

The servant and the saviour

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 1, beginning at verse 26.

Gabriel's a pretty silly guy, no sooner has he left Zechariah than he pops up down in Nazareth, ready to speak to Mary. Well actually of course it has been six months or so between the two, it's about 26 tells us, but Luke seems to be very deliberately moving directly from one to the other so that we can compare and contrast these two events.

Look at how Gabriel spoke to Zechariah and look at how he speaks to Mary here. In fact the whole of the first two chapters of Luke seem to be an interwoven pair of storylines that alternate between looking at John the Baptist and looking at Jesus himself.

And so if you now look at this diagram, you can see that this week's passage, the top pale blue section there, kind of runs in parallel to last week's.

Next week those two lines are going to come together as the mothers go out and meet one another and then split out again for the birth of John and then Zechariah's recognition of him.

[1 : 19] And then in parallel with that, the birth of Jesus and Simeon and Anna's recognition of him. And then finally as these infancy narratives come to a close, we have that incident with Jesus in the temple.

And just as that first greener block kind of shows us John beginning to fulfil his role of pointing to Jesus as even in his mother's womb he recognises who Jesus is.

He begins his role then and here in the temple Jesus begins to fill his role as teacher. So Luke is interweaving these two stories.

And if you remember that passage from last week, then I imagine you will have spotted some of the parallels between the two as we went through. But we can run through a few together to help jog your memory if you like.

You might have noticed that both begin by introducing the key figures. Here we are introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth and here we are introduced to Mary. Both include mention of conditions that means that conception is not likely or not possible.

[2 : 24] Age and infertility and virginity here. Both have an encounter with Gabriel. Both are responding in a troubled fashion. Zechariah is the fact that he has been visited Mary to the way that she is greeted.

Both are told not to fear. Then both of course have the birth announcement. Both of which include the giving of a name. A prediction of greatness.

The role of the Holy Spirit. And the future role of the child. Both of them have a question and response that finds some kind of a problem with the announcement that's been made.

And both have that problem answered by an angelic sign. And both then indicate a departure. So there are enough similarities between these two that I think we have to say that that is deliberate.

Partly because both on at least some level follow the standard pattern of an Old Testament birth announcement. But also because I think Luke is structuring and phrasing things to draw out these parallels.

[3 : 24] And even behind the words it's because God chose to go and behave in a parallel way. We can't get sidetracked can we into seeing these parallels to such an extent that we end up thinking that Lucas fabricated one of the two just to match up with the other.

Remember Luke has introduced himself as a careful historian. So when he writes these things he is clearly presenting them as a true record of what happened. And he's saying it's based on the testimony of the idol of the system.

So whether Zechariah and or Mary are still alive when Luke writes we don't know. But if he isn't getting it from them directly clearly he's spoken to enough other people to be confident this is what

happened.

Zechariah and Mary were alone when they had all these visions. So these accounts ultimately must have come from there one way or another. So there are very similar things happening in these two episodes.

But we note too that there are differences. A number of ways in which the people and events described in today's passage surpass those that we saw last week. And we'll see a few as we go through.

[4 : 34] So our title this morning is The Servant and the Saviour. Looking first at Mary who characterises herself as the Lord's servant in the end of verse 38.

And then reflecting on that what we're told of this son who will be born to her. He who verse 31 tells us is to be called Jesus. Which Matthew tells us is because he will save his people from his sins. He will be the Saviour. The Servant and the Saviour. So we see this servant who then is this woman. This servant of the Lord. Just as with Zechariah and Elizabeth, we're introduced to her at the start of the narrative.

And the first thing we learn about her, before we even learn her name, is because she is a virgin. She's pledged to be married. She's betrothed to Joseph. Now many of you will know that betrothal is a more binding state than our modern day engagement.

In fact, to break a betrothal, we have to initiate divorce proceedings. The woman in question has the same status as our wife. She has that legal standing in the community.

[5 : 41] We notice a stronger binding than our modern day engagement. Not least from the stipulations of Deuteronomy 22. That talk about different things that happen with women who are unattached, who are betrothed and who are married.

