

## **Genuine News**

### **Luke 1. 39-45 (46-55)**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

So we're almost there! Tomorrow is Christmas Eve so if you're not ready now then don't worry about it – just chill, have a glass of fizz and a mince pie and let it all wash over you. I'm sure, knowing you all that your homes are like Mary Berry's or Delia Smith's on the eve of Christmas Eve – all calm efficiency. The mince pies made, the cake iced, the turkey ready, the sprouts already on to boil!

Most important of all, that great Christmas tradition that I remember so fondly from childhood, the Christmas Edition of the Radio Times laid out by the sofa. It is a sign of the times now but I have to say that the Christmas Radio Times is not what it was- mainly because Christmas TV is not what it was. When I was young, you had two choices of what to watch on TV; BBC or ITV. Then along came BBC2 and you needed the Radio Times because planning the Christmas viewing was getting more complicated.

Now, it's a waste of time as the choices are endless. I counted up on our TV the other day and we now have access to 781 channels at any one time and that's without the stuff we've recorded on Sky Plus or the endless piles of DVD's. TV viewing is no longer a major social event where the whole nation watched the same thing at the same time – like the Morecambe and Wise Christmas show or Carol's from King's on Christmas Eve.

Even that bastion of British broadcasting, the News is not what it was. Time was when, you would have to make sure that you were in front of the TV at either 6 or 9 to ensure you knew what was going on in the world. Not any more. Again, my survey of our TV showed that there are no less than 17 news channels beaming into our home and not just a few times a day but 24 hours producing what is now called 'Rolling News'.

The problem with this is that if you have to provide news items for 17 channels 24 hours per day then it's not really news any more. The clue is in the word. News implies that what we are hearing is 'new', something that we've not heard before and something that is important enough to interest us. Well, I don't know about you, but there are very few times when I sit up in front of the news and think, 'Goodness, I never knew that before! I must nip next door and let them know'.

All of this endless news coverage on TV, the press and on line sort of undermines the news for me. When you have a genuine piece of news, you want to share it. You can't wait to tell someone else, you want to be the first to let someone else know but in this day and age that is virtually impossible. And the things that we tend to want to share are either

really bad news or really good news – that’s what excites us and that is how our story from Luke’s gospel begins today.

We’re in Palestine before the birth of Christ so we don’t have to worry about 24 hour rolling news, or Google or even the early edition of the Manchester Evening News; here news, whether good or bad, needs to be shared, person to person and Mary has some amazing news and she is bursting to share it.

Just before our reading, Mary, a poor teenager was living a very normal life. She was engaged to a man named Joseph and was, presumably, starting to think about their future life together when everything changed. The angel Gabriel came to her and told her she was to bear the Son of God. She couldn’t understand how this could be as she was a virgin but the Angel assured her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her. To Mary’s eternal credit, instead of running a mile, she uttered those immortal words, “Let it be to me, according to Your word”.

And what did she do then? Well she needed to tell someone – to share this amazing news and who better to tell than her dear cousin Elizabeth, who was, herself 6 months pregnant. Not only that but Elizabeth was a truly devout Jew and the wife of Zechariah, one of the priests of the Temple. If anyone was going to make sense of what had just happened then surely it would be Elizabeth.

Elizabeth’s own pregnancy was almost as amazing as Mary’s. Elizabeth and Zechariah had been trying to have children for many years but with no success and they’d now resigned themselves to a childless existence as they both felt well past the age for having kids. Now the priests at the Temple, of whom Zechariah was one, drew lots to see who would have the honour of entering the heart of the building to burn incense twice each day and it happened on this particular day that Zechariah’s name was drawn.

He duly entered the holy place whilst the rest of the priests waited outside praying and while he was there an angel appeared to him standing on the right of the altar. To say that he was shocked was an understatement.

As Luke says, he was gripped with fear but the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid Zechariah, your prayer has been answered. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to give him the name John. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Now, I don’t know about you but I have a real fondness for the passages in the bible that show we humans for what we really are and especially the ones that show our doubt and confusion as it somehow legitimises my own weakness and frailty in faith. I always think I was well named as Thomas, tat most human of disciples and here we have another wonderful human doubter, the priest Zechariah.

Unlike Mary's interaction with the same Angel Gabriel 6 months later and her selfless acceptance of God's will, Zechariah is frightened and confused and oh so human. Instead of meek acceptance Zechariah blurts out, "How can that happen? I'm an old man and as for Elizabeth, well she's no spring chicken" (or words to that effect!). Gabriel obviously felt that a little backbone wouldn't go amiss with this doubting priest and so he tells Zechariah not to be so cheeky. "I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of the Lord and I have been sent to give you this good news"

Just to make sure that Zechariah was properly put in his place, he then strikes him dumb until all of this would come to pass. Zechariah then staggers wild eyed out of the temple and into the arms of his waiting priests who were just wondering what on earth was keeping him so long. Unable to speak, he gestures wildly until they get the message that he must have seen a vision.

