

## LUKE 1:1–4

### Prologue

<sup>1</sup> Many people have undertaken to draw up an orderly account of the events that have occurred in our midst. <sup>2</sup> It has been handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses and stewards of the word. <sup>3</sup> So, most excellent Theophilus, since I had traced the course of all of it scrupulously from the start, I thought it a good idea to write an orderly account for you, <sup>4</sup> so that you may have secure knowledge about the matters in which you have been instructed.

‘SPACE ALIENS TOOK MY BABY’, screams the headline. Or perhaps ‘GRANDMOTHER SWIMS ATLANTIC’. And what do people say? ‘It must be true; it was in the newspapers.’ ‘I saw it on television.’ ‘The person who told me was told by someone who was there at the time.’

We have learnt to laugh at all of these. News is ‘packaged’ to tell us what we want to hear. Television cameras often deceive. And stories which come from ‘a friend of a friend’ might as well be fiction. How do we know what to believe?

Luke opens his **gospel** with a long, formal sentence, like a huge stone entrance welcoming you impressively to a large building. Here, he is saying, is something solid, something you can trust. Writers in the first-century Mediterranean world quite often wrote opening sentences like this; readers would know they were beginning a serious, well-researched piece of work. This wasn’t a fly-by-night or casual account. It would hold its head up in the world at large.

‘Of course,’ we think, with our suspicious modern minds, ‘he would say that, wouldn’t he?’ But look at the claims he makes. Luke isn’t asking us simply to take it on trust; he is appealing to a wide base of evidence. Several others have written about these events; he has these writings, some of which we may be able to trace, as sources. He has been in touch with eyewitnesses who have told him what they saw and heard. And, perhaps most important, he has listened to accredited teachers within local communities. We need to say a further word about these people.

Imagine a village in ancient Palestine. They didn’t have printed books or newspapers, television or radio. They had official storytellers. Some great event would happen: an earthquake, a battle, or the visit of an emperor. Within a day or two the story would be told all round the village, and would settle into a regular form. Everyone would know the story, but some of the better storytellers in the village would be recognized by the others as the right people to tell it.

And that’s what they’d do. They wouldn’t change the story or modify it; if they did, people would notice and set them straight. Perhaps the closest we get to this in the modern Western world is when a family tells a story or anecdote, often with everybody knowing what’s coming. In the same way, you don’t change the words of your national anthem, or of the songs that you sang as a child. So when Luke went round the villages of Palestine and Syria in the second half of the first century, listening to the stories told by the accredited storytellers—‘the stewards of the word’, as he calls them—he would know he was in touch with solid, reliable evidence that went right back to the early events. Plato had said, five hundred years earlier, that there was a

danger in writing things down; human memories, he thought, were the best way to get things right and pass them on. In the century after Luke, one of the great Christian teachers declared that he preferred living testimony to writings. You can't tell where a book has come from, but you can look witnesses in the eye, and use your judgment about whether to trust them.

So why is Luke writing it all down now? Isn't he shooting himself in the foot? Who was he, anyway, and when was he writing?

I wish we knew for sure who the author of this book was, but actually we don't. We call him 'Luke' because that's who the church, from very early on, said had written this gospel and the Acts of the Apostles (as you'll see from Acts 1:1, Acts appears to be written by the same person, and there are signs throughout both books that this is in fact the case). He may well have been the Luke whom Paul mentions as his companion (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11). He could have been writing any time between AD 50 and 90; there must have been time for the 'many others' he refers to to have written and circulated their works, but equally there is no particular reason to insist that he must have been writing as late as 90, or even 80. A fair guess is probably that he was indeed Luke, one of Paul's companions, and that he was writing in the 60s and 70s.

The main reason he's writing is that the **message** about Jesus has spread far and wide, way beyond the original communities in the regions Jesus himself visited. Peter, Paul and other missionaries had carried the message in all directions, and doubtless there were garbled, muddled and misleading reports circulating about who exactly Jesus was, what he did and said, and what had happened to him. Luke knows of other writings that have begun the task of putting it down on paper, but he has a wider audience in mind, an educated, intelligent, enquiring public. 'Most excellent Theophilus' may be a real person, perhaps a Roman governor or local official, whom Luke has come to know; or this may be a literary device, a way of addressing anyone who has heard about Christianity, and who is perhaps 'a lover of God' (that's what 'Theophilus' means in Greek). He does imply that 'Theophilus' has already been officially taught something about Jesus and what it means to follow him, so perhaps he also intends it for recent converts who are eager to learn more.

In any case, if he is writing in the late 60s or early 70s, a further reason would be the horrendous war that was raging in Palestine at the time. The Jews rebelled against the occupying Roman forces in 66, until finally, after a long siege, Jerusalem was destroyed in 70. The result was that many towns and villages where Jesus had been seen and known were decimated. Not only was the older generation dying out, but communities that had witnessed Jesus' activities were being dispersed or destroyed. The stories, which depended for transmission on a peaceful, stable society, were in danger of dying out. Unless steps were taken to write them down, the message would not be passed on to the next generation. And since Luke, like all the early Christians, believed that the things that had actually happened—what we would call the historical facts—had changed the course of the world, it was vital that they be presented as clearly and unambiguously as possible.

Luke thus constructs a grand doorway into his gospel. He invites us to come in and make ourselves at home. Here we will find security, a solid basis for lasting **faith**.

## LUKE 1:5–25

### Gabriel Visits Zechariah

<sup>5</sup> In the time when Herod was King of Judaea, there was a priest called Zechariah, of the priestly division of Abijah. His wife, who came from the Aaron family, was called Elisabeth. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous in God's sight; they followed all the Lord's commandments and ordinances without fault. <sup>7</sup> They had no children. Elisabeth was barren, and both of them were of an advanced age.

<sup>8</sup> It so happened, when Zechariah was performing his priestly service before God, according to the order of his division, <sup>9</sup> that the lot fell to him, according to the priestly custom, to go in to the Lord's sanctuary to offer incense. <sup>10</sup> The people were praying outside in a large crowd, at the time of the incense-offering. <sup>11</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right hand side of the incense-altar. <sup>12</sup> Zechariah was troubled and terror-struck when he saw the angel.

<sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him:

'Don't be afraid, Zechariah: your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elisabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. <sup>14</sup> This will bring you joy and celebration, and many will rejoice at his birth. <sup>15</sup> He will be a great man in God's sight; he will drink no wine or strong drink. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, <sup>16</sup> and will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, and he will turn the hearts of fathers to children, and of unbelievers to the wisdom of the righteous. He will get ready for the Lord a prepared people.'

<sup>18</sup> 'How can I be sure of this?' said Zechariah to the angel. 'I'm an old man! My wife's not as young as she used to be, either!'

<sup>19</sup> 'Look here,' replied the angel, 'I'm Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and give you this splendid news. <sup>20</sup> Now, listen: you will be silent—you won't be able to speak—until the day when it all happens, because you didn't believe my words. But they will come true at the proper time.'

<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and were surprised that he was taking such a long time in the sanctuary. <sup>22</sup> But when he came out he couldn't speak to them, and they understood that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He made gestures to them, but remained speechless.

<sup>23</sup> So, when the days of his priestly service were complete, he went back home. <sup>24</sup> After that time, Elisabeth his wife conceived. She stayed in hiding for five months.

<sup>25</sup> 'This is the Lord's doing,' she said; 'at last he has looked on me, and taken away my public shame.'

The capital of Ireland is the wonderful old city of Dublin. It is famous for many reasons. People go there from all over the world to stroll around its streets, to drink in its pubs, to visit its historic buildings, and to see the places made world-famous by writers such as James Joyce.

Perhaps surprisingly, the attraction that draws most visitors in Dublin is the zoo. And, perhaps equally surprisingly, the second most popular site for visitors is the Book of Kells, displayed at the centre of a special exhibition in Trinity College. This wonderfully ornamented manuscript of the gospels dates to around AD 800—considerably closer in time to the New Testament itself than to us today.

