



# Learning from Luke's Gospel

## Day 1: Introduction to Luke & Preaching from Luke

### Who is Luke? [MR]

- An educated man, skilled at research and editing: he says that he sets out to write “*an orderly account*” (Luke 1:3).
- A member of the Christian community.
- Not an eyewitness to the events of Jesus’ life, but he claims to have made use of the testimony of those who had known Jesus. He writes of making use of texts “*handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word*” (Luke 1:2). So we could fairly say that he is a second-generation Christian.
- A Greek speaker, but familiar with Jewish life – perhaps a God-fearing Gentile Greek. The sympathetic treatment of gentiles in both Luke and Acts certainly suggest that the author may well have been a gentile himself.
- He had known and travelled with Paul on some of his missionary journeys, which took place between AD 47 and about AD 65. Most scholars put the date of writing of Luke’s gospel around AD 80-90, so around 50 years after the events he is writing about.
- Yet the narrative of Acts ends in AD 62. Why does it not mention the deaths of Peter and Paul and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70? The answer is that he is not telling Peter or Paul’s story or that of Jerusalem, but of the gospel of Christ.

### Who is he writing his gospel for? [JN]

“I too decided **to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,** <sup>4</sup> so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” (Luke 1:3-4)

#### \* Who is ‘Theophilus’?

- Luke says he is writing the account for “*you, most excellent Theophilus*”. The address ‘most excellent’ was typically given to a high-ranking Greco-Roman noble, so this suggests that Theophilus could be a wealthy Christian patron who has in effect sponsored the research and writing of Luke’s gospel.
- On the other hand, ‘Theophilus’ means “*lover of God*” in Greek, which may indicate that this is a generic address to Christians who are keen to learn more about Jesus, rather than a dedication to a particular person. Using this Greek form of address may be Luke’s way of emphasising that he is not writing only for Jewish Christians, but for Gentile Christians too – in fact for any ‘lover of God’ who wants to find out more about Jesus’s life and teaching, whatever their previous religious or racial background. We will be thinking more about this diversity of audience for which Luke seems to be writing on Day 3.
- It is notable that Luke also begins his sequel to the gospel, known to us as ‘The Acts of the Apostles’, with a dedication to Theophilus: “*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach <sup>2</sup> until the day he was taken up to heaven...*” (Acts 1:1). This emphasises that Acts is a continuation of the same narrative which Luke began in his gospel.

## What makes Luke's gospel different from those of Matthew, Mark & John? [PD]

### \* What is unique and distinctive about Luke's gospel, compared to the other gospels?

It is highly probable that Luke's gospel was written later than those of either Matthew or Mark. 40% of Luke's gospel is shared with Mark, while 25% is shared with Matthew, but not Mark. Luke's use of Mark as a source is in blocks. 9:51 – 18:14 consists of material that is not in Mark's gospel. So about one-third of the content of his gospel is unique to Luke and it is this part we need to look at to judge what is unique and distinctive about Luke's account.

- Luke includes more **parables** than the other gospels; there are 11 which are unique to Luke, including some of the best-known and most powerful ones; for example:
  - The Good Samaritan
  - The Prodigal Son
  - Dives & Lazarus.
- The **narrative of Our Lord's birth** is much more detailed in Luke than in the other gospels (more about this later).
- **Incidents in Jesus' life** which are only mentioned in Luke include:
  - Jesus' visit to the home of Mary & Martha in Bethany;
  - his encounter with the tax-collector Zacchaeus;
  - the widow of Nain;
  - the thief on the cross beside Jesus;
  - the two disciples' encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus;
  - the Ascension.
- Luke, as already mentioned, is the only gospel with a sequel, The Acts of the Apostles, and the marvellous story of Pentecost and the early church in **Acts** is found nowhere else.

## Where did Luke obtain the information to write his gospel? [MR]

"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup> just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were **eyewitnesses** and servants of the word. <sup>3</sup> With this in mind, since **I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning...**" (Luke 1:1-4)

### \* Luke was not an eyewitness to the events of Our Lord's life on earth. Does this make his gospel less reliable and less valuable than other accounts?

- Luke emphasises that in writing his gospel he has done his research thoroughly. He thinks and works like a historian, gathering information, both from written sources and from conversations with people who knew Jesus and had been there at the time. He specifically states that his sources include "eyewitnesses" who "*handed down*" the story of Jesus.
- So Luke's account is based on rock-solid evidence and everything he writes is based on careful research in order to arrive at what he himself calls "*an orderly account*".

- Take a major event in world history, for example the **Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962**. A book written today, 63 years later, is not necessarily less reliable than one written in the 1960s or 1970s when it was a relatively recent event. Accounts of the crisis written then, such as Robert Kennedy's book *Thirteen Days*, tended to be biased to one side or the other. But by the 1990s, the archives of both the USA and the USSR had allowed access to crucial and hitherto secret documents about the decision making process in both governments. A modern historian, therefore, writing today 60+ years after the events has access to a much wider variety of sources and can be more objective in writing about events which are no longer recent than someone writing soon after it happened.

**Three significant examples illustrate Luke's research methods and how they enhance his writing and validate his account:**

1. Luke writes in 3:1-3 of his gospel, *"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."*

Luke wants the reader of his gospel to know exactly when the events he is going to write about happened. Although it is specifically the start of John the Baptist's ministry to which he is referring here, he is clearly intending to place the events of the gospel as a whole accurately on a timeline of History. This is I believe the only place in the New Testament where this is done with anything like this degree of precision.

So we are given a six-fold reference to contemporary rulers, both secular and ecclesiastical – it is the 15<sup>th</sup> year of **Tiberias'** reign as Roman Emperor, **Pontius Pilate**, **Herod** and **Lysanias** are governors of the various provinces in Palestine, and **Annas** and **Caiaphas** are high-priests. Tiberius inherited the throne when Augustus Caesar died on 19<sup>th</sup> August 14 AD, so the fifteenth year of his reign would run from 19<sup>th</sup> August 28 to 18<sup>th</sup> August 29. So this enables us to date the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry and hence the narrative which follows to an exact year - 28/29 AD.

Luke clearly goes to considerable lengths to specify exactly when the events he goes on to write about took place – who was governor of Judea at the time, who was tetrarch of Galilee, who was high priest, and the names he mentions are all corroborated by non-Christian Roman historians, such as Josephus, Suetonius and Tacitus.

Luke does this so that the message is very clear to his readers - to us - that, even though he was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus, he has done his research thoroughly and the events he writes about were not fables or stories or fantasies, but were real historical events which happened at a particular time and in a particular place, and could be pinned down with some precision. And that is really, really important. Luke wants us to be sure that we are basing our faith, not on some fanciful myth or legend or philosophy, but in the historical person of Jesus Christ, who walked this earth just as we do.

**2. His account of the birth of Jesus:**

- It is widely believed that when writing his gospel Luke had obtained much of his information for the birth narrative either directly or indirectly from **Mary**, the mother of Jesus.
- There are many details of the events surrounding Jesus' birth and of his childhood which are not mentioned in the other gospels, but only by Luke, such as...
  - **Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth;**

- the **shepherds** and the **angels** in the birth narrative;
- the encounters with **Simeon** and **Anna**, when Mary and Joseph took the infant Jesus to the temple for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses;
- the occasion when, travelling back to Nazareth with family and friends, Mary and Joseph realise that the 12-year-old Jesus is not among the party and they both hurry back to Jerusalem, where “*after three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.*” (Luke 2:46).
- It is hard to see how Luke could have come to know these unique details about Jesus’ birth and early life without either meeting Mary himself or at least talking to someone who had known Mary well. There is a clue in the text which strongly suggests that she is the source of this information: at the end of the story of the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple, Luke notes, “*his mother treasured all these things in her heart*” (Luke 2:51).

