

## Reflection

Luke 1:26-38

The Gospel of Luke opens with two rather different birth narratives: the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. Unlike other Gospels, in the Gospel attributed to Luke the children are relatives, although the tradition of Mary and Elizabeth being cousins is not part of the story in the Greek. Our lectionary only deals with one of these stories, but today I am going to explore them both.

Zechariah, John's father, was a somebody. Not just a somebody, but a priest in the temple. This meant he had two attributes that gave him status – he was a priest and he had some level of education beyond what the ordinary villager would have had. Indeed, Zechariah did not need to work with his hands, as did most people who lived in the villages. After all, he was a priest. He had status.

Mary, on the other hand, would have been an ordinary village girl in early adolescence. She would have become a “daughter of the Law” (Bat Mitzvah) around her twelfth birthday, though no one could really be relied on to record these dates accurately for a girl. The expectation was that she would be married off to a man in the village shortly after. She would have had enough education from her family (and any passing Pharisees) to make sure she could maintain a household that kept the Torah. Anything more would be considered a bit of a waste of time.

Both of these people are shown as having a visit from an angel. “Do not be afraid” was the standard introduction from an angel. In most of the stories about an angelic visitor, those words are needed – fear and terror typically seem to precede those words. Mary, on the other hand, is simply perplexed. While Zechariah is overcome with fear and trembling, Mary ponders on the words and wonders what sort of message is about to be given.

In the ancient world, indeed until relatively recently, failure to have a child was considered a fault of the woman, never the man. So, when Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, fails to conceive the people in her world would have understood that she was the problem – usually because God was punishing her for something. On the other end of the scale, for the unwed Mary to be pregnant, that would have also been considered her fault, even if it had been the result of rape. Mary would have been deeply shamed by her village as soon as they knew her predicament. Knowing that predicament would not have taken very long. With so much of village life taking place communally, as soon as she stopped washing her monthly rags, the rumour mill would have started.

And we get two very different responses to the news. Both of them ask a question. Mary, being the practical village girl who grew up around animals and so would have known a bit about these things, asks how it is going to happen. Of course, simply reading the words does not give us the tone of voice, since that was not important to early authors. It could have been said in any tone ranging from acceptance to typical teenage sass. Zechariah asks a similar question, but he also asks for proof, for which he is struck dumb (so we can infer the tone of his question!).

The comparison of these two stories shows an important point: God can call anyone. In this pair of stories we see two very different people being called to be a part in God's plan. We can compare Zechariah, who is portrayed as the sort of person God might have called in times past, with Mary, who is the opposite. Zechariah is educated, well off, lives in Judea, with his gender giving him authority and yet he

fails to respond appropriately to God. Even so, he is still called to be part of this plan of bringing renewal into the world. Mary, on the other hand, is poor, barely educated, from Galilee, and a woman (just). She has nothing to offer but herself.

On a scale from Zachariah to Mary, few of us these days would be in a similar situation to Mary. The majority of us here would have some form of privilege in our lives – gender, social standing, or education, to name but a few. And so, it can be quite challenging to hear Mary's response and her vision of a world where the vulnerable are lifted up in God's special care.

These stories show us something of grace – it is not about who we are (or are not), but simply openness to encountering God in our lives. Mary had no particular qualifications to be considered as someone whom God would call – indeed, she had everything against her. Zechariah, on the surface at least, looked as if he was the perfect candidate to be called. In the end, both were called to be part of that something new.

This grace is important to us as well. Sometimes, it breaks in as unexpectedly as the angelic messenger and we need to be told “do not be afraid.” The bigger question is how we respond. Are we ready to encounter grace?

There is one more difference between the two stories to consider: this is the question of what happened next. For his requests for proof, Zechariah was struck dumb until the naming of John, at which point he starts praising God in the tradition of the psalms. The one with the voice to power has his voice taken away. Mary, on the other hand, responds to Elizabeth with her Magnificat and the one without a voice is given one. She sings of the priorities of the world being turned upside down.

Last week we heard the Magnificat as the psalm for the day. We will later join Mary singing her song, but for now, let us sing a modern take on the same concepts.