Family Service Talk 17th January 2021

Luke 1:11-20 + 57-65

This is the 2nd in a series of talks on making decisions which started last week when Gillian wrote about the decisions Joseph had to make when he heard that Mary was pregnant.

This week we are looking at Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist and a seemingly small but actually hugely important decision she had to make.

Now I don’t know about you but I am pretty bad at making decisions … and seem to be getting worse at it the older I get! Some decisions are easy ones … would I choose this plate of food to eat (muddy leaves) or this one (chocolate biscuits)? Or … should I wear these on my feet to go out in the snow (sandals) or these (boots)?

But some are harder. Yesterday morning I spent 2 hours (when I should have been writing this talk) trying to make a decision as to whether I should do something I had been asked to do or not. I’d prayed, I’d thought about it, I’d talked to Alan, I’d weighted up the pros and cons, I’d thought about the effect on the people involved but it still felt like a stalemate…. I didn’t know what to do for the best. And then I realised that what God was showing me was that when it comes down to it, we can only do what seems best to us and then we must trust him to bring the right outcome from the decision we make. In other words, we might make the decision but God is in control of the outcome, not us! How often do I have to learn that lesson?!

But back to Elizabeth who demonstrated the right way to go about decision-making …. She and her husband Zechariah were elderly, faithful, Jews who were obedient to the one true God but, sadly, were childless. Zechariah was a priest and was on duty in the temple one day having been chosen to burn the incense there (a once in a life-time honour). And whilst there, the angel Gabriel visited him from God and told him that Elizabeth was going to have a son who would prepare the people ready for God coming to earth – the Messiah coming to save his people. What an amazing thing to be told! Zechariah’s reaction (like ours I suspect) was ‘how on earth can that happen?’ …. and almost … ‘why should I believe you?’ …. rather than joyful acceptance. And as a result, he was unable to speak until the baby was born.

It is hard to imagine the scenario when he got home to Elizabeth and had to explain all this to her without words but I’m sure there were some pretty late-night (somewhat one-sided) conversations!

And this is where we can learn a first really important part of decision making. Elizabeth and Zechariah will have looked back at all the aspects of the situation. It might well have seemed a pretty incredible and unlikely scenario, but God had promised the Jews over and over that he would send a saviour to save his people – the Messiah. Then through the prophet Malachi he had promised to send a messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah. And throughout the history of the Jewish people, even when they had made some really wrong decisions and disobeyed God, he had always been faithful. So, if this really was a message from God then they certainly could trust it and believe the angel.

We too can look in the Bible and discover God’s faithfulness throughout history – always keeping his promises and wanting to love and bless his people. We can also look at creation all around us … and look back at our own lives … and see God’s faithfulness there giving us confidence to involve God in our decision making.

Our first hymn today reflects these truths … ‘Great is thy faithfulness, oh God my father’.

Once Elizabeth was pregnant, her response was to spend the first 5 months of pregnancy at home, away from other people. She knew that this baby was God’s doing and, in that time, I imagine that she spent many hours in God’s presence – in grateful prayer, acknowledging with awe what God had done for her and preparing for her role ahead. It is often said that we are called human ‘beings’ not human ‘doings’ for a reason! God loves it when we spend time in his presence just being with him.

One of the most difficult things about the present situation is not being able to spend time with those we love – but it may have given us extra opportunity to simply ‘be’ with God. In these moments, when we are still and quiet, that may be when we can hear God’s voice speaking to us through our thoughts and prayers.

So, if we have a decision to make, here is a second important thing to make time for - just being in God’s presence, to be reminded of his glory and power ….. even more reason to involve God in our decision making

Our next hymn describes this vital part of decision-making … ‘Be still for the presence of the Lord, the holy one is here’.

Having looked back at God’s faithfulness and spent time in his presence, Elizabeth was finally ready to move forward in life and obediently embrace the new role that God had given her even though she did not know what the outcome would be. She was ready to trust God and, against Jewish tradition and all the expectation of her friends and family, she announced that the baby was to be called John as the angel had told Zechariah. There would have been uproar among those listening but Elizabeth knew her decision was the right one and she stood firm, putting her trust in the one true God. She didn’t know what would happen next but she knew she could trust God for the outcome.

And we can do the same when we have a decision to make – trust God for the outcome, in the knowledge of his faithfulness to us and his glory and power.

Our final hymn shows us what trusting God looks like …. ‘Father, I place into your hands the things I cannot do’.

It covers the whole of our lives where we may have to make decisions - ‘the things I cannot do’ … ‘the things that I’ve been through’ … ‘the way I should go’ … ‘my friends and family’ … ‘the things that trouble me’ … ‘the person I would be’. And each verse ends with that wonderful truth … ‘for I know I always can trust you’.

Elizabeth didn’t know what would happen next after she made the decision to trust the message from God, but she knew she could trust God for the outcome.

And we too, even in these difficult and challenging times when we don’t know what the right decision is, we should…

… look back at God’s faithfulness

… be still in God’s presence

… trust God for the outcome

And we do this in the certain knowledge that God loves us more than life itself. Amen.