

**Matthew 1:18-25**  
**“A Christmas I can believe in - Elizabeth”**

I hope I didn't give the wrong impression last Sunday, the way I started off the talk. I certainly don't want to give the impression that my response to the way we do Christmas nowadays is that of **Ebenezer Scrooge**, with his famous phrase **Bah! Humbug!**

All I was really trying to do was to point out that it must really be very confusing for anyone not already in the know - and that includes kids growing up - which of these things we actually believe in, which of the things we reckon are really true ... and which are just so much harmless make-believe.

So when you have TV and media screens forever shouting at us about **Santa Claus**, with his **flying sleigh** and his **little helpers**

(Oh, a quick **Christmas Cracker** joke for you. What does an English teacher call Santa's little helpers? *Subordinate clauses*)

And yes, not just Santa's little helpers but **all those presents** ... all of that seems a whole lot more fun than just a boring old **baby in a stable**. I mean, he just lies there and sleeps. Where's the fun in that?

And even if you bring in the traditional **nativity stable animals**, the baby isn't bothered:

*The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes  
But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes*

Now that doesn't sound greatly realistic, if you've ever had a **baby** in your house!

But yes, even if I have to insist it's all rather confusing, the way we do Christmas nowadays, I have to admit to spending part of my day off this week **decking the lounge with boughs of tinsel**.

But just as the tinsel coming out of the box, and even more with the **Christmas lights**, it takes quite a bit of untangling. And that's what I'm trying to help with, with these talks taking us up to and just beyond Christmas this year. Pointing out some comments that, to me, are just so down to earth and realistic about the way the Christmas accounts are written in the Bible. Observations that just ring true, and really do confirm to me that when the Bible says ...

***Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.***

(Matthew 1:18)

... that *it really did*. And that this *really is* (borrowing the Aldi slogan)

## ***A Christmas that I can believe in***

Last time, we read on from Matthew 1:18 into the account of Joseph, and his young wife-to-be, Mary. Today, we're jumping over to Luke's account of things, where we meet an older married couple, Zechariah and **Elizabeth**. Only we don't know about the age thing first. That will become relevant as we read on. But to start with, just another ... could be young, could be old, could be any age couple, really.

***In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.***

(Luke 1:5)

Herod, by the way, we'll come back to again next Sunday. And although we read much more about Zechariah in the rest of this chapter, it's Elizabeth I want to focus in on. Both of them come from the Jewish tribe that performed the priestly services in the Temple. But that wasn't just tradition to them. They weren't just religious. This was something about their whole lives.

***And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.***

(Luke 1:6)

That's not Luke saying that these two were both perfect. But they were both sincere in their devotion and worship of God, and that flowed out into every aspect of their lifestyles. And I think Luke is almost tempting us to smile as we read this, thinking what an enviable situation they're actually in. Happy in serving the true God. Only ... that's not quite the whole story.

***But they had no child, ...***

(Luke 1:7)

And if they're young, only just married, that might not be an issue. But that's *not* how it is. And suddenly Luke shows us a far less rosy picture. Automatically, with the societal values of the day, anyone reading this will know that this is going to be a cause of intense sadness, and even *shame*, to Elizabeth in particular.

***But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.***

(Luke 1:7)

And since it's *Luke* writing this, Luke the doctor, I think he is specifying that there is clearly some biological problem that can be pinned down to Elizabeth. "They had no child" and "Elizabeth was barren" are *not* two equivalent statements. So, despite so much that was right in their lives, she would feel that there was something wrong about *her*, deep down in the very core of her feminine persona.

Folks, remember that nowadays too, childlessness can blight a couple's life. "Barren" is a frightfully well-chosen word to describe this, with the connotations of empty, dusty dryness.

But, 2000 years ago, what could be done about a situation like that? Even nowadays, IVF is no guarantee of success, and it's a huge stress in its own right for a couple undertaking it. Back then ... there was just getting on with life. A bit like that first Lockdown back in March and April. No fun socialising. Just one day following another, life suddenly put on hold. Only Elizabeth's whole life had been slowly, increasingly, relentlessly, put on hold ... awaiting a fulfilment that she knew would never come. And the emptiness slowly gnawed on her soul.

Folks, just look at those two verses now put alongside each other on your screen.

***And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years.***

(Luke 1:6-7)

I think I just have to say to that, that it is quite possible for profound joy and profound sadness to coexist in the same life. Don't think that the Christian life is going to be one of continual bounce.

I remember the chorus to a hymn which, even when I was a fairly new Christian, still in my teens, struck me as not just odd but dishonest, and which I refuse to sing:

*At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light  
And the burden of my heart rolled away  
It was there by faith I received my sight  
And now I am happy all the day*

Folks, that line is *not* the experience of most Christians. Some carry huge sadnesses through their lives. Elizabeth in her barrenness. Paul for his people:

***... I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.***

(Romans 9:2-3)

It is only when you have something like that as the bleak, black backdrop, that the promise of correspondingly substantial peace seems like a miracle of grace:

***And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.***

(Philippians 4:7)

And you see it in Jesus, too:

**... a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; ...**

(Isaiah 53:3)

**... of the Son he says, "... God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."**

(Hebrews 1:8-9)

Folks, that old carol rings true, with those two rhyming lines side by side. Not two different people; not two different classes of Christians; but possibly coexisting in one and the same person:

*And He feeleth for our sadness  
And He shareth in our gladness*

But ... back to our story. Which, having set the scene, featuring Zechariah and Elizabeth, is now seized by Zechariah and the Temple and the Angel. For Zechariah, a special day of special privilege:

**Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.**

(Luke 1:8-9)

The high point of his career, possibly. And I don't doubt that Elizabeth would have been pleased for him. But for her ... rather more like just another day at home, I would imagine. And yet stuff was happening over there in the Temple that was going to turn things upside down for her ... or, possibly right-side up.

