Advent: the Names Say It All.
John – the Lord is Gracious
Luke 1

This is the first Sunday of Advent so we're going to take a break from Acts until the New Year, and instead prepare our hearts for Christmas.

Now, when I was a boy, my parents wouldn't allow us to talk about Christmas until after the 5th of November, Guy Fawkes Night, Bonfire Night. But once the last firework had gone off, and the bonfires had burned, it was open season on Christmas. It was the next and the best thing in the year to look forward to, and you just wanted it to come.

Which of course is what Advent is all about.

But for the moment forget the coming of Christ as a baby, and think about the arrival of any other baby. One of the milestones as a parent as you're waiting for the baby to come is choosing the name. And you get out the books and you write your lists, and you argue and discuss it. And as someone said to me recently, the whole process makes you realise just how many people you *don't* like, because when a name gets suggested you immediately think of this person you know with just that name and you go, 'no way, we're not calling him that!'

But when you choose a name, most of us go either for a name of a favourite relative, or maybe a Bible character we admire, or just a name we really like. And even though we might spend ages deciding the name, there's not a huge amount of signficance to the name beyond us liking it, or it reminding us of someone we really like.

In the Bible things are very different. Because when God names someone, or changes someone's name, it's always significant. It's not that he goes through a book and says 'hmm Martin is such a better name than Simeon, let's change his name to Martin.' When God names, it's very deliberate, and the name has a meaning, and almost always that meaning gives a foretaste of what's coming next, and a clue as to what God is up to in the story.

So, God changes Abram's name to *Abraham*, which means 'father of a multitude' – and Abraham becomes the father not just of the people of Israel but the world wide family of all who put their faith in God. God changes Jacob's name to *Israel* – which means *he strives* or *wrestles with God*. And that's not just symbolic of Jacob having just wrestled with God, but of how Israel, Jacob's descendants, as a people, will behave. God tells Isaiah the prophet to give his children specific names – like Mahar-Shalal-Hash-Baz, (there's one for any of you who are expecting a baby, no one's chosen that one yet!), which means *The spoil speeds, the prey hastens* – and it's a warning of the destruction that was to come on the nations.

So when God names, it's always significant, and you always want to know – ok, what is this name telling me about what's happening here?

Well, in case you haven't got it, the first Christmas begins with God doing the naming: first of John who becomes John the Baptist, and then of Jesus. And so when God says 'these are the names of the key players', knowing how this works in the Old Testament, you and I should sit up and pay attention – 'ok, something is going on here, these names are telling me what God is up to in this story.'

So, this Advent, we're going to see what God is saying through the various names he gives in the Christmas story. Because when God enters history, the names really do say it all.

Reading Luke 1:57-79

So, the build up to the first Christmas begins with God telling Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth is going to have a boy and that he should call him John, which means, 'The Lord is Gracious.'

So imagine you're at the theatre, and it's the opening night, and the production you're seeing is Christmas, or the drama of the Message of Christianity, and the lights go down, and the theatre stills, and the music begins and then the great red curtain is drawn back and there emblazoned in lights at the back of the stage is the word, Grace.

And that's how Act One of the drama of Christmas begins with this declaration: The Lord is Gracious. It's the opening line of the whole story, the whole Christian message: God is gracious. As J. Gresham Machen, the famous Princeton theologian of the last century said, *'the doctrine of the grace of God'* is *'the very centre and core of the whole Bible.'*

Great, but what is grace? Because that's a word you hear a lot around churches, but that doesn't mean we understand what it means, let alone have it impact us deeply.

Well, think about what grace isn't. You see grace is the opposite of the idea of Karma. Karma is you getting what you deserve. And you can't escape your karma –You've lived in this way and you will reap the consequences of it. Good or bad. You get what you deserve. But grace is very different. Grace is God's favour on those who don't deserve it, the ill-deserving and the un-deserving. John Stott said that 'grace is the love that cares and stoops and rescues'. Justin Holcomb has described it as 'the love of God shown to the unlovely; the peace of God given to the restless; the unmerited favor of God.' It is God reaching down to rescue those who have turned their back on him.

So, can you see how grace is the opposite of Karma? Grace is not you being treated the way you deserve, but you *not* being treated the way you deserve, you being treated *way better* than you could ever deserve.

The problem is that the world we live in is one of deserving and earning. And even in non-Buddhist western Europe, we like the idea of Karma… at least we like it for others, we like the idea that those we don't like, those we don't approve of, have it coming to them: politicians, or bankers, or those liberals, or those conservatives. We want others to face the consequences of their lives and of their actions. It's just we're not quite so keen on it for ourselves, at least not if we have some insight as to what we really deserve.