The people who arranged the exhibition don't let the public see the gospels themselves straight away. Wisely, they lead you first past several other very old books, which prepare you step by step for the great treasure itself. By the time you reach the heart of the exhibition you have already thought your way back to the world of early Celtic Christianity, to the monks who spent years of their life painstakingly copying out parts of the Bible and lavishly decorating it. You are now ready to appreciate it properly.

Luke has done something very similar in the opening of his **gospel**. His story is, of course, principally about Jesus, but the name 'Jesus' doesn't occur for the first 30 verses, and Jesus himself is not born until well into the story. Luke is going to tell us about Mary's extraordinary pregnancy and Jesus' extraordinary birth, but he knows we will need to prepare our minds and hearts for this story. So he begins with the story of Zechariah and Elisabeth, a devout couple going about their everyday life.

First he grips us with their human drama. This couple, well past childbearing age, are going to have a son at last, in a culture where childless women were mocked. This drama is heightened by the comic encounter between Zechariah and the angel (don't be frightened of finding the Bible funny when it really is!). Luke indicates that through this all-too-human story of puzzlement, half-faith, and dogged devotion to duty, God's saving purposes are going to be dramatically advanced. The son to be born will fulfil the biblical promises that had spoken of God sending someone to prepare Israel for the coming divine visitation. The scriptures had foretold that the prophet Elijah would return one day to get the people ready for God's arrival. Gabriel tells Zechariah that this will be John's task.

The story would remind any Bible reader of much older stories: Abraham and Sarah having a child in their old age (Genesis 21), Rachel bearing Jacob two sons after years of childlessness (Genesis 30; 35), and particularly the births of Samson (Judges 13) and Samuel (1 Samuel 1). This story, Luke hints, is not a strange new thing, but takes its place within a long-standing sequence of God's purposes. The child to be born, who will be called **John**, will play a key role in God's fulfilment of his promises. The story thus prepares us, like tourists getting into the mood for the central exhibit, for the still more remarkable events that will follow swiftly.

Zechariah and Elisabeth weren't expecting any of this. They were simply devout people going about their regular business. They were 'righteous in God's sight', observant Jews, keeping the law as a sign of grateful devotion to God. They lived outside Jerusalem, in the Judean hill-country. Like all **priests** except the chief priests, who lived in Jerusalem itself, Zechariah would come in to the city when it was the turn of his division to perform the regular Temple-liturgy; he would stay in lodgings within the **Temple** precincts, and then return home to continue his normal work as a teacher and leader in the local community. On this occasion Zechariah was appointed by lot to go into the inner court, out of sight of the lay people, to offer incense. Sometimes regular duty provides the context for extraordinary visions.

Luke is careful not to dress up the story by making Zechariah a great hero of **faith**. Like some of the Old Testament leaders, his first reaction to the news is to clutch at straws: he needs a sign, something that will help him to believe. He is given one, but it comes as a punishment; we can almost see the angel putting his hands on his hips and telling Zechariah off for presuming to doubt his word. Zechariah is struck speechless, and the dark comedy continues with the old priest coming out to the people and making signs and gestures to indicate what had happened (how would you describe seeing an angel, just using your hands and arms?). The account concludes, of course, with Elisabeth's joy at her unexpected pregnancy.

This story, preparing us for the even more remarkable conception and birth of Jesus himself, reminds us of something important. God regularly works through ordinary people, doing what they normally do, who with a mixture of half-faith and devotion are holding themselves ready for whatever God has in mind. The story is about much more than

Zechariah's joy at having a son at last, or Elisabeth's exultation in being freed from the scorn of the mothers in the village. It is about the great fulfilment of God's promises and purposes. But the needs, hopes and fears of ordinary people are not forgotten in this larger story, precisely because of who Israel's God is—the God of lavish, self-giving love, as Luke will tell us in so many ways throughout his gospel. When this God acts on the large scale, he takes care of smaller human concerns as well. The drama which now takes centre stage is truly the story of God, the world, and every ordinary human being who has ever lived in it. That's how Luke intends it to be.

## LUKE 1:26–38

### The Annunciation of the Birth of Jesus

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month, Gabriel the angel was sent from God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>28</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man called Joseph, from the family of David. The virgin was called Mary.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Greetings, favoured one!’ said the angel when he arrived. ‘May the Lord be with you!’

<sup>29</sup> She was disturbed at this, and wondered what such a greeting might mean.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Don’t be afraid, Mary,’ said the angel. ‘You’re in favour with God. <sup>31</sup> Listen: you will conceive in your womb and will have a son; and you shall call his name Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be a great man, and he’ll be called the son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, <sup>32</sup> and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever. His kingdom will never come to an end.’

<sup>34</sup> ‘How will this happen?’ said Mary to the angel. ‘I’m still a virgin!’

<sup>35</sup> ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you’ replied the angel, ‘and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. For that reason the holy one who is born from you will be called God’s Son.’

<sup>36</sup> ‘Let me tell you this, too: your cousin Elisabeth, in her old age, has also conceived a son. This is the sixth month for her, a woman who people used to say was barren. <sup>37</sup> With God, you see, nothing is impossible.’

<sup>38</sup> ‘Here I am,’ said Mary; ‘I’m the Lord’s servant-girl. Let it happen to me as you’ve said.’

Then the angel left her.

Ask a newspaper editor what sort of stories will sell the most copies, and three categories come swiftly to mind: sex, royalty and religion. If they can be combined, so much the better. ‘POP STAR’S LOVE CHILD’ is good; ‘PRINCESS HAS SECRET AFFAIR’ is better; ‘KING’S SECRET NIGHT WITH NUN’ is better still. So when people read the story of Gabriel visiting Mary, with the child to be born being the future Lord of the World, their minds easily jump in the way the newspapers have conditioned them to do. People have read into the story all sorts of things that aren’t there, and have failed to notice some of the really important things that are.

Let’s begin with the obvious point. The story makes it clear that Jesus was conceived in Mary’s womb before she had had any sexual relations. Many people today find this impossible to believe, but they often think that this difficulty has only arisen in modern times, because of all we now know about the precise mechanics of conception and birth. Not so. The ancient world didn’t know about X chromosomes and Y chromosomes, but they knew as well as we do that babies were the result of sexual intercourse, and that people who claimed to be pregnant by other means might well be covering up a moral and social offence. Yet Mary’s story is told by both Luke and Matthew, in versions so different that they can hardly be dependent on one another; in other words, the story seems to have been widely known in the very early church, rather than being a fantasy invented several generations after the fact. Why would these two writers, and devout Jewish Christian congregations that passed on such stories, have done so, giving hostages to fortune in this way, unless they had good reason to suppose they were true?

It’s important to stress that the story says nothing about Mary remaining a virgin after Jesus’ birth. That’s a much later idea. Nor does it say anything about the goodness or badness of sexual identity or sexual relations. Whatever Luke (and Matthew) are trying to say with this story, they aren’t saying that virginity is a morally better state than marriage. They are not denigrating sex, women, conception or birth. They are simply reporting that Jesus did not have a father in the ordinary way, and that this was because Mary had been given special grace to be the mother of God’s incarnate self.

Luke has no thought that this might make Jesus somehow less than fully human. Scientists will say that virgin birth is in theory possible (it sometimes happens in small animals, e.g. lizards), and that a child thus produced would be a complete human being. The problem is that, always supposing such a thing were possible, the child would naturally be female. The truly remarkable thing from the scientific point of view is that Jesus was male.

The angel gives what looks like a double explanation for the whole event. The **Holy Spirit** will come upon Mary, enabling her (as the Spirit always does) to do and be more than she could by herself. But at the same time 'the power of the Most High' will overshadow her. This is something different: God himself, the creator, will surround her completely with his sovereign power.

All this sounds extremely peculiar, but we should remember that in the Bible, and in Jewish and Christian thought at their best, the true God is the one in whose image humans were made in the first place. We aren't talking about a pagan god intervening roughly and inappropriately in the affairs of mortals, but about the one who, as St Augustine said, made us for himself. When he takes the initiative, it is always a matter of love, love which will care for us and take us up into his saving purposes. Mary is, to that extent, the supreme example of what always happens when God is at work by grace through human beings. God's power from outside, and the indwelling spirit within, together result in things being done which would have been unthinkable any other way.

