

## LUKE 7:1–10

### The Healing of the Centurion's Servant

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus had finished saying all these words in the hearing of the people, he went into Capernaum.

<sup>2</sup> There was a centurion who had a slave who was particularly precious to him. This slave was ill, at the point of death. <sup>3</sup> The centurion heard about Jesus, and sent some Jewish elders to him, to ask him to come and rescue his slave from death. <sup>4</sup> They approached Jesus and begged him eagerly.

'He deserves a favour like this from you,' they said. <sup>5</sup> 'He loves our people, and he himself built us our synagogue.'

<sup>6</sup> Jesus went with them.

When he was not far off from the house, the centurion sent friends to him with a further message.

'Master,' he said, 'don't trouble yourself. I don't deserve to have you come under my roof. <sup>7</sup> That's why I didn't think myself worthy to come to you in person. But—just say the word, and my slave will be healed. <sup>8</sup> You see, I'm used to living under authority, and I have soldiers reporting to me. I say to this one, "Go," and he goes; to another one, "Come," and he comes; and to my slave, "Do this," and he does it.'

<sup>9</sup> When Jesus heard this he was astonished.

'Let me tell you,' he said, turning to the crowd that was following him, 'I haven't found faith of this kind, even in Israel.'

<sup>10</sup> The people who had been sent to him went back to the house. There they found the slave in good health.

The soldier walks forward slowly into the jungle. His task is to protect villagers from terrorists; every step means danger. Suddenly a command reaches him on his radio. His senior officer has seen where the enemy are hiding. He must obey instantly, not only for his own sake but in order to get the job done. It isn't what he was expecting, but he has been trained to do what he's told without hesitation.

That kind of clear authority and automatic obedience is vital in certain dangerous jobs. Authority like this works almost like a machine: an order goes out from the top, and each rank underneath does what they are told, passing on the word to those below them.

Most of us don't live in very tight or clear authority structures. There are always people that we respect; in our places of work, there are people whose decisions we accept and go along with, and whose instructions we carry out. But we can then make the mistake of thinking that God's authority is somewhat less definite, more like the less direct models of authority we have known in other aspects of our own lives.

It's true, of course, that God's sovereignty over the world is exercised with such love and compassion that the image of a commanding officer organizing a battle or a route march is hardly the best picture to use. But if we see God's authority, at work in Jesus Christ, as any less absolute than that of a military officer, we are, according to the passage, not only mistaken but also lacking **faith** itself.

The heart of the story is not the healing of the slave; that's important, because without it the story wouldn't exist, but it's just the framework for what Luke wants to highlight. What

matters is the centurion's faith. Here he was, a middle-ranking military officer, stationed in Capernaum. He would be receiving regular orders from a commander, probably in Caesarea, about fifty miles away. And he would have soldiers responsible to him for performing tasks locally, perhaps including peace-keeping.

Often soldiers in that position would despise the local people as an inferior race, but this man didn't. He had come to love and respect the Jewish people, and had even paid for the building of the local synagogue. Luke presents him to us, as he does with another centurion in Acts 10, as a humble **Gentile**, looking in at Israel and Israel's God from the outside, liking what he sees, and opening himself to learning new truth from this strange, ancient way of life. Matthew's version of the story (8:5–13) is shorter, and omits the elaborate detail with which Luke emphasizes his respect and humility, sending two groups of messengers to Jesus.

Jesus is astonished at the second message; and we are astonished at his astonishment! Normally in the **gospels** Jesus does and says things that surprise people; this is one of the few places where Jesus himself is surprised. And the reason is the sheer quality of the man's faith. This faith isn't an abstract belief about God, or the learning of dogmas. It is the simple, clear belief that when Jesus commands that something be done, it will be done. He regards Jesus like a military officer, with authority over sickness and health. If Jesus says that someone is to get well, they will. What could be simpler?

