

There is nothing like a little detail in a story to get your attention. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius...when Pontius, and Philip; Lysanias and Caiaphas all wielded their power in various and sundry places...the word of God came to John. Luke's gospel tells the story like no one else. In fact, He begins by telling us that he will tell it better (Luke 1: 1ff). The details don't matter much to us. Herod - Pilate - Phillip; various rulers, tetrarchs and high priests elicit no more than a shrug of the shoulders from sophisticated, 21st century folks. We have our own struggles with powerful people - there are names that prompt emotions and reactions in us that will mean nothing to the generations to follow. But Luke gives us detail - a way of marking the mood of the times.

John, son of Zechariah is a creature of his time. Hard times for the people of God, which stretch back to the year of John's birth...and beyond. The enemies that have plagued Israel are given names in Luke's gospel. Zechariah identifies his new born son with the promise that stretches back to Abraham - the promise of salvation - the promise of peace. "...you, my child, will be called the prophet of the most high; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways..." That's a pretty heavy burden to lay at the feet of your first-born, but it's a detail that Luke needs us to have. God's people are desperate for salvation. They see the possibility in each new generation - in every tiny child there is the hope that peace will come.

This is a concept we understand. Our children carry our hopes and dreams forward for us. We want more for them - better for them - than we had. It's a cruel myth that 'every day, in every way things are getting better', but that doesn't stop us from wishing it were true. In the case of the modern, (so-called) developed world, the hope of constant improvement is a benign fantasy. In Roman occupied Palestine for the descendants of Abraham, it was urgent necessity.

Zechariah and his generation longed for a return to the glory days; a time when God was in the temple, and all was right with the world. Sure, God was still being worshipped - the temple was still standing - but all was not well. The 'promised kingdom' was being driven from view by the present reality. Roman rules took precedence over the rule of God. Religious observance was tolerated so long as it served Roman interest. The Romans kept things reasonably peaceful, but when peace comes at the cost of your integrity, is it really peace? God's people - full of the promise of lions and lambs lying together, and swords beaten into ploughshares - would be troubled by the Pax Romana, that came at the point of a sword. Parents (like Zechariah), so long sustained by the ancient promise, could not be blamed for putting high expectations on their children. And then, one day, it happens. The word of God came to the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. Isaiah's words begin to take shape - the word of God moves in to the neighbourhood and takes root in young John - and salvation steps closer, and peace looks possible.

Thirty years ago (today!), when a vocation in the church was something I had not imagined (nor ever considered) Lea and I became parents for the first time. There is nothing to compare to the experience of holding a child, mere minutes old, and imagining a future for her. That moment changed the future for Lea and I. Everything becomes filled with equal parts fear and fascination. There is immense responsibility and a feeling of liberation - that the world will be a better place now that this particular person is in it. I didn't sing like Zechariah, but I understood (in that moment) his majestic hope. It didn't matter that I had spent most of my youth in a world threatened by one crisis after another. Things would be better. God - whom I had just begun to know - had made a bold statement in the birth of my daughter.

Never mind that the world into which she was born would continue to re-invent horrors beyond imagining - famine, disaster, climate crisis and political

instability - on this day in 1988 my hope was re-invented, and peace was not just possible, it was the only outcome that made any sense.

I think that is why we invest so much energy in our Christmas celebrations. The story, told fresh every year, of a child. Born in the ordinary way, in obscurity, in the midst of political intrigue, this child ignites in all humanity the hope of something better. The world **MUST** be peaceful for the sake of our children, and **THIS CHILD** will be the one who guarantees that peace. The story Luke tells of the details that surround the child Jesus make it clear - our hope has become real; the word has taken on flesh and is among us. This child will transform the way we see God and the way we conduct ourselves. This child brings true peace. Not at the point of a sword, but offered with open, loving arms. Jesus ushers in a new way of seeing and being for all who desire something better. Not a shiny new system - but a kinder, gentler expression of what has always been. In **THIS CHILD** we are offered the peace beyond our understanding. The peace that Jesus offers is not just 'peace instead of war. He brings us peace 'in the midst of...' and 'peace in spite of...' the reality that will not go away.