Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

St Luke's Gospel Part 1



Saturday December 18th December – Friday 31st December 2021

Introduction

For the church year which started earlier in Advent and runs through to November next year the Gospel of Luke will be the main Gospel that is read in church on Sundays. The Gospel itself is anonymous but early on in the Church's life it was attributed to Luke, the companion of St Paul – but there's no evidence that he wrote it. Scholars think it might have been written as early as the 30 years between 80 and 110 whilst other scholars argue for a later date well into the 2nd Century. As in other Biblical texts we don't have the original manuscripts – the earliest documents we have date back to the 3rd Century and these are fragments – the earliest complete text we have dates to the 4th Century. The writer

used St Mark's Gospel (it's almost entirely included) and some other sources – one which looks like it is also used in Matthew (but not in Mark) and his own sources for material which doesn't appear in any of the other Gospels. Luke was written to be read aloud to early meetings of the Church gathered in peoples' homes. The author writes that his purpose is to present "an orderly account" of "the events that have been fulfilled among us" ie Jesus' life and ministry. Luke's purpose is not to justify the faith but to encourage it – to answer the questions: what happened and what did it all mean?

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experienced? What have you done that has pleased God and given glory to God? What sits in the "debit" column, for which you may yet need to confess and repent? How have you squeezed God out of your daily living, or hardened your hearts against the cries for justice from others? What do you need to change to put things right and live better in 2022? John the Baptist had faithfully shared the Good News of Jesus to all who would listen, and had spoken prophetically about sin and wrong living. Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch or Ruler of a quarter of the Roman province, wanted to keep the news about Jesus under covers, having mocked Him and sent Him back to Pilate. He lived a self-indulgent life, without regard for others. He was politically astute, and sought to garner power for himself. Luke concludes this section of His Gospel simply: in addition to all the other evil things the Tetrarch did, he locked John up in prison. Don't be like Herod Antipas. Be more like John: speak of Christ, speak of truth and justice, live faithfully.
Prayer

God our Father,
we have sinned against you and against one another,
in thought, word, and deed;
we have not loved You with all our heart;
we have not loved our neighbour as ourselves.
But You have kept faith with us.
Have mercy on us, forgive us our sins,
and restore us to newness of life,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Prayer taken the Rejoice & Sing, 3(b))

Saturday December 18, 2021 St Luke 1: 1 - 24

The Rev'd Samuel Silungwe, Minister, Rockingham Forest Group, Kettering

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that

this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

Reflection

In Sunday School, one of my favourite songs was: "What the Lord has done for me, I cannot tell it all… He saved me and washed me with His blood!" Part of Elizabeth's statement in verse 25 reads: "...what the Lord has done for me…" That is a statement of gratitude, expressed by someone who wholeheartedly celebrates God's great goodness. This is confirmed later in the same verse. "How kind the Lord is! He has taken away my disgrace of not having children." Elizabeth experienced a life changing encounter with God, and became a prime candidate for telling others what the Lord had done for her. Being childless in that era was considered a curse from God; a punishment for sin. Likewise, it meant the married couple would have no legacy - no continuation of their family line. As a result, women shouldered an outsized social stigma when they could not bear a child. Here the text makes clear that Elizabeth, and her husband Zechariah, were blameless.

So, are we the nourishing grain, or the superfluous chaff? And, by the way, who needs a coat? I've got one going spare.

Prayer

Baptize us with your spirit, pour your living water on us.
Refresh us and make us ready to serve.
Help us to be as generous with others as you have been with us.
Enable us to help to build the Kingdom you deserve Amen

Friday December 31, 2021 St Luke 3: 18 - 20

The Revd Steve Faber is Moderator of the West Midlands Synod

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

Reflection

Personally, I've no great interest in New Year's Eve or New Year's Resolutions. The date is essentially just a number like any other; if a change is worth making, it's worth making today rather than waiting for a new diary. Your views on both points may very well be different to mine, and that's ok.