Where he got this faith, we don't know. If he had lived in Capernaum for a while, he had no doubt heard of Jesus and perhaps seen him perform remarkable cures already. He recognized that there was a power at work in Jesus that could carry all before it. Like yet another centurion, later on (23:47), he looked at Jesus and was prepared to risk more than Jesus' own fellow-Jews had done, and declare that God was at work in him.

The story thus opens up in a practical way some of what the sermon of the previous chapter had highlighted. There was no need for Jesus' fellow-Jews to protect themselves from a Gentile like this, by drawing tighter and tighter circles of holiness around themselves. For all his lack of appropriate religious background, he had grasped the very centre of the Jewish faith: that the one true God, the God of Israel, was the sovereign one, the Lord of **heaven** and earth. And he had grasped it in its shocking new form: *this one true God was personally present and active in Jesus of Nazareth*. Luke presents this Gentile as a model for all those who will come in by faith from outside God's ancient people, to share the blessings of healing and salvation.

Contrast the prayer of this centurion with the prayers we all too often pray ourselves. 'Lord,' we say (not out loud, of course, but this is what we often think), 'I might perhaps like you to do this ... but I know you may not want to, or it might be too difficult, or perhaps impossible ...' and we go on our way puzzled, not sure whether we've really asked for something or not. Of course, sometimes we ask for something and the answer is No. God reserves the right to give that answer. But this story shows that we should have no hesitation in asking. Is Jesus the Lord of the world, or isn't he?

## LUKE 7:11–17

### Raising of the Widow's Son

<sup>11</sup> Not long afterwards, Jesus went to a town called Nain. His disciples went with him, and so did a large crowd. <sup>12</sup> As he got near to the gate of the city, a young man was being carried out dead. He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. There was a substantial crowd of the townspeople with her.

<sup>13</sup> When the Master saw her, he was very sorry for her. 'Don't cry,' he said to her. <sup>14</sup> Then he went up and touched the bier, and the people carrying it stood still.

'Young fellow,' he said, 'I'm telling you—get up!' <sup>15</sup> The dead man sat up and began to speak, and he gave him to his mother.

<sup>16</sup> Terror came over all of them. They praised God.

'A great prophet has risen among us!' they said. 'God has visited his people!'

<sup>17</sup> This report went out about him in the whole of Judaea and the surrounding countryside.

So where was the **faith** this time? The centurion's servant was healed because of his owner's faith, but in this story the only person who has any faith that the dead man can be raised is Jesus himself. Though Jesus loves to see the signs of faith, he isn't always bound by it, and in this case he acts freely, from sheer compassion, to do something nobody had imagined he could or would.

Luke certainly wants us to make a connection between this scene and the later one, when Jesus is himself carried off, his widowed mother's eldest son, for burial outside Jerusalem. In the present case, of course, the young man is brought back to ordinary **life** and will have to die again one day. Luke will eventually tell of Jesus' new life in which death is left behind for good.

Come inside the story and allow its force to sweep over you. Walk in the crowd a few paces behind the bier, on a hot day in Galilee, with the bright sun sparkling on the tears which are streaming down everyone's cheeks. Death is common enough, and everybody knows what to do. The professional mourners and wailers are there, making plenty of noise so that friends and relatives, and particularly the poor mother, can cry their hearts out without the embarrassment of making a scene all by themselves. (How much kinder a system than the clinical, detached solemnity of a modern Western funeral!) People are coming along with spices to anoint the body, ready to wrap them up in the grave-clothes to offset the smell of decomposition.

You make your way from the family home, through the streets, to the town gate. A death in a small Middle-Eastern community touches everyone. The family burial plot will be a little way outside the town: probably a small cave in the side of a hill, where the husband and father had been buried some time before, and where now his bones, folded with care and devotion, lie stored in a bone-box, leaving the main shelf clear for the next burial. That's where the procession is going.

