

were able to overcome positively any problems presented by those around them who sought to present another gospel.

Above all, the ecclesia at the beginning of Luke's Gospel recognised the importance of Jesus in their midst; he was the promised Messiah

bringing peace. At the end of Luke's Gospel a new ecclesia was forming. In order to strengthen it, "Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, 'Peace to you'" (24:36). Let us put Jesus in the midst of the ecclesias today, that peace might prevail.

The 'holy songs' of Luke

The songs of Elizabeth, Mary, Zacharias and Simeon

Eric Marshall

A unique feature of Luke's Gospel is his detailed account of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus, in particular the inspired utterances of four faithful men and women involved in these momentous events. These 'holy songs' depict the great joy experienced by the faithful of those times, joy in the knowledge that God was at last fulfilling the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament about the Saviour to come.

THE BACKGROUND to the birth of Jesus is carefully traced out by Luke in his Gospel record. Consequently, the part played by key figures, and especially their reactions to the amazing developments that they experienced, are documented. We are given the reactions of four named participants in the events surrounding Jesus' birth: Elisabeth and Zacharias, the parents of John the Baptist, who was destined to be the messenger to go before the face of Messiah; Mary the mother of Jesus, who spoke of the prospect of his birth; and Simeon, who met the baby Jesus in the temple with Mary and Joseph.

Each of these was a faithful believer in God's promises. What we see in each case is the reaction of a person who has firmly believed God's promises and now is faced with their actual fulfilment and their close involvement in it. The promised event, firmly believed, and its fulfilment yearned for, is now about to happen. In a sense what was confidently expected had unexpectedly come to pass. Maybe we can see something of what our position, as believers in Christ's return, will be at the moment of its happening. If our minds, as theirs were, are filled with God's promises and His Word, then we shall know how to respond, as they did, willingly, with praise.

The responses of each to the situation are sometimes referred to as 'holy songs'. Certainly the words of Mary have been put to music in the Magnificat and sung throughout the world for centuries. The record gives no direct indication that their utterances were actually sung. Elisabeth "spoke out with a loud voice", Mary "said", Zacharias "prophesied" and Simeon "said"; and God's Spirit was, of course, active in what was said.

Their words, taken together, give praise to God for His work of salvation in Jesus, as the culmination of His promises to the fathers of Israel and through His prophets. The words used by each draw heavily on earlier Scripture, which came readily to their minds. We have here an illustration of Peter's comment, "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy [Spirit]" (2 Pet. 1:21).

We will consider what each has to say in the order given in the Gospel.

Elisabeth's song: 1:42-45

ELISABETH'S words are prompted by Mary's arrival and salutation. What Mary actually said, beyond a simple greeting on her arrival, we do not know. However, under Holy Spirit influence Elisabeth and her unborn baby respond with joy. Her words are both a confirmation of Mary's special role and of the fulfilment of God's word through Gabriel to her. Gabriel had called Mary "highly favoured", one that had "found favour with God" (vv. 28,30). Elisabeth describes her as "Blessed . . . among women" (v. 4). This

is an allusion to the words spoken by Deborah about Jael, who slew Sisera, captain of Israel's Canaanite oppressors (Judg. 5:24). As Jael had 'bruised' the oppressor of Israel in the head; so Mary's offspring was to do to sin (Gen. 3:15). Hence also her words, "blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Lk. 1:42).

The desire to have children to continue the family name in Israel was very strong. Elisabeth had prayed endlessly for a son. His conception, said Elisabeth, "[took] away [her] reproach among men" (v. 25). God's promise to a faithful nation was, "Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body" (Deut. 28:4). The blessing of children enabled the family, often described Scripturally as the house, to be built and continue into the next generation. The psalmist comments on this in Psalm 127. The point of verse 1 would not be lost on Zacharias or Elisabeth: "Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it". His blessing was now upon them, and "the fruit of the womb [was] His reward" (v. 3). But the fruit of Mary's womb would indeed build the house in which the Almighty desired to dwell. He would "speak with the enemies in the gate" (v. 5). He would ultimately, as *the* seed of Abraham, possess the gate of his enemies.

For a woman whose mind was filled with the Word of God, this coming together of God's long-standing promises, which would shortly result in the births of both John and Jesus the Saviour, caused her great joy.

Her final words, "blessed is she that believed" (Lk. 1:45), confirm the necessity for, and value of, believing what God has said and being involved in its outworking. Mary's belief was in marked contrast to Zacharias' unbelief when the angel spoke to him.

Mary indeed believed, as she had said: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (v. 38). And Elisabeth, under inspiration, confirms, "there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord" (v. 45). And so it came to pass.