He finally returns home and over the coming weeks and months, sure enough Elizabeth is pregnant and, unlike her doubting husband, she is elated at the work of God. "The Lord has done this for me." She says, "In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people".

This is Elizabeth's miraculous news and Mary's is even more wonderful as she arrives breathless into the Judean hills where she enters Zechariah's house and sees a blooming and expectant Elizabeth.

Now for those of you who have been following the General Synod debates on women bishops over recent weeks, there follows a passage of scripture that, for me, gives lie to all those who would quote a scriptural basis for a male dominated episcopate. If God had truly wanted women to 'know their place' then why, at this most momentous moment when the spark of Christ's life on earth begins, would he have given all the big parts to the women?

Zechariah is struck dumb and silent. We hear nothing from Joseph but first Elizabeth and then Mary make two of the most profound and poetic statements of faith that you will find anywhere in scripture.

As Mary enters Elizabeth's house, before she even has a chance to breathlessly tell Elizabeth her news her cousin, filled with the Holy Spirit shouts out, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favoured that the Mother of my Lord should come to me. As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her shall be accomplished."

From one astounding declaration of total faith from Elizabeth we move straight to another from Mary in the words that are now so familiar to us that they are a fundamental part of our liturgy, the words of The Magnificat. Mary begins by stating in wonder what she feels about her new life as the future mother of Christ.

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me and Holy is His name."

She then carries on with a wonderful song of praise and hope and a declaration of her faith in God.

"His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich empty away. He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers."

We all know what came next. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months, which would have been up to the time that Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist – when we see the completion of poor old Zechariah's story. When the baby was 8 days old, all the friends and neighbours came for the circumcision and the naming ceremony. They were preparing to name him after his father Zechariah when Elizabeth spoke up and said "No, he is to be called John".

They all dismissed this as nonsense and turned to Zechariah for a bit of common sense. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote on it, "His name is John" at which point his mouth was opened and he began to speak to the amazement of the assembled company.

As for Mary, her story is the one that we know so well; the trip to Bethlehem, the stable, the birth, the shepherds and the Wise Men. Old news for us you might think but think again. You may have seen that a recent poll by Theos of Britain's understanding of the nativity story is not what you might imagine. They asked 4 fairly straightforward questions – you can try these for yourselves now.

- 1 Where was Jesus born?
- 2 Who told Mary she would give birth to a Son?
- 3 Who was Jesus' cousin?
- 4 Where did Joseph, Mary & Jesus go to escape from King Herod when Jesus was a young child?

27% of people had no idea that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, rising to 36% in the 18-24 age group. 27% did not know that an Angel had come to Mary. 52% did not know that John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. 78% did not know where Mary and Joseph fled to to escape from Herod. In total, only 12% of people questioned got all 4 questions right.

So the story that we think of as old news, is maybe not as well known as you might think and our duty to spread this good news is as great today as it ever was. The vast majority of people in this country have only a

passing knowledge of the Christmas story and an even greater number I suspect have no real idea of what it means to them in their lives.

The amazing and wonderful Good News that so excited Mary and Elizabeth so that they uttered those wonderful declarations of faith is still as real today as it was then but does it excite us in the same way. Do we as Christians really feel that transformative power working through us and spilling out from us such that we can't keep this Good News to ourselves. Elizabeth and Mary were energised by the Spirit. They wanted and needed to share their Good News with each other and with the World and it should be the same for us here in Bunbury in 2012.

So this Christmas time, as we get absorbed in the minutiae of Christmas, keep in your thoughts that breathless excitement in the life of the young Mary that led her to declare her faith in the Magnificat. Let that spill out from us and remind us of the truth of Christmas and the real Good News that we need to share with anyone and everyone we meet. If you can't find your own words then borrow someone else's. Here are Betjemen's – they always work for me.

And is it true? and is it true?  
The most tremendous tale of all,  
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,  
A Baby in an ox's stall?  
The Maker of the stars and sea  
Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,  
No loving fingers tying strings  
Around those tissued fripperies,  
The sweet and silly Christmas things,  
Bath salts and inexpensive scent  
And hideous tie so kindly meant.

No love that in a family dwells,  
No carolling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single Truth compare -  
That God was Man in Palestine  
And lives to-day in Bread and Wine.

**Tom Crotty**