3. The third point is about the **Acts of the Apostles**, rather than Luke’s gospel, but it is a point worth making.

- In Acts Chapter 16, Luke’s narrative changes: in verse 6, “*Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia*”; verses 9 & 10: “*they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘come over to Macedonia and help us’.*” Then without fanfare in verse 10, it happens: “*After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*”
- What a marvellous moment! “**Paul and his companions**” and “**they** passed by Mysia” has suddenly become “**we** got ready... *God had called us.*” At Troas, Luke has joined Paul and at that point travels with him.
- There are three sections of Acts written in the first person (“We...” rather than “They...”): 16:10-17, 20:5 – 21:18, and 27:1 - 28:16. So whereas he was not an eyewitness to the events of Our Lord’s life on earth which he wrote about in his gospel, Luke was an eyewitness to some, though not all, of the events about which he writes in Acts.

## Preaching from Luke [MR]

### Why is preaching important?

\* **Why is preaching sermons important & what are we trying to do when we preach?**

- Preaching is at the heart of church life.
- Canon B18 of the Church of England reads: “*The preacher shall endeavour with care and sincerity to minister the word of truth, to the glory of God and to the edification of the people.*” It is a powerful medium through which the learning and the faith of church leaders can be used to inspire and educate the people in our congregations.

- The American preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor writes this about preaching on a passage from the Bible: *“What I am hunting for is the God in it, God for me and my congregation at this particular moment in time.”*
- We should ask ourselves...
  - What are we aiming to excite about the gospel in this preaching?
  - What will change for our hearers?
  - How will the world change through our hearers?
- **Wherever the gospel is preached there is contact with the living God. It is not us as preachers, but the Holy Spirit which allows real contact with God. We are participating in something bigger than ourselves and we need to trust that. We are more open to His leading the more we pray.**
- **Self-awareness** in preaching is important. Too little of ourselves and people will find it difficult to relate to what we say. Too much of ourselves and it will obscure the message. Getting the balance right is important, which is where self-awareness comes in. There is a school of thought which says that preaching should not include personal anecdotes, but if we exclude them, we are failing to use our life experience to enlighten our preaching.
- Everything which happens to us or is in the news is potentially material for a sermon. I am always amazed how often, when I am starting to think about a sermon, I read in a newspaper or a book about something that is absolutely relevant to my topic and would make a great example to illustrate what I am trying to say. In his book *‘Telling the Truth’*, Frederick Buechner argues that everything which happens to you or is happening in the world is potential material for a sermon. *“Every single moment of experience”* he writes, *“can be useful in a future understanding.”*
- Last year I attended a course led by the Bishop of Ramsbury, Bishop Andrew, about preaching. He mentioned an analogy (or you could call it a parable) which offers some insight into structuring sermons:
- Imagine preaching as being like a **flight in an aircraft**. When you preach, you are inviting people to come on board, take a seat and see their familiar world from above in a new light, with a new perspective. You may be in a different place when you land.
  - The **take-off** needs a rush of fuel so there is sufficient power to get airborne. Begin strongly and you will gain the attention of your listeners.
  - **Climbing** is important, is generally about the meaning in the reading and takes hard work for us.
  - The next section is **above the clouds** – now you are safely aloft, you have got their attention. What are the implications of this for us? When we see things from God’s perspective, things are different.
  - **Landing** – The inability of a preacher to land a sermon is one of the most frustrating things for a congregation (That said, inability of a pilot to land an aircraft is even more alarming to his passengers...). As the congregation sense that the sermon is coming towards the end, circling the destination several times is disconcerting for them – line the aircraft up with the runway for the final descent and touch down smoothly. As the end of a flight approaches, the cabin crew remind the passengers of things (fasten your seatbelts, remain in your seat until the aircraft has stopped, etc.) At the end of a sermon it is good to have some reminders of the main points you have made and particularly the **application** of what has been said.

## What makes Luke's gospel a good text from which to preach?

### Parables [MR]

First, as already mentioned, Luke includes more **parables** than the other gospels and 11 of them are unique to Luke. And they are really good for teaching – after all, Jesus often taught his disciples using these stories, traditionally known as **parables**, from the Greek word *παραβολή*, meaning 'thrown beside' - that is, a comparison to provide a vivid illustration of the point he was making. We would do well to follow his example. There is something about the nature of the kingdom of heaven which makes parables powerful and these stories are available in the gospels, and especially in Luke's gospel, for us to do exactly the same thing.

For obvious reasons, when he was teaching through parables, Jesus generally chose images and circumstances which would have been familiar to his listeners – these were stories he knew they could relate to.

Take the parable of the **Lost Sheep** (Luke 15:1-7). The idea of straying sheep as a metaphor for sinners and the portrayal of God the Father as a shepherd caring for his flock did not originate with this parable, but would have been well-known concepts to anyone who studied the Hebrew Bible. In Isaiah 53:6 the prophet writes: *"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way."* And in Psalm 23, the psalmist writes as one of the flock cared for by God the Father: *"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters."*

So in this parable, Jesus was taking up and developing a metaphor which was familiar to his listeners from these passages in the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, **first century Palestine was a predominantly agricultural society**, so when Jesus said, *"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them..."*, his audience knew at once what he was talking about: some of them no doubt were shepherds, others probably had relatives or friends who were shepherds. And look at the first lines of many of his other parables from Luke's gospel:

- *"A farmer went out to sow his seed..."* Luke 8:5
- *"The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops'..."* Luke 12:16-17
- *"What is the kingdom of God like?... It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden..."* Luke 13:18-19
- *"A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time..."* Luke 20:9

The world of the parables, like 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, is a landscape full of farms, pastures, vineyards and vegetable gardens; livestock and crops; sowing and harvesting. In fact, I think this makes it easier for you in South Sudan to use parables in your preaching than for us in Britain. I did some research while I was preparing what I was going to say on this and found that 60% of people in South Sudan are employed in agriculture; while in the UK, only 1.4% of the workforce is employed in agriculture. In our country, parables often need quite a lot of explaining...

### "An orderly account" [MR]

Secondly, we began this morning by saying that Luke was an educated man, skilled at research and editing. I then quoted his intention stated at the beginning of his gospel to write *"an orderly account"* (Luke 1:3). This indicates that he had set out to carefully construct his narrative of the life and ministry of Jesus in an order which has clarity, underpins the message he wants to convey, and ultimately would

be persuasive to the reader. I think that Luke succeeded in this and it makes his work all the easier to preach from.

His gospel has a very clear structure. For example, the gospel begins and ends in the temple: we find Zechariah serving as a priest there in Chapter 1 and the disciples return there after witnessing Christ's ascension in Chapter 24 – the very last verse reads, *"And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God."* The midpoint of the gospel too has Jesus turning towards Jerusalem: *"As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem"* (9:51). And this tethering of the narrative to Jerusalem and the temple continues into Acts: the temple is where the disciples pray (Acts 2), scene of their first miracle (Acts 3), preaching (Acts 5), Paul's arrest (Acts 21). This emphasises that however gentile this gospel may be, its story focuses in and around Jerusalem and its temple.