What we really want for ourselves is grace. Which is why Christmas matters for even the most jaded and cynical amongst us, because the first Advent begins with

this declaration of the very thing you and I need. And so from what happens and gets said around John the Baptist's birth I want to pull out four simple reasons why you and I need grace, and show you where you can find it.

Grace Takes Away Shame

This week a report was published into the toxic culture in British banks that helped contribute to the recent financial meltdown. And it describes how bank workers would receive extravagant rewards and gifts – ipads, or tickets to Wimbledon or cash bonuses for over-reaching their targets. But those who didn't were treated very differently. They would come in to work to find that whilst their colleague had been given an ipad, on their desk had been put a cabbage or some other vegetable. They were publically shamed.

And shame is a powerful thing, isn't it?

But when the angel first appears to Zechariah in the temple and tells him that Elizabeth is going to have a son, the angel says, 'and you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord' (Luke 1:14-15). Their son wasn't going to be just any other baby – he was going to be somebody, to prepare the way for the Messiah. In the angel's words in v17, he's going 'to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.' And that is reason enough for joy.

But Zechariah and Elizabeth had another, very personal reason to be overwhelmed with joy. These guys were getting old, and had endured years of infertility. And just as it does today, back then infertility had a pain all of its own. All their friends had had children and watched them grow, and yet these two were still just two, with all the feelings of shame and inadequacy and failure and anger and hurt that came with it, and all the while having to deal with the questions and raised eyebrows and odd looks that come from neighbours and friends and family. 'Isn't it about time you had kids Zechariah?'

And at this first Advent, the grace of God comes to a hurting and bruised couple and takes away their shame. As Elizabeth says in v25, "Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people."

Now, there is no promise here that you and I will always get what we want or pray for, however good or honourable that thing is. But the grace of God has lost none of its power to remove our shame. Because sometimes it can seem as if life, or your past, or your present has put your shame on display, like a cabbage placed on a bank worker's desk. The shame of failure, the shame of past sin, the shame of failing to meet the expectations of parents or family, the dark shame of abuse. But the message of Advent is that God has come to remove that shame, and replace it with the greatest gift of all. Not because you have earned it, or deserve it, but because he is gracious.

You see John was born and named 'The Lord is Gracious', preparing the way for the coming of Jesus, the one full of grace. So Advent tells you that God loves you enough to send his own Son for you; that you are loved regardless of your performance, regardless of your past, regardless of what others could say about

you. And as you find your acceptance and worth in Christ, the shame vanishes like the morning mist before the rising sun. The pain may still be there, but it is pain without shame, pain tinged with the knowledge that God loves you so much he would enter history to make you his.

But there's another reason why Zechariah and Elizabeth are glad at the birth of John:

Grace Keeps its Promises

Now 500 years before John was born, the prophet Malachi saw it coming. And in Malachi 3:1 the Lord speaks through Malachi and says "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me," and the messenger he's talking about is John. But what I want you to see is the context in which Malachi says what he says, and why he says it in the first place? Why this promise, at this time, that first a messenger and then God himself will come to his people?

And the answer is that the Jewish people of Malachi's day were in a bad place. They had returned from exile in Babylon and were attempting to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. And there had been a huge amount of hope and expectation that this was going to be it, that at last the people of God were free of their enemies, that their best days were ahead of them.

But things had not worked out quite like that. They hadn't seen the fulfilment the way they had hoped for. Sure, the temple was rebuilt – but there had been no return of God's presence – the Shekinah glory - to the temple. And as a people they were still oppressed and economically depressed. The prosperity they thought God had promised them had failed to show. And so, as a result, there was an atmosphere almost of cynicism amongst the people. And immediately preceding Malachi's promise that the Lord's messenger was coming, Malachi repeats back to the people the kind of things they were saying about God, like: "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them" or "where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 2:17) In other words – 'look, it's our enemies who are prospering, it's the wicked who are successful, the violent who gain power, the corrupt who get rich, and where's God in all this, he's nowhere. So much for his promises!'

And if you have ever felt like God has abandoned you, that he has failed to show when you needed him, or that his promises have failed, you might know what they were feeling. But it's precisely in that context of feeling abandoned by God that Malachi says the Lord is coming.

And that's why, when Zechariah holds his new born son in his arms he says, 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people… to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant" (1:68, 72). And Zechariah's joy is because the birth of John, and the start of Advent, declares that God has not forgotten you, that you are not abandoned, that you are not at the mercy of events, or at the mercy of your enemies.

