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IT IS A THIN LINE BEWEEEN DOUBT AND CURIOSITY!

Today's Text: Luke 1: 1-38

Extracts:

There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias ... [and] his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But *they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. ... Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense [and] said unto him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias; for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John." ... And Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife well advanced in years." And the angel ... said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and am sent to speak to you, and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak, until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their own time [Lk 1: 5-6, 11-13, 18-20]*

Prahlad Jani, an 82-year-old Indian yogi, claims that for the past 70 years, he has not eaten anything or drunk one drop of liquid.¹ To test his claims, Indian military doctors put him under round-the-clock observation during a two-week hospital stay that ended early May 2010. The researchers reported that during that time the man did not ingest any food or water and remained perfectly healthy. But Dr. Michael Van Rooyen, an emergency physician at Harvard's Brigham and Women's Hospital and an associate professor at the medical school says that that was simply impossible, that depending on climate conditions like temperature and humidity, a human could survive five or six days without water or up to three months without food if that person is taking liquids fortified with vitamins and electrolytes.

Based on scientifically derived evidence, we would expect the American doctor to agree with his Indian professional colleagues. He remained skeptical, in spite of additional knowledge. The Indians, on the other hand, accepted the yogi's claim after satisfying their curiosity. Most of us react to God's word the same way. We either desire to know more (curiosity) or simply refuse to accept it (doubt or unbelief), but the line between them can be quite thin! In this week's study, we shall use the reactions of Zacharias and Mary to God's message through angel Gabriel to understand how to differentiate one from the other.

¹ Based on Brian Alexander, "70 years without eating? Starving yogi' says it's true," <http://bodyodd.msnbc.msn.com/archive/2010/05/10/2299480.aspx?GT1=43001> ; Mon., May 10, 2010

1. Introduction: Faith is the envelope!

It used to puzzle me why angel Gabriel would rebuke one of the two persons that asked him questions after he had delivered God's messages to them while taking pains to answer the other one. I know that God is not a respecter of persons, that is, He is not partial. Therefore, there must be a reason for it and that is what we shall set out to discover in this week's study. It is important for us because, on an average day, we may be on our knees asking God for one favour or the other, or asking for clearer guidance on what He has called us to do for Him. We do not want to receive a rebuke. We do not want to offend Him.

The word of God states quite clearly, "Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for *he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him*" [Heb. 11: 6]. The following points flow from that biblical truth:

- Those who do not accept that God exists (atheists) or place anything else above God (idolaters) are also likely to reject what comes from Him. That is why they are called fools [Ps. 14: 1], even if they are Nobel laureates! Knowledge begins with the fear of the Lord "but fools despise wisdom and instruction" [Prov. 1: 7].
- But God's ways are beyond finding out [Rom. 11:33] because His thoughts and ways are not like ours and, "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are [His] ways higher than [our] ways and [His] thoughts than [our] thoughts" [Is. 55: 8-9].
- Only the Holy Spirit knows the mind of God. If we are led by the Holy Spirit, we have access to the mind of God because we have the mind of Christ [1 Cor. 2: 11-16]. Nevertheless, there is no way that we can ever know all there is to know about Him for "the secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us... forever that we may do all the words of [His] law" [Deut. 29: 29]. In other words, *the only knowledge that God will reveal to us is the one that we require for our purpose or calling.*

Clearly, the measure of our faith [Rom. 12: 3] influences our reaction to the word of God. If you believe, you will not ask questions that suggest doubts or unbelief. Let us use that understanding to analyze how Zacharias and Mary responded to God's message through the angel Gabriel.

2. Zacharias and Mary pose questions to God's messenger!

From a careful study of this week's Bible text [Lk 1: 1-38], the following themes emerge quite vividly:

- a) *Zacharias and Mary's circumstances were different*

Zacharias was a priest whose duty in the order of his division and according to the custom of the priesthood included burning incense in the Lord's temple [Lk 1: 5, 8, 9]. He was married to Elizabeth of the daughters of Aaron. She was barren and "well advanced in years" like her husband [vv. 5, 7]. Both of them were said to be "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" [v. 6]. That suggests that they were people of faith because righteousness is by faith [Rom. 4: 1-5]. We are told "they had no child" [v. 7], implying they had looked for one until they discovered that Elizabeth was barren. As people of faith, they had prayed for one and none came. They might have finally given up since they were both advanced in age, implying that Elizabeth had reached her menopause.

On the other hand, Mary, Elizabeth's cousin [v. 36], was a teenage virgin who had been betrothed to Joseph, a carpenter of the house of David [v. 27]. The Lord was with her and she was highly favoured among women [v. 28]. Clearly, as a bride looking forward to joining her husband, she could not have prayed for the message that the angel was coming to deliver to her. That gives us a clue to differences between her circumstances and those of Zacharias: *in his case, God was bringing a favourable answer to his prayers; in her case, God was inviting her to an important mission.* As we noted earlier, God will only give you knowledge that fits your purpose or calling.

b) Angel Gabriel showed up

Zacharias was in the temple of the Lord when he saw "an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar of incense." Fear fell on him and he was troubled. The angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, *for your prayer is heard;* and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John, and you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth" [vv. 11-13]. That confirms what we said earlier that Zacharias and his wife had prayed for that favour. The angel then went on to show what John was going to do for the Lord. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit right from his mother's womb; therefore, he should never take any alcoholic drink. He would be the precursor of the Christ, that is, "to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" [vv. 15-17]. The angel that brought that good news was called Gabriel "who stands in the presence of God" [v. 19]. He was thus an archangel or an elect angel [1 Tim. 5: 21].