## Luke's themes and literary devices [PD]

- Luke uses a number of repeated themes and literary devices:
  - **Waiting** – for Jesus' birth at the start of the gospel; for the Holy Spirit in Acts.
  - **Journeys** – the people he writes about are often going on a journey, which serves as a metaphor for our journey of faith as Christians:
    - Jesus and the disciples repeatedly going up from Galilee to Jerusalem;
    - journey parables, such as the Good Samaritan;
    - after the crucifixion, the two disciples encounter the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus;
    - Paul's various missionary journeys.
  - **Verbal conflicts** - over meals in Luke, in court in Acts.
  - Luke has a tendency to **pair stories** about men with corresponding stories about women – more about this tomorrow!
  - **Set-ups** - Luke often signals a theme which will emerge a little later in the text in order to prepare the reader for its importance; for example...
    - In 9:52-56, Jesus and the disciples experience an incident in a Samaritan village, which reminds the reader of the historic hostility between Samaritans and Jews; half a chapter later, we have the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37).
    - Similarly, Luke relates the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector (18:9-14), then at the beginning of the following chapter tells us about Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, who is also a tax-collector (19:1-10).
- **The use of such literary devices and more generally the care with which Luke has constructed and written his gospel makes it easy for the reader to understand, and also makes it straightforward for us as preachers to unpack and explain Luke's message for our congregations.**



# Learning from Luke's Gospel

## Day 2: Luke and Women's Role in the Church

### Introduction [PD]

**Almost one-third of the material unique to Luke's gospel is about women.** His gospel begins with a major narrative concerning two women – the first two chapters are dominated by the pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary. After this, there are 15 further sections of Luke with significant female characters and 19 passages in which women or the traditional work of women is the focus.

Some of the stories in Luke in which women feature prominently also appear in Mark's gospel, though Luke often adapts them to his own purposes (eg: Simon's mother-in-law; Jairus' daughter).

### Women's part in the Christmas Story [PD]

But there are many stories in which women feature which are unique to Luke. Notable amongst these are **the first two chapters of Luke**, which provide a unique view of the narrative of **the birth of Jesus**. Characters are introduced who appear in no other gospel and women play a prominent role:

- Luke begins the story of Jesus' life with three women:
  - a married woman thought to be past child-bearing age, **Elizabeth**;
  - a virgin peasant girl, **Mary**;
  - an elderly widow and prophetess, **Anna** (Luke 2:36-38).
- At this point, we are going to look in some detail at Mary.

### Mary (Luke 1:26-38) [MR]

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

<sup>34</sup> 'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.'

<sup>38</sup> 'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her.



- \* **Who was Mary?**
- \* **What part did she play in the gospel story?**
- \* **What lessons can we learn from her which are relevant to our congregations today?**

**Mary's part in the story of Christmas is obviously a vitally important one. She was chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus, the Messiah.** She has a visit from the angel Gabriel who tells her she will conceive and bear a son, who *"will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."* (Luke 1:32).

How does Mary react to this extraordinary revelation that she has been chosen to bear God's son? She replies by asking a question of Gabriel (Luke 1:34): *"How will this be since I am a virgin?"* A very reasonable question!

Now some feminist theologians and philosophers, such as the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, condemn the story of the Annunciation and of Mary bearing God's child, claiming that it portrays women as unacceptably submissive and promotes the idea that women's only purpose is to bear children. They interpret Mary's response to Gabriel's message to her as demonstrating passive subordination to male power.

**But Mary is not simply meekly submissive.** She is a woman who makes a free choice to accept God's task for her - a task she could have refused. When she questions what Gabriel says to her, asking, *"How will this be since I am a virgin?"* that is not meekly submissive; in fact, **it is a really feisty thing to do, to talk back to the angel Gabriel!**

And when Mary ultimately says, *"I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled,"* (Luke 1:38) that is not a demeaning role; after all, Jesus also regarded himself as a servant, not least when he washed the apostles' feet. Mary chooses to cooperate with God in his plan of salvation, a plan which He needs her assistance to carry out.

Although Mary is referred to as *"a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph"* (1:27), Joseph himself does not appear in Luke's gospel until Chapter 2 (in contrast with Matthew's gospel). **So the story of Christmas, as told to us by Luke, emphasises the importance of women, since in the Incarnation God enlists the help of a woman to bear His son and gives men no part to play in this work.**

As mentioned in our Introduction about Luke's gospel, it is widely believed that when writing his gospel Luke had obtained much of his information for the birth narrative either directly or indirectly from Mary herself. We should be grateful to Mary that, through Luke, she chose to share these treasured memories of Jesus' birth and childhood with us.

**But Mary's role does not end there. When Jesus begins his ministry, Mary also plays a part in it.** Straying briefly from Luke's gospel to John's, we are told (2:1-3), *"a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there,"*<sup>2</sup> and *Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.*<sup>3</sup> **When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine.'**

Well, we know what happened next, and John concludes his account of this remarkable occasion by saying, *"What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory."* So Mary was there beside her son right at the start of His ministry, being actively involved in the circumstances which led to His first miracle.

Moreover, John goes on to say (2:12) that, *"After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days."* So it seems that Mary actually accompanied Jesus in the early stages of his ministry.

Moving forward, **Mary is also at Golgotha standing near the cross watching her son being crucified.** John describes this terrible scene (19:25-27): *"Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene."*<sup>26</sup> *When Jesus saw his mother there, and the*

disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, 'Woman, here is your son,' <sup>27</sup> and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home."

**As we have seen, Mary plays a central role in the Christmas story. But she is also there on Good Friday, standing by the cross watching her beloved son suffer and die. She is, apart from Christ Himself, the only one who is there at the start of Jesus' life on earth and at its end. Mary's presence at both the beginning and the end of Christ's earthly life reminds us that the Christmas story and the Easter story are inextricably linked, and that, as we rightly join in the rejoicing at Christmas, we should also remember what Jesus did for us some 33 years later on the cross.**

**Furthermore, all of us, men and women alike, can learn from Mary's example:**

- When we worship, we can say with her, "*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour*".
- And when we pray, we can acknowledge God's almighty power, as Mary does when she sings "*the Mighty One has done great things for me ... He has performed mighty deeds with his arm.*"
- And, whatever form His answers to our prayers may take, we can say, as Mary said to Gabriel at the Annunciation, "*I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.*"

## **Conclusion to women's part in the Christmas Story [PD]**

**The story of Christmas as told by Luke emphasises the importance of women, since in the Incarnation God enlists the help of a woman to bear His son and gives men no part to play in this work.**

**Not only Mary, but also her cousin Elizabeth, who Mary visits, and Anna, the prophetess who Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus encounter in the temple, are all faithful women who become God's chosen instruments in salvation history.**

## **Luke pairing stories about men and about women [PD]**

Luke has a tendency to **pair stories** about men with corresponding stories about women. We are going to start by looking at an example of this from early in Luke's gospel, the narrative of how Mary and Joseph take the baby Jesus to the temple, they encounter first Simeon and then Anna:

### **Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:22-38) [JN]**

<sup>22</sup> When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord<sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), <sup>24</sup> and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

<sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup> Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

<sup>29</sup> "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss<sup>[d]</sup> your servant in peace.

<sup>30</sup> For my eyes have seen your salvation,

<sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

<sup>33</sup> The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him.<sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against,<sup>35</sup> so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,<sup>37</sup> and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.<sup>[e]</sup> She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.<sup>38</sup> Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

### Simeon was one of “**The Quiet in the Land**”

- **Most Jews** at this time, under the yoke of Roman occupation believed that the Jews were the only chosen people and at some point they would be masters of the world. Many thought - that there would arise another king of David's line and throw out the invaders and bring Israel's prosperity.
- **The Quiet** did not believe that Israel's chosen people status meant the Messiah would bring Israel's glory in this sense of populist military intervention in the world.
- **The Quiet** followed practices of prayer and watchfulness, of faithful expectation.
- Although we are not told much about **Anna**, we can gather that she is also one of the **Quiet in the Land**

### Simeon's Character

Luke writes that Simeon was...