Then, quite suddenly, some strangers arrive. A man leading a small group of followers. He seems vaguely familiar: Upper Galilee isn't such a large place, and perhaps he grew up in a neighbouring village (Nain is about five miles south-east of Nazareth). He is looking at the widowed and now doubly bereaved mother, and something inside him seems to be stirring. He comes up and says something to her—and then, to everyone's surprise and horror, he touches

the bier. (Nobody would normally do that except the official bearers; touching a corpse or the bier, or even the bearers themselves, would make you unclean.) Then—the biggest shock of all—he’s telling the lad to get up ... and he’s getting up. The whole funeral procession goes wild with astonishment, delight, disbelief.

They don’t know which one to look at, the no-longer-dead boy, his amazed and ecstatic mother, or this stranger who has done what the old prophets, Elijah and Elisha, used to do. (Luke has told the story with deliberate echoes of 1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4.) ‘God has visited his people,’ they say: not in the sense of paying them a social visit, but in the old biblical sense, where this phrase was used to refer to God ‘visiting’ Israel at the time of the **Exodus** and other great events. It means, ‘God has come near to us, to save and rescue us.’ It means, ‘This is the time we’ve been waiting for.’

Now go through the scene again; but this time, instead of it being a funeral procession in a small first-century Galilean town, make it the moment you most dread in this next week or next year. Maybe it’s something that you know is going to happen, like a traumatic move of house or job. Maybe it’s something you are always afraid of, a sudden accident or illness, a tragedy or scandal. Come into the middle of the scene, if you can, in prayer; feel its sorrow and frustration, its bitterness and anger. Then watch as Jesus comes to join you in the middle of it. Take time in prayer and let him approach, speak, touch, command. He may not say what you expect. He may not do what you want. But if his presence comes to be with you there that is what you most need. Once he is in the middle of it all with you, you will be able to come through it.

These two stories at the start of Luke 7—the centurion’s servant and the widow’s son—do two things in particular as Luke’s larger narrative develops. They take the commands of the great sermon in chapter 6 and they show what this life looks like on the ground, with God’s love going out in new, unexpected, healing generosity. And they prepare us for the question that is now emerging as the central one. Who does Jesus think he is? What do these actions say about his own role, his vocation and mission?

## LUKE 7:18–35

### Jesus and John the Baptist

<sup>18</sup> The disciples of John the Baptist told him about all these things. John called two of these followers <sup>19</sup> and sent them to the Master with this message: ‘Are you the Coming One, or should we expect someone else?’

<sup>20</sup> The men arrived where Jesus was. ‘John the Baptist’, they said, ‘has sent us to you to say, “Are you the Coming One, or should we expect someone else?”’

<sup>21</sup> Then and there Jesus healed several people of diseases, plagues and possession by unclean spirits; and he gave several blind people back their sight. <sup>22</sup> Then he answered them:

‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor hear the gospel. <sup>23</sup> And a blessing on the person who isn’t shocked by me!’

<sup>24</sup> So off went John’s messengers.

Jesus then began to talk to the crowds about John.

‘Why did you go out into the desert?’ he asked. ‘What were you looking for? A reed swaying in the breeze? <sup>25</sup> Well then, what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in silks and satins? See here, if you want to find people who wear fine clothes and live in luxury, you’d better look in royal palaces. <sup>26</sup> So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes indeed, and more than a prophet. <sup>27</sup> This is the one of whom the Bible says, “Look: I send my messenger before my face; he will get my path ready ahead of me.”

<sup>28</sup> ‘Let me tell you this:’ he went on; ‘nobody greater than John has ever been born of women. But the one who is least in God’s kingdom is greater than he is.’

<sup>29</sup> When all the people, and the tax-collectors, heard that, they praised God; they had been baptized with John’s baptism. <sup>30</sup> But the Pharisees and the lawyers, who had not been baptized by John, rejected God’s plan for them.

<sup>31</sup> ‘What picture can I use’, Jesus continued, ‘for the people of this generation? What are they like?’