Suppose, though, that the turn of the year is a helpful or important point to take stock – it's as good a day as any, and some of you will certainly feel it's a better day than most. What sits in the "credit" column for you? How have you lived this past year, with all the difficulties we've

worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Reflection

So, fairness is at the core of who we are, but how should we express this value in our daily lives?

Like many of us, I'm sure, I have more than one coat. Giving one of those coats away isn't much to ask. Sharing, especially in order to make sure everyone has enough, makes sense. But what if it's not just our coats, what if it's our food, our money, our gifts, our time?

Being called to share everything, not just what we have spare is a tougher ask, but surely if we are to follow Christ then giving not only to the point that we feel we have given our fair share but to where are giving a little more, is right, but it can be hard. Freely we have ben given, so let us freely give.

We live in a world where, sadly, our success is measured by how much we have, and having more, even to excess, is held up almost as a virtue. Keeping all of our coats for ourselves (and probably stealing other people's coats too) is how the world would have us live.

The words of John here turn those values on their head. We aren't called to conform to the standards of this world; we're called to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. John must have known that these words would get back to Herod, yet he boldly proclaimed this truth.

God measures our success by how fair we are, how much we uphold not just human justice, but Gospel justice, how we act, day in, day out to uphold and love not just those who share our faith and values, but all people.

Do you see and hear what Elizabeth is saying? It is rare to hear this statement preached on. We often quickly delve into the story of the birth of John the Baptist. Of course, his birth is miraculous, and moreover it parallels the supernatural birth of Jesus. Two grand narratives for Christmas. "This is what the Lord has done for me." Elizabeth is talking about her pregnancy. But this is not the only thing the Lord has done for her. If you look at the story, you will notice that the hand of the Lord is evident in her life way before this.

What lesson can we learn here? As Christians we cannot be quiet about what the Lord has done for us. Lesslie Newbigin talked about the Gospel as public truth. We have heard and seen - truly to hear and see - so go and tell, "This is what the Lord has done for me."

Prayer

God of good tidings, we thank you for the good news.
The good news of hope.
The good news of salvation.
The good news that is extended to all.
We thank you for the gift of memory,
and the ability to remember wonderful, joyous & pleasant times in our lives.
We praise you for your divine plan. For choosing us to be part of it.
May we be bold, as we proclaim the good news to those around us. Amen.

Sunday December 19, 2021 Psalm 72

The Rev'd Fleur Houston, retired minister, member of Macclesfield and Bollington URC.

Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
great David's greater Son!
Hail in the time appointed,
his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
to set the captive free;
to take away transgression,
and rule in equity.

2. He comes with succor speedy
to those who suffer wrong;
to help the poor and needy,
and bid the weak be strong;
to give them songs for sighing,

their darkness turn to light,
whose souls, condemned and dying,
are precious in his sight.

3. He shall come down like showers
upon the fruitful earth;
love, joy, and hope, like flowers,
spring in his path to birth.
Before him on the mountains,
shall peace, the herald, go,
and righteousness, in fountains,
from hill to valley flow.

4. To him shall prayer unceasing
and daily vows ascend;
his kingdom still increasing,
a kingdom without end.
The tide of time shall never
his covenant remove;
his name shall stand forever;
that name to us is love.

James Montgomery 1821

You can hear the hymn sung to the tune Ellacombe here
https://bit.ly/2SvBSKX

Reflection

Montgomery's great paraphrase of Psalm 72 was written for Christmas 1821 and has been a firm staple of Advent services ever since. It celebrates with exhilaration the righteous rule of a great king. As befits the Lord's anointed, he reflects God's attributes. He will rule in equity, treat with justice those who are poor and needy and break those who oppress them. In political, economic, social and spiritual dimensions, he will bring abundant new life to human beings and life and harmony to all creation. His far-reaching power will be recognised by all nations, and the whole world will find blessing.

Of course, no king in Israel's history ever matched that glorious vision but there are hints in the hymn that Montgomery is identifying this one with the Messiah. Verse 1 resonates with Isaiah 61.1 which at Luke 4.18 Jesus appropriates so memorably to himself at the start of his ministry; and the final couplet of verse 5 clinches the matter with its startling, dramatic emphasis on the mighty king's name, Love.

