I don't know about you, but one of the things I really used to dislike about Christmas as a child was the chore of writing thank-you letters afterwards. The more presents there had been on Christmas Day, the worse it was! Letter after letter to be laboriously written out. Careful calculations made about how large I could make my writing and how little I could get away with saying.

Well now, if you share my feelings about post-Christmas correspondence, I've got a suggestion to make. It comes from the Bible, from tonight's reading from the first chapter of St Luke's Gospel. It's simply to write your thank-you letters in advance. That way the post-Christmas blues won't be so bad.

You see, writing a thank-you letter in advance is what John the Baptist's father Zechariah is doing in this passage from Luke 1. He comes out with this marvellous Spirit-inspired outpouring of praise to God, to thank him for the gift that he is about to give the world.

Now of course, if we were to write our thank you letters in advance, we would have to leave blanks to fill in later to describe what we've been given. 'Dear Blank, Thank you very much indeed for the lovely box/tin/bottle of blank. It will come in very useful when I blank...' But Zechariah doesn't leave blanks. For he has, as it were, already had a peek on the top of the wardrobe. He knows what's coming. He knows exactly what God is going to give. Because, as verse 70 tells us, God announced it through his messengers the prophets long ago. He's already told them. 'I'm going to give you this...'

So what is it? What is this wonderful gift that God has promised to give for which Zechariah is writing a thank-you letter before the big day?

The answer is that God gives us just what we've always wanted. Have you ever found yourself saying that on Christmas morning? 'Oh, it's just what I've always wanted...' Well, with God it really is true! Deep down in all of us lurks a hunger for the things Zechariah gets excited about here. A hunger which Christmas, with its talk of 'peace on earth and goodwill to all people', brings a bit nearer the surface. The ideals which are usually drowned out by the busy clamour of our daily lives. They come to the surface at Christmas. The challenge for us is to grasp hold of them before they sink back down again.

So what is it that, deep down, we've always wanted? Well, it's like a pizza with four delicious slices of promise. There may well be more but four are enough to be going on with for now. What Zechariah does is to draw together the strands of promise and weave them into this song of praise about what God is about to do through Jesus.

The first slice is the promise that we will be rescued from our enemies, all the things in this world that are against us. Have a look at verse 71: 'that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us'. And then again in verse 74: 'we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies'. It's an uncomfortable fact but one which it's good to face up to: God does not always choose to stop bad things from happening to us, does he? He does not always prevent us from facing the consequences, not only of our own wrong choices, but also the wrong choices of others.

Sometimes we catch a hint of why this might be. Often, though, we don't. We are invited to share the apostle Paul's confidence that 'all things work together for good for those who love God' (Romans 8.28) but this sometimes far from easy. One way or another, things don't go smoothly, we have enemies, we face opposition, we find ourselves in conflict. So much so that we sometimes find ourselves actually even 'in the *hands* of our enemies'.
So what do we discover here? First, we’re reminded that the prospect of rescue and freedom has been part of God's deal with humanity right from the start. Verse 70: 'as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old' and verses 72-73: 'Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham...'

Right from the word ‘go’ it has been God’s clearly-stated intention to deliver us from the consequences of the mess we’re in - despite the fact that, as we shall see, our injuries are self-inflicted and the mess we’re in is one which we made for ourselves. Secondly, it’s good to note that the mess may be pretty dire but God has promised to send someone who is well able to deal with it - verse 69: 'he has raised up a mighty saviour for us'. He can cope with anything. He can never be overwhelmed. As the angel has told Mary earlier in this chapter (verse 37): ‘nothing is impossible with God’. So that's slice number one. We will be rescued from our enemies, delivered from all the things in this world that are against us.

A second slice here is the promise that the way will be open for us to become friends with God, able to come close to him without any sense of feeling afraid. Verse 74: ‘so that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days’. Here’s where we begin to get a clearer focus on exactly who our enemy is and what he is up to.

It’s really important for us grasp hold of this. [PP - Roman] In Zechariah’s day, God’s people were inclined to think that their greatest enemies were the occupying Romans, who oppressed them and made their lives a misery. We too might be able to identify a particular person or group of people or maybe a particular circumstance that we’re having to face as our greatest enemy.

But no. Our greatest problem isn't necessarily what we think it is. It's all too easy to concentrate on symptoms and ignore their root cause. There’s something far worse than that around, an even more oppressive foe. An enemy who is able to disrupt the relationship between God and his people by sowing fear and trepidation where there should be love and freedom.

Zechariah is talking here about the enemy-in-chief, the enemy who lurks behind all our other enemies and gives them their power over us. He explains that this is an enemy who prevents us from serving God without fear, an enemy who prevents us from living holy and righteous lives before him. The Bible’s name for this enemy is sin, [PP - sin] the urge within each of us to reject God’s rule and so experience a barrier that alienates us from him and clouds the sunshine of his love. But God is about to fulfil his promise to defeat this enemy and neutralize its power. Slice two, then, is the gift of friendship with God, being able to live as God intends us to, serving him without fear, in holiness and righteousness.

The third slice, then, is what we come to in verses 76-77. Zechariah tells his newborn son John that you ‘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 by the forgiveness of their sins’. [PP - pizza 3] As Zechariah peers prophetically into the future he sees the dim outline of what we know to be the cross of Jesus, through which the enemy is defeated and deprived of his power.

This is slice number three - the gift of the forgiveness of sins. And what a wonderful promise it is! It’s worth pausing to reflect on just what it means. We can so easily take it for granted without thinking it through. For the truth is that when God forgives he does so absolutely. The slate is wiped completely clean. Every file on the hard drive is permanently deleted and gone for good. God decides that what we have said and thought and done in the past will have no influence at all on how he sees us and treats us in the future. Just as we find foreshadowed in Psalm 103.11-12: ‘For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us’. He remembers our sins no more. This is the gift God is planning to give to us.

Rescue from enemies. Friendship with God. Forgiveness of sins.

Slice number 4 comes in verse 79. 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.' [pizza 4] Here we have the promise of a bright hope for the future. It’s a very vivid picture, isn't it? Sitting in darkness, overshadowed by the prospect of death. For most people, death is indeed something to be feared, [PP - brick wall]
like a brick wall into which they will crash at the end of their lives. Death overshadows us as human beings. Until we receive God’s amazing gift of assurance about the future.

At which point, death is no longer a brick wall which will destroy us but simply a doorway through which we enter into a better place. [PP - doorway] What is it that makes the difference? [PP - delayed dawn] 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death...' What a wonderful picture of Jesus to reflect on and absorb the truth of: the one who brings light, the dawn from on high.

We’re going to be helped to do just that in a song I want to play now. As we listen, let’s ask God to open our hearts to the truths that Zechariah declares about God’s Christmas present to us. Which particular aspect of his gift is for you to unwrap more fully this evening? Rescue from enemies. Friendship with God. Forgiveness of sins. Hope for the future. All brought to us in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. It’s because of him that we know for sure that, whatever happens, it's almost morning. [PP - video]