to write down an ordered account.

An account with facts and dates and people and events, which can be verified and tested and proven to be right. But he didn't just want to write us a history textbook.

An interesting biography of this man called Jesus. He tells us in verse 4 why he wrote it, doesn't he? He says in verse 4, writing to Theophilus, who he dedicates this book to, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Now just a side note here, certainty doesn't mean we always feel 100% like we are 100% confident. It doesn't mean we'll never have doubts or questions.

[3 : 44] Anybody who knows children know they're 100% confident one day they like peanut butter, isn't it? And the next day when you offer them a peanut butter sandwich, the reaction you get is as if you were skinning a cat alive.

They're 100% certain the next day they don't like peanut butter. Now we're not that different. Our emotions and our feelings do vary. The confidence, the certainty that Luke wants us to get here is from looking outside of ourselves.

At what really happened. At who Jesus is. And I think in our day, in our time, in this day and age, more than ever, we need to look at, very closely, at the facts and the person of Jesus.

We think we know the stories, we're so familiar with them, and it gets, like I say, so jumbled in with all these other stories that the world tells us about Jesus, and then about Christmas. I think we need this well-ordered account of Luke more than ever.

So I hope in the next couple of weeks leading up to the carol service, we'll be looking at Luke 1, at the start of this Gospel, about how Luke wants us to understand Jesus' birth, and the events leading up to that.

[5 : 00] And I hope we'll discover a new certainty as we look at this chapter of this Gospel of Luke. We will cut through some of the fluff that goes along with this time, and see who Jesus really was.

Now, I mean, it's interesting when we look at this chapter, that Luke starts with people who seem to have nothing to do with Jesus. A priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, they're an older couple, we know that, and we know that people who know God and love him and follow his commandments, they're not without sin, but people who live a life following God.

And yet there's something missing from this picture. They do not have a child. Now, many people who long for children know the pain of that longing, and some of us here may know that or have known that ourselves.

And it was no different for Zechariah and Elizabeth, I'm sure. I think we're much better now, and understanding and empathizing with people who want to and cannot have children, but in those days, even more so than with us, not having children was seen as God having removed his blessing from you, his favour.

So they were not... The picture does have an element missing, but for them caused a lot of pain. Now in the wider context though, Israel was itself also not in a good place.

[6 : 38] For 400 years, God has been silent to them. No prophets speaking to Israel. They're under Roman occupation. I mean, these were the days of Herod, the king of Israel, after all, as we read.

They were longing for a promised saviour. The saviour God has promised to his people since the day it all went wrong in the Garden of Eden. And it's been a long, long wait.

And it didn't look like things were looking up. So I think we can speculate about whether Zechariah was praying about their personal circumstances, or about Israel's predicament.

Maybe both. But what we know from Luke's researched account is this. On this day, the pinnacle of his priestly career, the day he is chosen to go in to offer the incense of all the priests, this one day that he personally gets to do that, he got more than he bargained for in that temple.

An angel appears to Zechariah. The angel Gabriel, no less, we learn. And he has a message for Zechariah. The angel standing at the right-hand side of the incense altar, and just an aside here, just note the little details there as we go along.

[8 : 03] I mean, we know exactly where the angel was standing when he appeared to Zechariah. This is only the kind of thing you can know when you've spoken to the people involved. This angel was there to tell him, their wish for a son, and their longing for Israel's salvation, was wrapped up in a way that Zechariah couldn't even have imagined.

This angel promises Zechariah a son. But it's not just any son, is it? This son has been named by God before he's even conceived.

John, meaning God has favour. That's from the Hebrew, which came into the Greek for John. And he'll be a delight to his parents, and many people will rejoice at his birth.

He'll be great before the Lord, he'll be filled with the Holy Spirit from his birth, and he'll cause many people to return to God. His work will cause the restoration of relationships between parents and their children, and turn foolish people to wisdom.

Now, of all the kind of birth announcements that you've read in your life, I don't think we've seen one quite like this, have we? Because of him, people's relationships with God, vertically and with each other, horizontally will be restored.

[9 : 29] It's an incredible announcement. An incredible announcement about who this son is going to be, this promised son. And I mean, this is more than what Zechariah and Elizabeth wanted, even, isn't it?

This is the child they have longed for, and more. And Zechariah blows it completely. How shall I know this?

For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. Now, there are echoes of the Old Testament here. If you know the Old Testament, Abraham said something very, very similar, didn't he?

When he was told by the angel of the Lord that he and his wife Sarah were going to have a son, through whom God would bless all the nations of the world. And people sometimes say, if God spoke to me, I would believe he exists.

Or even, if God sent an angel to speak to me, I would believe he exists, and I would listen to him. And I think we see from the Bible that that's not necessarily true.

[10:38] I think Zechariah shows us something about all of us. Even someone like Zechariah, who walks blamelessly before the Lord, who keeps all of God's commandments, can disbelieve God's promises when we don't want to believe him.