Mary's song: 1:46-55

MARY'S words are a direct response to Elisabeth's Spirit-inspired praise. We notice that, although the words of Elisabeth, Zacharias and Simeon are said to result from Holy Spirit inspiration, Mary's are not. What she says, however, is wholly in tune with the Spirit, for she expresses her thoughts in words and ideas used elsewhere

in Scripture. Her mind is full of God's words and purpose. What she says is the result of her deep knowledge of God's Word and her meditation on it, especially in her unique situation of carrying the Son of God. We are given here an insight into why she was chosen as *the* woman to bear the Messiah and be responsible for his upbringing. The key features of her words are:

- praise to God
- God's role as Saviour
- His long-term purpose and faithfulness.

As many will know, there are clear parallels with the words of Hannah after Samuel's birth.

Praise to God

Mary's opening words are praise: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour" (vv. 46,47). Her response is in the spirit of the Ten Commandments, for the first is, "I am the LORD thy God . . . Thou shalt have none other gods before Me" (Deut. 5:6,7). She puts God first in her thinking, and is able to marvel at His work with her, which was to have such an impact both on her, "for . . . henceforth all generations shall call me blessed" (Lk 1:48), and on the world. Her following words also emphasise the character of God, Who looks favourably on the humble—"He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden" (v. 48, *cf.* v. 38)—and is merciful and faithful to His covenant Word.

God the Saviour

Having given God the title Saviour, Mary then illustrates this in her subsequent words. He is Saviour at both a personal level and a national level. At a personal level, besides the words of verse 48 quoted above, she says, "He That is mighty hath done to me great things" (v. 49). At the national level, "He hath holpen His servant Israel" (v. 54); but this extends beyond Israel, as subsequent events and the teaching of Jesus were to reveal. For the "mercy . . . to Abraham, and to his seed for ever" (vv. 54,55) provides the key to eternity for all who show Abraham's faith (Rom. 4:23-25).

God's salvation is also shown in His strength, directed against the proud and the mighty and the rich for the benefit of those of low degree and the hungry. Of whom is Mary thinking when she utters these words? She is drawing on Hannah's prayer recorded in 1 Samuel 2. In that context it is reasonable to see the proud, the mighty and the rich as the corrupt priesthood of Eli's sons. This too is the context in which Mary speaks.

The priesthood was corrupt, proud and well fed, as portrayed in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31), *at the expense of the poor and lowly*, for the scribes were those who “devour widows’ houses” (20:46,47). The hungry to be filled with good things were those who would hear the gospel and respond to it, those who hungered and thirsted after righteousness (Mt. 5:6; Lk. 6:21); but the rich and full went away empty (vv. 24,25).

The God of purpose and faithfulness

Another aspect of filling the hungry reminds us of God’s covenant with David, which was prominent in the words of Gabriel to Mary. Isaiah 55:1-3 calls to those who hunger and thirst to take advantage of the opportunity to “buy wine and milk without money and without price”. This would be achieved by hearing (and, obviously, believing) God’s Word. To those who did hear, God would give “the sure mercies of David”. These promises to David, which involve eternal life (Acts 13:34), are alongside those to Abraham, and are the expression of His mercy to all faithful ones. Mary emphasises this faithfulness of a God of covenant, because she says, “He hath holpen His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy; as He spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever” (Lk. 1:54,55).

The song of Zacharias: 1:68-79

IN REPLY to the enquiry as to what his newborn son should be called, Zacharias wrote, “His name is John” (v. 63). The angel had said so (v. 13), and now all those doubts that had assailed him when the angel spoke to him were gone. Now that other angelic word was to be fulfilled, “thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, *until the day that these things shall be performed*” (v. 20).

So Zacharias, inspired by the Holy Spirit, bursts forth into prophecy. His words cover similar themes to that of Mary: praise for God, Who has revealed His salvation in accordance with His long-standing purpose. The words of Zacharias do not focus on his son particularly, although his birth had been his and Elisabeth’s deep desire for years. They focus on God’s bigger purpose, in which John was to play such a significant part. Zacharias’ praise of God is simply stated in the words, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel” (v. 68), but developed in his survey of His plan of salvation and this new stage of fulfilment of His purpose.

Salvation revealed

The idea of God’s visiting His people has a background of both salvation and judgement. At the Exodus God “visited the children of Israel” (Ex. 4:31, cf. 3:16) to initiate their involvement in His redemption of them. That God in His greatness should bother to concern Himself with the salvation of men and women, who are often resistant to His will, is commented on by the psalmist: “What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?” (8:4). Hebrews 2 comments further on this psalm to show that the salvation of God comes through Jesus and is available to all believers.