Of course, no one is likely to be convinced of Luke's story who isn't already in some sense open to the possibility that Jesus, though certainly a fully human being, was also the one in whom Israel's God had made his personal appearance on the stage of history. And it's important to say that neither Luke nor Matthew (the two writers who speak about Jesus' conception directly) suggest that this is the most important thing about Jesus. In all of Paul's writings, he never mentions that there had been anything unusual about Jesus' conception or birth. Jesus' death and **resurrection** remain, for him, far more significant. But to those who have come to some kind of faith in the crucified and risen Jesus, whose minds are thus opened to God being uniquely present in him, there is a sense of appropriateness, hard to define, easy to recognize, about the story Luke and Matthew tell. It isn't what we would have expected, but it somehow rings true.

Far more important for the whole story, though, is the political or royal meaning Luke gives to the whole event. The child to be born will be the **Messiah**, the king of the house of David. God had promised David a descendant who would reign for ever—not over Israel only, but also the whole world. And this coming king would be, in some sense, 'God's son' (2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7; Psalm 89:27). As with a good deal of New Testament language about Jesus, this is both a huge theological claim (Jesus is somehow identified with God in a unique way which people then and now find it hard to grasp and believe) and a huge political claim (Jesus is the true ruler of the world in a way which leaves Caesar, and the powers of the world today, a long way behind).

Put all this together—the conception of a baby, the power of God, and the challenge to all human empires—and we can see why the story is so explosive. Perhaps that's one reason why it's so controversial. Perhaps some of the fuss and bother about whether Mary could have conceived Jesus without a human father is because, deep down, we don't want to think that there might be a king who could claim this sort of absolute allegiance?

Whatever answer we give to that, we shouldn't miss the contrast between muddled, puzzled Zechariah in the previous story and the obedient humility of Mary in this one. She too questions Gabriel, but this seems to be a request for information, not proof. Rather, faced with the chance to be the mother of the Messiah, though not yet aware of what this will involve, she says the words which have rung down the years as a model of the human response to God's unexpected vocation: 'Here I am, the Lord's servant-girl; let it be as you have said.'

## LUKE 1:39–56

### The Magnificat: Mary's Song of Praise

<sup>39</sup> Mary got up then and there, and went in excitement to the hill country of Judaea. <sup>40</sup> She went into Zechariah's house, and greeted Elisabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elisabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby gave a leap in her womb. Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, <sup>42</sup> and shouted at the top of her voice:

'Of all women, you're the blessed one! And the fruit of your womb—he's blessed, too!

<sup>43</sup> Why should this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> Look—when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the child in my womb gave a great leap for joy! <sup>45</sup> A blessing on you, for believing that what the Lord said to you would come true!'

<sup>46</sup> Mary said,

'My heart declares that the Lord is great,

<sup>47</sup> My spirit exults in my saviour, my God.

<sup>48</sup> He saw his servant-girl in her humility;

From now, I'll be blessed by all peoples to come.

<sup>49</sup> The Powerful One, whose name is Holy,

Has done great things for me, for me.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy extends from father to son,

From mother to daughter for those who fear him.

<sup>51</sup> Powerful things he has done with his arm:

He routed the arrogant through their own cunning.

<sup>52</sup> Down from their thrones he hurled the rulers,

Up from the earth he raised the humble.

<sup>53</sup> The hungry he filled with the fat of the land,

But the rich he sent off with nothing to eat.

<sup>54</sup> He has rescued his servant, Israel his child,

Because he remembered his mercy of old,

<sup>55</sup> Just as he said to our long-ago ancestors—

Abraham and his descendants for ever.'

<sup>56</sup> Mary stayed with Elisabeth for three months, and then returned home.

What would make you celebrate wildly, without inhibition?

Perhaps it would be the news that someone close to you who'd been very sick was getting better and would soon be home.

Perhaps it would be the news that your country had escaped from tyranny and oppression, and could look forward to a new time of freedom and prosperity.

Perhaps it would be seeing that the floods which had threatened your home were going down again.

Perhaps it would be the message that all your money worries, or business worries, had been sorted out and you could relax.

Perhaps it would be the telephone call to say that you had been appointed to the job you'd always longed for.

Whatever it might be, you'd do things you normally wouldn't.

You might dance round and round with a friend.

You might shout and throw your hat in the air (I once did that without thinking, before I stopped to reflect what a cliché it was).

You might telephone everybody you could think of and invite them to a party.

You might sing a song. You might even make one up as you went along—probably out of snatches of poems and songs you already knew, or perhaps by adding your own new words to a great old hymn.

And if you lived in any kind of culture where rhythm and beat mattered, it would be the sort of song you could clap your hands to, or stamp on the ground.

Now read Mary's song like that. (It's often called *Magnificat*, because that is its first word in Latin.) It's one of the most famous songs in Christianity. It's been whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in small remote churches by evening candlelight, and set to music with trumpets and kettledrums by Johann Sebastian Bach.

It's the **gospel** before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, thirty years before Calvary and Easter. It goes with a swing and a clap and a stamp. It's all about God, and it's all about revolution. And it's all because of Jesus—Jesus who's only just been conceived, not yet born, but who has made Elisabeth's baby leap for joy in her womb and has made Mary giddy with excitement and hope and triumph. In many cultures today, it's the women who really know how to celebrate, to sing and dance, with their bodies and voices saying things far deeper than words. That's how Mary's song comes across here.

Yes, Mary will have to learn many other things as well. A sword will pierce her **soul**, she is told when Jesus is a baby. She will lose him for three days when he's twelve. She will think he's gone mad when he's thirty. She will despair completely for a further three days in Jerusalem, as the God she now wildly celebrates seems to have deceived her (that, too, is part of the same Jewish tradition she draws on in this song). All of us who sing her song should remember these things too. But the moment of triumph will return with Easter and Pentecost, and this time it won't be taken away.

Why did Mary launch into a song like this? What has the news of her son got to do with God's strong power overthrowing the power structures of the world, demolishing the mighty and exalting the humble?

Mary and Elisabeth shared a dream. It was the ancient dream of Israel: the dream that one day all that the prophets had said would come true. One day Israel's God would do what he had said to Israel's earliest ancestors: all nations would be blessed through Abraham's family. But for that to happen, the powers that kept the world in slavery had to be toppled. Nobody would normally thank God for blessing if they were poor, hungry, enslaved and miserable. God would have to win a victory over the bullies, the power-brokers, the forces of evil which people like Mary and Elisabeth knew all too well, living as they did in the dark days of Herod the Great, whose casual brutality was backed up with the threat of Rome. Mary and Elisabeth, like so many Jews of their time, searched the scriptures, soaked themselves in the psalms and prophetic writings which spoke of mercy, hope, fulfilment, reversal, revolution, victory over evil, and of God coming to the rescue at last.

All of that is poured into this song, like a rich, foaming drink that comes bubbling over the edge of the jug and spills out all round. Almost every word is a biblical quotation such as Mary would have known from childhood. Much of it echoes the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, the song which celebrated the birth of Samuel and all that God was going to do through him. Now

these two mothers-to-be celebrate together what God is going to do through their sons, **John** and Jesus.

This is all part of Luke's scene-setting for what will follow, as the two boys grow up and really do become the agents of God's long-promised revolution, the victory over the powers of evil. Much of Mary's song is echoed by her son's preaching, as he warns the rich not to trust in their wealth, and promises God's **kingdom** to the poor.

But once again Luke hasn't just given us a big picture. Mary's visit to Elisabeth is a wonderful human portrait of the older woman, pregnant at last after hope had gone, and the younger one, pregnant far sooner than she had expected. That might have been a moment of tension: Mary might have felt proud, Elisabeth perhaps resentful. Nothing of that happens. Instead, the intimate details: John, three months before his birth, leaping in the womb at Mary's voice, and the Holy Spirit carrying Elisabeth into shouted praise and Mary into song.