<sup>32</sup> They’re like children sitting in the square and calling this old riddle to each other:

“We piped for you and you didn’t dance;  
We wailed for you and you didn’t cry!”

<sup>33</sup> ‘When John the Baptist came, he didn’t eat bread or drink wine, and you say, “He’s got a demon!”

<sup>34</sup> When the son of man came, eating and drinking, you say, “Look! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” <sup>35</sup> And wisdom is justified by all her children.’

Pull a coin out of your pocket and look at it. What does it tell you?

I don’t mean, how rich does it say you are. Nor am I thinking about the actual words that are engraved on it. I’m referring to the pictures, the symbols.

The last two countries I visited before writing this were Greece and the United States; as usual, some of their coins came home with me. The Greek ones have pictures of ancient heroes: Alexander the Great on a 100-drachma coin, Democritus the philosopher on a 10-drachma one. On the other side they have symbols: the sun with its bright rays on the first, the sun and the solar system on the other. The American coins have heroes, too, though not quite so old: Abraham Lincoln on one, George Washington on another. And the symbols, for those

who bother to look at them, are powerful too: Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home in Virginia, on the back of the cent piece, the great eagle on the quarter, and so on.

Now imagine that you had never seen a book, a newspaper, a photograph or even a stained-glass window. The only pictures you would know would be occasional paintings, carvings, mosaic floors (if you were, or worked for, someone very rich)—and coins. And coins were the only ones you would see regularly. They were the only mass medium in the ancient world. They were the principal way of getting across a symbolic message to ordinary people. For Jews, who (at least in theory) weren't allowed to make pictures of human beings, the choice of symbols for coins was very important indeed.

When Herod Antipas chose the symbols for his coins, just a few years before the time of Jesus' public ministry, his favourite was a typical Galilean reed. You would see whole beds of them swaying in the breeze by the shores of the sea of Galilee. A reed would symbolize the beauty and fertility of that area.

'What did you go out to see?' asked Jesus to the crowds who had gone to be baptized by **John**, and were now following him. 'A reed swaying in the breeze?' They would have got the message. Were you looking for a new king—another one like old so-and-so up the road? If they missed the point, the next line brought it closer home. Were you looking for someone wearing the latest splendid fashions? If so, you were looking in the wrong place: the royal palace is the place for luxurious clothes. Well then, what were you looking for? A prophet! Yes indeed, but something more than just 'a' prophet. This was a special prophet indeed. This was the Advance Guard, the Preparer.

This whole long passage, the discussion between Jesus and John's messengers, and then Jesus' cryptic comments to the crowd, highlight one question in particular: who does Jesus think he is? To talk about Herod on the one hand, even by implication, and to talk about John on the other, are ways of talking about the figure who stands in between them. Is Jesus just a powerful prophet? Is he the new king, God's anointed, destined to replace Herod? Or what is he?

John, in prison, was clearly puzzled. Jesus wasn't doing what he had expected. If Jesus really was the **Messiah**, why wasn't he establishing the sort of messianic **kingdom** John wanted—presumably including liberation for prisoners like himself? Jesus is far too astute, with listening ears all around, to say openly, 'Yes, I'm the Messiah'. We hear a few chapters later that Herod wanted to kill him (13:31), and a clear statement would have been an unnecessary risk. Instead, he heals all sorts of people before the eyes of the messengers, and suggests that they draw their conclusions—with a helping shove in the right direction provided by the quotation of various passages of Isaiah. (Some Jews already saw this sort of list as a prediction of what the Messiah would do when he came; one such list occurs in an ancient scroll found in **Qumran**.) This is the kind of Messiah Jesus intends to be: not a straightforward rival to Herod (though his kingdom will eventually challenge and outlast all the Herods in the world), but a kingdom operating in a different mode altogether, healing people and the world at every level.

