

DAY ONE -- ELIZABETH

Good morning to you all,

The first couple of words for our stars are not ones particularly well known in the cultural nativity story, although most church stalwarts will have heard of them. Today, we start with ELIZABETH. Elizabeth's story can be found in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. She is a descendant of Aaron, who was the first of the High Priests of Israel, and older brother to Moses. She was married to Zechariah but they had no children, despite both being righteous before God and living according to all God's commandments. But, after her husband is visited by an angel, Elizabeth becomes pregnant. When the child is born, he is named John, and becomes 'John the Baptist', who points people towards Jesus.

Whilst she is still pregnant, Elizabeth is visited by her younger cousin Mary, who is also pregnant. We are told that, when Mary arrives, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and her baby leaps in her womb. There is a lot going on for this woman, whom we often gloss over in nativity plays! Moreover, we have quite a lot of spoken words associated with Elizabeth, something few women in the Bible are afforded. Some of the words she says to Mary are used daily by Christians across the world: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb". Now, if you are CoS and these do not ring a bell, this is not surprising: they are part of the 'Hail Mary' prayer. But, whilst the CoS tradition has side-stepped these words, millions of our sisters and brothers of Christ echo Elizabeth's words whenever they offer this prayer.

Elizabeth's story might seem small in the context of the whole Christian bible. Nonetheless, her place in history is marked by who her ancestors were, who her child was to become, but--perhaps most significantly of all--by being filled by the Holy Spirit and proclaiming her experience of God. In that respect, Elizabeth is a good example for many of us to follow, today.

Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY TWO -- ZECHARIAH

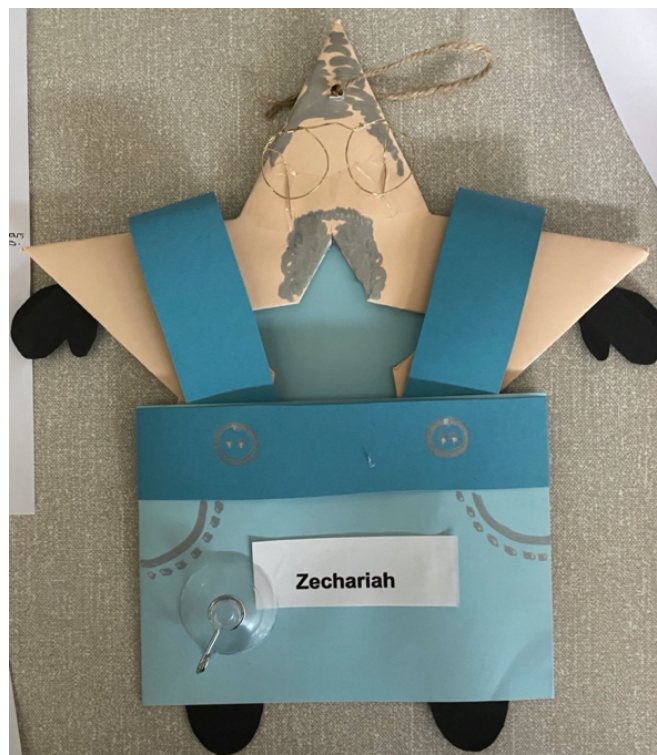
Good morning everyone,

Today's word, ZECHARIAH, gives us the 'other half' of the Elizabeth's story. It is interesting, although by no means unusual, that although it was Elizabeth who carried the baby and gave birth to him (a not undangerous endeavour at the time) more words are devoted to Zechariah than Elizabeth. Anyway, what of Zechariah? He was a priest from the order of Abijah, and he too was righteous before God and lived according to all God's commandments. It was not looking good for them to have a child as they were both "getting on in years" (this phrase amused me, but this is what the NRSV translation says, so I thought I'd share it!)