Underneath it all is a celebration of God. God has taken the initiative—God the Lord, the saviour, the Powerful One, the Holy One, the Merciful One, the Faithful One. God is the ultimate reason to celebrate.

## LUKE 1:57–80

### Zechariah's Song of Praise

<sup>57</sup> The time arrived for Elisabeth's child to be born, and she gave birth to a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had increased his mercy to her, and they came to celebrate with her.

<sup>59</sup> Now on the eighth day, when they came to circumcise the child, they were calling him by his father's name, Zechariah. <sup>60</sup> But his mother spoke up.

'No,' she said, 'he is to be called John.'

<sup>61</sup> 'None of your relatives', they objected, 'is called by that name.'

<sup>62</sup> They made signs to his father, to ask what he wanted him to be called. <sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing tablet, and wrote on it, 'His name is John.'

Everyone was astonished. <sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth and his tongue were unfastened, and he spoke, praising God. <sup>65</sup> Fear came over all those who lived in the neighbourhood, and all these things were spoken of throughout all the hill country of Judaea. <sup>66</sup> Everyone who heard about it turned the matter over in their hearts.

'What then will this child become?' they said. And the Lord's hand was with him.

<sup>67</sup> John's father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and spoke this prophecy:

<sup>68</sup> 'Blessed be the Lord, Israel's God!

He's come to his people and bought them their freedom.

<sup>69</sup> He's raised up a horn of salvation for us

In David's house, the house of his servant,

<sup>70</sup> Just as he promised, through the mouths of the prophets,

The holy ones, speaking from ages of old:

<sup>71</sup> Salvation from our enemies, rescue from hatred,

<sup>72</sup> Mercy to our ancestors, keeping his holy covenant.

<sup>73</sup> He swore an oath to Abraham our father,

<sup>74</sup> To give us deliverance from enemy hands,

So we might worship him, <sup>75</sup> holy and righteous

Before his face to the end of our days.

<sup>76</sup> You, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest One,

Go ahead of the Lord, preparing his way,

<sup>77</sup> Letting his people know of salvation,

Through the forgiveness of all their sins.

<sup>78</sup> The heart of our God is full of mercy,

That's why his daylight has dawned from on high,

<sup>79</sup> Bringing light to the dark, as we sat in death's shadow,

Guiding our feet in the path of peace.'

<sup>80</sup> The child grew, and became powerful in the Spirit. He lived in the wilderness until the day when he was revealed to Israel.

Many people today can't imagine what life would be like without a television. We are so used to it telling us what to think about all the time that, without it, some people become quite worried, lost in a world of their own unfamiliar thoughts like an explorer whose guide has just disappeared. Take away radio and newspapers as well, and ... what would *you* think about all day?

That was the situation, of course, of most people in the world until very recently. It was the situation for everybody in Jesus' time. If you were Zechariah, what would you think of all day?

Your family, certainly. Local village business, presumably. Your health, quite possibly. The state of the crops, the prospect for harvest.

But behind these obvious concerns, there are deeper questions. Something is wrong in the world. People are suffering. *Your* people are suffering. Wicked foreigners have come from far away, with hatred in their eyes and weapons in their hands. Darkness and death have stalked the land. Many people in many countries have had all this to think about over many centuries.

Behind that again, there may be a sense that, though much has gone wrong, somehow there is a larger hope. Things can be put right. Things *will* be put right. Let go of this and you're sunk. Often it's the old people, the ones who cherish old memories and imaginations, who keep alive the rumour of hope.

Zechariah comes across in this passage, especially in the prophetic poem, as someone who has pondered the agony and the hope for many years, and who now finds the two bubbling out of him as he looks in awe and delight at his baby son.

It's a poem about God acting at last, finally doing what he promised many centuries ago, and doing it at a time when his people had had their fill of hatred and oppression. One evil empire after another had trampled them underfoot; now at last God was going to give them deliverance. We can feel the long years of pain and sorrow, of darkness and death, overshadowing his mind. Nameless enemies are lurking round the corner in his imagination and experience. No doubt it was partly this that had made him question Gabriel's word in the first place.

But we can also feel the long years of quiet prayer and trust. God had made a **covenant** with Abraham. God had promised to send a new David. God had spoken of a prophet who would go ahead to prepare the way. All these things he had known, believed, prayed and longed for. Now they were all to come true.

Much of the poem could be read simply as the celebration of what we would call a 'political' salvation—though few ancient Jews, and not very many modern ones, would want to separate the secular from the sacred the way the modern West has done. But there are signs that Zechariah's vision goes beyond simply a realigning of political powers. God's mercy, the forgiveness of sins, the rescue from death itself; all of this points to a deeper and wider meaning of 'salvation'. Luke is preparing us to see that God, in fulfilling the great promises of the Old Testament, is going beyond a merely this-worldly salvation and opening the door to a whole new world in which sin and death themselves will be dealt with. This, of course, is the message that will occupy the rest of the book.

Zechariah's own story, of nine months' silence suddenly broken at the naming of the child, is a reflection on a smaller scale of what was going on in the Israel of his day. Prophecy, many believed, had been silent for a long time. Now it was going to burst out again, to lead many back to a true allegiance to their God. What had begun as a kind of punishment for Zechariah's lack of **faith** now turns into a new sort of sign, a sign that God is doing a new thing.

Luke's long first chapter holds together what we often find easier to keep separate. At point after point he has linked his story to the ancient biblical record of Israel, to the patriarchs, kings, prophets and psalms. He is writing of the moment when the centuries-old story was going to come round a corner at last, out of darkness into sudden light. He never forgets this larger

perspective; everything that he will tell us about Jesus makes sense as the fulfilment of God's ancient promises, the hope of Israel come to fruition at last.

But Luke's story vibrates equally with the personal hopes and fears of ordinary people. Zechariah, Elisabeth and Mary stand out as real people, hesitating between faith and doubt, called to trust God at a new moment in history. It's a mark not only of Luke's skill as a writer but also of the nature of the God he is writing about that both the big picture and the smaller human stories matter totally. This is, after all, as Zechariah had glimpsed, the story of how the creator God came to rescue his people. It is the story, as Luke will now tell, of how God himself was born as a baby.

## LUKE 2:1–20

### The Birth of Jesus

<sup>1</sup>At that time a decree was issued by Augustus Caesar: the whole world was to be registered. <sup>2</sup>(This was the first registration, before the one when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup>So everyone set off to be registered, each to their own town. <sup>4</sup>Joseph too, who belonged to the house and family of David, went from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judaea, David's city, <sup>5</sup>to be registered with his fiancée Mary, who was pregnant.

<sup>6</sup>So that's where they were when the time came for her to give birth; <sup>7</sup>and she gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him up and put him to rest in a feeding-trough, because there was no room for them in the normal living quarters.

<sup>8</sup>There were shepherds in that region, out in the open, keeping a night watch around their flock.

<sup>9</sup>An angel of the Lord stood in front of them. The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

<sup>10</sup>'Don't be afraid,' the angel said to them. 'Look: I've got good news for you, news which will make everybody very happy. <sup>11</sup>Today a saviour has been born for you—the Messiah, the Lord!—in David's town. <sup>12</sup>This will be the sign for you: you'll find the baby wrapped up, and lying in a feeding-trough.'

<sup>13</sup>Suddenly, with the angel, there was a crowd of the heavenly armies. They were praising God, saying,

<sup>14</sup>'Glory to God in the highest,  
and peace upon earth among those in his favour.'

<sup>15</sup>So when the angels had gone away again into heaven, the shepherds said to each other, 'Well then; let's go to Bethlehem and see what it's all about, all this that the Lord has told us.'

<sup>16</sup>So they hurried off, and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the feeding-trough. <sup>17</sup>When they saw it, they told them what had been said to them about this child. <sup>18</sup>And all the people who heard it were amazed at the things the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these things and mused over them in her heart.

<sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.

If you try to point out something to a dog, the dog will often look at your finger instead of at the object you're trying to point to. This is frustrating, but it illustrates a natural mistake we all make from time to time.

