

CHRISTmas is coming, are you prepared?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, Christmas is coming. It's only 27 days away. And today is officially the first day of Advent.

Now, for those who don't know, the word Advent comes from the Latin word Adventus, which means arrival or coming. And not so much for the coming of Christmas, of course, but for the coming of Christ into the world, which we celebrate at Christmas time.

But are you prepared? And I guess if we're prepared or not, depends on the sort of people we are. Some of us like to shop and buy presents quite early and store them up at home, particularly during lockdown when, you know, you go walk, garden or shop online, basically were the three options.

So people would do that. My daughter likes to prepare early by giving us an extensive list of what we can buy her. But for others, though, the thought hasn't even crossed their minds.

And the fact that there's 27 days until Christmas means they'll start thinking about it in approximately 26 days. But when it came to that very first Christmas, you know, the coming of Christ into the world, God wanted people prepared.

[1 : 1 6] And not so much just for his birth, but more so for his life, death and resurrection. But it all started at point one on your outlines, which on the back of the sheets.

But I think I've got on the screen as well. So either way, it started with a sad situation. Have a look at verse five and six. In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah.

His wife, Elizabeth, was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.

Now, before we get to a sad situation, notice here we meet a really good couple, don't we? We're told they're both righteous in God's sight and blameless with God's laws.

Blameless, by the way, doesn't mean sinless. It just means they sought to follow all God's commands as well as they could. If you saw them, you'd say of them, they're good people, which makes verse seven all the more sadder.

[2 : 2 5] Verse seven, but they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive and they were both very old. Now, I know of couples who have struggled to have children for years and others who are still struggling.

And they are good people, too. Our fallen world doesn't discriminate, sadly, does it? It impacts all people. And so even righteous Elizabeth is unable to have children.

She's barren. And what's more, her clock seems to have run out because we're told they're very old. Here is a sad situation, a childless couple.

And yet their situation pointed to another, that of a helpless nation. You see, God had brought his people back from exile. He resettled them in the land of Israel.

He gave them prophets to encourage them. And while some of them were faithful to God, like this couple, the nation as a whole had turned their hearts away from God.

[3 : 33] And so now they are ruled by the Romans without a king to save them. And they are led by the Pharisees who often misled them. And what's more, it has been more than 400 years since God had spoken to them.

Until now. Which actually brings us to the second point, a startling revelation. Have a look at verse 8 to 10, where we get a bit of the background.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty, he was serving as priest before God. He was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. And now just by way of explanation, the burning of incense was done in the holy place of the temple twice a day.

And so here is a picture of the temple. It's actually a model, a scaled model that you can see in Jerusalem. And so if we zoom in, that's got the outer courts. So zoom into the temple proper and we'll zoom in again.

[4 : 43] And you can see beyond the doors is the most holy place and then the most holy place. Well, the altar where Zechariah was going was that first section, the holy place.

And the altar itself was a gold covered square stand with kind of horns on the corners. And it stood just in front of the curtain to the most holy place where God dwelt.

The incense or smoke going up symbolize people's prayers going up to God. And that's why in verse 10, the people were praying outside at the same time. And no doubt for God to send the king and the Christ to save them.

But the point is, this was a big deal for a priest to get that close to God. Not every priest got to go and do it. There were about 18,000 priests who took it in turns to serve at the temple in groups or, as we're told, divisions.

But there was still too many to each have a go at offering incense. Those who did could only ever do it once. It was literally a once in a lifetime opportunity.

[5 : 56] And Zechariah just so happened to be chosen by lot, by the role of the dais. In other words, by God. And as he burns incense inside with the people praying outside, God speaks by his angel.

Verse 11. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

But the angel said to him, do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you are to call him John.

He will be a joy and a delight to you. And many will rejoice because of his birth. Now, there's a few startling things about this revelation or message.

I like the fact that an angel appears out of nowhere. I'm pretty sure that would startle all of us. And then there's the fact that this couple will have a child in answer to their prayers, despite their age.

[7 : 04] Those of you who are retired, imagine that. I'm pretty sure that would be startling to you. And then there's this child will not only bring the parents joy, which is not startling, but verse 14, it will bring many people joy.

When my children were born, our families rejoiced. I kind of dreaded the sleepless nights that I would face. Actually, that Michelle, my wife, faced. But the rest of Australia didn't rejoice.

So why does the rest of or many in Israel rejoice? Well, Luke tells us in verse 15 and following, he says, He says, You see, this John is John the Baptist.

And many will rejoice at his birth because after 400 years, here is finally another prophet who will speak God's word to them. A prophet like Elijah, we're told.

But actually, even greater. I mean, first, we're told he will be great. Second, we're told he'll be set apart for a special purpose. That's why he is not to drink alcohol, because he's to show that he's set apart from the rest of God's people who could drink.

[8 : 50] Third, we're told he'll have the spirit even in the womb. No prophet or person before Christ ever had that. Here is the greatest prophet who ever lived before Christ.