What this angel promised to Zechariah, what he promised him about his son, was more than what Zechariah could believe God could do. But especially as a priest, he should have known how God has done this time and time again, this exact thing, bringing life where life seemed impossible, giving children to people who, humanly speaking, would have been unable to have them. And how God has always kept his promises. And how this promise of a son to come can be trusted too. But he, and I think we can have some sympathy with him, because we're rather like that too, aren't we, if we're honest, diminishing what God can do in our, in our minds. He trusts what he can see and what he can sense more than what he has heard from God. And he's disciplined for his unbelief.

But fortunately only temporarily. And even then, as another sign of God fulfilling his promises, that you will be, the angel tells him you will be silent until the day when these things are fulfilled.

[12:14] But yeah, one thing we see there, isn't it, that we shouldn't fool ourselves. Listening to our own feelings over God's promises to us rarely work out better for us than having listened to what God promises to us and believed him.

And mercifully, God does what we wouldn't. He's merciful to Zechariah there. He disciplines him, but in order to help him understand, rather than God writing Zechariah off and said, you don't believe my promises, I'll find someone else who does.

Despite our unbelief, God remains faithful to us. And Zechariah becomes the father of John the Baptist, who Jesus calls the greatest prophet who ever lived.

Incredible mercy from God in this story. But that's what the whole Christmas story is about, isn't it? God doing more than we can imagine.

Christmas isn't like the make-believe Christmas stories of Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. It isn't even about presents or meals or family. Those things are nice things.

[13:32] But it is about God doing a miracle that we couldn't even have imagined or believed if we had thought of it ourselves. Luke's cutting away at our presuppositions and our fantasy and our imagination because all of those things come up short.

He wants us to see in this ordered account that he wrote that this is as real as it gets. And that's why he gives us all of this detail in this account.

This detail about Zechariah and Elizabeth's families and where the angel was and the brutal honesty here about the characters that we meet, isn't it? And that's why he starts with this story, I think.

Because this promised son, John, who would do such great things, is being put on the stage to prepare us as he was preparing Israel for Jesus' birth, for greater things to come, for the even greater miracle to come than this miracle child, John, being born.

He's reminding us of the fact that throughout history, God has done miracles, providing children where people thought they could not have them because they were too old, like Abraham and Hannah, the prophet Samuel's mother, and others.

[14:50] He reminds us that God promised right at the end of the Old Testament as well to send a prophet like Elijah, who performed incredible miracles and turned the people back to God from worshipping idols and false gods.

Someone who spent time away in the wilderness before coming back to be God's voice to a people who turned their backs on him. And we'll see more of that in the rest of this chapter.

He's giving us the background, isn't he? He's preparing us to see God's incredible work in Jesus Christ being born for what it is.

He's reminding us of all of these promises that came before this promise of a son. This promise isn't out of the blue. It isn't random. It isn't unconnected to what God has been doing throughout history. He's setting the stage, and it's like he's saying, you think this John is great? Wait for it. There's more. Because if you read carefully, he says, doesn't he, in verse 17, that not just will this John be like Elijah, the prophet, he would go before the Lord their God.

[16:01] Zechariah was fearful at the sight of this angel, but he didn't realize what the right response was. The people immediately realize, when he goes out, that something had happened, that he'd seen a vision in the temple.

Now Elizabeth's wife recognized in some ways much better what had happened, doesn't she? She's the one who says, verse 25, Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me to take away my reproach among people.

Elizabeth's experience is, in a nutshell, what Christmas is really about. In the promised son that Israel had been waiting for, the son through whom God would provide salvation for all people who believed in him, he's done exactly this, hasn't he?

He looked upon us, and he took away our reproach, our disgrace, our very sin. And unlike Elizabeth, it wasn't disgrace in the eyes of people, because we're all in the same boat.

It's much greater than that. He took away our reproach in the eyes of God, so that, like Zechariah and Elizabeth are described, we can walk truly blamelessly before God.

[17:22] Now if you and I look at our own lives, that might seem impossible. You might sit here today and think, there is no way that God can forgive me for what I have done.

And we might well be tempted to ask, like Zechariah did, how can I be sure of this? Luke's answer is to show us this Jesus, this true promised son, what he did, how he was born, how he lived, how he died, and how he rose from the dead and descended into heaven.

The question for you and me this Christmas is really simple in many ways. Are we taking God at his word? Are we going to allow ourselves to see what is there, what is real and what is true, or are we going to be tempted to see this obscured Christmas we will see, if we look at the shop windows and the Christmas ads, rather than the account God gave us in his word, so that we can be certain about these things.

Maybe, unlike Zechariah, we need to talk less and listen more, especially when we might feel we are very familiar with the Christmas story.

Ironically, speaking less and listening more might make us more confident, not less. And this glorious certainty, this faith rooted in real events, in real places, in the lives of real people, is what Christmas was for.

[18:54] A promised son finally come, a God who looked upon us, and a promised son who takes away our reproach. Let's be a people prepared for God, a people ready to hear his voice, and believe his promises this Christmas.

Amen. Let's pray. Let's pray.