It's the mistake many people make when reading the Christmas story in Luke's **gospel**. What do people know about Jesus' birth? The manger—the Christmas crib. The most famous animal feeding-trough in all history. You see it on Christmas cards. Churches make elaborate 'cribs', and sometimes encourage people to say their prayers in front of them. We know about the animals, too, not that Luke even mentions any; the ox and the ass feature prominently in Christmas cards and carols, though there is no indication here either that the shepherds brought their own animals with them, or that there were any in the place where Mary and Joseph were staying.

Let's be clear about where they were lodging. Tradition has them knocking at an inn door, being told there was no room, and then being offered the stable along with the animals. But the word for 'inn' in the traditional translations has several meanings, and it's likely that they

were, in fact, on the ground floor of a house where people normally stayed upstairs. The ground floor would often be used for animals—hence the manger or feeding-trough, which came in handy for the baby—but there is nothing to say that there were actually animals there at the time.

To concentrate on the manger and to forget why it was mentioned in the first place is like the dog looking at the finger rather than the object. Why has Luke mentioned it three times in this story?

The answer is: because it was the feeding-trough, appropriately enough, which was the sign to the shepherds. It told them which baby they were looking for. And it showed them that the angel knew what he was talking about. To be sure, it's another wonderful human touch in the story, to think of the young mother finding an animal's feeding-trough ready to hand as a cot for her newborn son. No doubt there are many sermons waiting to be preached here about God coming down into the mess and muddle of real life. But the reason Luke has mentioned it is because it's important in giving the shepherds their news and their instructions.

Why is that significant? Because it was the shepherds who were told *who this child was*. This child is the saviour, the **Messiah**, the Lord. The manger isn't important in itself. It's a signpost, a pointing finger, to the identity and task of the baby boy who's lying in it. The shepherds, summoned in from the fields (like David, the shepherd boy, brought in from the fields to be anointed as king), are made privy to the news, so that Mary and Joseph, hearing it from this unexpected source, will have extra confirmation of what up until now has been their own secret.

We have to assume that the shepherds, like other Palestinian Jews at the time, including old Zechariah in the previous chapter, would have known what a saviour, a Messiah, a Lord was to do. In case we need reminding, Luke has introduced the story by telling us about Augustus Caesar, way off in Rome, at the height of his power.

Augustus was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. He became sole ruler of the Roman world after a bloody civil war in which he overpowered all rival claimants. The last to be destroyed was the famous Mark Antony, who committed suicide not long after his defeat at the battle of Actium in 31 BC. Augustus turned the great Roman republic into an empire, with himself at the head; he proclaimed that he had brought justice and peace to the whole world; and, declaring his dead adoptive father to be divine, styled himself as 'son of god'. Poets wrote songs about the new era that had begun; historians told the long story of Rome's rise to greatness, reaching its climax (obviously) with Augustus himself. Augustus, people said, was the 'saviour' of the world. He was its king, its 'lord'. Increasingly, in the eastern part of his empire, people worshipped him, too, as a god.

Meanwhile, far away, on that same eastern frontier, a boy was born who would within a generation be hailed as '**son of God**'; whose followers would speak of him as 'saviour' and 'lord'; whose arrival, they thought, had brought true justice and peace to the world. Jesus never stood before a Roman emperor, but at the climax of Luke's gospel he stood before his representative, the governor Pontius Pilate. Luke certainly has that scene in mind as he tells his tale: how the emperor in Rome decides to take a census of his whole wide domain, and how this census brings Jesus to be born in the town which was linked to king David himself.

Historians have puzzled about the census. The one taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria was considerably later than Jesus' birth (and, interestingly, caused riots because the Jews

resented being taxed by Rome). One way of translating the Greek here is to see this census as an earlier one, before the famous one under Quirinius. There are many puzzles the historians may never work out, and this may be one of them.

But the point Luke is making is clear. The birth of this little boy is the beginning of a confrontation between the **kingdom** of God—in all its apparent weakness, insignificance and vulnerability—and the kingdoms of the world. Augustus never heard of Jesus of Nazareth. But within a century or so his successors in Rome had not only heard of him; they were taking steps to obliterate his followers. Within just over three centuries the Emperor himself became a Christian. When you see the manger on a card, or in church, don't stop at the crib. See what it's pointing to. It is pointing to the explosive truth that the baby lying there is already being spoken of as the true king of the world. The rest of Luke's story, both in the gospel and, later on, in Acts, will tell how he comes into his kingdom.

## LUKE 2:21–40

### Simeon and Anna

<sup>21</sup> After eight days, the time came to circumcise the baby. He was called by the name Jesus, which the angel had given him before he had been conceived in the womb.

<sup>22</sup> When the time came for them to be purified according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him before the Lord. <sup>23</sup> That's what the law of the Lord says: 'Every firstborn male shall be called holy to the Lord.' <sup>24</sup> They also came to offer sacrifice, according to what it says in the law of the Lord: 'A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.'

<sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout, waiting for God to comfort Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. <sup>26</sup> He had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup> Led by the Spirit, he came into the Temple. As Jesus' parents brought him in, to do for him what the law's regulations required, <sup>28</sup> he took the baby in his arms and blessed God with these words:

<sup>29</sup> 'Now, master, you are dismissing your servant in peace, Just as you said.

<sup>30</sup> These eyes of mine have seen your salvation,

<sup>31</sup> Which you made ready in the presence of all peoples:

<sup>32</sup> A light for revelation to the nations,  
And glory for your people Israel.'

<sup>33</sup> His father and mother were astonished at the things that were said about him. <sup>34</sup> Simeon blessed them.

'Listen,' he said to Mary his mother, 'this child has been placed here to make many in Israel fall and rise again, and for a sign that will be spoken against (yes, a sword will go through your own soul as well), <sup>35</sup> so that the thoughts of many hearts may be disclosed.'

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophetess called Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having been widowed after a seven-year marriage, <sup>37</sup> and was now eighty-four. She never left the Temple, but worshipped with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup> She came up at that moment and gave thanks to God, and spoke about Jesus to everyone who was waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

<sup>39</sup> So when they had finished everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> The child grew and became strong, and was full of wisdom, and God's grace was upon him.

I watched as the craftsman went about his task. He carefully set the lead into the window to be the framework for the beautiful glass he had been staining. Now came the moment: where before was a plain window, now there was a riot of colour and shape, telling a story and making it sparkle at the same time.

Luke has now sketched the outline of a picture. He has placed the lead around the window. What coloured glass is he going to use to fill it in? What story will he tell, and what sparkle will he give it?

The picture is of Jesus as the true world ruler: the Lord, the **Messiah**, the saviour, the real king of the world instead of Caesar. How easy it would be to fill in this picture in glowing, royal colours, giving us a sense of future glory, world dominion, power and majesty.

Luke does the opposite. He chooses sombre colours; and the more he fills in the picture the more we realize that this is a different sort of kingdom to that of Caesar Augustus. It is indeed

what God had promised; but, not for the last time, Luke is warning us that it doesn't look like what people had expected.

In particular, this is becoming a story about suffering. Simeon is waiting for God to comfort Israel. Anna is in touch with the people who are waiting for the redemption of Israel. They are both living in a world of patient hope, where suffering has become a way of life. It now appears that God's appointed redeemer will deal with this suffering by sharing it himself. Simeon speaks dark words about opposition, and about a sword that will pierce Mary's heart as well.

So this, Luke is saying, is what happens when the **kingdom** of God confronts the kingdom of the world. Luke invites us to watch, throughout the story, as the prophecies come true. Mary will look on in dismay as her son is rejected by the very city to which he offered the way of peace, by the very people he had come to rescue. Finally, the child who is, as Simeon says, 'placed here to make many in Israel fall and rise again', himself passes through death and into resurrection, taking with him the hopes and fears of the city, the nation and the world.

