

## Sunday Evening 9th December 2012- Kenneth Gray, Luke 1: "To show mercy to our fathers "



This first chapter of Luke's gospel displays a mixture of opposite states and emotions – joy/fear; light/darkness; rejoicing/mourning. This is particularly true of the verses entitled "Zechariah's Song". In this passage he rejoices in the people's deliverance from their enemies and 'all who hate us'.

Thinking of the term 'hate' Kenneth observed that hatred as a concept is not something most of us have to deal with on any kind of regular basis. However for the Israelites others' hatred was an ever-present challenge. Indeed the Jewish nation has throughout its history experienced some 2000

years of hatred, even in its own land.

We have enjoyed freedom to worship and to teach successive generations about Jesus. This has been our church's heritage in the West for hundreds of years and our religious observances have been regarded as 'normal' and acceptable by society. This has not been the experience of some parts of the world where the Christian church has suffered and continues to suffer persecution. Kenneth wondered what would be the situation in 10 or 20 years time if current societal trends continued – would society come to view our Christian observances and practices as perverse and strange and treat them as unacceptable?

Zechariah is rejoicing that the Lord has kept his covenant with his people. In so doing God is showing mercy to all Zechariah's forefathers' generations that have gone before. If previous generations had abandoned Temple worship and the religious practices observed by the Patriarchs then there would have been no holy heritage to pass on to succeeding generations.

We, similarly, have a duty to hold fast to our faith and to pass it on to following generations. How difficult this must be for first generation Christians in places like Japan and Korea. We all must take this responsibility more seriously if faith in the Word is to be upheld in the future. But remaining faithful will, at times, make us unpopular, unfashionable and may result in social disadvantage, even threats to our security. **It costs to take a stand for Jesus Christ in every generation – this truth is non negotiable!** As Christians we are all called to be like John the Baptist pointing the way to Jesus, whatever the cost.

Some people regard Christians as narrow-minded and old fashioned. But here Zechariah praises the perseverance and faithfulness displayed from generation to generation because this has been acknowledged by the Lord. This history of faithfulness will now be rewarded and the Lord will now: *'...give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.'*

Kenneth commented that his work can frequently take him where people are *'living in darkness and in the shadow of death'*. Many individuals in hospital are certainly living under sentence of death and need the light of the gospel more urgently than most. Yet the NHS seems increasingly to be antipathetic to Christianity. Ministers of religion are no longer notified by hospital staff when parishioners are admitted nor are they permitted the relatively free access to patients they enjoyed in the past. With the local Royal Alexandra Hospital having some 900 beds, which are usually all full, there are clearly large numbers of souls there in need of the Good News. Yet there is no cross or other Christian symbol permitted in the hospital chapel.

The Church tends to organise itself to act in 'seasons'. Christmas is often perceived as a 'season for evangelism' but the truth is that evangelism should always be 'in season' for followers of Jesus. We do not know how many more opportunities we will be given to spread the gospel message. Many in the church, even those whose faith is rather shallow and tentative, look around at what is happening in the world and perceive us to be 'in the last days'. We encounter so many angry people all around us every day in our streets, in our workplaces, on TV. Their anger and frustration come from not being right with God. Let us continue to do whatever God enables us to do to guide their feet into the path of peace.