

Luke 1:5-23 and 57-66; 3:1-18

Aim of lesson

To show the character and work of the man chosen by God to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus.

Background study

Isaiah 40:1-11; Malachi 4:5-6; Matthew 3:1-4; Luke 1:39-56; John 3:22-30. Study the work of the priests in the temple. Find pictures of the Judean wilderness and the Jordan valley.

Suggested outline of lesson

Setting the scene

This story could well begin with the introduction of visual aids. Show the children pictures or models of a Levitical priest and Herod's temple, with its magnificent courtyards, the golden decorations and furniture of the holy place and the exquisite curtain which screened the most holy place. Help the children to imagine the subdued lighting from the candlestick and the reverent atmosphere as Zechariah went about his holy duties at the hour of incense.

Zechariah's story

Having introduced the priest by name, go on to explain that he was very old, that he was married to Elizabeth who was also devout and that, to their disappointment and in spite of having prayed for children, they had no child. Zechariah now devoted himself wholeheartedly to the Lord's service. Convey the sudden fear felt by the old man when he realised that an angel had appeared before him - something he had no doubt never before experienced and which, therefore, would have greatly disturbed him. He knew that angels brought messages from God and he wondered what the message could be. The angel was quick to reassure him and went on to tell him the one thing he most wanted to hear. Read the exact words Gabriel spoke. At this point, the children will no doubt recall that Gabriel was the angel who visited Mary. Explain that, in fact, the appearance to Zechariah preceded the appearance at Nazareth and that Elizabeth was related to Mary.

Zechariah was incredulous and questioned the message of the angel, who then added to his prophecy that the priest would be struck dumb until the boy was born. Describe the scene as the priest emerged from the holy place, by which time the people were puzzled by his delay. Although he was unable to say what had happened, it was obvious to all that something extraordinary had occurred. The children will be able to imagine something of the problems and frustrations felt by Zechariah as he endeavoured to explain first to the congregation, and later to his wife, about the angelic visitation.

Elizabeth's story

Somehow Elizabeth was made to understand that she was to give birth to a son, John, who was destined to fulfil a very special role in God's plan. Refer briefly to the happy visit of Mary, and the joy both women shared in the knowledge that God had chosen and honoured them.

The account of John's birth and his presentation at the temple eight days later, in accordance with the law, is a moving one. In witnessing to the message he had received from Gabriel many months before, Zechariah proved his faith by confirming in writing (he was evidently deaf as well as dumb, so that the family had to make signs to him) that his son's name was to be John. The restoration of his faculties was a sign to all that the hand of God was at work in this family.

John's story

No doubt the growing boy was greatly loved and carefully instructed in God's ways. From the start John led a pure and simple life (comparable to that of a Nazirite) with strict rules and self discipline. He was preparing himself for his God-given task, and spent much of his time alone in remote places. Describe John in your own words, in order to convey his zeal and enthusiasm, the plainness of his clothing and the simplicity of his way of life. Conjure up a picture of the uniqueness of this man, who drew people to him with his message of hope and warning. He was single-minded, sincere and direct, and spoke with the authority of God, for he had been filled with the Holy Spirit from his birth. John stirred the hearts of his hearers, many of whom responded to his call for repentance, and were baptized. Yet he made it very clear that he was not the promised Messiah, but that his work was to prepare the way for the imminent appearance of the Son of God. When Jesus did begin his ministry, John knew that his own work was accomplished, and he directed those who would have stayed with him to follow the Lord Jesus.

Relevance to the children's lives

What did John the Baptist say was about to happen? Was he glad to be able to give the people this news? Did it make them glad?

What does the Bible tell us is shortly going to happen? Does this make us glad? How can we share what we know with other people, and make them glad?

Worksheets

The jumbled words (top to bottom, left to right) are: VOICE, VALLEY, CROOKED, FLESH, WAY, DESERT, MOUNTAIN, ROUGH, STRAIGHT, SALVATION, MANKIND, PREPARE, HILL, LORD, WILDERNESS, PATHS, SMOOTH.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we know that one day soon Jesus will be here. Please help us to tell our friends about this, and help us also to be ready to welcome him. Amen.

Memory verse

"I baptise you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie" (Luke 3:16).