But if Luke is colouring in the picture with the dark notes of suffering, he is also showing that the kingdom brought by this baby is not for Israel only, but for the whole world. Simeon had grasped the truth at the heart of the Old Testament (which, Luke is careful to note, Jesus and his parents fulfilled): when Israel's history comes to its God-ordained goal, then at last light will dawn for the world. All the nations, not just the Jews, will see what God is unveiling—a plan of salvation for all people without distinction. This will be the true glory of Israel itself, to have been the bearer of promise, the nation in and from whom the true world ruler would arise: 'A light for revelation to the nations, and glory for your people Israel.' This is not the sort of revelation the world was expecting, and not the sort of glory Israel wanted, but true revelation and true glory none the less.

Luke adds yet another human dimension to the story. By the time the first two chapters are finished, almost all his readers will have found someone in the story with whom they can identify. We have met the older couple surprised to have a child at last. We have seen the young girl even more surprised to have a child so soon, and her husband coming with her to the **Temple**, offering the specified **sacrifice**. The next section will feature Jesus himself on the threshold of young adult life. Now, in this passage, we have the old man and woman, waiting their turn to die, worshipping God night and day and praying for the salvation of his people. Luke wants to draw readers of every age and stage of life into his picture. No matter who or where you are, the story of Jesus, from the feeding-trough in Bethlehem to the empty tomb and beyond, can become your story.

In becoming your story, it will become your vocation. Everybody has their own role in God's plan. For some, it will be active, obvious, working in the public eye, perhaps preaching the gospel or taking the love of God to meet the practical needs of the world. For others, it will be quiet, away from public view, praying faithfully for God to act in fulfilment of his promises. For many, it will be a mixture of the two, sometimes one, sometimes the other. Mary and Joseph needed Simeon and Anna at that moment; the old man and old woman needed them, had been waiting for them, and now thanked God for them. The births of **John the Baptist** and Jesus are already beginning their work, of drawing people of all sorts into new worship and fellowship.

## LUKE 2:41–52

### The Boy Jesus

<sup>41</sup> Jesus' parents used to go to Jerusalem every year for the Passover festival. <sup>42</sup> When he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. <sup>43</sup> When the feast days were over, they began the journey back, but the boy Jesus remained in Jerusalem. His parents didn't know; <sup>44</sup> they thought he was in the travelling party, and went a day's journey before looking for him among their relatives and friends.

<sup>45</sup> When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. <sup>46</sup> And so it happened that after three days they found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. <sup>47</sup> Everyone who heard him was astonished at his understanding and his answers.

<sup>48</sup> When they saw him they were quite overwhelmed.

'Child,' said his mother, 'why did you do this to us? Look—your father and I have been in a terrible state looking for you!'

<sup>49</sup> 'Why were you looking for me?' he replied. 'Didn't you know that I would have to be getting involved with my father's work?'

<sup>50</sup> They didn't understand what he had said to them. <sup>51</sup> He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and lived in obedience to them. And his mother kept all these things in her heart.

<sup>52</sup> So Jesus became wiser and taller, and gained favour with God and with those around.

When I was a child, I walked a mile to the bus stop every morning, by myself or with my sister. At the other end of the trip, I walked by myself to school. In the evening, I came back the same way. I never felt unsafe, even in the dark winter days. Now, in many places, children are often taken to school by car. Parents are worried about all kinds of dangers that might be waiting for them.

Perhaps the first remarkable thing about this story is that Mary and Joseph were happy to set off with their large group from Galilee without checking that Jesus was with them. That tells us a lot about the kind of world they lived in, where extended families of kinsfolk and friends lived together in close-knit mutual trust. But, by the same token, once they had left Jerusalem, and when they returned to it by themselves, without the rest of the party, the city was a large and potentially dangerous place, full of dark alleys and strange people, soldiers and traders, not a place where one would be happy to leave one's son for a few days.

The agony of Mary and Joseph, searching for three days, contrasts sharply with the calm response of Jesus when they found him. Mary blurts out an accusation, perhaps tinged with that mixture of guilt and relief that most parents will recognize. Instead of saying, as she might have, 'How could *I* have done this to *you*, leaving you behind like that?', she says, 'How could *you* do this to *us*?' Jesus accepts no blame, and indeed issues a gentle rebuke that speaks volumes, in Luke's portrait, for his own developing self-awareness. 'Your father and I', says Mary, 'have been looking for you.' 'No,' replies Jesus, 'I have been busying myself in my father's work.' Some families today keep notebooks of the striking things their children come out with. Mary kept her notebook in her heart, and this remark in particular will have gone straight there with a stab.

The way Luke has told the story may strike a careful reader of his **gospel** as part of a large-scale framework around the main story, which is just about to begin. One of the best loved

moments in his gospel is the story of the road to Emmaus (24:13–35), in which two **disciples** are sharing their anguish over the three days that have elapsed since Jesus' death. Jesus meets them, and explains how 'it was necessary that these things had to happen'. Here is another couple, coming back to Jerusalem, finding after three days the Jesus they thought they had lost, and having him explain that 'it was necessary' (the word is the same in Greek) 'that I had to be busy at my father's work'. You might call the pair of stories something like, 'On Finding the Jesus You Thought You'd Lost'. And if that is the message of these two passages, maybe Luke is wanting to tell us something about his gospel as a whole: maybe he is writing, at one level at least, for people who may have some idea of Jesus but find he is more elusive than they had imagined.

Finding him, of course, will normally involve a surprise. Jesus doesn't do or say what Mary and Joseph, or the two on the road, were expecting. It will be like that with us, too. Every time we relax and think we've really understood him, he will be up ahead, or perhaps staying behind while we go on without thinking. Discipleship always involves the unexpected.

At the heart of the picture, though, is Jesus in the **Temple**—a theme full of meaning for Luke. We have, indeed, visited the Temple quite a bit in the gospel so far: Zechariah's vision, the meeting with Simeon and Anna, and now Jesus himself taking the initiative and entering into discussion with the teachers of the law. The gospel will end, too, with the disciples in the Temple praising God. But, in between this beginning and this end, the Temple, and the holy city which surrounds it, are the subject of some of Jesus' sternest warnings. From now on Jesus will be challenging his contemporaries to make real the promises that go with the Temple. If they don't, the Temple itself will be destroyed.

As we read this story prayerfully, then, we can probably identify quite easily with Mary and Joseph—and perhaps with Jesus, too, quietly asserting an independence of mind and vocation, while still returning home and living in obedience to Mary and Joseph. We may want to remember times when we thought we'd lost someone or something very precious. We may want to reflect on whether we have taken Jesus himself for granted; if Mary and Joseph could do it, there is every reason to suppose that we can too. We mustn't assume he is accompanying us as we go off on our own business. But if and when we sense the lack of his presence, we must be prepared to hunt for him, to search for him in prayer, in the scriptures, in the sacraments, and not to give up until we find him again.

We must expect, too, that when we do meet him again he will not say or do what we expect. He must be busy with his father's work. So must we.

## LUKE 3:1–9

### The Preaching of John the Baptist

<sup>1</sup> It was the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea; Herod was tetrarch of Galilee; his brother Philip was tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene. <sup>2</sup> Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests.

At that time, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> He went through all the region of the Jordan, announcing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup> This is what is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

‘A voice shouting in the wilderness:

Get ready a path for the Lord,

Make the roads straight for him!

<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled in,

And every mountain and hill shall be flattened,

The twisted paths will be straightened out,

And the rough roads smoothed off,

And all that lives shall see God’s rescue.’

<sup>7</sup> ‘You brood of vipers,’ John used to say to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him. ‘Who told you to escape from God’s coming anger? <sup>8</sup> You’d better prove your repentance by bearing the proper fruit! Don’t start saying to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father”; let me tell you, God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones! <sup>9</sup> The axe is already standing by the roots of the tree—so every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’

Imagine massive floods sweeping through the countryside. Ancient cities suddenly find themselves under several feet of water. People aren’t expecting it, and now can’t quite believe it’s happening.

If the authorities have enough warning, they do their best to get people out of their houses to stop them being trapped. They drive round parts of the city announcing that trouble is approaching and that people should leave at once. They make announcements on the local radio and television. Imminent danger needs urgent action.