And so, God's grace to you at Christmas is to know that you are not forgotten, however bad life might seem, and that's not because someone buys you a nice pair of socks at Christmas, but because God has given the greatest gift for you –

the greatest expression of his grace to you, that as his Son is born in the squalor of a stable, he has fulfilled the ultimate promise, to come himself to rescue you.

But the third thing we can learn about God's grace at Advent is that:

Grace Restores Relationships

Now for all its fun, if you get caught up in the consumer drive of the holiday season it can be seriously stressful, can't it? Especially for parents. There are all these expectations that you are going to struggle to meet, there's the perfect gift that you've got to find but can't afford to buy, there are the inevitable comparisons to what others have got, or are going to get, or are doing for their holidays. And so if you get caught up in the rip tide of consumerism, rather than it being a time that brings together, you can find yourselves being dragged further and further apart.

But you don't need Christmas to do that, do you. There's plenty enough pressure going on in the other 364 days of the year to strain relationships. Work, the kids, tiredness, our own sin and foolish choices. These things can be like forces pulling marriages and families and friendships apart.

But grace is different. Listen to what the angel says to Zechariah about his son, v17, he will go before the Lord, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children.' Again, it's a direct quote from Malachi, who said that the messenger who goes before the Lord will, 'turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers' (Mal 4:6).

And so this announcement at the start of Advent that the Lord is Gracious, makes it clear that his grace extends to relationships under strain. You see what happens when we are hurt by others is that we almost inevitably turn in on ourselves. We aren't getting the time with the other person that we want; or someone has said something that cuts deep; or someone has done something that hurts us. And our protective reaction is that we turn in and shut down, or we hurt back. Both just do more damage.

But grace does something very different. You see Advent and Christmas tell us that the Son of God humbled himself for us, and did not seek to please himself, that he looked not to his own interests but to our interests. Though we deserved nothing from him, in his grace he gave everything. And just think what happens when it begins to sink in that Christ gave himself for you, and endured the insults for you, and absorbed the pain for you, and humbled himself for you, because if you let it, it can have this funny effect on your heart. It gives you both the desire and the ability to do the same for others. Instead of turning your heart inwards in hurting self-pity, it turns your heart outwards in love to others. And so grace receivers become grace givers, and in the process, relationships and marriages and families are restored, and the hearts of children turn to fathers and fathers to children. It's the grace of Christmas.

But fourthly and finally:

Grace Brings Forgiveness

Just imagine, if instead of the angel telling Zechariah he was to call his son John – the Lord is gracious – he told him he's got to call his boy a name which means, 'the Lord is a scorekeeper'? What if Advent were to begin, not with a declaration that God is gracious, but with an announcement that God is going to keep a record, an extremely accurate record, of every wrong thought, word and deed, everything you shouldn't have done but did do, everything you should have done but didn't do. And he's going to keep your scorecard where he can find it and bring it out at opportune moments to remind you of your sin. Suddenly the message of Christmas would be less like the good news of great joy the angels tell the shepherds that it is, would it?

You see, just think about how destructive it is in any relationship to have one party constantly pointing out the other's faults, keeping a record of them, and bringing them up at opportune times: 'o sure you tell me you love me, but let me remind you of what you said, or did, in December 2007.' And we call the ghosts of the past back into the present. Scorekeeping kills relationships.

But listen, if we struggle to stand up under each other's gaze, what would it be like if God were the scorekeeper? In Psalm 130, the psalmist wrote, 'If you o Lord, should mark iniquities [if you keep a record of wrongs], O Lord, who could stand?' We'd all be stuffed wouldn't we? I mean sure when we compare ourselves to others, when we're the scorekeeper, we don't look so bad, and we look at them and think we are doing so much better, and if only the world had more people like me in it, it would be a better place. But which of us could stand if God took out our scorecard?

And that's why these opening lines of the drama of Advent are such good news, because Advent tells us that the Lord is gracious and will forgive us our sins through Christ. As Zechariah holds his boy he says, 'And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God.' (Luke 1:77-78).

And the coming of Christ at Christmas – and the cross that follows, finally deals with our sins, the record of all our wrongs is nailed to the tree as Jesus takes them upon himself, and your scorecard is wiped clean.

And when the measure of his forgiveness of you sinks in – that you are more sinful than you could ever imagine, but more loved, more forgiven than you could ever dare hope, then it kills the scorekeeper in you, and you find that you can forgive those who sin against you, rather than hold a grudge. And it opens your heart wide to those around you.

So, church, as we start this advent season, let Christmas begin in your heart knowing that the Lord is Gracious.