And what's more, he will bring many people back to the Lord, their God. That's why the people rejoice. And yet there's actually a fifth reason they'll rejoice.

Because verse 17, John will prepare a people for the Lord himself. In other words, after John will come the Lord.

That's why we heard, that's what we heard in our first reading. So from Malachi, remember, God promised that before the day of the Lord, he would send a prophet, Elijah.

And here is John the Baptist, who is like Elijah, going on in the spirit and power of Elijah. And so the people who saw John and knew their Old Testaments would realize that this was the messenger.

[9 : 58] And after this person would come the Lord himself. It's usually like how a dog rejoices when they see the lead because they know a walk is coming next.

You know about that, don't you? Though I say usually because during lockdown, I heard that many dogs were just done. They were over being walked. You know, they were kind of a bit like this one.

Or this poor one that conked out halfway on the walk. But the point is that people who saw John as an Elijah-like person will rejoice at his birth because they knew the Lord himself was coming next.

It would be his arrival, his advent. Yet John had to prepare people before the Lord arrived. Otherwise, the people might find themselves judged instead of being saved.

But how would John prepare them? Well, by turning their hearts. If you look at verse 16, the word bringing is literally turning them back to the Lord, their God.

[11 : 08] And verse 17, turning their hearts back towards one another, like parents to children and so on. And turning them to live wisely, like righteous Zechariah and Elizabeth, who sought to follow God's law blamelessly.

In other words, John will prepare people for the Lord by calling them to repent. That's what he does in chapter 3 of Luke. And that's what turning means here in chapter 1, to repent.

When we first moved to Melbourne, we loved the fact that we could do U-turns everywhere. You can't do that in New South Wales. And you know a U-turn is like you do a 180, right?

And that's what it is. But that's what repentance is. You know, you're going one way, you change your mind and you turn around and do a 180 and you go the other way. From, you know, rejecting the Lord Jesus to trusting in the Lord Jesus.

From living our way to living God's way. And from ignoring God's word to believing God's word. Which brings us to point 3.

[12 : 17] And what I think is an unreasonable reaction. Have a look at verse 18. So after this angel appears to Zechariah, Zechariah asks the angel, How can I be sure of this?

I am an old man and my wife is well along in years. Now at first glance, this seems like a reasonable reaction, doesn't it?

I mean, he and Liz are old. It does look impossible. But consider the evidence Zechariah has in front of him. He has an angel of God who appeared in the temple of God as he's offering incense to God that represented prayer.

Is that not exactly the kind of time when you'd expect God to speak? And if it is God speaking, then cannot God do anything?

In fact, has not God already done exactly this sort of thing? Abraham? Sarah? You see, Zechariah had every reason to believe God's word.

[13 : 24] But he doesn't. Instead, he wants more proof. How can I be sure? He asks. Even though he has enough evidence to reasonably believe.

And so I think it's an unreasonable reaction, which I think Luke confirms for us in the following verses. Do you see verse 19? The angel said to him, I think Gabriel thought Zechariah had enough evidence to believe.

But because Zechariah didn't believe God's word spoken to him, now he won't be able to speak a word until this happens, until John's born. Last week, we saw that Luke has written his book about Jesus by carefully investigating everything from the beginning, including eyewitnesses, and then writing an orderly account so that we can have certainty.

In other words, Luke 2 thinks we have enough evidence to reasonably believe. You see, even though some people say Christian faith is blind faith, it's not.

It's reasoned faith based on evidence that we have in front of us. Yet like Zechariah, people say that they want more proof. You know, some Christians will say, well, I'll believe in God if God does, you know, A, B and C, or sends an angel to appear to me.

[15 : 08] But that didn't help Zechariah, did it? In the end, it's not more evidence that's needed. It's a heart willing to consider it. Yet this is also a warning for us Christians too, because Zechariah was like us.

He was righteous in God's sight, wasn't he? And yet even he still doubted God's word. You see, even as Christians, we can doubt God's word, can't we?

I doubt God's word is right when our world says it's wrong. I doubt God's word is good when our feelings might say it's bad. I doubt God's word that says he's in control when our world and sometimes even our lives seem out of control.

But we have every reason to believe his word. In fact, we have even more reason, because we have God's word to Zechariah too, that he kept.

So have a look at verse 21 to 25. Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them.

[16 : 15] They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them, but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

The Lord has done this for me, she said. In these days, he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people. Just as God said through Gabriel, Zechariah was unable to speak.

God kept his word, didn't he? And just as God said through Gabriel, Elizabeth did become pregnant, didn't she? God kept his word. In fact, that's what Elizabeth acknowledges in verse 25.

The Lord has done this for me. And so if God can keep his word like this in the past, even when it looked impossible, then we have more evidence to believe his word about the future.

Even when it looks impossible. We can believe his word. Of course, for us, Jesus has already come into the world. And so at one level, it's too late for us to be prepared.

[17 : 28] But you see, Jesus will come again, won't he? And so this brings us to a fourth point, a second preparation. Remember on the first reading that Malachi spoke of the day that is coming as though it's one single day.