Israel are a redeemed people; redeemed by God out of Egypt. However, the means of a greater salvation was now revealed in the “horn of salvation . . . in the house of . . . David” (Lk. 1:69). Hannah in her song had spoken of Messiah when she said, “the LORD shall . . . exalt the horn of His anointed” (1 Sam. 2:10). David describes the Lord Himself as “the horn of my salvation” (2 Sam. 22:3); but the Lord’s promise was also that the horn of David would bud (Ps. 132:17), and so it came to pass with the birth of Jesus, for whom John was the fore-runner.

So important is this theme of salvation through the one to be raised up that Zacharias identifies it as witnessed by the prophets “since the world began” (Lk. 1:70).

The features of salvation are spelt out by Zacharias in verses 71-77; they are:

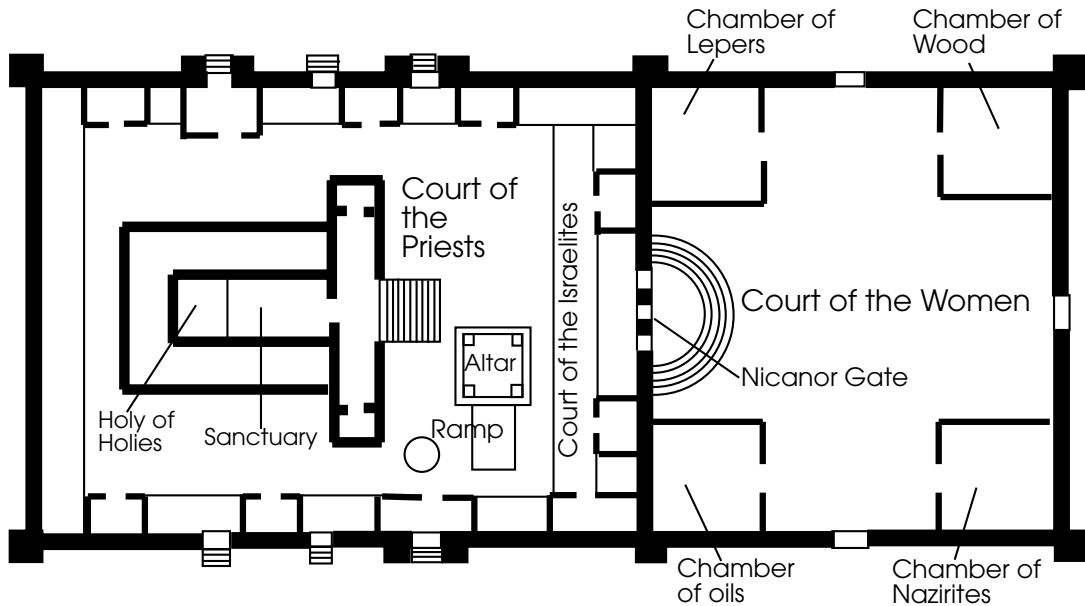
- saved from enemies who hate them
- deliverance to allow service without fear in holiness and righteousness
- salvation by remission of sins
- light to those in darkness and the shadow of death
- guiding feet into the way of peace.

A look at the marginal references for this passage will show how deeply Zacharias draws on the Old Testament Scriptures. The constraints of space prevent us following them up here, but readers will profit by doing so for themselves.

God’s purpose celebrated

Zacharias’ words celebrate the fact that God’s purpose had been declared a long time beforehand “by the mouth of His holy prophets, which have been since the world began” (v. 70). In what may be an allusion to their names he reminds us of:

“the mercy [John means ‘Yahweh shows mercy’] promised to our fathers”;



The temple in the time of Jesus. The incidents of Luke 2:22-38 would have taken place in the Court of the Women.

“to remember [Zacharias means ‘Yah has remembered’] His holy covenant”;
 “the oath [Elisabeth means ‘the God of the oath’] which He swore to our father Abraham” (vv. 72,73).

The oath made to Abraham (Gen. 22:16-18) is of crucial importance to all believers, as the writer to the Hebrews makes clear in 6:17,18: “Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by [with, RV] an oath: that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon [of, RV] the hope set before us”.

God’s purpose reflects His “tender mercy” in giving salvation through remission of our sins. Zacharias, applying it to his situation, describes the result as, “the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light . . .” (Lk. 1:78,79). Our minds will readily go to the Old Testament, where the sunrise and darkness are powerful figures for God’s work of salvation of His people, especially through Messiah.