And so we are invited to read the hymn with Christ in mind. What is the relationship then between our mighty monarch and ourselves?

I once produced a programme with Billy Graham and the late Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins – another contrast in styles - but in the end they were delivering the same message: the kingdom of God is here and now, and we need to put our respective houses in order. John told us that "the axe is lying at the root of the trees". Jesus told us that the vines which do not bear fruit are thrown away and burned. If John and Jesus had not lived, we would never have heard of Pontius Pilate, Herod, Annas and Caiaphas. But because John opened the way, and Jesus trod the path to Calvary, we have the chance to become citizens of the new Jerusalem and know that the kingdom of God is a reality as we play our own modest bit parts.

Prayer

Ah! Jesus health of sinful souls,
Give ear unto our loving prayer;
Guide now our wandering feet again,
And hold our doings in our care.

The Oxford Book of Prayer

Thursday December 30, 2021 St Luke 3: 10 - 17

Sam Goodman, Elder, Central URC, Derby

And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not

the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
   make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
   and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
   and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."'

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Reflection

Luke marks the date. He does it with a cast list of the principal players of the time – Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, Annas and Caiaphas, the High Priests. We shall see those names again. Herod will execute John before the drama reaches its tragic climax when they will be back on stage for the last act, and the curtain falls on the crucifixion.

I sometimes like to speculate about what might have happened if Herod had not executed John the Baptist. He appears in Luke like a whirling Dervish coming out of the desert to baptise the repentant in the Jordan and promising the wrath to come. In contrast, Jesus walks the length of the land telling us to become like little children. Yet both of them believed passionately in the promises of the Second Isaiah who taught the downtrodden exiles in Babylon that the day of salvation had dawned.

Montgomery himself was passionately engaged with social justice issues, campaigning against slavery, and boy chimney sweeps, and was imprisoned for an editorial which he wrote for the Sheffield Iris. Do we too reflect the attributes of God? Do we take a stand against oppression and violence, not counting the cost? Do we intervene on behalf of the poor? Do we actively help those who have no one to stand up for them? As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus the Messiah, are we heralds of God's transforming peace and righteousness? and do we praise God for his blessings?

Prayer

God of justice, life and power, you have given Jesus Christ
sovereignty over every age and nation.
Guide us, in his love so to care for the poor and needy
and challenge those who oppress them
that your righteous rule may be acknowledged
by all people and your name be praised. Amen

Monday December 20, 2021 St Luke 1: 26 - 38

The Rev'd Carole Elphick. Retired Minister worshipping at Muswell Hill.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the pøwer of the Most High will

overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Reflection

Angels. Virgins. Unplanned pregnancies. Strange words. Strange greetings. Incredible understatements. Ground breaking, life changing, universe shattering news. As if we didn't have enough to cope with this year what with pandemic, political crisis and powerful propaganda alongside ordering the sprouts and ensuring Aunt Bertha's favourite biscuits are on the table on Boxing Day, now we have The Annunciation to get our heads round too.

Our lives have been an unforeseen roller coaster ride of coping and adapting to unprecedented challenges for almost two years and we could be forgiven for wanting a bit of calm and predictability now and through 2022. If today's reading tells us anything it tells us just to hang on tight because none of us knows what's coming next. In the space of this account from Luke's gospel a young teenager goes from astonishment and perplexity via some astute questioning to acceptance and compliance in an almost unbelievably short space of time. Mary's life will undergo the most difficult and complicated changes socially, culturally and gynaecologically and we are told that she just gets on with it. What an example of how to learn from young people.

What we also know is that somehow we too can find the strength to face it, deal with it, come through it and learn from it - whatever IT turns out to be. And we know that we are not alone. We travel this very rocky road in company with all of humanity and the responsibility that God's love places upon us is to walk that way faithfully and often courageously, looking out for and being looked after by our fellow travellers at all

worry his parents. We wonder at this union between the divine and the human - was it a growing awareness of his divine nature or did he know even at this age? Could one live with such knowledge?

