

## Homily – Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2018 – 6 pm

One of the most helpful things that has been suggested to me when reading the Bible is to try to figure out what the writer might be trying to tell us. Think, for example, about this evening's gospel reading, that beautiful story of the angel Gabriel's visit to Zechariah to tell him that his wife, barren for many years and clearly not in the first flush of youth, is to bear a child.

Luke has already set out his purpose. He is seeking to present an orderly account of recent events so that Theophilus might know the truth. So far, so straightforward. Except that the matter of truth isn't straightforward, is it? Your main interest may be in the factual accuracy of this account and whether and how these events actually took place. You may find yourself exercised about whether it is really possible for a woman of advancing years to conceive – exactly how old *was* Elizabeth? And while we're at it, exactly what is a visitation from an angel like? Or these things may not matter to you at all – you may take at face value a beautiful story of a miraculous occurrence.

But how else might Luke be helping us to know the truth? At the heart of this story appears to be faithfulness. The faithfulness of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the faithfulness of God. I love that wonderfully simple sentence about the couple: "Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord." Now I'm not one to cast aspersions, but can you actually imagine any people who live a completely sinless life? But in a society likely to consider childlessness some kind of punishment for sin, it strikes me that this sentence was an important way of showing that people's suffering did not represent God's judgement. Life can be difficult even for the most faithful people.

Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford, has written a wonderful Advent book, *Walking Backwards to Christmas*. In it he explores the Christmas story from the perspective of a series of characters who form part of that story – beginning with Anna's story of the presentation of Christ in the Temple and moving back to Moses. Each chapter seeks to see through the eyes of the chosen character, one of whom is Elizabeth. And what is so helpful about this approach is, not least, that it recognises just how much is left out of the Bible. We meet Elizabeth at the time that she is about to become pregnant, making it easy to forget the years she has spent waiting, longing for a child, losing hope, learning to live without one. That simple sentence about Elizabeth and Zechariah's faithfulness means so much more when we start to think about exactly how it might have felt to be in their shoes. Just how faithful they had to be.

And of course Luke is also keen that we should know the faithfulness of God. Can you imagine hearing those extraordinary words of the angel: "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news." No matter what it is that we are enduring, no matter how hard our life may be, God remains faithful. God's love continues to surround us. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus will show that we are never alone in our suffering, but God's faithfulness to God's people is an enduring message of the scriptures which Luke emphasises from the outset.

This is a truth that is the essence of God's good news for all of us.

Amen