We begin with Zechariah being selected as the priest to go into The Holy Place to make the incense offering, whilst everyone else prayed outside. Whilst inside, the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah; unsurprisingly, he is terrified. Most of us would be scared witless should an angel appear in our midst! Moreover, the Israelite people had not known God or God's angels to appear to anyone for over 400 years. This was, indeed, most unexpected. The angel tells him not to be afraid (they *always* say that, right?!) and that his prayers have been heard. His wife Elizabeth is to have a son, whose name is to be John. John is to be filled with the Holy Spirit before birth, a prophet with the spirit and power of Elijah, and make the people of Israel ready for the coming of their Lord. Zechariah is, naturally, quite sceptical due to his and Elizabeth's ages. Yet, for this puzzlement, Gabriel renders Zechariah temporarily mute. Outside, the praying people are starting to wonder what is taking Zechariah so long, then when he emerges unable to speak, they know something big has happened.

Zechariah remains mute throughout the pregnancy and even after the birth, until the baby is 8 days old. This is when he is to be circumcised and named. Everyone assumes he'll be called Zechariah, after his father, but Elizabeth insists on John. They appeal to the father, who writes on a tablet "His name is John". He is immediately able to speak and begins praising God. At the end of Luke, we have the words he is said to have sung, praising God, foretelling of the life of his son, and the work of God. This song is less well-known than Mary's Magnificat or the Hail Mary prayer, but it is part of regular worship for many Christians and is really quite beautiful. I invite you today, if you have a little to time, to have a read: Luke 1:68-79.

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." May you know that peace this day, Fee.