Ultimately, we don't know how Jesus resolved any tension between his divine and human natures - it is, after all, a mystery to be contemplated rather than a puzzle to be solved but a rich strand in Eastern Orthodox theology is that Jesus became one with humanity so that we might become one with God. We seek to unite our humanity - with its glories and flaws - with divinity.

Prayer

Finish, then, O God, thy new creation;
true and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
till in heav'n we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise. Amen

Charles Wesley 1747

Wednesday December 29, 2021 St Luke 3: 1 - 9

The Rev'd Peter Moth, retired minister and former broadcasting executive, St Andrew's, Kenton, Newcastle upon Tyne.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler 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 region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for

have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

Reflection

This curious passage is the only account we have of Jesus' childhood and it's hard to know who we'd place ourselves with in this situation. Would we stand alongside Mary and Joseph squabbling about who'd seen Jesus last and whose job it was to check on him?

Would we be part of the crowd feeling sorry for the hapless parents but checking our own kids were safe?

Can we imagine the frantic searching in Jerusalem, retracing their steps until going to the Temple - maybe to pray in utter desperation.

Can we imagine the relief, giving way to astonishment, to find Jesus in the Temple?

Would we be alongside Jesus teaching in the Temple or would we see him as a bit precocious?

I'm sure Joseph and Mary would have been tempted to give Jesus, at best, a good telling off after all that worry. It's all very well saying that thereafter he was obedient to them but that experience would have scared the wits out of Mary and Joseph just as it would any parents.

Luke is trying to express two truths about Jesus with which we wrestle - divinity and humanity. As God the Son he was fine; he was in the Temple, chatting Scripture and theology and having a grand old time. As a human he was a missing child that hadn't thought through how he'd

times.

Well, bring it on then!

Prayer

Loving God,
help me not to be overwhelmed by whatever life throws at me but to take a deep breath and move onwards with you. May I take a leaf out of Mary's book and be ready for anything. And please may I remember where to put my hands on the recipe for Aunt Bertha's favourite biscuits.
Amen

Tuesday December 21, 2021 St Luke 1: 39 - 45

The Rev'd Sue Henderson retired minister and member of United Church Bradford on Avon

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Reflection

The teenage Mary, newly pregnant, makes her way through the hilly country to visit Elizabeth. As soon as she sees her, Mary understands that at least a part of what the angel said is true, for Elizabeth is well advanced in her pregnancy.

Elizabeth speaks – Why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come to me? They sound so much like the words her son will speak to Jesus some thirty years later – I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?

There is a beautiful humility to both Elizabeth and Mary. There is also a deep sense of overwhelming wonder of being caught up in the purposes of God.

For the same Spirit that worked in Mary is alive and active in our world. That Spirit brought life and light into the world in the person of Jesus – and still brings light and life to the world in people like us. Mary wasn't an important person – she was ordinary. We aren't important people, we are ordinary. God worked a work in Mary and God can work a work in us.

That light and that life cannot be destroyed.

We are ordinary people, but with an extraordinary task to perform – for we are to be co-workers with God. We are not called to be spectators – willing to criticise but unwilling to act – willing to moan but unwilling to take a risk. Those who are open to God cannot be spectators.

It's not always easy to discern the significance of apparently ordinary events. Transformation is usually gradual, and the impact is over time. Evolution is more comfortable than revolution. Yet the effects might well be revolutionary – a change in perspective or attitude, a life-changing experience, the fulfilment of great expectations.

Prayer

Living God, help us to express our joy and love as we praise you each day. Forgive us for letting our doubts and hesitations interfere with our obedience to your will. Give us courage to obey your commands and to respond to your promises in faith. Thank you for the gift of life, and all

forming new and changed futures.

Old traditions, familiar though they are, can always be improved, and new light can shine and worlds can be changed if we embrace the new in our midst. What new traditions may our lives need when faced with the incarnate Christ?