That’s the kind of work **John the Baptist** was doing. We don’t usually think of preachers going around making that kind of announcement. Even politicians don’t usually tell us things are getting very urgent—or, if they do, we usually take no notice. But people believed John, and came to him for a different sort of flooding: **baptism**, being plunged into the river Jordan.

What was the emergency, and how would being plunged in the Jordan help people to avoid danger?

Luke’s introduction to the story of John the Baptist is designed to give us a fairly precise date when it all happened, but actually it gives us a lot more besides. Behind the list of names and places is a story of oppression and misery that was building up to explosion point.

Rome had ruled the area for about a hundred years, but only since AD 6 had there been a Roman governor resident in the area, living in Caesarea (on the Mediterranean coast) but also keeping a base in Jerusalem. Augustus Caesar, the first Emperor, had died in AD 14, and his place had been taken by the ruthless Tiberius, who was already being worshipped as a god in

the eastern parts of the empire. Two of Herod the Great's sons, Herod Antipas and Philip, were ruling somewhat shakily, under Roman permission, in the north of the country, but Rome had taken direct control of the south, including Jerusalem itself. Most Jews didn't regard Herod's sons as real rulers; they were a self-made royal house, ruling, like Rome, by fear and oppression. The **high priests** weren't much better. Popular movements of resistance had come and gone, in some cases being brutally put down. Everybody knew they couldn't go on as they were. Something had to happen. But what?

Devout Jews had longed for a new word from God. Some believed that prophecy had died out but might one day be revived. Many expected that a movement would begin through which their God would renew the age-old **covenant**, bringing Israel out of slavery into a new freedom. The old prophets had spoken of a time of renewal, through which God himself would come back to them. They had only a sketchy idea of what this would all look like, but when a fiery young prophet appeared in the Judaeen wilderness, going round the towns and villages telling people that the time had come, they were ready to listen.

Baptism, plunging into the river Jordan, was a powerful sign of this renewal. When the children of Israel had come out of Egypt—a story they all knew well because of their regular Passovers and other festivals—they were brought through the Red Sea, through the Sinai wilderness, then through the Jordan into the promised land. Now they were in slavery again—in their own land!—and wanted a new **Exodus** to bring them to freedom. Since the old prophets had declared that this slavery was the result of Israel's sin, worshipping idols rather than their one true God, the new Exodus, when it happened, would have to deal with this. The way to escape slavery, the prophets had said, was to 'return' to God with heart and **soul**; that is, to 'repent'. 'Return to me, and I will return to you', one of the last prophets had said (Malachi 3:7).

Hence John's agenda: 'a baptism of **repentance** for the forgiveness of sins'. John was doing what the prophet Isaiah had said: preparing a pathway for the Lord himself to return to his people. This was the time. Rescue was at hand.

But the people were not in good shape. Indeed, since baptism was part of the ritual Gentiles had to undergo if they wanted to convert to Judaism, John's summoning of Israel itself to baptism speaks for itself. Nor was it simply that the nation was in trouble politically; everybody in the crowds needed to face their own moral predicament. John wasn't going to be satisfied with a mere outward ritual, in which many could hide their real selves behind an outward conformity to this new movement. If God was coming back, he wasn't coming just to tell them that because they were Abraham's children everything would be all right. The reason God brings rescue and salvation is precisely because he is the holy and faithful God, keeping covenant with his people—but, if that is so, he is bound to bring judgment as well as mercy. He isn't a tame God.

John uses a picture which Jesus developed later. The tree is meant to bear fruit, but if it doesn't it will be cut down (see Luke 6:43–45). The fruit must show that repentance has been genuine. The warning echoes down the years, and must be taken to heart by all the baptized today. We cannot presume that because we have shared in the great Christian mystery, the new Exodus, coming through the water of baptism with all that it means, God will automatically be happy with us even if we show no signs of serious repentance. Of course, Christian living is far more than simply repentance, but it is not less. All spiritual advance begins with a turning

away from what is hindering our obedience. If John were to come down your street with a megaphone, what would he be saying?

## LUKE 3:10–20

### John the Baptist Confronts the Crowds

<sup>10</sup> ‘What shall we do?’ asked the crowds.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Anyone who has two cloaks’, replied John, ‘should give one to someone who hasn’t got one. The same applies to anyone who has plenty of food.’

<sup>12</sup> Some toll-collectors came to be baptized. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘what should we do?’

<sup>13</sup> ‘Don’t collect more than what is laid down,’ he replied.

<sup>14</sup> Some soldiers, too, asked John, ‘What about us? What should we do?’

‘No extortion,’ replied John, ‘and no blackmail. Be content with your wages.’

<sup>15</sup> The people were very excited, and everyone was questioning in their hearts whether John might not be the Messiah.

<sup>16</sup> To this, John responded:

‘I am baptizing you with water. But someone is coming who is stronger than I am. I don’t deserve to untie his sandal-strap. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. <sup>17</sup> He will have his winnowing-fork to hand, ready to sort out the mess on his threshing floor and gather the corn into his barn. Any rubbish he will burn with a fire that will never go out.’

<sup>18</sup> John urged his news on the people with many other words. <sup>19</sup> But Herod the tetrarch—whom John had accused in the matter of his brother’s wife Herodias, and for all the evil things which Herod had done—<sup>20</sup> added this to his list of crimes, that he shut John up in prison.

A cartoon shows a sceptic shouting up to the heavens, ‘God! If you’re up there, tell us what we should do!’

Back comes a voice: ‘Feed the hungry, house the homeless, establish justice.’

The sceptic looks alarmed. ‘Just testing,’ he says.

‘Me too,’ replies the voice.

**John the Baptist** doesn’t seem to have wasted time and breath going into the details of ethical debate. Not for him the learned discussions of particular cases, the small details of law that take time and energy away from actually doing anything about the way the world is—and the way one’s own life is. Of course, one might grumble that John hadn’t said anything to the people who *didn’t* have two cloaks or too much food, but that wasn’t the point. If people were coming for **baptism**, they were committing themselves to be God’s Israel, the light of the world, the people in whom God’s justice would be seen by all. There was no time, and no need, for lengthy discussions such as we find in the writings of the **rabbis**. What they needed was rules of thumb. ‘Two cloaks? Give one away. Too much food? Same applies.’ Nobody could miss the point. Like the great Old Testament prophets, John could see the rich getting richer and the poor poorer. A start had to be made to get things back on track.

The special cases are doubly interesting. Nobody likes paying taxes at the best of times, and some of the tolls were levied simply at the whim of local rulers, shamelessly lining their pockets and giving the collectors tacit licence to do the same. John doesn’t say they should stop working for the hated rulers; he’s not going to recommend unemployment. But they must earn their living and no more. No getting rich at the expense of their own people. We shall meet more tax-and toll-collectors later on in Luke’s gospel.

The soldiers are probably from Herod's own troops; they are unlikely to be Roman soldiers, coming to a Jewish prophet for a ritual that only made sense within Israel's national story. Like the toll-collectors, they aren't told to abandon their careers, but they must avoid abusing their position, as was evidently commonplace. No thuggery, using their brute force to rob people with impunity. 'Be content with your wages' isn't a way of telling them not to campaign for higher wages from their employers; the steady creeping inflation that modern Western economies experience was virtually unknown in the first-century Roman world, and annual pay rises would not have been an issue. Rather, the soldiers are not to use a complaint about low pay as an excuse to rob and pillage ('Herod doesn't pay us enough, so we have no choice').

Simple, clear commands; but if they were obeyed they would demonstrate that people meant business. None of these things happens by chance; they only occur when people have genuinely repented of the small-scale injustices which turn a society sour. But there is more. John is not just a moral reformer; he is not just announcing that the time has arrived for the great liberation, the great new **Exodus**. He is the herald of the **Messiah**.

There was already, of course, a 'king of the Jews'. Herod Antipas, though officially a 'tetrarch'—a kind of second-rank prince—was working on rebuilding the **Temple**, which was itself a way of claiming royal status. King Solomon, after all, had been the first Temple-builder, and some of Israel's greatest kings had rebuilt or restored the Temple. Herod was hoping to inherit his father's title, king of the Jews.

