

## Sermon 20 November 2022

### Readings: Luke 1:68-79 and Luke 23:33-43

When we read the Bible and think about our faith, we all do so from a particular perspective. Our upbringing, culture, education, employment, and our circle of friends all have an influence on the way we think about everything, including religion.

In the first reading we heard today from Luke's gospel the first few verses of Zechariah's prophecy reveals his context, that is the things going on around him within his world. In Zechariah's lifetime, Jerusalem and its surrounding territories had become part of the Roman Empire, conquered sixty-three years before Christ's birth. The Jewish people were forced to accept whoever the Roman Emperor decided to appoint as their king, so Zechariah's prophecy simmers with the underlying tension of oppression and political domination.

Against this backdrop of political tension, Zechariah's prophecy begins with praises to God for bringing about the reinstatement of the nation of Israel. Zechariah then outlines why this victory will be wonderful; once God's people are saved from their enemies they can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness all of their days. We know that Zechariah was a Temple priest who served in the holy area, just in front of the of the Holy of Holies. What was the Holy of Holies I hear you say? Traditionally it was the part of the temple that contained the Ark of the Covenant and therefore God's holy and terrifying presence, and I mean terrifying; a priest went in there only once a year on the Day of Atonement, to ask God for forgiveness for the whole nation, a slate wiped clean kind of forgiveness, but if the priest was not carefully and ritually prepared, people feared God's shining presence would strike him dead. Worship in the Temple was the be-all and end-all for Israel and the people's reverence for God kept God's presence hidden away behind a curtain right up until Jesus' death upon the cross, when it was torn in two.

The temple curtain torn in two is a little detail mentioned in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It symbolises Jesus destroying the barrier, the wall, the divide between us and God; we do not need to fear God because in Jesus we see God's nature fully revealed as love, mercy, and acceptance. However like Zechariah our context can influence the way we see things. There is a sinister and dangerous assumption we can cling to because of the way our society operates and that is the assumption that we are not good enough.

In our world you have to be good at something, we expect our kids to excel academically, or to be talented athletically or artistically, we admire people who make a lot of money or amass thousands of followers on social media, and some of us finding all of that too hard will decide instead to be very good at being very bad. Because of our context, this image and status driven world, we can mistakenly assume that we also need to be good, need to be something great, before God will love us.

I ran a youth group for several years that grew in numbers due to my own children bringing along their school friends. Most of the kids were non-churched and it was a real struggle trying to get even five minutes of devotional time into the two hours of fun and games. A

friend of mine who came along to be the second mandatory adult in the room, who btw has mixed feelings about the church and Christianity once asked me, “why are you always trying to make the kids good”? I have thought about that question a lot over the years, and I realise that my desire to see a better world inhabited by kinder, nicer people had hijacked the beauty of the good news. I regret that I had not realised that these kids needed to hear the message that God is good, that God is all grace, tender mercy, and unconditional love, that God loved them. Surprisingly, although the beginning of Zechariah’s prophecy sits within his own context, and addresses a particular situation in a particular time, the ending expresses the goodness of God, for all times. In words that are both beautiful poetic we hear the most incredible description of the good news,

Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

God’s love breaks upon us like the morning sun and there is nothing we need to do other than say yes, to approach the warmth of that light without fear, or feeling as if we need to be worthy, or good enough before we bask in it and soak it all in.

We all sit in darkness at times, and we are all in the shadow of death no matter how hard we try to ignore that fact, what is it they say, death and taxes, the only two certainties of life, but here at the end of Zechariah’s prophecy we move from a local time bound context to a universal one. Richard Rohr puts it this way, “Divine Love is not a reward for good behaviour, as we first presume it to be; it is a *larger Life, an energy and movement that we can participate in*—and then, almost in spite of ourselves—we behave differently.” Our feet are guided into the way of peace, (that’s where the change in a society stems from, not moralising, as per my youth group days). “It seems few of us go there willingly. For some reason, we’re afraid of what we most want.”

Friends, don’t be afraid to let God love you. If you are still not convinced that God loves you unconditionally, if you still think you need to be good enough or somehow proven worthy listen again to Jesus’ words from the cross. First we hear Jesus ask God to forgive ‘those who do not know what they do’, this is nothing other than amazing and boundless, tender mercy. Secondly we hear Jesus grant one of the criminals life together with him in paradise, today, right then and there. This thoughtful criminal does only three things, he recognises and admits his own mistakes, he recognises that Jesus is blameless and unfairly condemned and simply asks to be remembered.

Just as Zechariah’s prophecy expands from local concerns in the first few verses to a universal one, Luke’s entire gospel expands to include everyone, outcasts, the sick, the poor, the lowly, and here in today’s second reading, in case we are still not convinced of the light of God’s tender mercy comes down to meet us where we are, we see a common criminal receiving grace just because he sees Jesus for who he really is. Jesus is the one who breaks the down the wall, or the curtain between us and our incorrect assumptions about God.

God is a hard concept to fathom, we will either fear God and put God in a box that is rarely opened, or wrongly assume that God demands more from us than we are capable of, and then still put God away in a box, because it all seems too hard and too confusing. That if we

don't know Jesus. Thank God for Jesus! He is the light that breaks upon us, not because we have proven ourselves worthy, no, simply because God loves us. We can relate to Jesus because he was one of us, we can relate to him because he is the personification of the tender mercy of God. He is not and was not like a worldly king wielding aggressive might and power, and in the eyes of society he was not successful or widely popular, he did not come to guide us into material prosperity or happy ever after lifestyles, he did not come to judge or moralise, he did not come to start an institution full of legalities and doctrine, he came to start a movement like the sun breaking upon the landscape at dawn, transforming us through love, if only we are willing to go there.

There is nothing God requires of us except the simple act of saying yes, yes I believe, yes I will follow you, yes I am worthy because you have said so. And the good news is we enter into the new life in Christ, right here, right now, today. **Amen.**