Prayer

Master God,
reveal your new light to me.
Help me to see how you will change my actions.
Help me to be a catalyst for change.
Guide me into new ways for your kingdom. Amen.

Tuesday December 28, 2021, St Luke 2: 39 - 52

The Rev'd Andy Braunston works with four churches in and around Glasgow.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I

a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Reflection

Christmas is a time for doing things that while not 'stated in the law' are certainly familiar traditions. These may be like second nature to us and seem perfectly ordinary. But put yourself in a different family over the Christmas period and you soon find that there is suddenly a very different set of traditions. Sometimes these feel like improvements to the festival while other traditions are not something you will ever warm to.

The Holy Family went to Jerusalem to do what was expected after the birth of Jesus – making a sacrifice to God. Yet in doing so they are faced by Simeon and Anna who have other ideas. Anna praises God for what will come. Simeon embraces the Child and gives thanks. This is what he has been waiting his life for – a celebration that brings together the one person who will change his world – change the whole world.
There's a lot to be said about being brought together in extended families, interacting with a wider fellowship or engaging in a different set of traditions. Sometimes we can encounter differences that cause us discomfort or distress – relationships that are destructive or painful – and these give us desire to 'depart in peace'. But at other times we can be embraced by those who know we are part of a changed, improved and lifegiving future. We may be brought into new traditions and new ways forward – not just for these to be done to us but for us to become part of

the blessings you shower upon us.

Wednesday December 22, 2021 St Luke 1: 46 - 56

The Rev'd Dr Matthew Prevett, Chaplaincy Coordinator, Newcastle University

And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,
  and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
  Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
  and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
  from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
  he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
  and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
  and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
  in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
  to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Reflection

Over the past two years, I guess many of us have needed to find alternative ways to mark our praise of God. Social distancing, worship online, and lack of singing have all altered how we have been able to

worship as communities. Where once we could join together with one voice in prayer and song, we needed to find our own ways to 'magnify the Lord'.

It's also been a difficult time for our spirit to rejoice. We've been faced with the catastrophic effects of a pandemic that has disproportionately affected those from communities affected by poverty and those made up from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Together with increasing utility costs, decreasing benefits and supermarket shortages, these past months have not been easy on ourselves and our neighbours.
In Mary's Song, we are faced with this dual reality. A woman who is soon to experience a new normal of motherhood in which there will be difficulty and challenge ahead, reflecting the previous challenge of a rushed marriage. She recognises the context in which she lives – where the powerful need to be brought down a peg or two, where the poor need to be supported and fed. Such a cry for justice is not all that dissimilar from our own cry two millennia later.

Yet we too can relate to her affirmation that gives thanks to God, rejoicing and 'magnifying' the Lord for all that God has done for her and the world. In the challenge of the past two years we may have found new ways to rejoice – or maybe we've struggled to find that voice. As we encounter the celebration of Christmas, perhaps we too can find a way, whatever our context, to praise the Mighty One who does great things for us all.

Prayer

O God, the Mighty One,
we rejoice in all that you do in our lives,
for the family and friends who surround us,
for the compassion and generosity in action in our communities,
for the blessing of your presence with us.
May we each be filled with the joy of your love,
magnifying your work in our communities with the weak and powerless,

Help us to mirror your choices.
Deliver us from the seductions of power, wealth, privilege, popularity, and influence.

May we, like the shepherds, draw near to the manger and see Jesus again for the very first time. Amen.

Monday December 27, 2021 St Luke 2: 21 - 38

The Revd Dr Matthew Prevett, Chaplaincy Coordinator, Newcastle University

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.' Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be

instead on the risk, danger, outraged religious sensibilities and God's declaration of war on Rome by the angels. Watch as God begins to change the world before our very eyes in these texts.

One thing to remember about Luke's Christmas story: we're supposed to see and hear the events unfold through the eyes and ears of the little people: poor people; women; religious and social outcasts; sex workers; sell-outs; shepherds.