But what was one day in the Old Testament has been split into two days in the new. The first coming of Christ into the world with his birth, life, death and resurrection is like the first advent.

It began the day of the Lord, if you like. Where Jesus is like the son of righteousness rising to begin that day of the Lord. And where he paid for our sins at the cross so that in the words of Malachi, we who revere, who trust in his name will be able to go out into the new creation and frolic like well-fed calves.

We will be able to find healing in his rays or wings. That is forgiveness for sin. One of my favorite Christmas carols is this one.

I think you can guess which one it is. One of the verses is, Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace. Hail the Son of Righteousness. For a long time, I thought they misspelled son.

[18 : 51] It doesn't mean God the son. You shouldn't that be an O? Life and light to all he brings. Risen with healing in his wings. I had no idea what that meant. Until I looked at Malachi.

You see, Charles Wesley understood Malachi 4 and Luke chapter 1. Charles wrote, Hark the Herald Angels Sing. He understood that John the Baptist was the Elijah-like prophet. And that the day of the Lord began with Jesus' first coming into the world.

Which was like the sun rising of a new day. Beginning the day of the Lord, if you like. Where his death radiates out like the sun's rays.

Bringing forgiveness or healing to all who believe. Light and life. But the second coming of Christ into the world with judgment day, the new creation, is the second advent.

It will end the day of the Lord, if you like. And between those two advents of Christ are what the Bible calls the last days. And they are the last days because they are the last chance to be prepared for the coming of the Lord.

[20 : 05] And so the question for us this morning is not so much Christmas is coming, are you prepared? But Christ is coming. Are you prepared? How? Well, the same way as in John's day.

By repenting and believing. It's the only reason God is waiting before sending his son. He's giving people more time to repent and believe. And so for those who perhaps haven't, if you're tuning in online and you haven't yet repented and believe, then why not?

Why not open your hearts to consider the evidence we have? Do a 180 and believe. And for us who already have that crucial first time, then we are to prepare by continuing to repent and believe.

Or as Peter puts it on this slide, you ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to that day of God. And so is there an area of your life where perhaps our hearts have wandered from God?

Where we need to do a 180. Repent and be more godly. Perhaps it's in the area of priority. And one of the things with lockdown was that life slowed down for many of us.

[21 : 26] Children's activities, social outings, probes and all the like, they were all cancelled, weren't they? And so there was less things to do. But as things open up, what will be your priorities?

Will making time to pray each day be a priority? Will coming to church, even if it's a bit weird and you have to wear these bings, still be a priority?

When I sent out the RSVPs, I was a little surprised that we still had quite a bit of room. And so can I say to those online, not so much those here, I know there are good reasons to stay at home and many people emailed me to say they couldn't come.

Reasons like being careful with health, that's a good reason. Sickness, you know, if you're feeling sick, you're not allowed to come. Holidays or nervousness.

Not being able to cope with wearing these masks, which I understand. And certainly if you're tuning in from another state or country. I know also many wanted to leave room for others because we cannot fit everyone in.

[22 : 35] But when there is room, it's worth asking our hearts, are we staying home just because it's easier? And it is, especially when the weather's not so great.

But remember, God says, which I know you people here know, that we're not to give up meeting together, but to encourage one another. And all the more as we see the day of Christ's second coming approaching.

Whatever it is, if there's an area of your life where your heart has wandered from God, then we're to do a 180 and live a holy and godly life. We're to prepare for Christ's coming by repenting and by continuing to believe.

And so is there a part of God's word that like Zechariah, you doubt? Perhaps his word that says he answers our prayers for our good.

And yet sometimes it's hard to see how or it feels like he's taking forever to answer the way we want. Well, look at the evidence. Israel waited 400 years.

[23 : 42] Elizabeth and Zechariah waited many years. But at just the right time, when Romans ruled and roads were built to take the gospel global, God answered their prayers and sent Christ for their good and ours.

At his timing for our good. Or perhaps it's doubting his word about Christ's return, where we'll enjoy paradise in a future creation, which seems so far-fetched in this present creation.

Well, again, look at the evidence and see that he's already created the world by his word. I mean, remember Genesis and God said, let there be light.

And it was so. I mean, even if you believe in a Big Bang theory, someone still had to put the particles there that created the bang. Or there's evidence of intelligent design in the world.

I'm not going to get into theories now, but the point is God created. And if God created the world once, then he can do it again, can't he? What's more, if he's already given Jesus to die for our sins, then do you think he'll waste his only son's death on us by not completing our salvation and bringing us home?

[25 : 04] He won't do that, will he? No, we have every reason to continue believing his word. And so we ought to be a people prepared for the Lord. His second advent, by continuing to repent and believe his word.

I started by saying Christmas is coming. Are you prepared? But again, the real question for us this morning is Christ is coming. Are we prepared? Let's pray. Dear God, we thank you, not only that Christmas is coming and the joy that brings, but that Christ is coming again and the great joy that that will be.

Help us, we pray, to be prepared by continuing to repent and believe your word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.