Isaiah in 60:1-3 speaks of the exaltation of God’s people, of light dispelling darkness, of God’s glory being seen in them. David in his last words spoke of the man who would be “filled with iron” (mg.) as the king ruling over men: “He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And

he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth” (2 Sam. 23:7,3,4). Malachi speaks of the Sun of righteousness who was to come with healing in his wings, at the time when Elijah would also come (Mal. 4), in whose spirit John was to come to the nation. This new dawn was to break on a nation which largely “walked in darkness”, but unto which, in fulfilment of the covenants to Abraham and David, “a child [was to be] born” (Isa. 9:2,6) who could guide their feet into the way of peace (Lk. 1:79).

John’s role

Zacharias briefly touches on his son’s role in these dramatic events. He was to be the prophet of the highest, to go before the face of the Lord to prepare the way, which in due course he did.

The song of Simeon: 2:29-32

SIMEON had been waiting for years, a lifetime in fact. His hope was to see “the consolation of Israel” (v. 25). “Consolation” (Gk. *paraklēsis*) also means ‘comfort’. Simeon’s hope was for the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy, “Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God” (40:1), a prophecy which in verse 3 speaks of the work of John the Baptist: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD”. Comfort, however, would come through Messiah

(cf. 52:1,2,7,9,10). Consequently, through the Holy Spirit, he knew that he would see “the Lord’s Christ” before he died (Lk. 2:26). While he waited he continued to be “just and devout” (v. 25). He provides an example for believers now who look for the return of Messiah.

He blessed God

Simeon’s witness to the future role of the baby Jesus was under Holy Spirit guidance. His words, as those of Elisabeth, Mary and Zacharias, praise God for His salvation and faithfulness to His prophetic Word. Simeon’s praise is in words that spell out the way God’s purpose was coming to pass. He also gives thanks that the long-awaited opportunity to see “the Lord’s Christ” had arrived. It was “according to Thy word” (v. 29). Simeon’s words can help us to praise God in our prayers. Like many faithful, he praises by considering God’s promises and how they have come to pass, thus establishing the certainty that those still outstanding will be fulfilled.

“Mine eyes have seen Thy salvation”

We do not know whether Simeon knew that the Messiah he would meet would be a babe in arms. Whatever the case, although it was only a baby that he saw, Simeon speaks of the central place Jesus has in the Father’s purpose of salvation. At the moment he spoke it was yet to be fully realised, but to the faithful Simeon it was certain: “mine eyes have seen Thy salvation”, a salvation to be “before the face of all people” (vv. 30,31). The psalmist had promised this: “The LORD hath made known His salvation: His righteousness hath He openly shewed in the sight of the heathen. He hath remembered His mercy and His truth toward the house of Israel: all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (98:2,3). These words were also echoed by Zacharias (Lk. 1:72,73).

It is instructive that Simeon’s words show a deeper understanding of God’s purpose than seems to have been the case with his contemporaries. God’s salvation is “before the face of all people”, for Messiah was to be “a light to lighten

the Gentiles” as well as “the glory of Thy people Israel” (2:31,32). Simeon is quoting Isaiah 49:6. Paul later quoted it to the Jews at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:47) and alludes to it in his defence before Agrippa (26:23).

That this babe in Simeon’s arms was to be the Saviour of both Gentiles and Jews caused even Joseph and Mary to marvel.

A warning

One might have thought that this advent of God’s salvation for both Gentiles and Israel would have been straightforward, a steady progress to success. But it was not to be. In blessing Joseph and Mary he says to Mary: “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against . . . that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Lk. 2:34,35).

Indeed the prophet had said that he would be “for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to . . . Israel . . . and . . . Jerusalem” (Isa. 8:14). Jesus himself linked this prophecy and Psalm 118:22 with that in Daniel 2 when he said, “whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder” (Mt. 21:44).

The coming of Messiah would challenge his contemporaries, many of whom would speak against him and ultimately reject him. Both Moses and the prophets were witness to this (Acts 26:22), the outworking of which would cause agonising sorrow for Mary: “a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also” (Lk. 2:35).

Conclusion

Jesus’ ministry would cause “the thoughts of many hearts [to] be revealed” (v. 35) as individuals were presented with the challenge of the gospel. It was so then; it is so now. Elisabeth, Mary, Zacharias and Simeon spoke with great joy and thankfulness for God’s faithful progress of His purpose of salvation, marked out in the life of Jesus as recorded by the Gospel writers. How thankful we should be that Jesus was “prepared before the face of all people” and is “a light to lighten the Gentiles”!

It was in this solemn and beautiful setting [the temple] that Jesus was recognised and brought an ecstasy of joy to the hearts and lips of two who were waiting for redemption in Israel. It is a picture of rewarded devotion which we find repeated in Scriptural records of the experiences of the servants of God. Years of barrenness are forgotten in the wonder of consummation.

Melva Purkis, *A Life of Jesus*, The Christadelphian, 1953, p. 18