

Loving Father, help us this morning and in the coming weeks to understand better the true meaning and challenge of Advent. Amen.

SURPRISES & DELIGHTS - Zechariah (Malachi 4.1-6; Luke 1.1-25)

Happy New Year! Before you think I'm one of those irritating folk sending Christmas and New Year greetings before you've even started to think about your cards, I must emphasise that today, **Advent Sunday**, is the start of the new church year. That follows naturally from Pat telling us last week that **Christ the King Sunday** was at the end of the last ecclesiastical year.

"Mind the gap! Mind the gap!" the station warnings go. Many people are dull and sombre in the Advent season, as they rush around frantically trying to fit ever more into the remaining shopping days before Christmas. Many folk think that Advent is **just the gap** between the Black Friday / Cyber Monday spending spree fortnight and Christmas, a season to be bombarded by non-stop advertising in every available format. Splashing out on a gourmet or alcoholic Advent calendar may be their only nod to the Christian season.

"Mind the gap! Mind the gap!" I'm suggesting that Advent can offer Christians more **surprises and delights** than even the most special Advent calendar.

Last Christmas our elder daughter Caroline **surprised** us with some really unexpected news. Now, as some of you know, we have a lovely little granddaughter, who is a real **delight**.

Here at All Saints' we anticipate our Saviour's birth with a "**surprises and delights**" sermon series - the **surprises** of Zechariah and Mary, then the **delights** of Mary and Zechariah.

As write Christmas card addresses each year, I'm aware of friends who move so often they almost need their own page in the address book. Not a problem, you will say, if you store the addresses electronically! One neighbour called each property "**Jan-Joy**" after her two daughters, Janet and **Joy**. What a wonderful name **Joy** is! Surprisingly, we've only **one Joy** on the church database, although we do have three Joyces!

Malachi 4.2 promises that all who revere God's name will be saved and show **joy** in their actions: *"You will go out and frolic like well-fed calves"*. Anyone who has seen the **joyful** antics of young cattle released into the field for the first time will know what I'm talking about.

Leon Blay said: ***Joy** is the infallible sign of the presence of God.*

Advent is a time for **rejoicing** at God's preparations for sending his Son into the world, to *"greet him with joyous eyes"* as our first hymn (39) put it. Isn't it great to sing refrains like *"**Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel!**"* (45)? Let's **rejoice** together as we study the first chapter of Luke's Gospel over the next few weeks.

Nowadays if you want to **buy a book** you can read online reviews, see a few selected pages on Amazon or (better still) visit The Grove Bookshop. But if you had gone into a bookshop in Rome, or any Greek-speaking city of the Roman Empire, you would have found that most books had **some sort of Preface**, rather like a modern publisher's blurb. And you would certainly have noticed **who the book was dedicated to** – if it was a well-known figure (and not just family members), the book might be worth reading!

The beginning of Luke's Gospel is just such a Preface. In fact, **Luke's is the only Gospel with a Preface**. After all, scripture was not written to compete with the book trade, but to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Luke probably moved in a wider circle than other Gospel-writers, so perhaps he hoped that by giving his work a Preface it would be read by people outside the church.

We don't know who **Theophilus** was. The name "Theophilus" literally means "loved by God," but implies **"friend of God."** Some people think that "Theophilus" is just a generic title that applies to all Christians. However, from the context of Luke and Acts, it seems clear that Luke is writing to a specific individual, even though his message is for all Christians in all centuries.

It seems most likely that Theophilus was a **high-ranking or influential Gentile** for whom Luke wanted to provide a detailed, historical account of Christ and the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Whether Theophilus was a wealthy relative of Caesar, an influential lawyer or government official, or some other benefactor doesn't really matter. We can't be sure who Theophilus was, but we do know Luke's reasons for writing.

“Many” (v.1) had written before him, including Mark. Luke was **NOT an eyewitness to events**, but he wrote around 60 AD to update and supplement existing accounts and to produce an “*orderly account*” (v.3) based on close research and careful reflection, with the intention of enabling Theophilus (and us) to “*know the certainty of the things you have been taught*” (v.4).

With next week being Bible Sunday, we would do well, as the Collect says, to “***read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Holy Scriptures***”. Like Theophilus (whoever he was), we are encouraged to read the facts and use them as a basis for our faith. Luke enables us to get to know about Jesus, and what he accomplished to fulfil the OT prophecies. For example, he mentions John the Baptist “*in the spirit and power of Elijah*” (v.17), referring back to our Malachi passage: “*I will send the prophet Elijah to you ... He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents*” (4.5f).

Luke’s **style changes abruptly** in v.5: “*In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah*”. Not only is the language reminiscent of the OT, but so is the theme of a divine promise to a barren woman.

