

To shine on those living in darkness

That day was a once in a lifetime experience, but not for the reason I had dreamed about most of my adult life.

All that week I was working at the very heart of our nation's life, in our capital city. And my workplace for those days is the most special place in that special city. It is on the highest point of the highest hill in all the land. It is a landmark for miles around, because it's built of white stone finished with pure gold. It gleams and glistens in the sun.

Parts of it are very ancient, but it was rebuilt in recent times by order of the King, and no expense was spared. Massive blocks of stone were used in its foundation, and the whole hill top flattened. He wanted to impress the rulers of the Empire, and he wanted the people to love him for rebuilding their Temple. Perhaps he wanted to earn favour with God himself!

But it takes more than gold and massive stone, more than wealth and power to win God's favour. It takes righteousness—justice and truth, mercy and love. And there was precious little of those around—in the heart of King Herod, or even in the hearts of the High Priests he appointed to the most sacred position in our religion. They were political appointees, and more concerned to ape the Greek culture of our conquerors

and to line their own pockets than to consider what pleased God.

Nonetheless, they do keep up all the ceremonies—the daily, weekly, monthly, yearly ceremonies and sacrifices. No expense is spared. Thousands of animals are slaughtered. The priests' garments and all our equipment are the very best.

And yet, at heart it is all empty. The Temple precincts are made up of a series of courts and buildings, each inside the other and, as you progress inwards, each more restrictive than the other—Court of the Nations, open to all; Court of the Women, open to all Jews, men or women; Court of Israel, open to Jewish men only; the inner court and Holy Place open only to priests; and the Most Holy Place, into which the High Priest alone can enter, and that only once a year on the great Day of Atonement, and not without blood.

And that is where the true emptiness lies. For many generations the Most Holy Place has lain empty. The most important part of all the Temple had been the Ark of the Covenant containing the Ten Commandments, with its golden lid and golden Kheroubim whose wings stretched from wall to wall. It was there on the golden lid (the place of atonement) that the High Priest was to sprinkle the blood of atonement in the presence of God. But the Ark of the

Covenant was lost generations ago, the Most Holy Place is completely empty, and the High Priest now sprinkles the blood on the bare rock of the floor. It is believed that the Ark of the Covenant was carried away to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, but never returned.

I am an ordinary priest in the great Temple in Jerusalem—one priest out of the hundreds in our division, and my division (that of Abijah), one of twenty-four. But I longed to be chosen for a very special task—to offer the incense on the golden altar and to pray for God’s blessing on the people. It was the nearest an ordinary priest is ever allowed to come to the Most Holy Place, as the altar is right before the huge curtain that hangs as a barrier before the very presence of God.

I had been waiting all my life for this. By this time I was already old, and sometimes I had thought I would never be chosen. All that day I was meditating on that long wait. And that reminded me of another long wait. All our sacred literature was pointing forward—forward to a time of great blessing, not only to ourselves but to the whole world. That blessing would come through the promised descendent of Abraham, the Son of David who would redeem us, set us free from our slavery, enable us to serve God in righteousness and lead us in the paths of peace. We had

been waiting a long time. O that he would come soon, was my prayer.

And all mixed up with that was another longing—a more personal longing—but a longing that was now in vain. I had always wanted a child, a son. But Elizabeth and I had no children. We loved each other dearly (and still do), and we prayed for a child, but the Lord did not see fit to answer our prayers. And by that time we knew he was not going to answer—or rather his answer was no—because Elizabeth was past the time for childbearing.

It was hard for us. I wanted a son to carry on the family name. But it was harder still for Elizabeth, as other women looked down on her as “barren”. She may have been barren in that sense, but not in every other sense that matters. She has been my help and support these long years, and she has always been as concerned to do the Lord’s will as I have been. Nonetheless, there were those who treated us as if we were under God’s judgement. That was hard to bear, particularly as few of them showed much concern for the things of God.

At times my mind became filled with fears. Perhaps we were also waiting in vain for the Son of David? Perhaps the Lord had abandoned us, because of our rebellion. Perhaps not for ever, but for another generation. After all it had been 400 years since we had

heard a word from the Lord through a prophet—the prophet Malachi. And his book had ended with the words “...or else I will come and strike the land with a curse”. Perhaps God’s curse was still upon us. I wanted to go and read what else Malachi had said, but that day I was too busy.

The section of us priests on duty that day had slept in the Temple the night before. We were up long before dawn and were bathed and dressed for the duties of the day—the morning and evening sacrifice. Every morning at dawn and every evening at three in the afternoon, a lamb was slaughtered, its blood sprinkled on the altar and the meat consumed on the altar of burnt offering. Only by such costly sacrifice could our sins be atoned for. And every morning and every evening, incense was offered on the golden altar, and the priest who offered it prayed for the people.

