

KINGTON BAPTIST CHURCH

ONLINE NOTICE BOARD - 54

Advent Sunday

An angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah. Zechariah was overwhelmed by fear. The angel said, 'Don't be afraid. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son, and you will name him John. You'll have joy and gladness. He will be great man in the purposes of God.' Zechariah questioned the angel, 'How do I know this will happen? I am an old man, my wife is old too'. The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel! I stand in the presence of God. I have been sent to tell you this good news. What I've said will happen. But because you didn't believe my words you'll be unable to speak until the child is born.' (Luke 1.11)

The angel's response to Zechariah makes it clear that Zechariah's question – *How do I know this will happen?* – sprang from disbelief. Zechariah's response was an inability to believe not just the words of the angel Gabriel but the word of God. Gabriel replied in two parts to Zechariah. The first part of Gabriel's reply is to confront Zechariah's disbelief head on: Zechariah said, 'I am an old man'. Gabriel says, 'I am **Gabriel!**' By stressing his authority, in contrast to Zechariah's incapacity, Gabriel makes clear that Zechariah's disbelief is preposterous: 'You think you're a problem? You're forgetting I'm *Gabriel!*'

The second thing Gabriel says raises his response to a higher level. Gabriel has emphasised his dignity as an angel of the Lord. Now he emphasises his authority and the trustworthiness of what he says because *he stands and speaks in the presence of God*. Gabriel is in the presence of God. Zechariah is in the presence of Gabriel. So Zechariah is also in the presence of God! His disbelief is rejection of God's word in God's presence. Zechariah thinks that his great age is a problem too big for God to overcome!

Zechariah sees an angel but is oblivious to the fact that he's in the presence of God. God's presence was *real* but *invisible*. God spoke through Gabriel. Gabriel brings God's message to Zechariah. Gabriel's words have the authority of God. It's the same for us: *Where two or three meet in my name, I am there in the midst.* (Matthew 18.20) The Lord, though invisible, is really with us. God calls, equips and sends those who come to us in his name. Their word is not theirs alone but God's word: '*...when we preached his message to you, you didn't think of the words we spoke as being just our own. You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it was.*' (1 Thessalonians 2.13) The word of those who speak in God's name comes with God's authority. This isn't personal to the preacher. The preacher himself doesn't have the authority of God, only their words have that authority – and then only when those words are truly God's Word. We have an obligation to believe and respond to the word of God that is brought to us, however it comes to us. But we must be sure what we are hearing is

the Word of God; we're to 'test the spirits, to see if they are of God': *Don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.* (1 John 4.1)

Test before you trust. Don't be too critical, don't be too credulous. How may we know; what is the test? *If they teach what God had taught in his word, and if their lives level-up with his requirements, and if what they teach agrees with what had been taught by those who were true apostles.* (Albert Barnes) We must ask: Do their words echo the Bible, or do they spout their own bright ideas? The acid test is whether or not what we hear is what we read in Scripture as it is understood by the tradition left by the apostles. (Acts 17.11)

Zechariah's meeting with the angel Gabriel is a lesson in doubt, doubt that led to disbelief. Doubt that God can do what he says he will do – because I'm too big a problem for him! – too old, poor, weak, unworthy, sinful, impatient, afraid and so on and so on. As if God didn't know all that before he gave me his promise!

In contrast, Mary's meeting with the angel Gabriel and her meeting with Elizabeth are lessons in faith, obedience and trust.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. He said to her ... 'Your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Behold, the Lord's handmaiden; be it unto me according to your word.' (Luke 1.27-38)

Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaimed to Mary, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why is this to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who believed that the word of the Lord spoken to her would be fulfilled.' (Luke 1.41-45)