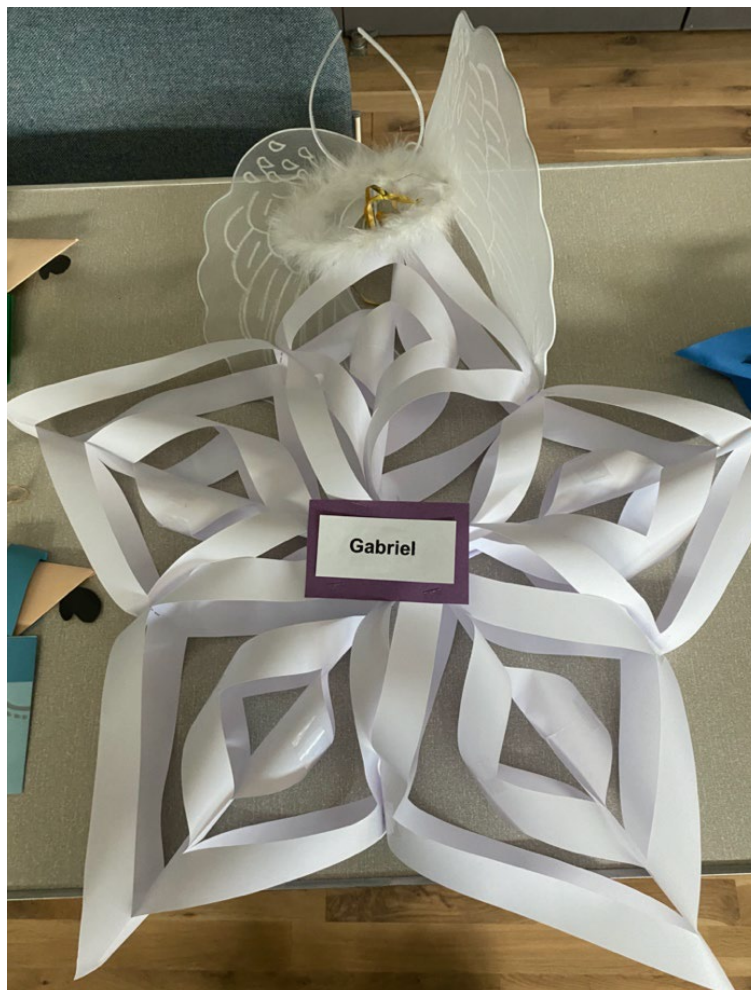


DAY THREE – GABRIEL

Good morning everyone,

Today, we are thinking about GABRIEL. Many of us, when we think of the Angel Gabriel, think of cute wee people (usually girls) dressed in white with wings and tinsel halos. The biblical Gabriel is a little different, and I have enjoyed learning a little more of him in preparation for today's thoughts. The words in the Bible translated as "angel" mean something like "messenger" or, even, "minister". This is perhaps emphasised by few angels being named in the Bible, leaving us to remember the message rather than messenger. However, whilst many angels act as messengers—and many messengers are latterly considered to be angels—their biblical remit is even broader (think 'choir of angels' singing above the shepherds). Gabriel is therefore quite unique. We are told his name both times he appears in Luke, a name which means "Greatness of God": first, when he appears to Zechariah in the Temple and then when he appears to Mary. There is no doubt over this angel's identity; moreover, the words spoken by him tell us that he identifies as male whilst giving us more detail about his angelic role. He stands in the presence of God and is sent, by God, to give people on earth good news. He also has the power to change people's physicality, such as rendering Zechariah mute. I also wonder if he looks a bit intimidating, as he has to tell both Zechariah and Mary not to be afraid. Perhaps that's because he came out of nowhere, or perhaps it is how he looks (I imagine him looking like a rather stern, scary-looking angel figure we have in the manse: it makes us giggle each year, but I definitely would not want to encounter a human-sized one...ever!). Overall, our nativity plays get the name correct, but most of the rest of our interpretations have been coloured by centuries of culture, lore and artwork (there is no mention of Gabriel having wings, for example!)

Like many aspects of the nativity story, the details around Gabriel have been lost or distorted over time. The fundamental truth of his role remains, however: he is sent by God to bring good news to people on earth. Perhaps that is something more of us might emulate in the days and weeks to come...? Grace and peace be with you, all. Fee.



DAY FOUR – MARY

Good afternoon to you all,

With my apologies for not posting earlier (too many appointments today!), I would us to think today about MARY. She is probably the most well-known of all the nativity characters, other than Jesus himself. And it is not surprising: she did all the hard work, after all! Yet, she is also side-lined by a great majority of Protestant Christians, who wish to distance themselves from the Marian doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, and other traditions. As such, I fear we lose the richness of this pivotal person in our faith's story, to the detriment of us all.

Mary is mentioned in all four Gospels (and Acts), but there are only birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, and even then, Matthew's focus is on Joseph. But between these 2 accounts, we learn that our story starts with Mary betrothed to Joseph, but they are yet to be married, live together or have sexual relations. We do not know how old Mary is, but she may have been as young as 12 or 13. Whatever her age, she is confronted by the Angel Gabriel and told she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Son of God. And, I have to say, I think she takes this news remarkably well! Also, having heard about her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy, she goes and spends 3 months with her: solidarity? comfort? learning-curve? Whatever the motives behind this journey, it is when she meets Elizabeth that Mary praises God with her famous hymn, the Magnificat. If you wish to read this today, you can find it at Luke 1:46-55.

When the early church was grappling with what all this might mean—the incarnation, the role of the Holy Spirit, the significance of Mary—one of the things they agreed about Mary was that she could properly be called 'Theotokos', which literally means 'God-bearer' but is usually translated as 'Mother of God'. That is one powerful title. No matter whether we believe in the immaculate conception or Mary's eternal virginity, I hope we can agree that to bear God, to give birth to God, to nurse God, is an awe-inspiring role. Mary had a relationship with God, through Jesus, that no other human being possibility could, and that is worthy of reflection, not just to give thanks for her courage in taking on that role but also how we might come closer to God ourselves in our own ways.

"God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." May your soul magnify the Lord our God this day, as we rejoice in a God who brings justice and peace to earth. Blessings, Fee.