- **Upright or righteous** - that is he had a reputation for being honest in every sense of the word. While there are many references to righteousness in the Bible there are not many individuals called righteous; in fact in John writes “*there is no one righteous, not even one*” (3:10). So to be termed righteous is a big deal. It is saying much more than he is a good person.
- **Devoted to God's service** - Simeon did what he believed God wanted him to do and served God in whatever way possible. He was devoted to this, which means in effect it was his priority all the time.
- **Living in expectation of the Restoration of Israel** (v25). This doesn't mean that Simeon expected God to make the Israelites masters of everything but rather that Israel would return to its God fearing and God following ways. They were clearly not near the mark and yet Simeon had faith they would be drawn back into true fellowship with God.
- **Open Heart** - this tells us that Simeon was ready to receive whatever God wanted to say to him. It wasn't just his mind that was open, it was his heart. In 1 Samuel 16:7, God says to Samuel prior to him selecting and anointing David that “*The Lord sees not as man sees. For man looks on the outward appearance but the Lord looks on the heart.*” God saw that Simeon's heart was open to him.
- **Lead by the Spirit** - Simeon had direction. It wasn't just direction that he had worked out for himself but direction given to him by God's Holy Spirit.
- **It was revealed to Simeon** - because God knew Simeon was this man of character and faith, he revealed to him that he would not die until he saw the Lord's Christ.

These characteristics are probably also those of **Anna**, although we are not told much about her character. Luke also says of Anna that she “*spoke about Jesus to all those in Jerusalem who were expecting redemption*”. Anna was prepared to speak out about Jesus – although she was 84 years old.

## Pairing stories about men and about women, continued [PD]

The story of the meeting in the temple with first Simeon and then Anna is one of many such pairings in Luke's gospel of stories featuring men and women. Other examples include:

- In Chapter 1, the annunciations by angels to Zechariah and to Mary.
- Also in Chapter 1, the song of Mary (the *Magnificat*) and the song of Zechariah (the *Benedictus*).
- In Chapter 7, vv. 1-15, Jesus heals the dying son of a Centurion, then raises the son of the widow of Nain from the dead.
- In Chapter 15, vv. 1-10, Jesus pairs two parables: **the lost sheep**, in which a (presumably male) shepherd searches for one of his flock who has wandered off, followed by **the lost coin**, in which a woman searches for a silver coin which has gone missing.
- In Chapter 18, vv. 1-14, Jesus again pairs two parables, about a persistent widow and a humble tax collector.

### \* Why do you think Luke pairs stories about men and women in this way?

In these examples, Jesus is addressing different parts of his audience, knowing that some of them were women, who would identify more, for example, with the loss of a valuable coin in the house than with the loss of a sheep out on the pasture. Jesus goes out of his way to address both the men and the women in his audience, by tailoring the examples in the stories to the experience of both.

It is as if **Luke is telling women that they are not left out** – there are encounters and parables which speak specifically to them. It is notable that the order varies – in some (eg: the Centurion's son, or the 'lost' parables), the male version comes first, but in others (eg: the persistent widow, or the songs of Mary and of Zechariah), the female one precedes the male one. Although Luke recognises that society is divided by gender, he does not give precedence to one gender over the other.

Luke seems particularly focused on **widows**, usually portraying them in a positive, exemplary light, such as Anna (2:36-38), the widow of Zarephath (4:25-27), the widow of Nain (7:11-17), the persistent widow (18:1-8), the generous widow (21:1-4). It has been suggested that Luke highlights widows positively to encourage Christian communities to make provision for them and value their contribution to the church.

## Women in a variety of contexts [PD]

Another feature of Luke's references to women is **the variety of contexts** in which they crop up:

- Women feature in **miracle stories**, such as Simon's mother-in-law (4:38-39), the widow of Nain (7:11-17), the daughter of the synagogue leader (8:40-56).
- There are also the **parables** in which male and female examples are twinned, as already mentioned.
- Women are mentioned in several places in Luke as **followers of Jesus**:
  - in 8:1-3, in which three are named – **Mary Magdalene, Joanna & Susanna**;

- some of these were **women of high social standing**. For example, **Joanna** is “the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household”) and independently wealthy (“These women were helping to support them out of their own means”) Luke 8:2-3.
- in the narrative of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus: Luke 23:49 mentions a group of women followers of Jesus, “**the women who had followed him from Galilee**”, also mentioned in 23:55 and playing a major role in the events described in Ch24. Mary Magdalene and Joanna are specifically mentioned (24:10) as amongst this group.
- in 10:38-42, the sisters **Martha** and **Mary** in Bethany. We are going to break for lunch now. After lunch, we are going to look at Martha in more detail.

## Martha (10:38-42) [MR]

<sup>38</sup> As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. <sup>39</sup> She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. <sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’

<sup>41</sup> ‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, <sup>42</sup> but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.’

\* **Who was Martha?**

\* **What part did she play in the gospel story?**

\* **What lessons can we learn from her which are relevant to our congregations today?**

Reading the passage, it is hard not to feel a certain sympathy for poor Martha. She has invited Jesus into her home and is rushing around making all the preparations – cleaning the house, moving the furniture, cooking the food, and there is her sister Mary, just sitting at the Lord’s feet, apparently doing nothing. No wonder Martha got a bit grumpy!

But how could any church function without a small army of ‘Marthas’ tirelessly working behind the scenes seeing to all the practical details? If it were not for their devoted work, the church could scarcely function. Many people, men and women, contribute in all sorts of different, practical ways to the life of the church, and that is absolutely how it should be. So why does poor, hard-working Martha come in for criticism from the Lord?

- First, a key word here is ‘distracted’: “*Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.*” This word suggests that she has become so preoccupied with all the practical things she was rushing around doing, that they had become an end in themselves, and she had lost sight of what really mattered – that Jesus was visiting her house. There is a lesson for us here, that **however important those practical details are** (and I am not saying that they are unimportant...), **if we lose sight of why we are doing them, if worshipping the Lord and furthering the Kingdom of God are not central to everything we do as a church, then what we are doing is pointless.** “*Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain,*” to quote Psalm 127.
- Secondly, Martha’s **distraction by all the preparations** has led her to a selfish feeling that she is the only one doing any work, to the point where she not only vents her anger towards Mary, but even gives orders to Jesus: “*Tell her to help me!*” I am sure that Martha, looking back on this exchange, was mortified that she had chosen the occasion when the Lord in person came to visit her house to involve Him in this ill-tempered outburst against her sister.

**It is also a reminder to us that to work hard in the service of God and of our fellow Christians should be a joy and a privilege, and not something to complain about.**

- Thirdly, Martha is a **terrible worrier**. Jesus says to her, “*you are worried and upset about many things*”. But worrying is just another form of distraction from trusting and worshipping God. Jesus has the answer to this. Just a couple of chapters later, Luke tells us how Jesus said to his disciples: “*Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. ... Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?*” It is easier said than done, I know, but **we can cast the burden of all our worries upon Him**.

And yet in all this analysis of Martha's failings, we should not lose sight of the fact that she is a **generous and capable woman**: it was Martha, not Mary, who invited the Lord into their house. At the start of this passage, Luke tells us (10:38) that, “*He came to a village where a woman named Martha opened **her home** to Him,*” indicating that the house in Bethany belongs to her, even though she shares it with her brother Lazarus and her sister Mary.