It is clearly a much stronger state. But nevertheless, it is still not a marriage. And the expectation, both biblically and culturally, is that the time of betrothal, usually for one year, the woman would remain in her parents' house.

And the couple are not expected during that time to engage in intercourse. So virginity is the normal state for such a woman. And Luke affirms that is the case here.

As indeed does Mary's question in verse 34. But as we said, her virginity is one of the parallels with the previous passage.

It lies in parallel with verse 7. Elizabeth's inability to conceive as a result of her advanced age and indeed of some re-existing condition. We're told that Mary is a virgin as an introduction to this narrative of an extraordinary birth.

[6 : 48] That this is the barrier God will have to overcome. In other words, when she's addressed as highly favoured, that is not directly related to the fact that she is a virgin.

When she's told that God is with her in verse 28, that isn't why. Virginity is not held up as a virtue in and of itself. Not as a mark of spiritual humility.

Yes, it is the right and proper state for a woman in her position. But God doesn't come and choose a virgin because that means she's someone more holy. Rather, he does so to demonstrate the miraculous nature of the conception.

To demonstrate that this is the Son of God, not of a man. Nothing in the Bible suggests that Mary would be a virgin after the birth of Jesus. Indeed, there are some very strong indications otherwise. Two reasons why I bring this up. Firstly, there is a danger that we react against the shocking, appalling attitudes to sex and sexuality in our culture in such a way that we end up treating the whole thing as dirty or impure or unholy.

[7 : 55] In some ways, the virgin state of the highly favoured Mary hasn't sometimes been used to support that kind of attitude. There is something more holy about not being engaged in sex.

We should be clear that that is not Luke's intention. Luke is not doing without sex or women or conception or birth. This verse has no bearing on the propriety of sexual behaviour.

And where the Bible does comment on that, it is enthusiastic about sexual expression within a marriage. Luke is reporting that Jesus did not have a father in an ordinary way.

And secondly, I bring this up because if we end up thinking about virginity as an indication of purity or holiness, then we miss the point. We miss what is actually being conveyed here.

We miss the magnitude of the miracle involved. Mary's virginity is parallel to Elizabeth's infertility. And this is also one of the points where this narrative intensifies what has gone before.

[9 : 00] To be a virgin is an even bigger barrier to human reproduction than age or past infertility. It is certainly rare for those who have been judged infertile over a long period to then have a child.

But it is within the realms of the feasible. And furthermore, it is a way in which God has acted in the past as recorded for us. As we saw last week, there are a number of examples in the Bible of God granting a child where there was none before.

This is the only time that a virgin has conceived. And so Mary is introduced as a betrothed virgin.

Secondly, Mary is told, we are told, that she is highly favoured.

That God is with her. As with that description last week of Zechariah and Elizabeth as righteous, as those who observe God's commands blamelessly, this phrase is open to misunderstanding if we don't stop and think.

And as with her virginity has certainly been misunderstood down through history, non-east in Roman Catholicism. Now partly that's down to a really unhelpful translation that refers to Mary as full of grace rather than highly favoured.

[10 : 15] That somehow makes it sound like she has her own store of grace that she can go and dispense to others. That is not the picture at all. Rather, she has been favoured by God in exactly the same way as other people may be.

That God has bestowed his grace upon her, not as a reserve for her to hoard, but as evidence of his love and favour. She enjoys God's favour in the same way as you and I do.

So partly an unhelpful translation, partly also a theological commitment that needed Mary to somehow be without sin herself. But none of that is here in the text.

We cannot get too carried away with what we see as highly favoured. However, we should get at least a little bit excited here.

Because when Gabriel greets Mary, he calls her highly favoured. He tells her the Lord is with you. He reiterates in verse 30, she has found favour with God. Zechariah doesn't get any of that.

[11 : 19] He's greeted by name and nothing more. Now it's among Mary's humility that this awesome greeting, it is troubling to her, is perplexing.

She doesn't think for a moment that she deserves this. She isn't standing there patting herself on the back and congratulating herself for meriting God's favour. She is perplexed. She's wondering what's going on.