That morning I took part in my duties with all the others, but yet again another man was chosen by lot for the special task of offering incense. And then in the afternoon we all went about our appointed tasks until the moment for choosing the special honour. We all in turn put our hands into the bag and took out a stone and, to my astonishment, there in my hand lay the marked stone! I could scarcely take it in. Now at last in my old age, I had been chosen!

Most of what followed is a blur in my memory, until that moment when the others had withdrawn and I stood alone before the golden altar and the great curtain guarding the way into the presence of God. The room was bright with the light that blazed from the seven-branched lamp-stand. It felt indescribably solemn as I sprinkled the incense on the burning coals and watched the sweet-smelling smoke ascend to heaven. I started to pray, and never have I prayed like that day. I prayed that God would come to redeem his people, that he would glorify his name by setting us free and enabling us to live righteous lives.

Suddenly I stopped. You know that feeling you sometimes get that someone is watching you? A shiver ran down my spine. I lifted my eyes and there, to the right of the golden altar stood a person. He looked like a man, but no man was he. His face and his voice came from another world. He was neither young nor old. His face bore no marks of care, or shame, or fear, or doubt. While I was terrified, he was perfectly at ease.

“Don’t be afraid, Zechariah”, he said, “God has heard your prayers.” And I found my terror draining away, so I could concentrate on every word he said. His voice was as clear as a trumpet, as deep as the sea and as tender as a mother’s.

He said, “Your wife, Elizabeth, will give birth to a son, and you are to call him John. He will give you great joy and many people will celebrate his birth, because he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will never drink wine, but instead he will be filled with the Holy Spirit from before his birth.

“He will bring back many of the people to the Lord their God. He will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of the prophet Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn fathers’ hearts towards their children and turn the rebellious to the wisdom of the righteous—to make people ready for the Lord.”

I was flabbergasted! I could not take it all in. It was beyond belief. This was impossible! I had reconciled myself to now never having children. So I blurted out, “How can I know this will happen? I am an old man, and my wife is past the time of child-bearing.”

For a moment he looked severe. He said, “I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God. God has sent me to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent, you will not be able to speak until the day all this comes true, because you did not believe what I said.”

I fell to the ground and wept at my foolishness and sinful disbelief. I don’t know how long I lay like that,

but when I looked up, the angel Gabriel was gone. I struggled to my feet and tried to think straight. What was I to tell people? Then the thought struck me: Would I be able to tell them anything? Would I be able to speak? I opened my mouth to finish my prayer, to confess my sins and seek God's forgiveness, but no words came! No matter how I tried, I could not speak! And then it dawned on me: If Gabriel's words about my being silent had come true, his words about my having a son would also come true!

I thanked God in my heart and hurried out to bless the people, who had been waiting and wondering why I was taking so long. Of course I could not speak and made signs to my fellow priests that this was so, and they completed our duties.

Afterwards they crowded round me asking me questions, but of course I could not answer. Suddenly I had an idea. I got a scroll of the Book of Daniel and pointed to the place where Gabriel is mentioned, where he explains to Daniel how long it would be before the Anointed King would come. They started discussing and arguing all about whether it could have been Gabriel I had seen, but all I could think about was the coming of the Anointed King—the Son of David.

At the end of my week of duty at the Temple, I returned home to my town in the hill country. Elizabeth

met me at the door. She had been waiting for me. She threw her arms around me and kissed me and, leading me into the house, started asking me all about my journey and, without waiting for an answer, started telling me all about what had happened since I was away. Then suddenly she stopped.

“You haven’t said a word!” she exclaimed, “You’re even quieter than usual. What’s happened?”

And so I had to go through the whole rigmarole again, making signs and trying to make her understand. Ever the practical one, she fetched me a little wooden tablet and in the soft wax I wrote down what had happened. She was astonished at the mention of Gabriel, and then when I wrote, “He said we are to have a son”, she leapt up, pulled me to my feet and danced round the room, singing, “We’re going to have a son!” I smiled and laughed at her antics (although no sound came out) and held her tight.

For the next few weeks were happier than we had ever been. I spent the days reading the Scriptures in the synagogue, especially the Prophets Daniel and Isaiah and Malachi, and the Psalms, and at night I would write things down for Elizabeth, and she would recite whole passages of Scripture which she had memorized. And the more we thought about it all, the more excited

we became. We were convinced God was about to do great things.

And yes, a little while later Elizabeth came to me and said, “It has come true—what Gabriel said—I am expecting a child! The Lord has done this for me. He has looked on me in his love and taken away my disgrace!” I held her tenderly and I wept for joy. We both did, we wept and laughed—well, Elizabeth laughed and I smiled! God had done for us what he had done for Abraham and Sarah long ago, and what he had done for Hannah, the mother of the great prophet Samuel who prepared the way for the coming of King David. And Gabriel had said that our son would prepare the way for David’s greater Son.