This is God starting something. In the Roman Empire, the term "Good News" (gospel) was a technical term for anything the Emperor did. It was supposed to be good news for the Empire – or at least, those who counted. When something momentous happened – the birth of an Emperor, an imperial victory etc – official announcements were made throughout the Empire.

The angelic announcement of "Good News to all people" mimics the Roman imperial announcements. It's a direct challenge: Augustus was announced as "Lord", "Saviour", "Prince of Peace" and "Son of God" (as well as "Our Father in heaven"). The angels tell that Jesus is Good News because he will save the world from Rome. And he is Good News for all the people in the world whom Empire and the religious authorities deem unfit, unimportant, and unincluded.

If you're going to go up against Rome, it's advisable to have an army behind you. A BIG one! Yet God's "army" is a refugee peasant baby who hasn't even a warm bed to be born into. Buckle up – things are about to get interesting …

Prayer

Christmas God,
You choose stables over palaces, peasants over power-brokers, shepherds over influencers, babies over warriors.
This is the way to the peace proclaimed at Christmas.

that all may know your blessing. Amen.

Thursday December 23, 2021 St Luke 1: 57 - 66

Fay Rowland, author and graduate researcher at Wesley House, Cambridge, worshipping at Christ the King

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Reflection

As I write, Jeff Bozos has returned from his brief jaunt into space. Leaving aside what I think of burning that much fuel and money for 4 minutes of weightless somersaulting, this feels like the start of something new. I am just old enough to have seen the first moon landing and I reckon I will live to see the first space hotel. This pleasure-cruise feels like the start. Today's passage also feels like the start of something new. The birth of John marks the transition from Old Testament to New. His unexpected name means 'YHWH is gracious' – pre-figuring the grace expounded in the rest of the Gospel. It contrasts with the name everyone assumed he would have, Zechariah, meaning 'YHWH remembers'. That's a great name and great reminder of God's faithfulness, but John's role would be looking forwards, not back.

The reaction of all those present was fear. That's an interesting choice of word. The Greek is φόβος (phobos), but we're not talking arachnophobia here, nor the common malady of ergophobia (fear of work), nor the rarer sesquipedalophobia (fear of words a foot-and-a-half long).

This fear is more the silencing of chatter as you sit atop an 18-metre rocket … and the engines start. "I got goose bumps," said one person watching the launch from 40 km away. "The hair on the back of my neck stood up, just witnessing history." If that's what it was like watching the launch, what must it have been like actually doing it?

We experience such awe, wonder and open-mouthed amazement in the presence of the huge, the powerful, the majestic, in outstanding beauty, in overwhelming joy like holding one's new-born child. Not frightened fear, but the adrenaline-packed knowledge that this is a moment of eternity, happening now.

In a couple of days we will celebrate the coming of another baby, one before whom all heaven stands in awe, wonder and open-mouthed amazement.

This is the start of something new.

Prayer

Sovereign Lord,
You stand above the cherubim,
glorious in majesty, majestic in glory.
We stand in awe, and worship.
Gentle Saviour,
You lie in a peasant woman's womb,
perfect in humility, humble in perfection.
We kneel in wonder, and worship. Amen.

may each of us see, in the birth of a child,
the hope and the love, and the promises of justice and grace
swaddled in the manger of our own lives. Amen

Sunday December 26, 2021 St Luke 2: 8 - 20

Lawrence Moore, Mission & Discipleship Mentor, North Western Synod

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!' When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Reflection

God vs the Emperor: which is the real Good News?

This is seriously explosive stuff! Forget your Nativity Play with shepherds in dressing gowns and tea towels, clutching woolly toy sheep and clustered around a manger with nice clean straw in a wooden stable with a star shining brightly overhead and Gabriel looking on fondly. Focus

order to tax so that one oppression (the forced census) is leading to further oppression (crippling taxation).