DAY FIVE – JOSEPH

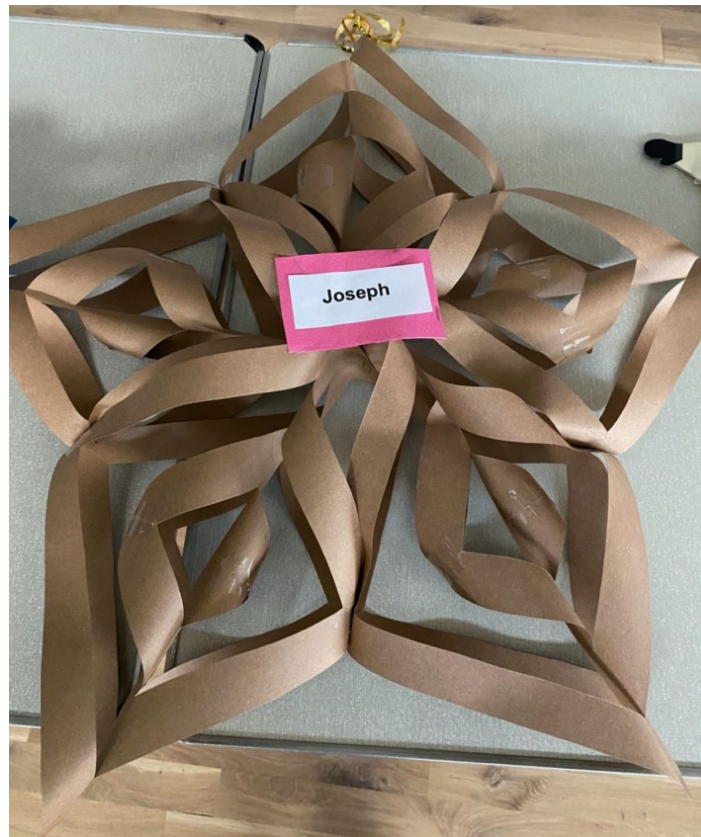
Good morning everyone,

JOSEPH is something of an enigmatic figure in the nativity story. We know little of him, and he disappears from the Gospels once Jesus is an adult, with only Matthew really focussing on his part in the nativity. Even so, the glimpses we have of him give us some things to ponder.

We are told that Joseph is a descendant of King David, although the Gospel genealogies in Luke and Matthew differ as to which of David's sons, Solomon or Nathan, comes next in the family tree. We understand from later on in the Gospels that Joseph worked with his hands, perhaps with wood as a carpenter, but it might have been with stone, or metal, or, indeed, in some form of construction work more generally. He may be living in Nazareth at the time of his betrothal to Mary, or he may be in Bethlehem; again, Matthew and Luke diverge in their narratives. All we do know is that, ultimately, he does marry Mary when she falls pregnant without him and does what he can to protect her and her baby.

Joseph was well within his rights to break off his engagement to Mary. It is noble of him to want to do it quietly, so as not to create a stoushie, which could have led to Mary being stoned. To then accept the word of an angel, that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and marry her, is incredibly brave. For me, it suggests someone who already has a trust in God that goes beyond mere religiosity. After the child is born, and some strange visitors have brought intriguing gifts, Joseph again trusts a night-visiting angel and flees to Egypt. This will have been no mean feat and, whilst Joseph might have had "transferable skills" and been able to seek employment in Egypt, they would have remained refugees throughout their stay. Finally, even when it is safe to return, he cannot risk taking them back to Bethlehem, so they establish a new home much further north, in Nazareth.

Much else about Joseph is speculation: was he married before? Did he already have children or was he a perpetual virgin? How long did he live? And at what age did he die? We can theorise and speculate to our hearts' content, but it should not detract from what we have been told about Joseph in the Scriptures: he was a man who trusted God fully and implicitly, and who risked everything to protect the vulnerable Mary and Jesus. In many ways, there is nothing else we need know about him. May we give thanks for his virtues and seek to emulate them as best we can. Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY SIX – PREGNANCY

Good morning everyone,

PREGNANCY is not something upon which I can claim expertise...then again, neither can any male Christian leader in history! So, what I offer today are my reflections as a woman looking-in on a story that has changes to women's bodies—changes outwith their control—as central to the plot.