**Martha is also a woman of great faith.** For the other passage in which the household of Martha and Mary in Bethany is mentioned, we have to look beyond Luke to Chapter 11 of John's gospel, which shows the strength of Martha's faith very clearly. This is the story of what happened when their brother Lazarus became ill and died, and it reveals that Martha was not only the worrier “*distracted by all the preparations*”, who we have heard about in the Luke passage, but a strong woman whose faith in the Lord is very powerful: “*When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.*” Again there, it is Martha who takes the initiative by going out to meet Jesus when she hears that he is on his way, confirming what we have learned from Luke that it is Martha, rather than Lazarus or Mary, who is the head of this household.

“*Lord,*” Martha said to Jesus, “*if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.*” What extraordinary faith this woman has! When, a little later, “*they took away the stone. ... Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.*”

In these two episodes in the lives of the sisters Martha and Mary, we see how this flawed human being Martha, “*distracted by all the preparations... worried and upset about many things*” and losing her temper with her sister, becomes a strong woman of amazing faith, indeed whose faith is so strong that through it Jesus raises her brother from the dead.

**In that transformation of Martha, in the way that, for all her imperfections, Jesus is able to use her so powerfully to further the Kingdom of God, there is hope for us all that, despite all our individual frailties and weaknesses, He can use us too to further His Kingdom. The story of Martha and Mary is also evidence that, at a very early stage in the development of what was to become the Christian church, women were active as leaders in it.**

## **Women as disciples [PD]**

So Martha & Mary, like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and other women, follow Jesus, becoming disciples exactly as his male followers do. Before we criticise Mary (Martha's sister) as lazy, we should note that Our Lord commends her eagerness to listen to and learn from Him, saying “*Mary has chosen what is better*” and adding, “*and it will not be taken away from her*” (Luke 10:42), showing that Our Lord welcomes women disciples. Some of them (Luke 8:2-3) provide for Jesus and the other disciples out of their own resources – showing that they travelled with Jesus and served him, a primary function of discipleship. In Luke's gospel, following Jesus, being his disciple, means detaching oneself from worldly

possessions, family and personal plans. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and the other women exemplify these qualities. In **The Acts of the Apostles** too, Luke makes it clear that women played important roles in the early church:

- When the disciples meet in the upper room in the weeks following the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, women are among them, although Luke only names one of them. *"They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus,"* Luke writes in Acts 1:14. When Peter addresses the group, he emphatically includes the women in what he says: *"In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, 'Brothers and sisters...'"* (Acts 1:15-16). And later when Peter and other apostles preached the word in Solomon's Colonnade, *"more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number"* (Acts 5:14).
- Women are included as disciples on an equal footing with men, not only by the leaders of the early church, but also by its enemies. Saul/Paul before his conversion is not fussy about the gender of those Christians he persecutes: *"Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison"* (Acts 8:3). And as he sets out on the road to Damascus, Saul takes with him, *"letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem"* Acts 9:2. Now of course Saul's journey to Damascus took an unexpected turn and he did no more persecution of Christians. But these two passages show that both men and women are full members of the early church, and that male and female Christians are regarded by their enemies, including Saul their persecutor-in-chief, as equally dangerous.
- As he narrates Paul's various missionary journeys in the course of Acts, Luke also mentions that *"Quite a few prominent women"* in Thessalonica become committed Christians (Acts 17:4), as do *"a number of prominent Greek women"* in Berea (Acts 17:12). It is clear then that Paul welcomes converts of both genders and preaches equally to men and to women – ironically, just as he persecuted men and women Christians equally before his conversion.
- Luke mentions a number of individual women converts. To look at three examples:
  - **Mary, the mother of John Mark**, at whose house *"many people had gathered and were praying"*, implying that she is the leader of a house church (Acts 12:12).
  - The first convert to Christianity in Europe whose name we know was a woman. **Lydia**, from Thyatira, is described in Acts 16:14-15 as *"a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message."* She and her household are converted at Philippi soon after Paul's arrival there. She is evidently the head of the household, so probably either a single woman or a widow. Furthermore, Luke writes, *"she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.'" So, like Mary, the mother of John Mark, she becomes the hostess of a house church. Lydia is described as "a dealer in purple cloth", which was a very expensive luxury product, for which her home town of Thyatira was famous, so Lydia is clearly a successful and wealthy businesswoman in Philippi, enabling her to act as a generous benefactress of the church.*
  - **Priscilla** and her husband Aquila are a Jewish couple who have moved from Rome to Corinth *"because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome"* (Acts 18:2), which enables us to date this encounter to 49 AD, when the Emperor Claudius issued a decree expelling the Jews from Rome. Paul *"stayed and worked with"* Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:3) for *"in Corinth for a year and a half"* (Acts 18:11) and then they went with him when he travelled back to Ephesus, where he left them (Acts 18:18-19). We hear of them teaching Apollos, an educated and articulate man but one who *"knew only the baptism of John"*. Priscilla and Aquila *"invited him to their home and*

*explained to him the way of God more adequately*" (Acts 18: 25-26). So they are a missionary couple, who first host Paul in Corinth and are co-opted by him in his journey, then entrusted by him to strengthen the church in Ephesus. One thing that is remarkable about them is that throughout Chapter 18 of Acts, Luke portrays them as clearly equal partners in these varied and important activities for the church – it is never Aquila alone; it is "*Aquila and Priscilla*" or more often "*Priscilla and Aquila*".

## Conclusion [PD]

So what we learn from Luke's gospel and his account of the early church in Acts includes:

- that women played a central role in the Christmas story since God enlists the help of a woman to bear His son;
- that women became Jesus' disciples just as his male followers did;
- that these women came from a variety of backgrounds, from poor widows, like the widow of Nain, to women of high social standing and independent means, such as Lydia and Martha;
- that Luke, by pairing stories about men and about women, tells women that they are not left out and there are encounters and parables which speak specifically to them;
- that Paul welcomed converts of both genders and preached equally to men and to women, just as he previously persecuted men and women Christians equally before his conversion;
- that women like Anna, a prophetess; Martha; Mary, the mother of John Mark; Lydia; and Priscilla all held positions of religious significance and leadership;
- **that all of us, men and women alike, can learn from the example of these women;**
- **that today we would do well to emulate the early church by similarly enabling women to play a full part in the life of the church including in positions of leadership.**





# Learning from Luke's Gospel

## Day 3: Salvation in Luke's Gospel and Acts

### What do we mean by salvation? [JN]

"Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." Luke 2:11.

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

<sup>30</sup> For my eyes have seen your salvation,

<sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel."

Luke 2:29-32 (the *Nunc Dimittis*)

#### \* What is Salvation?

#### \* What are we being saved from?

### Luke focuses on Jesus as Saviour

- Only Luke refers to Jesus as Saviour.
- Salvation is not mentioned in Matthew or Mark
- In John it is only mentioned once – the Samaritan woman (Ch4) – Salvation is of the Jews.
- The title 'Saviour' and 'Salvation' are used repeatedly in Luke's writings – both Luke and Acts.

### Salvation in the Old Testament

Hebrew text of OT uses several words which are translated as 'Saviour'. It is used 60 times in Psalms; e.g. Psalm 42:11 and Psalm 62:1. Also 30 times in Isaiah.

### Salvation refers to God and his divine action and is an act of God as Saviour.

- Several words translated as Saviour mean: 'Liberating from oppression', in a negative sense of deliverance from enemies or afflictions. It doesn't typically refer to eternal life. Examples – Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 6:6 & 2 Kings 13). So Salvation is an act of God freeing people from Slavery and oppression.
- In other cases in OT Salvation is to do with Redemption. – see Ex 6.6 again "I will free you from being slaves to them and I will redeem you"

#### \* What is Redemption?

- Redemption is an act by which one recovers what has come to belong to another. To redeem one had to have certain rights to a property.
- In Ruth 4: 5-8 it means "buying back".