**But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John."**

(Luke 1:13)

Notice what has been going on here? "Your prayer" - *you singular*. Elizabeth has had to bear the societal shame of childlessness. But Zechariah has prayed for her. I'm not sure we can read too much into the specifics here. I don't think we can presume that this is something that Zechariah has prayed for every day. It might even be that he has given up praying for this, and the "your prayer" is something that maybe dates back some years. We're not even told what his prayer was for; was it for a child, or for comfort in childlessness? Has *he* settled for this now ... but knows that *she* never will?

Folks, this is a call for us to not just "be there for you", but to *pray* for people, too. Perhaps once, perhaps occasionally, when that person and that situation comes to your mind. Perhaps daily, for someone you are particularly close to.

But not worrying if you miss a day, or a week, or even more, if a situation slowly settles from “acute” to “chronic”. And not worrying if you don’t know precisely how to pray. And not worrying whether to change that prayer, after months of years for praying for a child slowly morphs to praying for comfort when it appears that God has answered in the negative.

But just praying. And trusting that God will come up with the right answer, a good answer, at the right time. Being there, praying alongside,

***Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.***

(Romans 12:15)

For this aged couple of Luke chapter 1, the answer was an eventual miracle.

***And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”***

(Luke 1:18)

And because of that unbelief, Zechariah arrives home voiceless ... and it must have been rather interesting seeing how he explained to her just what had gone on, over in the Temple that day.

***And when his time of service was ended, he went to his home.***

(Luke 1:23)

And, some time later, we are discreetly advised ...

***After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, ...***

(Luke 1:24)

Just a point there, too. Just notice that Elizabeth, despite her profound sadness, had not just turned in on herself, and come to reject her husband. Folks, remember that kids do not make a marriage; *God* does. And what God regards as “*holy* matrimony” is not something that it is safe for us to despise, if it does not turn out precisely the way we had hoped.

But look at the response from Elizabeth. Remember that we were told that she was a godly woman. But here - and this is the precise point that, to me, shows the simple, candid honesty of this account part of the **Christmas I can believe in**.

Folks, something cosmic is going on here. That bump in her tummy is five months of John the Baptist. The guy who is going to be the predicted fore-runner of the *Messiah*. God’s purposes for the *world* are about to be fulfilled.

But for Elizabeth it looks as if it is, suddenly, at this moment, all about *me*.

***... and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."***

(Luke 1:24-25)

Yes, we do have to remember that there are things that *are* shameful, and society is *not* wise to commend or generally accept them. But here is something for which plainly there is *no* shame ... and yet Elizabeth, because of the attitudes of those people in those days, has been consumed by this "reproach among people".

And this is so odd that, at the very time you might think she would proudly be out and about, showing off her growing bump, she keeps herself hidden. I can only take this to be some psychological quirk ...

... almost as if she has so defined herself as "childless" that now it is a different kind of shame to shed that old image and become "normal" again?

Or perhaps for fear that she has still mistaken what is happening? ... that it is just too good to be true? ... that it might be only a phantom pregnancy?

Or perhaps it is just now so emotionally overwhelming anyway ... never mind the extra hormones circulating around her body ... that she would just break down in tears if she caught anyone's eye?

I really don't know. But this is just so strange, that, for me, it is such a clear proof of total authenticity. This is definitely **a Christmas I can believe in.**

And finally, if we read on - to what we normally think is "the next story" - we find Elizabeth in her *sixth* month - and the baby inside her gives her a kick which knocks her thinking back onto a rather less self-absorbed track.

No, this baby is not all about *her* reproach and *her* shame being dealt with. It is about the coming of the

***"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"***

(John 1:29)

It is *her* baby whose job it will be to say those words. There are bigger things going on here! And there is *another* baby on the way. *His* mother is a relative of yours, Elizabeth! Gabriel pays another visit - of which, more on Christmas morning - and mentions her.

***"And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren."***

(Luke 1:36)

And the mothers-to-be meet up.

***In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.***  
(Luke 1:39-40)

And John the Baptist-to-be starts his work witnessing to Jesus pre-natally:

***And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb.***  
(Luke 1:41)

And Elizabeth is now delighted to find that the world does not revolve about her. Or the baby in *her* womb. But in that little scrap of life in the womb of her young relative, probably not at that time even so much as an inch in length. But Almighty God ... in a human body.

***And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"***  
(Luke 1:41-42)

Folks, *that* is a **Christmas I can believe in**. One which shows us ...

*Our God, contracted to a span  
Incomprehensibly (but incontestably) made man*