Luke has prepared us for this birth, telling us of the visits of angels, the shock of prospective parents and of the songs that were sung to rejoice in the (expectation of) birth. This portion of the story does not actually make a statement about Jesus – it just tells us, it was like this, a baby was born to a young mother – something both ordinary in its every-day-ness, and wonderful in its new-life-ness. We have to read on to discover the gloriousness of the incarnation-creating meaning of the birth. As every baby of that era, Jesus was born into the reality of oppression – as the babies of the refugee camps, or those born on the road as a mother flees Afghanistan or elsewhere. As a new life, this baby has a fragile existence in a time when infant mortality was far more common, so that his health and survival was something wonderfully to be rejoiced in. But Luke is, at this point, very quiet about the en- flesh-ing of the Christ.

Yet realities that surround Jesus' birth are international and national in significance – Jesus is born onto the world stage (as it was known at the time). Jesus was also born into ordinary humanity. The way Luke tells this story layers these different significances carefully.

As we celebrate the Christ-mas day, let's remember these layers of meaning: that Christ has come is good news for the earth, for the nations, and for each one of us. We give thanks!

Prayer

For every child born today, we give thanks.
For the children who will grow up under oppressive governments or in poverty, we offer our prayers.
Hold, O God, the young mothers who give birth and raise their children with little support and all parents who struggle to provide.
May Earth hear the song of the angels proclaiming good news,
may the nations hear the challenge of Luke's critique of power,

Friday December 24, 2021 St Luke 1: 67 - 80

The Rev'd Carole Elphick. Retired Minister worshipping at Muswell Hill.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
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,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon[h] 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.'

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Reflection

When he was a baby, my second son spent a lot of time sleeping in the organ loft of the very high Anglican church in Brighton where I was solo

soprano for some years. It was the source of much merriment among the choir that he would often wake up just at the beginning of the Benedictus; a fact that was attributed to him being called Benedict. Of course it was no such thing - it was usually that he wanted another feed or at least some amusing company and he certainly absorbed a great deal of choral music in his early years. But if you are going to wake up for anything during a long service I think that Zachariah's song of praise and thanksgiving and prophecy about his newborn son John is a good place to start your spiritual journey.

On this day we remember too that Mary's baby puts in an appearance and would also have been carried everywhere she went in his early days, as he too would need feeding and would need company. It's quite a thing to be born with all those weighty expectations on your shoulders whether your name is John, Benedict or Jesus. Earthly parents are bad enough with their plans and dreams and often unrealistic hopes for their children's futures. We can only begin to imagine what it was like for the mother of the Son of God. After the surprise and necessary adaptations of her life after the annunciation she now has to deal with the fact that other people recognise what is happening to her and have their own ideas about how this baby will develop and grow and how ancient prophecies will be fulfilled by this tiny scrap of life that has come to her in the most unpromising of circumstances.

Zachariah says quite clearly that John will prepare the way for the Messiah. And it's a miracle. Every birth is a miracle but both John's and Jesus' births are so extra-ordinary that they had the power to change the world, to give light to those who sit in darkness and to guide our feet into the way of peace. Huge expectations; huge promises. But we are all in the hands of a God for whom all things are possible, so we give thanks this Christmas Eve for the commonplace and the miraculous sitting side-by-side in the glory that we call human life. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

Loving God
As your purposes unfold on this holy day we are in awe of your presence and care in the midst of everyday life. Help us to keep sight of the promise and the love that we celebrate at Christmas. Amen

Saturday December 25, 2021 St Luke 2: 1 - 7

The Rev'd Dr Rosalind Selby, Principal, Northern College Manchester

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Reflection

Happy Christmas! I'm writing in September, before I've seen (and complained about) anything surrounding Christmas appearing in the shops. The thing about writing for Daily Devotions is that it's hard to write into the national or international context when we prepare them ahead like this. By the time you read this, the COP talks will have happened in Glasgow; you will know what's happening to Covid during the winter; and all sorts of painful, and joyful things may well have happened in our individual and mutual lives. On the other hand, Luke is, here, writing absolutely into context and on multiple levels.

Luke reminds us of the Roman rule: this is not just a dating exercise at a time when calendars were not the fixed things they are today. This is the reality of the world and the nation into which Jesus was born, and Jesus and his family has to comply with the government that wants to record in