- Mary and Joseph take the infant Jesus to the temple (Luke 2:21-24). The Law made every firstborn God's property – the firstborn had to be redeemed by means of a sacrifice.
- The words 'redemption' and 'redeem' only occur in Luke, not in other Gospels. **Redemption is a Lukan theme.**

### Conclusion from OT

- Words translated as 'Saviour' or 'Salvation' in OT have several meanings including particularly
  - Liberating from oppression.
  - Redeeming from another.
- It isn't to do with eternal life. It's to do with our lives here and now.

### Salvation in Luke's books in New Testament

"To you is born in this day in the City of David a Saviour who is the Messiah, the Lord." Luke 2:11

- This follows OT pattern of God intervening in history with a liberating action.
- The shepherds would have understood the angels statement in the context of OT teaching.

"But we had hoped he was the one who was going to restore Israel" Luke 24:21

- Even as Jesus ascends to heaven the disciples still have an OT view of salvation and the Messiah.
- We need to understand salvation in the NT in the light of its OT meaning, particularly that salvation is to do with our lives in the present. **Salvation is for today, not eternity.**
- New testament examples of this: Zacchaeus "**Today** salvation is come to your house" (Luke 19:1-10). **So salvation is today , not for tomorrow / after death.** Jesus says this after Zacchaeus has given half his possessions to the poor. i.e. Z had changed = indicates change in heart and mind – that is salvation. **So Salvation is an act of God that changes us now.**

Peter says: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" Acts 4:12

- Peter is saying this in relation to healing a lame man at the temple gate (Acts 4: 8-12). So the reference to salvation is about bodily healing of the lame man.
- In chapter 3 Peter and John are arrested for healing the man, the trial is about healing, not about eternal salvation, but Peter refers to salvation .
- In Greek the same word refers to salvation and healing the sick.
- **So Peter is in effect saying that all healing comes from Jesus Christ and that healing is a form of salvation.**

Same idea in Luke 8:41–48. The story of Jairus' daughter. In v48 Jesus says "Daughter, it is your faith that has healed you, go in peace".

- The word translated as "healed" can also be translated as "saved".
- Also Luke 5:17–26. Story of the paralytic man lowered through the roof.
- Jesus associates forgiveness of sins with healing and health.

**Salvation from evil spirits.** The Story of the spirit possessed girl, Acts 16:16-18 .

- She was affirming the 'way to be saved'.

- Yet Paul commanded the spirit out of her.
- If salvation was only about eternal life Paul might have been better leaving her saying what she did.
- But salvation is more – she was exploited by her owners – so save her from exploitation. Also, liberation from an oppressive spiritual power.

**Salvation brings joy.** The story of the jailer, when Paul and Silas are in prison Acts 16:22-34.

- Jailer asks “What must I do to be saved?”
- “His whole household were overjoyed at finding God” (v34). So salvation brings joy in the present.

**Salvation and eternal life.** The Jewish ruler and eternal life, Luke 18:18-24 & 30.

- This links eternal life with the present life.
- “without receiving very much more in this present life and eternal life in the world to come”.

## CONCLUSION

The theme of salvation is from the beginning of Luke to the end and continues throughout Acts.

**Salvation is all-encompassing – it covers hope here and now and through eternity. It covers body mind and spirit.**

## Zechariah (1:5-23 & 59-79) [PD]

We are going to look at a couple of examples of how Luke uses the concept of salvation. First, let's look at how Zechariah uses the word salvation in his song in the first chapter of Luke's gospel...

*“He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.”* Luke 1:69-71.

*“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”* Luke 1:76-77.

Summary: Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, plays a unique and significant role in the biblical story of salvation. His story is mainly found in Luke 1, where he serves as both a prophetic figure and a key witness to God's salvation plan.

This salvation is needed because of sin and the need for the constant sacrificial blood penalty. The problem is that this sacrifice is only temporary – so a permanent solution is needed.

God had a plan for that permanent solution in the person of Jesus Christ, proclaimed by John the Baptist, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah.

Zechariah, a priest in the temple from the division of Abijah, was chosen to go into the temple to burn incense. Although this was an important job undertaken morning and evening, a priest might only have the honour of performing this act of devotion once in his lifetime as he would be selected by drawing lots.

When Zechariah was performing this task, we read that his prayers were to be answered. God even gave the baby a name: JOHN (1:13), which means, “The Lord is gracious.”

When the baby was born, Elizabeth's friends and family rejoiced that the couple finally had a son and wanted to name him “Zechariah,” after his father. But Elizabeth named him John, and Zechariah, still mute, confirmed in writing, ‘His Name Is John’.

In that moment, by obeying God and naming his son John, Zechariah proved his belief that God could do all that He promised to do and so Zechariah could speak again. His first words gave praise to God.

Luke 1:76-79 tells us how Zechariah praised God with the song we call the Benedictus.

The Benedictus is a companion to Mary's song, The Magnificat, (vs46-56). Both are about how the coming of Jesus will be a great day for Israel.

So let's plot Zechariah's role in God's Salvation plan:

1. **A Prophetic Voice:** Having been mute for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy over his initial doubt of God's message (1:18-20), Zechariah's speech is restored once he names his son as instructed by the angel Gabriel. He then bursts into a prophetic hymn, known as the Benedictus (1:68-79), a declaration of God's redemption and mercy.

2. **Announcing the Fulfilment of God's Promise:** Zechariah, in his prophecy, acknowledges that God is fulfilling His covenant promises to Israel. He speaks of salvation in terms of deliverance from enemies and from sin (1:71-75). Through his son, John, Zechariah acknowledges the coming of the Messiah (Jesus), who will bring permanent salvation through the forgiveness of sins.

3. **John as the Forerunner:** Zechariah's prophecy also highlights his son's role as the forerunner of the Messiah. He speaks of John preparing the way for the Lord by calling people to repentance (1:76-77). This emphasizes that salvation is not only about God's direct action in sending the Messiah but also about the preparation of human hearts through repentance and faith.

4. **Pointing to the Dawn of Salvation:** In Zechariah's words, there is a vivid image of the "dawn from on high" (1:78-79), referring to the coming of Jesus as the light that will guide people out of darkness and into the way of peace. This is a reference to the messianic salvation that will be brought through Jesus, who will die for humanity's sins and offer eternal life to all who believe in Him.

So Zechariah's role in salvation is not only as the father of John the Baptist but also as a key prophetic figure who recognizes the fulfilment of God's salvation plan. His prophecy is a declaration that salvation is at hand, embodied in the coming of Jesus Christ, and that John's mission is to prepare the way for Him. Through Zechariah, we see how God's promises unfold in the birth of John and the coming of Jesus, marking the beginning of salvation for the world.

God's plan of salvation was for all of us. First, God wants us to put our trust in the Jesus and then to do what John did – lead others to Jesus so their sins can be wiped away permanently. As priests and leaders in your communities this is your mission, to bring God's permanent plan of salvation to those who are still separated from God by sin.

**\* How you will lead others to Jesus and know God's salvation, his permanent solution.?**

## Who is salvation offered to? [MR]

Luke shows how salvation is not just for important, wealthy or outwardly religious people, but is available to **marginalised people** too: this theme continues throughout the rest of the gospel and in Acts. As we saw yesterday, Luke emphasises that women are to be included in the church and in Our Lord's offer of salvation, and the same goes for those often looked down upon as 'sinners', for Samaritans, for Gentiles, for the poor: in the very first chapter of Luke's gospel, Mary sings, "*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*" Luke 1:52-53. Luke clearly emphasises diversity in the church, which is a consequence of salvation being offered to all who put their trust in Jesus our Saviour, regardless of their background.