But if Jesus is a different sort of king, John is a different sort of prophet. He isn't just one prophet among many. He is the one spoken of by Malachi, the one whose task is to prepare the way for the coming Lord. In Malachi 3:1, the messenger clears the path for the Master to come to the **Temple** and cleanse it of all unholiness, to bring God's judgement and mercy to bear on Israel as a whole. And in this passage the Master in question doesn't seem to be simply the

Messiah; he is YHWH himself, Israel's God in person. That, we may suppose, is why (though initially it sounds surprising) the least in God's kingdom is greater than John. The least of those who belong to the new movement initiated by Jesus is greater than the greatest man who was ever born up to that time. This is a strong claim indeed, though still too indirect for anyone to take it back as a hostile report to Herod. Those who sat down and chewed it over, though, would realize what was being said. Those who didn't would still look and look but never see the point.

Many of Jesus' contemporaries were like that: complaining that John was too austere, complaining in the next breath that Jesus was too much the life and soul of the party. But wisdom will out, and those who had understood what was going on would see that this was how it had to be.

People today still judge Jesus by their expectations, instead of pausing and probing into the evidence to see what was really going on. They do the same, often enough, with Jesus' followers—criticizing some for being too strict, others for being too soft, some for being too intellectual, others for being too down-to-earth. Yet wisdom can still be glimpsed by those with eyes to see. Following the Messiah who is different to what we imagined is always demanding; but this is the only way to the kingdom of God.

## LUKE 7:36–50

### Jesus Anointed by a Sinful Woman

<sup>36</sup> A Pharisee asked Jesus to dine with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table.

<sup>37</sup> A woman from the town, a known bad character, discovered that he was there at table in the Pharisee's house. She brought an alabaster jar of ointment. <sup>38</sup> Then she stood behind Jesus' feet, crying, and began to wet his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

<sup>39</sup> The Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw what was going on.

'If this fellow really was a prophet,' he said to himself, 'he'd know what sort of a woman this is who is touching him! She's a sinner!'

<sup>40</sup> 'Simon,' replied Jesus, 'I have something to say to you.'

'Go ahead, Teacher,' he replied.

<sup>41</sup> 'Once upon a time there was a moneylender who had two debtors. The first owed him five hundred denarii, the second fifty. <sup>42</sup> Neither of them could pay him, and he let them both off. So which of them will love him more?'

<sup>43</sup> 'The one he let off the more, I suppose,' replied Simon.

'Quite right,' said Jesus.

<sup>44</sup> Then, turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'You see this woman? When I came into your house, you didn't give me water to wash my feet—but she has washed my feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You didn't give me a kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet from the moment I came in. <sup>46</sup> You didn't anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

<sup>47</sup> 'So the conclusion I draw is this: she must have been forgiven many sins! Her great love proves it! But if someone has been forgiven only a little, they will love only a little.'

<sup>48</sup> Then he said to the woman, 'Your sins are forgiven.'

<sup>49</sup> 'Who is this', the other guests began to say among themselves, 'who even forgives sins?'

<sup>50</sup> 'Your faith has saved you,' said Jesus to the woman. 'Go in peace.'

When you look at a painting, what do you look for first?

Some people stand well back and let the full sweep of it wash over them: the glorious colours, the contrasts, the light and shade.

Some people focus at once on the characters, the people in the scene. Are they happy or sad, noble or wicked, quiet or agitated? What are they thinking?

Others like to look for the way in which the artist has used the picture to comment on the world of his or her day, on its social or perhaps political issues.

Others again—perhaps artists themselves—may begin by coming up close and seeing how, with each individual brushstroke, the artist has built up to an overall effect.

The scene now before us is another of Luke's great 'paintings', and each of the possible lines of approach will work. The story of Jesus at the house of Simon the **Pharisee** is as full of meaning, of **gospel**, as any story in the New Testament. But it's also full of sheer artistry that brings the gospel up in three-dimensional, vivid reality.