She's trying to figure out why she has received God's favour and where Gabriel is going with this.

We pause for a moment in our consideration of the sermon to look at the Son.

To look at the Saviour. He's introduced to us here in a number of ways and we're not going to go in great depth on them. Because frankly we can have a whole sermon on each one of these titles.

But we won't. Not least because Luke's got another 23 and a half chapters to flesh and out of this. So we'll let him take his time over that. But we'll spend a little few moments long.

[12 : 21] So verse 31. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus. So far, not that big a deal really. I mean, whilst few English speakers today would dream of calling his son Jesus.

It was a perfectly awkward name at the time. Just as it is today in Latin America. So far, all Gabriel has really said that you will have a son and you should call him Joshua. It's the Hebrew form of the same name.

Joshua. Nothing special. And yet, after the name John took on special significance last week because God gave it to him. So here. And Matthew's account makes that very specific.

Joshua. Yeshua. Yahweh. Saves. God. Saves. Matthew 1.21. She'll give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

Secondly, verse 32. This servant will be great. As in 1.15. Job would be great in the sight of the Lord. Jesus' greatness here is without any kind of qualification.

[13 : 27] Without the other elements of this story. It's hardly earth shattering. Is it to say that this son would be great? Enough to make a mother proud. Sure. But not much more than that. There's plenty of other people described as great.

But verse 32 goes on, doesn't it? He will be called the son of the most high. And now we're getting somewhere, aren't we? In chapter 1 and verse 76, Zechariah is going to call John the prophet of the most high.

But Jesus is much closer than that. Jesus is the son of the most high. Again, there are other people in the Bible who are referred to as the son of God or the son of the most high.

People who are adopted into a special relationship with God. But the context here is already starting to suggest something a little more, isn't it? And that's fleshed out in verse 35. The one to be born will be the son of God in a fuller sense. So the context here is on the title given to the Messiah. The offspring who will succeed David.

[14:29] 2 Samuel chapter 7 verse 14. God says, I will be his father and he will be my son. Fourthly, still in verse 32, God will give him the throne of his father David.

In case that link to the Davidic Messiah wasn't already strong enough, here it is again. For the people of the time, after the past disappointment of the division of the Davidic kingdom into two. After the distress of their banishment into Babylonia exile. After the frankly pretty disappointing return from exile. After years by now of foreign rule under Roman oppressors. After all of that, so much of the people's hope is tied up in this promise of a Davidic king to come. Of one who will sit on the throne of David.

There's a huge number of different elements to that. Many of them expressed in that same passage in 2 Samuel chapter 7. Many also that come into Psalm 89.

[15:31] And a whole host of other references in the prophets. The time after the Old Testament makes reference to this coming Davidic king.

To the hope that is found there. And a number of other New Testament passages will also take up this same paradigm. To be the one who will sit on the throne of David is a big deal.

This is serious stuff. And it goes further. Verse 33. He will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.

The fact that this son will be not merely a king from the line of David. But rather will be the promised Messiah. Will be the eternal king.

Is promised here that his kingdom will never end. This isn't just another Rehoboam or Jeroboam. Or however many other different kings there were. This is not just another king in the line.

[16:28] This is the king whose kingdom will never end. Who will reign forever. Isaiah 9 verse 7. As the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom. Establishing and upholding it. With justice and righteousness. From that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 9 verse 7. Even from the already high bar of specialness. Of children born by the promise of God in extraordinary circumstances. Even starting from that as a baseline if you like.

This boy is going to be another level beyond. There is an extra dimension to what he will be. To the hope that he brings. And as we return to the servant.

Given who Gabriel has just told her she is going to give birth to. Is it any surprise that as we see her response. She is a little bit confused. She is surely utterly overwhelmed at this point.

[17:31] By what he has just said. And I would imagine is struggling to even string three words together. And so she asks verse 34. How will this be since I am a virgin?

Again this is similar to Zechariah. Again she is asking for clarification. But again this is different to Zechariah. Her answer doesn't seem to be coloured by doubt.