## Sinners: [MR]

Jesus' reply to the Pharisees when they question his association with sinners is this: *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* (Matthew 9:12-13).

There is a certain irony in what Our Lord says here, in that the **"healthy"** are the Pharisees who see themselves as having no need of repentance, while the **"sick"** are the sinners. But the true situation is very different – the Pharisees are not nearly as righteous as they think they are, for they are guilty of the sin of pride, looking down on those they see as unclean.

Many sinners, on the other hand, recognise their own need for forgiveness and healing - as the woman *"caught in the act of adultery"* (John 8:2-11) does. The *"woman who had led a sinful life"* who anoints Jesus' feet with her tears and with the contents of a jar of perfume (Luke 7:36-38) does too. On this occasion, a Pharisee is shocked by Jesus' willingness to be in the company of sinners: *"he said to himself, 'if this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner.'"*

By admitting and confronting their sins, they have taken the first step back towards God. Jesus' ministry to the tax collectors and sinners, the outcasts, the *"sick"*, is an act of mercy, and their repentance pleases God more than the Pharisees' fastidious, but ultimately hollow, attention to the letter of the Law.

On another occasion when Jesus was talking to tax collectors and sinners, in Luke 15: 1-10, Jesus tells the Pharisees who again lurk in the background muttering about it, *"there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent."* What we learn from all this and from Luke's gospel in particular is that God loves all, not just the righteous but even sinners.

We are going to look at an example of a sinner who encountered Jesus:

## Zacchaeus (19:1-10) [MR]

<sup>1</sup> Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup> A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. <sup>3</sup> He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. <sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

<sup>5</sup> When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, *'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.'* <sup>6</sup> So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

<sup>7</sup> All the people saw this and began to mutter, *'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'*

<sup>8</sup> But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, *'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.'*

<sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, *'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'*

**\* What do we learn from Zacchaeus' story about how sinners can attain salvation?**

On His way into Jericho, Jesus meets Zacchaeus, the tax collector. Now I suspect that people in almost every human society over the ages have grumbled about paying taxes, however much we know really that they are necessary to pay for the services we expect from our government. Two thousand years ago, tax collectors were certainly unpopular. A commentary I read on this says: *"In Jesus' day, heavy taxes were levied upon the people for all sorts of things. In addition to the three main taxes (ground tax,*

*income tax, and poll tax), duty was imposed upon all imported goods. Every caravan that used the main roads and all the ships that came into harbour were taxed."*

In 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, tax collectors like Zacchaeus obtained their jobs by bidding how much money they would pay to the authorities in the year. Their profit came from how much more than that amount they could squeeze out of the taxpayers, so they earned a reputation for greed and sharp practice. Furthermore, this dislike of tax collectors was given an extra edge by the fact that they were collecting taxes for a foreign power. He would collect taxes from the Jewish people and hand the money over (less his own share) to Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch, or ruler, of Galilee and Perea, which at the time was a client-state of the Roman Empire. Herod was a puppet-ruler who did the Romans' bidding and patriotic Jews despised those who collaborated with the Roman occupiers.

We know from elsewhere in the gospels that the payment of taxes to the Roman authorities was bitterly resented by the Jews and was a matter of deep controversy. In Matthew 22:17, some Pharisees ask Jesus, *"Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"* As I'm sure you remember, Jesus's reply is a clever one: *"Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, 'Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?' 'Caesar's,' they replied. Then he said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'"*

Luke tells us that Zacchaeus, who lived in Jericho, *"was a chief tax collector and was wealthy"*, and Jesus goes to his house. Among zealous Jews who longed to throw off the yoke of Roman occupation, tax collectors were hated as traitors. How shocking that Jesus should ask a tax collector to follow him, rather than a Pharisee. *"He has gone to be the guest of a sinner,"* they say (19:7). In going to stay at his house, Jesus is associating with someone who is despised, involved with handling pagan currency and collaborating with the Roman occupying forces, as well as swindling people by charging them too much tax and keeping the surplus for himself.

Zacchaeus is transformed by his encounter with Jesus and declares, *"Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount"*. This sounds like an admission that he has indeed cheated people, reinforcing this stereotype of the greedy and unscrupulous tax collector.

Yet Jesus' immediate response is remarkable: *"Jesus said to him, 'Today **salvation has come to this house** ... For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'"* (19:9). Zacchaeus has promised four-fold restitution for anyone he has cheated of money: repentance leads to forgiveness of sins and **salvation**. Moreover, the final sentence emphasises the role of Jesus in this because He *"came to seek and to save the lost."*

**The story of Zacchaeus teaches us that no matter what our background and past life, we can all obtain salvation by repenting of our sins and turning to Jesus.**

## **Samaritans (9:51-56) [MR]**

<sup>51</sup> As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. <sup>52</sup> And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; <sup>53</sup> but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. <sup>54</sup> When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, *'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them'* <sup>55</sup> But Jesus turned and rebuked them. <sup>56</sup> Then he and his disciples went to another village.

**\* Why do James and John show such a hostile attitude to Samaritans?**

**\* Why does Jesus rebuke them?**

In this passage, Jesus and some of his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. The most direct route from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south was through Samaria, which was on the west bank of the River Jordan. There they get a frosty reception from the inhabitants of a Samaritan village.

There had been hostility between the Samaritans and the Jews, going back a very long way into Old Testament times. According to the Second Book of Kings, 17:24-41, *“The King of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim and settled them in the towns of Samaria and lived in its towns. They worshipped the Lord, but they also served their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought.”* So they were apparently of gentile origin, although they claimed to be Jews and had established their own temple on Mount Gerizim, in opposition to the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Roman historian Josephus (c.37 – c.100 AD) writes that, *“Hatred arose between the Samaritans and the Jews for the following reason. It was the custom of the Galileans at the time of the festival to pass through the Samaritan territory on their way to the Holy City [Jerusalem]. On one occasion, while they were passing through, certain of the Samaritan inhabitants of a village ... joined battle with the Galileans and slew a great number of them.”*

It is not clear from Josephus's account when this violent incident happened – whether it is a reference to a recent event or one a long time in the past. But it certainly helps to explain why, like many other Jews travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples come to a Samaritan village, and also why the reaction of James and his brother John is to offer *“to call fire down from heaven to destroy them”*. Some manuscripts after *“to call fire down from heaven to destroy them”* add the words *“as Elijah did”*, a reference to an incident described in the Second Book of Kings (1:9-12) about Elijah calling down fire from heaven, consuming fifty armed men sent by Ahaziah, the King of Samaria.

Samaria covered the territory known as the West Bank today and inhabited predominantly by Palestinians, though occupied by Israel since 1967 – so you could say that the hostility between Jews and Samaritans is still reflected in the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians, which has caused so much destruction and bloodshed in the Middle East since 2023.

The most significant words in this passage from Luke are *“But Jesus turned and rebuked them”* (9:55). Jesus has no time for the anti-Samaritan bravado of James and John and tells them off before leading the disciples to another village. Furthermore, St Luke's is the only gospel which contains the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), in which Jesus deliberately makes the hero who rescues and takes care of the wounded man by the roadside a Samaritan. And in Acts 1:8, Jesus tells the apostles that *“you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea **and Samaria**.”*

Furthermore, in Acts 8:25, we are told that, *“<sup>25</sup> After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.”* It is a remarkable change that John, who earlier, along with his brother James, suggested they should *“call fire down from heaven to destroy”* a Samaritan village, is now preaching the gospel of salvation to the Samaritans.

In all these passages, then, Luke is showing that salvation is also offered by Our Lord to the Samaritans.

