

Luke 1:1-25

Preached in Wednesbury 4th July 2010

2nd reading: Isaiah 25:1-9

Last week we began looking at Luke's account of Jesus. Luke begins by insisting that his account is true and trustworthy. Read it, listen to it, and you find certainty.

The introduction, however, isn't over. We have 82 verses to go until Jesus turns up. But with the story of John the Baptist, his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth, Luke writes to get us excited. "God is back on the scene," says Luke. "He's at work. Things are happening. Guess who's coming!"

In this passage we're going to see:
Promises being fulfilled.
Pattern for our future.

First: PROMISES BEING FULFILLED (5-22)

There are two stories going on here. There is the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a childless couple in their later years, and God gives them a child.

The personal story involves promises. Verse 13ff the angel delivers God's promise of a son, and the drama is that Zechariah doesn't believe Gabriel's words. He doesn't take the LORD at his word. That's unbelief. Faith is: "you say it, I'll believe it and live as if it's true."

God makes a promise and keeps his promise. You'll have to read the

rest of the chapter to see that happen. That's the personal story. There is a bigger story of which they are one chapter. The story that began when God made the world, the story of God saving a people for himself.

There are lots of little clues here to show that this story of a small family is big part of that greater story.

I don't know if you watched the latest Dr Who series. It was the season finale last week. One of the enjoyable parts of watching the finale is seeing how earlier storylines made more sense. Small details from early episodes suddenly became significant parts of the overarching plot.

It's the same with good books and the best movies. And it's the same with the best book, the Bible. Let me list you some of the clues that connect Zechariah and Elizabeth to the rest of the Bible.

One obvious one is linking Zechariah and Elizabeth to Abijah and Aaron. They are part of a wider family and nation.

Elizabeth says that her pregnancy has taken away her disgrace, echoes Jacob's wife Rachel (in Genesis) when the birth of Joseph takes away her disgrace.

The angel appearing to announce a birth reminds us when an angel appeared to predict the birth of Samson. Samson, like John the Baptist, was not allowed to drink wine and was filled with the Spirit.

Verse 17 "He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children" is a quote from the prophet Malachi.

Now, it doesn't matter if you spotted these or not. The more you read the Scriptures the more connections you notice, and there are always

more to discover.

The point is: this is the next chapter in the big story. Since the last prophet in the Old Testament there has been some 400 years of silence. God has been missing (it seems) for 400 years. Imagine that. You're God's people but the last time God spoke was in the year 1610. That's a long time ago! What about God's great promises to drive out evil? What about his plan to bring blessing to the world?

Everything seemed to have stopped. But now God is back in action. The appearance of the angel to Zechariah tells us that God's promise-plan is now full-steam ahead!

PAUSE.

Why does that matter for us? Put simply: God makes promises to us. We need to know they are certain. I might make a promise to you, that on Wednesday I will come and completely redecorate your house, for free. I might make that promise, but I can tell you, don't take me at my word. It's a hollow promise, because I already have 3 meetings on Wednesday and I'm no good at decoration.

But what if I made that promise, and I could show you dozens of people that I made a similar promise to, and they could all tell you that I turned up on time and did a fantastic decoration job. Well then you might believe me. With that evidence you could take me at my word.

God has made a promise that one day he will come and redecorate the whole universe.

Isaiah 25 gives us a picture of that day. Jesus Christ will return. Sadness and sorrow, tears and turmoil – these will be driven out. No more death. No more evil. No more injustice. This is the world that

God promises.

The question is: can you trust him? Is it a hollow promise or can you take him at his word?

Yes. Zechariah and Elizabeth's story shows God keeping his promises. The whole Bible shows God making promises and fulfilling them.

So you can trust him about the promise of a better world when Jesus returns.

This passage we see promises being fulfilled. We also see a pattern of that better world. A pattern of our future.

Second, PATTERN OF THE FUTURE (25)

“The LORD has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown me his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

Think about Elizabeth's disgrace. Verse 7 “they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well on in years.”

For many people today, not being able to have children feels like a never-ending agony. Friends and neighbours and other family members celebrate a new arrival, while those who cannot have children smile on the outside but are dying on the inside.

It must have been worse for Elizabeth, in a society in which not being able to have children made you a nobody. A barren woman might be viewed as good as dead. She experienced disgrace, social isolation; she would feel as if she was at the very bottom of society.

But the Lord shows favour; he looks kindly upon her and gives her a

child. Her disgrace is taken away.

This passage is not a promise that upright, blameless Christian women will always be given children. No, it's a pattern. When God shows his favour, disgrace is taken away.

Many many followers of Jesus experience disgrace.

Around many countries, if someone converts to Christianity they bring shame on their family. It is a disgrace.

Christians are often overlooked, ignored, sidelined. In one area of India it might be that they are not allowed to buy food from the village shop. In the workplace in this country it might mean a follower of Jesus is the butt of jokes, is overlooked for promotion. Around the world it is common to find Christianity spreading among those who are low, the disgraced. In the Untouchables caste in India. The slums of Brazil.

In your life there will probably be things that bring, or could bring, disgrace. Maybe you feel a deep shame for something in the past. Something you have rarely, or never spoken about, yet it haunts you and the thought of others knowing terrifies you.

Imagine your whole life was displayed on the walls of this church. Everything you have done. Everything you have ever said. Everything you have ever thought. What would it feel like if your friends and family could walk around the room and see all your secrets. I tell you, if that was me, I would be deeply ashamed.

But here's the good news. A day is coming when God will come to fix the world. To you, to me, to followers of Jesus around the world – God says a day is coming, a day of his favour, when he will take away our disgrace. All our guilt, all our shame, all our brokenness, all our mess – will vanish.

Imagine a Christian from the untouchables caste in India. Her whole life others look down on her; she is given menial jobs that no one else

wants. Her health is poor, her appearance not worth mentioning. No one in government is interested in her. No big name in society is interested in her, they barely notice as they drive past in their chauffeur driven car. But she knows Jesus. Her story has been grafted into the Great Story.

A day is coming when all her disgrace will be taken away. Her body will be resurrected. She will shine with the glorious Spirit filling her completely. If people could see NOW what she will be THEN, they would fall down and worship her. The important, the rich, the powerful who passed her by – Jesus will say to them, “You are nothing. You have nothing. Depart from me you wicked people.” But to her, Jesus will say, “Welcome home. Great to see. Well done, good and faithful servant.”

A day is coming when God's people will shine with the very radiance of God. A day is coming when the humble believer will be exalted to the right hand of the Father, seated with Jesus on the Throne of Majesty. If your story has been grafted into Jesus' story, then his happy ending is your happy ending; his glorious victory and power will one day be your glorious victory and power. As Mary will say, later in chapter 1, “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty.”

Zechariah and Elizabeth show us promises being fulfilled. God's promise of a new world is certain.

They are also a pattern of our future. Elizabeth's disgrace was taken away. When Jesus returns, your disgrace will be taken away. Permanently. Together with all of God's people you will shine with everlasting glory and favour.

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