About six months later, we had a visitor. It was Elizabeth’s young cousin, Mary, from Nazareth in Galilee. As soon as she came into the house and called out her greeting, a remarkable thing happened to Elizabeth. Her baby jumped inside her! And suddenly she felt the Holy Spirit of God giving her words and she burst out, “God has blessed you above all other women, and how blessed is the child you will bear! Why am I so honoured that the mother of my Lord should come to visit me? As soon as I heard your voice, the baby in my womb jumped for joy! The Lord has blessed you, because you believe he’ll do what he said!”

I was astounded! Everything she said was amazing, but one thing stuck out above all others—“the mother of my Lord”. But I had scarcely time to think it out, before Mary started speaking and she spoke not like a young girl from Galilee, but like a prophet of ancient times. Don’t get me wrong. She was herself. It was her own voice and accent and mannerisms, but she too spoke as if from another world. Were we entering a new age - where, if men remained silent, the women would testify in words of wisdom and grace?

For in Mary’s words I heard the unmistakable tones of the Psalms of David, the Shepherd King. This is what she said:

“My soul gives all the glory to the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. For Almighty God has done great things for me. He shows mercy to all who fear him from one generation to the next. His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He’s scattered the proud and haughty. He’s brought down rulers from their thrones and lifted up the humble. He’s fed the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He’s helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful, for he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his children forever.”

I will never forget what she said, as I wrote it down soon afterwards. But that was nothing compared to what Mary had to tell us. Elizabeth was full of questions. She wanted to know what had happened and I listened avidly.

Just a few days before, Mary had a meeting with the very same heavenly messenger I had met in the Temple—none other than Gabriel, the angel of the Lord! And he told her she was going to have a son and she was to give him the name Jesus.

Elizabeth and I looked at each other in astonishment. This sounded so like what had happened to me! How I wished I could speak and ask her all about it! But I had to be content with Elizabeth's questions. To be honest I think Mary would have got on much better if my wife had not kept on interrupting her!

However, what Mary went on to say was even more marvellous. She said that Gabriel had said to her, "Your son will be great and he will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his forefather David, and he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

So this was it! The promise of the coming of God's great King was being fulfilled! The waiting was over—or very nearly!

But there was a problem—which Mary had seen right away. She asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.” And Gabriel didn’t strike her dumb! He explained, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.” And then just to encourage Mary, he said, “Look, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she’s now in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

“And what did you say?” asked my wife, because there was a second problem—the little matter that Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth. Mary said she had replied “I am the Lord’s servant girl. May everything you have said about me come true.”

“But what about Joseph?” burst out my wife. “Oh”, said Mary, “He’s all right now, he’s come round to the idea, but it took a visit from an angel in a dream to convince him. At first he was being very difficult—talking about breaking off our engagement—you know how men can be sometimes!” They both looked at me and laughed. How I wished I could have spoken then, but I could only glare at them! But I suppose they were

right. Certainly I had been much slower than Mary to accept what Gabriel had said.

Anyway Mary stayed with us right up to the time our son was born and she was a great help to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth was a great support to her. How gracious of the Lord to have brought them together, for there was no one else in the wide world who could have understood what they were going through.

Everyone was so delighted for us when our son was born. There was great celebration. But something was spoiling my joy. You see I thought that as soon as he was born I would have been able to speak again, just like Gabriel had said, but in fact I couldn't. I brooded on this every day and wondered what had gone wrong. Had I done something else to offend God? Was he displeased with me?

Then a week after he was born, the time came to name our son, and all our friends and relatives were saying that he should be named after me, Zechariah. Elizabeth said, "No! He is to be called John." This started an argument. People were saying, "There's no one in your family with that name!"

Then they started making signs to me to find out what I thought. It's funny—if you can't speak, people think you can't hear as well! I got them to give me my writing tablet and I wrote, "His name is John."

As soon as I did that, I found I could speak! And I too felt the power of the Holy Spirit and words of praise and prophecy poured from my lips.

“Praise the Lord, the God of Israel”, I said, “Because he’s visited and redeemed his people. He’s sent us a mighty Saviour from the royal line of his King David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago. Now we’ll be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us. He’s been merciful to our forefathers by remembering his sacred covenant he made with our ancestor Abraham. We’ve been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live.”

I took my son John in my arms and said, “And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to shine on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us in the path of peace.”

Everyone was awestruck, and news spread throughout all the hill country of Judea. And people were asking, “Who is this child going to be?”

I know who he is going to be, but I know too that I will not live to see that day. But it will be a glorious day, the day the Prophet Isaiah foresaw:

“Prepare the way for the LORD in the desert. In the wilderness make a straight highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain made low. The glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all the world will see it.

“Behold your God! Look, the Sovereign LORD is coming in power. He tends his flock like a shepherd. He carries the lambs in his arms, close to his heart, and he gently leads their mothers.”

Luke 1

Isaiah 40