What was Zechariah doing in the Temple? The **first-century Temple in Jerusalem** was served by “priests”, simply male members of the 24 families or clans who could trace their ancestry back to Aaron. “*Zechariah belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron*” (v.5). Each clan gathered twice a year for a week’s duty in the Temple, then lots were drawn each day to determine who should perform the sacred functions.

Most of these functions took place at the great altar outside the Temple, in full public view. **One coveted task** was to go inside the Temple and offer incense on the small altar near to the door of the Holy of Holies – this was the privilege which **fell by lot to Zechariah**. It was as close as anyone (apart from the High Priest allowed into the Holy of Holies once a year) could get to the very focus of God’s presence on earth.

For Zechariah it must have been **like winning the jackpot**. But like many winners of financial jackpots, he wasn’t prepared for the consequences. (I don’t speak from experience!). He was “***gripped with fear***” (v.12) as the angel said to him: “*Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been answered. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son ... John will be a joy and delight to you... he will be*

great in the sight of the Lord” (vv.13-15). Then the angel quoted Malachi 4.5f to emphasise John’s vital role in God’s plan (v.17).

What an incredible **surprise!** The completely unexpected promise of a gift of a **very special baby** to a couple who *“were both very old” (v.7)*. And just to make things even more bewildering, Zechariah emerged confused and dumb from this highlight of his Temple career: *“When he came out, he could not speak” (v.22).*

Yes, if we are mindful of our greater Christian responsibilities, then we can rejoice like Zechariah and look forward in excited anticipation this Advent to celebrating a very special birth. Can we use these “gap” weeks **joyfully** and be **surprised and delighted** that *“God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform” (647)* in the 21st century, as in the time of Zechariah in the Temple?

We will be celebrating in a different place this year. That will come as a **surprise** to some people, but hopefully it will be a **delight** too. We always enjoy Anglican worship with our son in a primary school and with our younger daughter, whether on a Dutch barge, in a museum or in a cinema. We are **looking forward to celebrating Christmas here in Clarke Foley**. For anyone who still has reservations about worshipping in a building that has not been consecrated, can I remind you that on Dec. 25th we will be celebrating Jesus’ first worshippers - shepherds who praised Jesus in a stable. They would certainly have been both **surprised** by the angels’ message and **delighted** by what they found. Yes, **God can be worshipped anywhere**.

Let’s watch and pray this Advent, and look out for the signs of God’s presence. If **Christ’s birth matters** to us, we should want it to matter to the whole world. **Let’s tell others** about the **surprises and delights** of Advent, so that they too can be joyful in the hectic run-up to Christmas.

For, as the late Mother Teresa said:

Joy is prayer – Joy is strength – Joy is love – Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls.

I like the last bit, ***Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls.***

I apologise if you don’t approve of **comparing Jesus with Santa**. You may want to share this piece, sent to me by a Church of Scotland minister in the Shetland Islands, with grandchildren or any youngsters you have contact with. I would particularly like to emphasise the ending, **challenging folk of all ages:**

Jesus is Better than Santa

*Santa lives at the North Pole.
JESUS is everywhere.
Santa rides in a sleigh
JESUS rides on the wind and walks on the water.*

*Santa comes but once a year
JESUS is an ever-present help.
Santa fills your stockings with goodies
JESUS supplies **all** your needs.
Santa comes down your chimney uninvited
JESUS stands at your door and knocks and then enters your heart.*

*You have to stand in line to see Santa
JESUS is as close as the mention of His name.
Santa lets you sit on his lap
JESUS lets you rest in His arms.
Santa doesn't know your name, all he can say is "Hi little boy or girl, What's your name?"
JESUS knew our name before we did. Not only does He know our name, He knows our address too. He knows our history and future and He even knows how many hairs are on our heads.*

*JESUS has a heart full of love.
JESUS offers health, help and hope.
Santa says "You better not cry"
JESUS says "Cast all your cares on me for I care for you.*

*Santa's little helpers make toys
JESUS makes new life, mends wounded hearts, repairs broken homes and builds mansions.*

*Santa may make you chuckle but
JESUS gives you joy that is your strength.*

*While Santa puts gifts under your tree,
JESUS became our gift and died on **the tree.**
It's obvious there is really no comparison.
We need to remember Who Christmas is all about.
We need to put Christ back in Christmas.*

Jesus is the reason for our joy this Advent season

*Loving Father, we are grateful that you know everyone by name and that you chose us to bring healing and restoration to the lives of others. Help us to use these Advent "gap weeks" wisely and to look for **surprises and delights** as we draw closer to celebrating the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ, the ultimate healer and transformer of lives. Amen.*