## Gentiles: [MR]

As we mentioned on Day 1 on this course, Luke himself was almost certainly a Gentile. Throughout his gospel and Acts, Luke seems to treat gentiles in a sympathetic way. It is therefore not surprising that he is widely regarded as having written his gospel, at least to some extent, for gentile readers. As we saw earlier, from the start of the gospel, Luke has Simeon describing the infant Jesus as he holds Him in his arms in the temple as *“A light for revelation to the Gentiles”* (2:32).

Even Romans, who many Jews hated as the forces which were occupying Israel, are portrayed surprisingly benevolently. We are going to look now at one example of this, the Roman Centurion whose servant is ill:

## The Roman Centurion (7:1-10) [PD]

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. <sup>2</sup> There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was ill and about to die. <sup>3</sup> The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. <sup>4</sup> When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, *'This man deserves to have you do this, <sup>5</sup> because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.'* <sup>6</sup> So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: *'Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. <sup>7</sup> That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. <sup>8</sup> For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, "Go", and he goes; and that one, "Come", and he comes. I say to my servant, "Do this", and he does it.'*

<sup>9</sup> When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, *'I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.'* <sup>10</sup> Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

In Luke we encounter the story of a Roman centurion whose faith in Jesus demonstrates the expansion of salvation beyond Israel, to the Gentiles. This passage is pivotal in showing how Jesus' mission to bring salvation to all people, is already taking root. And the centurion's interaction with Jesus reveals important lessons about faith, humility, and the nature of God's salvation.

As a Gentile and a member of the occupying Roman forces, this man would have been considered an outsider by most Jews. But the centurion is presented in a positive light in the gospel, demonstrating qualities that go beyond his ethnic background or military role.

### 1. The Centurion's Heart (Luke 7:4-5)

The Centurion heard about Jesus, and cried out for his servant. Here he was, a Roman, a pagan, coming to a Jewish God to intercede on behalf of his servant. To do this, he had to humble himself and was ready to do what was necessary to ask for mercy for his servant.

A centurion was a military officer supervising 100 soldiers. He would have understood authority and power. But he was also a man of compassion, even for those who were below him, as seen by his heart for his servant.

The Centurion must have concluded that Jesus was no threat to him, but someone who could make a difference for him and for his family. But being a non-Jew, he did not feel worthy to come into Jesus' presence, believing Jesus more likely to answer his plea if he sent Jews to him.

He sent the Jewish elders to go and seek Jesus. They knew he was a soldier and a leader of soldiers, an enemy, but because of his authority, they deemed him worthy of attention.

The Centurion, on the other hand, did not see himself as worthy.

Luke 7:4-5 tells us that the Jewish leaders told Jesus. *"He is worthy for you to grant this, because he loves our nation and has built us a synagogue."*

It seems the Centurion understood the importance of worship, study and prayer.

### 2. The Centurion's Humility (Luke 7:6-7)

The centurion's approach to Jesus is marked by remarkable humility. When he hears that Jesus is on His way to heal his servant, the centurion sends Jewish elders to ask Jesus not to come directly to his house. Instead, he says, *"Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof."*

This humility is significant. Despite his authority as a military leader, the centurion recognizes that he is unworthy of Jesus' presence, demonstrating a deep reverence for Jesus' power and holiness.



He understands that Jesus' ability to heal is not dependent on being physically close but is a matter of authority.

### 3. The Centurion's Faith (Luke 7:7-9)

The centurion's statement of faith is even more striking. He says, "*But say the word, and let my servant be healed.*" He expresses a profound understanding of Jesus' authority, even from a distance. He compares Jesus' authority to his own as a military officer. Just as he can command his soldiers with a word, the centurion believes that Jesus can command healing with just a word.

This is a remarkable expression of faith, especially given that the centurion is a Gentile, not a member of Israel. He recognizes Jesus as having divine authority, which shows that the gospel of salvation is not confined to the Jews but is accessible to all who believe, regardless of their background.

### 4. Jesus' Response: The Praise of Faith (Luke 7:9)

Because of his actions Jesus deemed him to be humble and of great faith, responding with amazement and admiration, Jesus says, "*I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.*" This is a powerful declaration that faith in Jesus does not depend on nationality, ethnicity, or religious background, but on trust in His authority and power. Jesus' praise of the centurion's faith is an important moment in the Gospel, illustrating that salvation is for all who believe in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile.

This moment serves as a turning point in Luke's narrative, signalling that the message of salvation is not just for Israel but is to reach beyond Israel to all nations. The centurion, through his faith, represents the openness of Gentiles to receive God's grace and healing.

The Jews who were present, and the disciples, needed to hear and see this important lesson.

It is all about the heart of the person and how their actions demonstrate faith.

How this must have impacted the disciples – a Gentile with great faith who recognized Jesus Christ's authority! All he wanted was for Jesus to speak the word and he knew that his servant would be healed.

### 5. The Healing (Luke 7:10)

Finally, the servant is healed, not because Jesus physically goes to him, but because of the centurion's faith. Jesus' words demonstrate that salvation - both physical healing and spiritual salvation - comes through faith. Jesus heals from a distance, affirming that His power transcends physical space and barriers. Distance is no barrier to the power of the word of God. It also foreshadows the coming spread of the gospel to the Gentiles, where belief in Jesus will bring healing and salvation.

### Conclusion: The Gentile's Faith as an Example for All

The story of the Roman centurion in Luke 7 is a key moment in the Gospels where the message of salvation is shown to extend beyond the Jewish people. The centurion's faith becomes a model for all, showing that salvation is not based on ethnic identity or adherence to the law, but on faith in Jesus' authority and power. His example demonstrates that anyone, regardless of their background, can experience God's healing and grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

As leaders we know that people need to hear about Jesus and they need to go to Jesus to find healing and salvation. How might our lives enable them to see Jesus as a friend in whom they can put their faith?

In summary, the Roman centurion's interaction with Jesus reveals that the gospel is for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. It shows that faith in Jesus, rather than ethnic background or status, is what grants access to God's salvation.

## Salvation in Acts [MR]

- In **Acts**, Luke returns to the theme of salvation and a major theme is the extension of the offer of salvation through forgiveness of sins from Jews to Gentiles as well.
- There are two key passages about this, one centring on Peter, the other on Paul:
  - The first is the story told in Acts 10 about the vision experienced by Peter in Joppa. It is a long passage, and I am not going to read it all, as it is quite lengthy, but it begins like this, vv.9-13:
    - <sup>9</sup> About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup> He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup> He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. <sup>12</sup> It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. <sup>13</sup> Then a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'
    - This vision, together with the visit of Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian Regiment, who is sent, again having been told in a vision to do so, to find Peter in Joppa.
    - The episode concludes like this (vv.44-48):
    - <sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. <sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. <sup>46</sup> For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.
    - Then Peter said, <sup>47</sup> 'Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' <sup>48</sup> So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

**\* What do we learn from this passage about God's plan for the Gentiles?**

- The second key passage on the admission of gentiles to salvation comes near the end of the book in Acts 28:23-28:
  - In Rome, the Jews ask to meet Paul: and they "*came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus.*" (v23).
  - Here Luke shows that salvation is offered to the Jews. But their response is mixed: "*some were convinced, others would not believe.*" (v24)
  - Paul then quotes Isaiah 6:9-10, implying that the prophesy that "*this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes*" (v27) has been fulfilled and that the offer of salvation has been extended to the Gentiles, and Paul then makes the definitive statement: "***Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles and they will listen!***" (v28)
  - So the story which Luke tells in Acts is how the gospel goes to the Gentiles and moves from Jerusalem, to Samaria, across the Mediterranean to the centre of the empire, Rome itself, showing that **salvation is offered to ALL the world.**