

## The Hardest Thing

### [Zechariah was struck dumb]

*It is just after the first Christian Pentecost.  
An old Temple priest is in conversation with a visitor  
who is puzzled by the excitement of the Jesus people.  
He tells of his experience some thirty odd years ago.  
He is not a Christian believer himself,  
but he does have an open mind  
about Jesus of Nazareth*

If all the accounts are true - and I've no real reason to doubt them - the story of Jesus began with my cousin John. He was a lot younger than me, mind. His parents, Elizabeth and my uncle Zechariah were both getting on in years when John arrived. It was the best joke in town at the time. I tired of hearing people say, *If I was Zechariah's age and my wife told me she was pregnant, I'd have been struck dumb!*

Zechariah was a Levite, like me and the rest of our family. We all take our turn of Temple duties. We're responsible for the worship and sacrifices and we lead the psalm singing. I was on the rota at the same time as Zechariah. It was the last week of our duty. Zechariah had been chosen to burn the incense at the altar. Sorry, I should explain ...

We Jews believe God chooses the one to offer the prayers of the people. We draw lots and that way the one who gets it is obviously the one God has chosen. It's a tremendous moment for a priest to be chosen to go alone to represent the people before the Lord's altar. I've only been chosen once in all my years, but Zechariah offered the prayers many times. That's not surprising. He was such a good, kind, gentle man .. so close to God. We never heard a wrong words from his lips. But then he never did have much to say even when he wasn't dumb. Being struck dumb wasn't half the trouble for him as it would have been for me!

On that day, Zechariah passed through all the purification rituals and went into the Temple. He entered through the curtain to stand before the altar. We waited outside, chanting and praying with the people. The prayers seemed to be going on longer than usual. We'd been right through the psalms. We were beginning to be a bit concerned about Zechariah, but the moment he appeared we knew something was wrong. He walked unsteadily and we thought he had been taken ill until we saw his face .... Everyone stared at him. He had the strangest expression. Someone said it must have been like Moses when he came down from Sinai. His face was shining. It was as though he was all lit up from inside with a mix of fear and wonder. He signed to us that he had seen a vision, but that was obvious.

It was not till much later we found out what had actually happened. He had seen an angel in there behind the curtain. The angel was standing on the right side of the altar. Zechariah was petrified. It wasn't that which struck him dumb though. The angel told him not to be afraid. I think that's what they always say and it doesn't really help much. It's easy for an angel to say, but then he told Zechariah how God had heard his prayers for a son. Aunt Elizabeth was going to have a son who would be a special servant of God - a new Elijah!

When Zechariah could speak again, he told us the story over and over. That's why I can remember it - every detail. The boy was to be called John and he was to be the forerunner for the Messiah. He was going to be like the old prophets - full of God's Spirit. He would have the job of getting people right with God and ready for the Messiah. It was all a bit overwhelming, but it wasn't that which made him speechless! No, what caused that was that Zechariah answered the angel back. *It's not possible!* he said. Now, you don't say things like that to angels, or at least it's a bit risky, but I suppose he was just so overcome. *Elizabeth's too old,* he said. *And I'm no youngster!* I don't know if angels get cross, but this one certainly put Zechariah straight. *If you want proof of God's word,* he said. *You'll be struck dumb right now and stay that way till the boy's born!*

Well, that's exactly what happened. Sure enough, about a year later, John was born. The family naturally wanted to call him Zechariah after his father, but Zechariah set it down on a writing tablet, *His name is John.* It was just as though that was the key to unlock his lips- as though he was saying, *I believe. I'm going along with the angel and with God's word.* Then he was free to speak again, and we heard his story over and again. The rest came true too. John grew up to be a real fiery Elijah too!

Strange lad he was. He went to live in the wilds after his parents died. Got himself mixed up with one of those groups living in the desert. Next thing we heard was he was preaching and people were flocking to him from all over the country. It was just like the angel said. He called people to repent of their sins and when they did he baptised them in the Jordan, down near Aenon. There's no doubt. He really believed he was getting things ready for the Messiah. Then, when his cousin, Jesus came out from Nazareth and settled at Capernaum where he started preaching, John told people he believed Jesus was the Messiah!!

I wanted to believe it, but I never felt able to get involved, especially when John got all political. It's sad though. Both of them are dead now. John got too outspoken for his own good. He went too far with the Tetrarch and got himself separated from his head. Awful business that was. And with Jesus. The authorities trumped up blasphemy charges against him just to get rid of him. They had him crucified. Now his followers are going wild with stories about him coming back from the dead and living with them again. They're in the Temple and out on the streets calling us all to repent and follow Jesus. They still believe his is Messiah. They say his spirit is in them and he's doing his work for God's Kingdom through them. Likely they'll all get themselves all killed at this rate.

I don't know what to make of it all. I wonder what Zechariah would have thought? He used to say that God planned his not having a child, just so that John could be born at the right time. He reckoned it was all to do with the old prophecies coming true. Sometimes I think he may have been right. There've been strange things happening here in the last few weeks. Perhaps it is all part of something bigger than we know. Maybe Jesus was God's Son after all. And maybe John was the Elijah who went before him. Maybe Jesus is still alive. Now I'd better not be saying that too loud here in the Temple ... after all ... there may be angels around!