

Introduction

THE ONE WHO CAME BEFORE

Some while ago a very important person came to a service of worship at the congregation where I was minister. A short time before they arrived, a team of security personnel came to the building along with sniffer dogs and systematically cleared the way so that it was ready for the VIP.

Nothing in the history of planet earth could have been more important than the arrival of Messiah, the one spoken about, and eagerly anticipated, from the earliest chapters of the Bible (Gen. 3:15) to the very last book of the Old Testament (Mal. 4:5). The start of the Lord's ministry in space and time required preparation. It necessitated anticipation. The responsibility of doing that fell to a most unlikely individual.

UNCONVENTIONAL, COUNTERCULTURAL AND SELF-EFFACING

This leader's best indication of success was when people did not shine the light on himself, the warm-up

performance, but instead focused on the main act. When men and women didn't applaud and adore him, but Jesus!

After 400 years of 'silence', that period of time between the Old and New Testaments during which Israel was ruled successively by the Medo-Persian Empire, the Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians and Romans, God communicated once again to the Jewish people – a resumption of the story of God's saving activity.

This book is an attempt to discover what the Gospel writers tell us about 'The one who came before', John the Baptist, in his preparations for, and anticipation of, the arrival of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Enjoy diving in!

The birth of John the Baptist foretold

The story begins with a baby. Or rather, without one, for Zechariah was old and Elizabeth his wife was menopausal. A house doesn't need a baby to be a happy home, but in days when children were seen as a reward from the Lord (Ps. 127:3-5) Elizabeth felt judged by other people (1:25).

At the time when Herod the Great was king of Judea, Zechariah was a priest in the Jewish Temple located in Jerusalem. There were some 8000 priests within 24 divisions of 300 men, and Zechariah served in Abijah's unit. He and his wife Elizabeth were upright in the Lord's eyes. Not sinless, but 'righteous in the sight of God' (v. 6). In other words, they were a praying couple seeking to live faithful and obedient lives.

One day when he was on duty, a 'lucky' thing happened to Zechariah. According to custom the presiding priest was chosen by lot and the lot fell on Zechariah to enter the Temple of the Lord, burn incense and offer prayers on behalf of the people. This opportunity did not come to every priest and it could only happen once in anyone's lifetime. It 'just so happened' to come Zechariah's way at this particular moment. 'The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord' (Prov. 16:33). At this specific time, God chose

to do something that would not only change Zechariah's life, but shape the course of history.

Back home, Elizabeth was not experiencing much luck. Just like many other godly women before her, she was unable to have children, and, being past natural child-bearing age, had no heir or offspring to take care of her or her husband in old age. Yet, despite bitter personal disappointment, she remained faithful, serving God.

Just as Zechariah placed the incense on the altar, representing the prayers of God's people, an angel – a messenger of the Lord – appeared to him. After reassuring Zechariah, God's messenger told the priest who he was and why he had come. 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you are to call him John' (v. 13).

It's a natural reaction to be alarmed when an angel of the Lord appears! Mary was afraid when she was told of Messiah's conception (Luke 1:30). The shepherds were filled with fear when they heard the news of Messiah's birth (Luke 2:10). The women were terrified when they met the angels announcing Christ's resurrection (Luke 24:5). But do not be shocked if God responds to the prayers of His people. God's purposes are furthered through this good news that astonishingly Elizabeth will have a baby and his parents will call him 'God is gracious' – 'John'.

QUESTION

Can you think of a time something 'just happened' that, looking back, wasn't 'chance'?

PRAYER

Gracious God, I bless you that neither this cosmos nor my life are accidents, but that you are a sovereign Lord who both knows the needs of the world and responds to the prayers of your people. Please Lord, however 'lucky' or 'unlucky' I feel right now, enable me to keep on loving and serving you for Jesus' sake. Amen.