According to Luke, Elizabeth and Mary both experience pregnancy for the first time. One woman is advanced in years; the other is possibly very young. Other than what women around them had told them, they had no idea what to expect. Even what they were told is only a guide: each woman and pregnancy is unique. No one can know before a pregnancy whether they will experience morning sickness, high blood pressure, swollen ankles, acid reflux, backache...or, indeed, whether they will carry their baby to term and deliver safely. It is a journey into the unknown every time, fraught with danger as well as excitement, anxiety as well as awe. Each and every woman who embarks on this journey (intentionally or not) has my complete respect: I know I could not face the uncertainty of pregnancy and its impact upon my body.

Yet, even as I type, a little voice in my head is asking whether this is an appropriate reflection for our church media. Bodily changes, particularly those of women, are not something we mention in church, are they? We don't talk about menstruation or sex or pregnancy or miscarriage or breast-feeding, do we? One day, during my training, I was observing a nativity rehearsal. The girl who was playing Mary took the 'Jesus doll' and put it up her costume, ready to give birth when the moment came. It was promptly removed and placed under her chair instead. I understand the Sunday Club leader's position, I really do. However, until we start being honest about the messy, visceral nature of the Christmas story pregnancies, we will be stopping short of the wonder of the incarnation. Moreover, we will continue to deny the real-life experiences of women whose pregnancies are not clean and simple, consigning them, perhaps, to silence, shame, guilt and isolation. That's not why Jesus came. He came to offer us all life, whatever our circumstances and experiences, and to enter into our human world, without exception.

Each of us was carried by a woman on an uncertain journey. Some of us have carried another human being. Those truths are something to be marvelled upon at any time, but which take on a whole other dimension in Advent. May you know yourself held and blessed this day, Fee.



DAY SEVEN – BABY

Good morning to you all,

I might not have much experience of pregnancy, but I have held a BABY. Indeed, I have held a few babies in my life. Shockingly, I even seem to be relatively competent with them! I love talking to babies...about anything (honestly, anything, mostly complete drivel). I love interacting with them. I love watching their facial expressions and seeing the wonder in their eyes. It is something I have done fairly instinctively since my friends started having babies a number of years ago; yet it is only really in this past year that I have learned some of the science behind it.

Many people think babies cannot do very much: they eat, sleep, poop and cry, and that's about it, right? Wrong! Babies are amazing. From the moment of birth, babies are wired to seek connection with other human beings around them, primarily their mother and immediate family. This connection is by touch, eye-contact, sound, smell: anything that tells baby they are not alone. Why? Because, for a baby, connection equals safety. Connection means they are not alone, and that someone is around to try and keep them alive. By contrast, a lack of connection triggers their fear hormones, which keeps them on high alert, either to get a connection back or to do whatever else they can to stay alive. This makes some sense when we stop and think about it, but the real learning for me has been that the level of connection a baby feels in their first few years of life can affect the rest of their life: physical health, as well as emotional and social wellbeing.

I saw some of this learning in action as a volunteer chaplain in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. There, babies are kept alive in incubators and their bodies are incredibly delicate. But care for their immediate survival in this way restricts connection, which impacts long-term health and wellbeing. Where I was, parents were encouraged to talk to their babies as much as possible, and to touch them when it was safe to do so...even if just fingertip to fingertip. As the babies grew stronger, they were able to come out of the incubators for short periods of time and be held by their parents. Most moving for me was seeing new dads holding their babies up against bare chests, to maximise this sense of connection.

Every baby who is born is fragile and vulnerable, but also utterly amazing, and is learning at a mind-boggling speed. Science tells us that connection with other human beings is the single most important thing in that learning. How does that change the frame through which we glimpse the story of God coming to earth as a human baby? Peace be with you, Fee.