In the way that his was. She doesn't reduce the power of God. To what she can wrap her senses about. Rather she inquires as to the fact. In which this will occur.

Her reaction is astonishment. Not disbelief. But like Zechariah she is given a sign. Where he was made unable to speak.

Mary is given the sign of Elizabeth's own pregnancy. Given that they are relatives. Mary is surely well acquainted with Elizabeth's infertility. But it was seen as in the first few years of her pregnancy.

[18:29] A sign that if God could give them a baby. He can do as he says in this situation too. And that brings us to Gabriel's declaration. In verse 37. For no word from God will ever fail.

Or to put it another way. For nothing will be possible with God. Now this brings to mind a number of similar statements. Throughout the Old Testament. Joshua chapter 21 and verse 45.

Not one of all the Lord's good promises to Israel failed. Every one was fulfilled. Jeremiah 32 verse 17. Sovereign Lord you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and the outspoken arm.

Nothing is too hard for you. And especially Genesis 18 verse 14. When the Lord promises Abraham a son. Is anything too hard for the Lord?

I will return to you at the appointed time next year. And Sarah will have a son. The 16th century theologian John Calvin. As he commentates on this passage.

[19 : 35] He makes a very helpful point. He notes that what the angel does here. Is what God frequently does in scripture. That he takes a general doctrine. And he uses it to confirm a specific point.

It is always true that no word from God will ever fail. And therefore it is true here. That this word from God will come to pass.

He says this is the true and proper use of a general doctrine. To apply its scattered promises to the present subject. Whenever we are uneasy or distressed.

For so long as they retain their general form. They make little impression upon us. It is much easier to say out there. What God has said will come to pass.

It is much harder to say. What God has said means in this situation. Right here, right now for me. This will be the case. But it does us so much more good.

[20 : 34] When we can say that doesn't it. When we don't allow it to stay out there. But bring it home. Into our own lives. And so we come to Mary's second response.

To verse 38. I am the Lord's servant. Mary answered. May a word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her. Two things to notice from this response.

Firstly, it is easy for us to treat this as a natural thing. To kind of blip over it quickly. After all we are pretty familiar with these words by now. Aren't we? We know her Mary as an example of submission to Cartwell.

So of course that is what she says. But we really should stop and notice the quiet heroism here. Remember that this woman is only betrayed with Joseph.

She is not married to her. She lives in a culture that is far, far less accepting of extramarital intercourse and childbirth than houses. And so the implications for her relationship with the whole village are very serious, aren't they?

[21 : 39] Never mind the implications for her forthcoming marriage to Joseph. Indeed we learn in Matthew. He did indeed intend to quietly divorce her on learning of her pregnancy. Until Gabriel made another appearance.

And as if that fear of ostracism in the village. As if her fears are full of future. And how she would survive perhaps without a husband.

As if that weren't enough. Don't forget in the background there is still Deuteronomy chapter 22 and verse 23. Which opposes the death penalty for adultery. Now this doesn't seem to have been widely enforced.

But it was certainly not. It was a very real possibility. So when Mary said, I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.

She could not be sure as she said that. That it wouldn't break her suffering. And even death. She could be confident that she could bear this unsafely.

[22 : 37] God has promised that much. But beyond that. As yet. She recognized the will of God. And she accepted it. Secondly, we might note that her submission at this point in her life.

Continues on. And indeed is transferred. If you like. Her submission to God. Is transferred to her own son. As we read in John chapter 2. At the wedding in Canaan.

She said to the servants. Do whatever he tells you. Whatever the cost might be.

I don't think I need to labor. The application to our own lives. Of that attitude. Of humble submission. So let's pray. Lord God.

We thank you. That you. Show favor to people. That you. Draw people to yourself. That you abuse people. For your purposes. Lord.

[23 : 49] We pray. That you might. Use the example. Or not. Use the example. Of humble submission. In the face of. Danger.

That you might use her example. To speak to us. To encourage us. To bring us. To greater dependence. On you. And submission.

To your will. In Jesus name. We ask it. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.