

The Redeeming God

(Luke 1:67-80)

I've an interesting conundrum for us to think about this evening which will lead us to these verses we read which rarely get preached on – even at Christmas. Why is it that the first chapter of Luke is dominated by the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth?

I think there are two reasons – first of all that the story of Jesus can't be told without the story of His relative John who was the Elijah – the promised forerunner of the Messiah. He went before to break the ground. John is the Elijah (Matt 11:14) - the great prophet. Jewish tradition at that time said Elijah had to come before the Messiah (Mark 9:11) because Elijah was regarded as the greatest of the prophets because of the miracles he did. The prophet announced the Messiah – this was the prophetic expectation and Luke wants to stress this connection.

There is a sub-plot here, particularly in Luke as the Baptist's influence spread far and wide in the first century and Jews began to await the Messiah even though He had come! You'll remember the story of Apollos who was a fervent preacher of John until Priscilla and Aquila caught up with him and put him right. I don't think this was a unique event – it is something which Paul and his team came up against and here we find Luke including this story that shows the greatness of John and the even greater greatness of Jesus. (I've mentioned before that Luke was present in Judea for at least 2 years whilst Paul was in prison there – plenty of time to pick up juicy stories that no-one else had related). They were relatives, both had miraculous births and both were anointed of God. The very miraculous nature of the births confirmed that God was at work. And Jesus – the greater – fulfils the prophetic work of the former – John.

But why tell us all this - it takes up most of the first chapter! We're told this because of the prophecy that Zechariah gives. Let's have a look. What is it about. It sets the scene for the whole gospel as in John we get the key to how God works and is going to work in the lives of His people. What I'm saying is that this piece of prophecy is important in helping us understand the nature of the gospel.

1. Redemption is the prerogative of God

68 "Let us praise the Lord, the God of Israel! He has come to the help of his people and has set them free. 69 He has provided for us a mighty Saviour, a descendant of his servant David. 70 He promised through his holy prophets long ago 71 that he would save us from our enemies, from the power of all those who hate us. 72 He said he would show mercy to our ancestors and remember his sacred covenant. 73-74 With a solemn oath to our ancestor Abraham he promised to rescue us from our enemies and allow us to serve him without fear,

He has come to redeem His people... By that he means Jesus – in fact this prophecy from Zechariah, father of John affirms his son's work but also endorses the way in which it points to the greater work of Jesus. The people haven't found a way of getting close to God through their upright lives and their religion. God is doing all the doing. He's come, He's redeemed, He's saved, He's shown mercy, He's kept His promises (even though we haven't). We've come to celebrate the fact this evening that we are a redeemed people. What do you do when you redeem something. You get it back - usually by buying something back. How did we need buying back. The word redemption could be used with slavery. If someone had got captured into slavery, or more usually were sold into slavery to pay debts, somebody could buy them out. When we were without Christ, we were sold into slavery to sin and Satan - and Jesus has come to buy us out. And how did He do that? By having His body broken and His blood shed for us. But there is another picture in that prophecy that we could also say about someone bought from slavery as well as somebody rescued from oppression by an enemy. We have an enemy – Satan.

Zechariah said He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. Raising up a horn say some commentators means strength. But it's more than that. What is a horn used for? For battle. Look at an old cowboy film and the horn indicates that the cavalry has arrived! When we were powerless, God sent in the cavalry. Here is Zechariah saying. God is sending the cavalry - we are going to be rescued! That's the message of this table. The cavalry came and won the battle. And we accepted the rescue that God provided and promised. As we come around this table this evening, we accept that rescue.

2. Redemption has service at its end

73-74 With a solemn oath to our ancestor Abraham he promised to rescue us from our enemies and allow us to serve him without fear, 75 so that we might be holy and righteous before him all the days of our life.

The second thing that comes out of Zechariah's prophecy is that God redeems us for a purpose. We are called to serve Him in holiness and righteousness. We are called to serve in a way that's set apart for Him. We like the idea of the cavalry rescuing us don't we? But what about service, obedience, holiness? In this day and age that's the problem isn't it. That was to be the message of John. God is sending the cavalry, but we need to be prepared to serve and obey Him. And the church in this age is marked by lack of commitment, lack of service, lack of holiness. Obedience is doing things in God's terms and not ours. As we come before this table this morning and meet a risen Saviour, we thank Him for the redemption, but we need to come in repentance for being less than the people we have been but recommitting ourselves to be the people we should be. But repentance means that. Not just saying sorry - but changing.

The trouble is that we so often are challenged aren't we? But are we changed? What's the product of being challenged by God's word? It's change. How are we going to move on as believers and as a church - by not just being challenged, but by being changed. Until then we stay as we are and the cavalry will just sit there and the enemy won't be pushed back.

3. Redemption is only achieved when sin is dealt with

76 "You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High God. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare his road for him, 77 to tell his people that they will be saved by having their sins forgiven. 78 Our God is merciful and tender. He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us 79 and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death, to guide our steps into the path of peace."

The final point is the shortest. Zechariah now moves to the ministry of John. Redemption came because the Messiah that John prepared for dealt with the whole issue of sin - which kept and keeps people apart from God. Look at the words that are used: *78 because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven 79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.* Sin brings darkness and the shadow of death. In Christ we have been rescued from it. The blood of Christ has dealt with all our sin - and as we come around the table this morning, let's celebrate that, but let's come in penitence for our sins, or failure to obey, our failure to live in holiness, our failure to be people of integrity - and to come to Him in repentance - and accept the God wants to bring change into our lives, into our attitudes and into our church. The table is that place where we meet, there we experience his presence, where we find forgiveness, where we say "the cavalry has come!!"

But as we have come into the presence of the risen Christ, are we going to come out changed this evening? That's between you and God. Changed. Do you want change? In your life? In the church? Then here's the place. It's here this week. It will be here next week. It's here twice a month. Are we going to take advantage of being in the presence of God. Or is it going to be another service where we do what we're familiar with and the cavalry remains camped, and the enemy still presses in?

Let's pray that God's Spirit will speak into our lives today.