But John had other ideas. The true Messiah, the true king of the Jews, was coming, and his coming would bring devastating judgment. The idea of the Messiah as judge as well as saviour is an important part of mainstream Jewish expectation; the Messiah would bring God's justice to the world, and this would involve naming and dealing with evil. John speaks of him in terms of the fork and the fire: the farmer's fork, to separate the wheat from the chaff, and the fire that burns up the chaff once it's been separated. It's not exactly the picture of Jesus that many Western Christians want, but unless we are to step right outside the biblical witness it's one aspect of the truth we have to take seriously.

Herod Antipas had had an affair with Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, after which she had divorced Philip (it was unheard of in Jewish law for a wife to divorce her husband) and married Antipas. John's denunciation of this flagrant and incestuous adultery was not simply a moral criticism. Part of the point was that if Herod had any pretensions to being the true king of the Jews, behaviour like that would prove him a sham. The Lord's anointed would never do such a thing. Like Elijah opposing Ahab (1 Kings 17–18), John spoke out fearlessly against Herod, and took the consequences.

Jesus himself would give more detailed teaching than John, and we shall look at it in due course. But he never retreated from the two things John was saying here. On the one hand, he too was just as committed as John to God's justice working its way out into the world in the behaviour of his followers. On the other hand, he like John was solidly opposed to the house of Herod, and spent his public career quietly subverting it by establishing his own network of supporters and followers. His vision of God's kingdom differed radically from Herod's: for him, God's justice would be displayed not through riches and royalty of worldly style, but through the love and justice that would finally be combined on the cross.

## LUKE 3:21–38

### Jesus' Baptism and Genealogy

<sup>21</sup> So it happened that, as all the people were being baptized, Jesus too was baptized, and was praying. The heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended in a bodily form, like a dove, upon him. There came a voice from heaven: 'You are my son, my dear son! I'm delighted with you.'

<sup>23</sup> Jesus was about thirty years old at the start of his work. He was, as people thought, the son of Joseph, from whom his ancestry proceeds back in the following line: Heli, <sup>24</sup> Matthat, Levi, Melchi, Jannai, Joseph, <sup>25</sup> Mattathias, Amos, Nahum, Esli, Naggai, <sup>26</sup> Maath, Mattathias, Semein, Josech, Joda, <sup>27</sup> Johanan, Rhesa, Zerubbabel, Shealtiel, Neri, <sup>28</sup> Melchi, Addi, Kosam, Elmadam, Er, <sup>29</sup> Joshua, Eliezer, Jorim, Matthat, Levi, <sup>30</sup> Simeon, Judah, Joseph, Jonam, Eliakim, <sup>31</sup> Melea, Menna, Mattatha, Nathan, David, <sup>32</sup> Jesse, Obed, Boaz, Sala, Nahshon, <sup>33</sup> Amminadab, Admin, Arni, Hezron, Perez, Judah, <sup>34</sup> Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, Terah, Nahor, <sup>35</sup> Serug, Reu, Peleg, Eber, Shela, <sup>36</sup> Kainan, Arphachsad, Shem, Noah, Lamech, <sup>37</sup> Methuselah, Enoch, Jared, Mahalaleel, Kainan, <sup>38</sup> Enosh, Seth, Adam, and God.

When I visited New Zealand some years ago, I was taught how to greet an audience in the traditional Maori fashion. I much enjoyed and appreciated the welcome I was given by this ancient people, many of whom are now devout Christians, and the chance to learn something of their history and culture.

Many of the Maori people in New Zealand can tell you which of the original eight long canoes their ancestors arrived in when they first arrived in the country between 800 and 1,000 years ago. There is every reason to suppose that this memory of family trees and origins is reasonably accurate. Many peoples in today's world, and perhaps still more in the ancient world, regularly told and tell stories of family history, and though these may be embellished from time to time, they are often to be seen as trustworthy. Only in the modern Western world, or where there have been huge social disruptions from war and migration, have people lost touch with ancestry beyond a generation or two.

The Jews were particularly conscious of ancestry, with good reason. God had made promises to Abraham and his family for ever, and through wars, enforced **exile**, and attempted genocide, they clung (as they still do) to their memories and stories of ancestry as to a lifeline. The books of Chronicles in the Old Testament begin with several chapters of names, which seem very tedious to a modern reader, but were vital for people at the time. They needed to know who they were, which meant knowing which part of the people of Israel they belonged to.

So to begin with it seems surprising that we have not one but two quite different family trees for Jesus. Matthew begins his book with a list of names from Abraham to Jesus; Luke now includes a list of names working back from Jesus, through Abraham, to Adam and thence to God himself. And the odd thing is that the lists don't match. Luke has considerably more generations between Abraham and Jesus; and, though some of the stages are the same, the lists part company altogether between David (around 1000 BC) and Salathiel and his son Zerubbabel (after the exile), and then again between Zerubbabel and Joseph. Even the name of Joseph's father is different. In any case, what is the point of a genealogy of *Joseph*, when both Luke and Matthew insist that he was not in fact Jesus' physical father?

Ever since the early days of the church, learned scholars have struggled to give good answers to these questions, and most have admitted defeat. Obviously, in a small and close-knit community, there is every probability that someone could trace their descent from the same source by two or more different routes. The Maori themselves can give several different genealogies for themselves, depending on which ancestor they want to highlight and how much intermarrying has taken place. Different tribal sub-units can trace their descent in different ways for different purposes, resulting in criss-crossing links of all sorts.

This is so even in modern Western society. After my own parents married, they discovered that they were distant cousins, with one remove of generation. Think of the little country of Israel in the period between David and Jesus; similar things could easily have happened. Many could have traced their descent to the same ancestors by at least two routes.

Luke, it seems, has come upon a family tree which he presents without comment, simply to declare that Jesus was indeed not only a true Jew but a descendant of David and Zerubbabel—part of the genuinely royal family. He was counted as Joseph's adopted son, which served, it seems, for this purpose (we are never told whether Mary was of royal descent; since she was a cousin of Elisabeth it may be that she was from a priestly family). If there were other motives in the arrangement of names as they came to Luke (some have suggested that the 77 names should be seen as eleven groups of seven), he doesn't draw our attention to them.

The one link between the family tree and what goes before and comes after is the final phrase: Jesus is the **son of God**. Of course, by that reckoning so is everyone else in the list, from Joseph right back to Adam. Luke certainly means more than this when he uses the phrase 'son of God' as a title for Jesus (1:35; 3:22; 4:3, 9). Perhaps it is best to see the family tree, stretching back to the creation of the world, as a way of saying that, though Jesus is indeed the **Messiah** of Israel (another meaning of 'son of God'), he is so precisely for the whole world. All creation, the whole human race, will benefit from what he has come to do.

This global scope to God's purposes is in the background as Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized by **John**. Luke adds here, as in one or two other key points, the fact that Jesus was praying when the crucial revelation occurred. Part of his constant picture of Jesus is that he was a man of prayer. It's often suggested that the **baptism** was the moment when Jesus received his first inkling of a messianic calling, but this can hardly be correct; the voice from heaven comes to confirm and give direction to something that has been true all along, as Luke has already told us (2:49). The **Spirit** and the word together give Jesus the encouragement and strength he needs to begin his short public career.

They also give an indication of where that career will take him. The heavenly voice echoes words of Isaiah the prophet (42:1), commissioning the Messiah as the Servant, the one who will suffer and die for the people and the world. Behind that again are echoes of Genesis 22:2, when Abraham was commanded to kill his beloved only son, Isaac. The voice is at the same time a wonderful affirmation of Jesus' vocation and a clear reminder of where it is to lead.

Together the baptism story and the family tree tell us where Jesus has come from, who he is, and where he is going. As we make his story our own in our own prayers, and indeed in our own baptism, we too should expect both the fresh energy of the Spirit and the quiet voice which reminds us of God's amazing, affirming love and of the path of vocation which lies ahead.