

Sermon on Wednesday 23 December

by Rev. Wendy Sellers

(Reading: Luke 1. 57-80)

That was a very long reading, I know. But I think you need Zechariah's song to make sense of the naming of John the Baptist.

Names have been a theme of our 'Thought for the Day' this Advent, where we have explored some of the many names given to Jesus in the Bible. Today, we hear how outraged both priests and neighbours are when first Elizabeth, then Zechariah, say their boy is to be called John.

Today, many parents choose unusual names for their child. Elon Musk and his partner, Grimes, chose a name no-one knew how to pronounce – spelled X, then the Elven letter for A, then A hyphen 12; it ran into difficulties with the Californian authorities who only allow names made up of the 26 letters of the English language, although some punctuation is permitted. To me, the name just seems selfish, not an expression of individuality, I'm afraid.

But John was a perfectly normal name, not a silly one at all. In Hebrew it translates as 'Yahweh is (or has been) Gracious'. So, the name itself wasn't the problem. The upset was because it wasn't a family name. The priests and neighbours presumed that Zechariah's son would be named after him and then would become a priest like him.

It turned out God had other plans, which he had shared with Zechariah. And what is surprising is that John's parents appear to be fine about God's plans for their only son.

John was to be not a priest, but a prophet. Not a respected member of the faith, but a radical. Not a neat family man, but a wild unkempt one. Not someone who lived a life of security, but someone who lived a life of danger. This is not what most parents want for their son, to be honest. When we say we want

our children to fulfil their potential and live their dreams, none of us really mean we want them to be prophets.

Of course, Elizabeth and Zechariah had given up hope of having a child. A bit like Abraham and Sarah all those centuries before. And they had no doubt that their son was the result of direct intervention by God, because the Angel Gabriel himself had explained it all to Zechariah in the temple before the baby was conceived. So, John was a gift from God and from the beginning was marked for his service. His task was to prepare the way of the Lord. And all this is why his name had to be John – God is Gracious.

I do wonder how we would react to any of this now. We like to believe that we have free choice and that we only do the things God asks of us, if we want to; that God would never manipulative or force us. Yet, that is exactly what appears to be happening to this family. God provides the baby, punishes Zechariah for doubting, names the child and decides in advance what John's life will be like.

And Zechariah responds in a way we might find difficult to replicate in such circumstances. With utter and complete joy. Not just joy that he at last has a child (although I'm sure he felt that, too), but joy that God had chosen to honour his family in this way. Joy that his child will be a prophet. And not just any prophet, but the Messiah's prophet.

Zechariah's 'yes' echoes the 'yes' of Mary heard about in the previous chapter of Luke. Both give us a canticle of joy, the Magnificat and the Benedictus, which remind us that serving God should be a joy, even when what is asked seems to us to be unreasonable.

We currently live in a world where what we do is very much controlled, even down to the detail of whether we can see our loved ones. If you are currently dealing with this with joy, then you are better people than me. But today's reading tells us that true joy can be found in unexpected places. And that it is up to us whether we approach a situation with joy or not. Zechariah

chose joy; not only accepting what lay before him, but exalting in it.

Whether you are someone who easily finds joy in unexpected places or someone who finds that harder, I hope and pray that you will discover times of real joy this Christmas.