Six months later, the same angel appeared to Mary and greeted her, saying, "Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" Like Zacharias, she was troubled to see the angel and wondered what kind of greeting that was. Angel Gabriel continued,

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for *you have found favour with God*. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus” [Lk 1: 26-31]. *Notice the difference in greetings. In the case of Zacharias, his prayer to have a child had been heard. In Mary’s case, she had found favour with God to be made the mother of Jesus.* That sets the stage for us to appreciate the angel’s response to their questions.

c) *A stupid question received a snappy answer!*

If you have asked God for a favour for so long and now He brings you word that it has been granted, does it make sense for you to ask Him if or how He will do it? Will that not make it a stupid question that deserves a snappy answer? It is like the story of a man who came home from work drenched and his wife asked him, “Is it raining?” Her husband snapped back, “No! I came home in a water truck!” In other words, that question was unnecessary.

After the angel had delivered such a gratifying message to Zacharias, he replied, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.” Look at that! He was asking for a sign. In the words of Jesus to the Pharisees who were asking Him for a sign, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign” [Matt. 12: 38-39]. You doubt the word of God and He counts it against you as unbelief. So, the messenger of God snapped back at Zacharias and said, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, *because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time*” [Lk 1: 20].

In the case of Mary, she did not ask to be made the mother of Jesus. Therefore, if God was asking her to do something for Him, He owed her some explanation. So, after the angel had delivered the message, she asked him, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” The angel replied, “With God nothing shall be impossible.” Then he went on to explain how the conception would be the work of the Holy Spirit. As soon as she had understood her mission, she said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! *Let it be to me according to your word*” [vv. 34-38]. She accepted the calling after her curiosity had been satisfied.

Now, the matter is clearer to us and we can lay down the following general principles on how to differentiate between doubts and curiosity:

- When you ask God for a favour and He tells you it has been granted, accept it by faith and rest on His guidance. But if you remain skeptical, especially when you see the circumstances around you (such as age,

scientific report, or economic and other pressures) to the contrary, you are telling God that you doubt what He has said, that you do not trust Him. For example, Jesus did not perform mighty miracles in His own country (Nazareth) “because of their unbelief” [Matt. 13: 54-58]. They could only see Him as the son of a local carpenter!

- However, if God is calling you out for His work and you do not understand what you are required to do, you can satisfy your curiosity by asking for clarification. That was what Mary did and angel Gabriel took pains to explain it to her. That was what Moses did when God sent him to deliver the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt. Out of fear, he did not want to go and God used a number of miracles to convince him that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was the one sending him there [Ex. Chaps. 3-4]. Thereafter, he moved with conviction and boldness. That was what Gideon did when God sent him to deliver the children of Israel from the oppression of the Midianites. He gave God several tests to convince himself that He was in deed sending him [Judg.6: 11-40]!

3. How to deal with doubts

There is nothing wrong, *per se*, with skepticism, that is, an attitude to doubt what others accept to be true, provided that you accept the truth when you now see the evidence. For example, Thomas, one of the twelve apostles, refused to accept the resurrection of Jesus until he could see and feel the nail prints on His hands. When Jesus later appeared and offered His hands for Thomas to see, he fell on his knees and accepted Jesus as his Lord and God [Jn 20: 24-28]. As we had said earlier, it is not every truth of God that can be proved by human or scientific methods. A good example is the doctrine of Three Persons in One God. Such truths you accept by faith. That was why Jesus told Thomas, “Because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” [v. 29].

The easiest way to deal with doubts is to understand and deal with what causes them. For example:

a) *Be open-minded*

Curiosity drives us to seek new knowledge and that is healthy. However, what you do with such knowledge can increase or decrease your doubts. The word of God says, “The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant” [Ps. 25: 14]. But ‘a fool has no delight in understanding but in expressing his own heart’ [Prov. 18: 2]. So, no matter what proof you can provide to demonstrate that it is God who has spoken, fools will never accept it because they are closed-minded.

A good example was Paul's experience with the Athenians. These people and the foreigners that lived among them "spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing" [Acts 17: 21]. After Paul had introduced them to Jesus and His death and resurrection, he told his listeners, "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead." Some of those who heard of the resurrection of the dead mocked him while some others believed and joined Paul [vv. 22-34]. In deed, "the ear of the wise seeks knowledge" [Prov. 18: 15]. So, be open-minded to obey God once He speaks or else you will drown in the sea of ignorance and unbelief.

b) *Learn from history or the past*

There is nothing new under the sun [Eccl. 1: 9]. God does not change [Mal 3: 6]. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever [Heb. 13: 8]. Therefore, do not expect that God's attitude to your unbelief or doubt will be different from that to Sodom and Gomorrah (for sexual depravity), or the children of Israel in the wilderness (for lack of faith) or to Zacharias (for doubt). You cannot expect to be blessed by God that you do not trust or acknowledge as God. Put fear and anxiety behind you because they have not helped you in the past and will not do so now.

4. Conclusion: Only believe!

Experts or your loved ones may tell you not to trouble God any further because your condition is beyond any solution. They may encourage or cajole you to ignore or question His call or the motive of His messengers. Such were the mourners who came from the house of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, to tell him, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any longer?" Jesus reassured him, "Do not be afraid; only believe." He did and his daughter came back alive [Mk 5: 35-42]. Jesus is reassuring you right now, "Do not be afraid; only believe."

It is a thin line between doubt and curiosity. Only believe!