Consider first the overall effect. Though several others are mentioned, three characters dominate the stage: Simon the Pharisee, Jesus and the unnamed woman. (People have often supposed that this is the same scene as the one we find in Mark 14:3–9 and the similar

passages in Matthew 26 and John 12, but it probably isn't.) The balance of the scene is superb, with Jesus keeping his poise between the outrageous adoration of the woman and the equally outrageous rudeness of his host—and yet coming up with something fresh, something which, to the onlookers, was just as outrageous as the behaviour of the other two. The story sweeps to and fro between the three of them with passion and power.

The central characters, though sketched in only a few strokes, are vivid and credible. The host is a Pharisee who was presumably not completely opposed to Jesus—at least, not to start with. There were several different positions within the Pharisaic movement. The majority were what we would call hard-line right-wingers, but several, including perhaps this Simon, may have been prepared to give Jesus a fair hearing. He has heard the rumours that maybe Jesus is a prophet (7:16), and he is keen to see for himself. He thinks he's found the answer (Jesus can't be a prophet because he hasn't realized what sort of a woman this is), only to be proved doubly wrong (Jesus knows what she has been and what she now is—a forgiven sinner—and what he, Simon, is thinking). Luke, telling the story, has emphasized three times in the first two sentences that he is a Pharisee, and that it is to his house that both Jesus and this woman have come.

The woman is an uninvited guest. What we think of as 'private life' in the modern West was largely unknown in Jesus' world: doors would often remain open, allowing beggars, extra friends, or simply curious passers-by to wander in. The woman intends, it seems, to anoint Jesus; we learn finally that this is an expression of grateful love because she has received God's overflowing forgiveness; but when she finds herself before him she is overcome, and his feet are wet with her tears before she can get the ointment jar open. Then, trying to make things better, she makes them worse as far as the onlookers are concerned: she lets down her hair, something no decent woman would do in public, and wipes his feet, kissing them all the while, and finally doing what she came for, anointing them.

Now look at this painting through the eyes of the artist, describing his world—in other words, for Luke, showing what happens when God's love in the gospel impacts on a human situation. Luke has shown us how Jesus, in Nazareth and then in the great sermon, stands on its head the normal expectation of what would happen when God brought in his **kingdom**. It would be a time of exuberant generosity, surprising grace, and at the same time fierce opposition which would meet God's judgment. Now we see, in a single incident, what this looks like in practice. Social convention is thrown out of the window; forgiveness and love set new standards and raise new expectations; human beings appear, not as society has 'constructed' them, but as God sees them. Several of the **parables** in Luke have a similar 'reversal' at their heart: think of the 'prodigal son' in Luke 15, or the 'Pharisee and tax-collector' in Luke 18. Luke lived in a church which was coming to terms with God's astonishing reversal of fortune. Many Jews had rejected the message about Jesus, but many non-Jews were accepting it and flooding into the church, delighted (as was this woman) that their sins were forgiven by the God of generous love.

When we look closer at the detail of the story, one of the things we notice is the way in which Jesus turns the tables on the Pharisee. *He* is the one who is guilty of poor hospitality—almost as much of a social blunder as the woman's letting down of her hair. The Pharisee has never come to terms with the depths of his own heart, and so doesn't appreciate God's generous love when it sits in person at his own table. For Luke, true **faith** is what happens when

someone looks at Jesus and discovers God's forgiveness; and the sign and proof of this faith is love.

## LUKE 8:1–15

### The Parable of the Sower

<sup>1</sup> Soon afterwards, Jesus went about in person, with the Twelve, through the towns and villages, announcing and telling the good news of God's kingdom. <sup>2</sup> They were accompanied by various women who had been healed from evil spirits and diseases: Mary who was called 'Magdalene', from whom seven demons had gone out, <sup>3</sup> Joanna the wife of Chouza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others. They looked after the needs of Jesus and his companions out of their own pockets.

<sup>4</sup> A large crowd came together, and people came to him from town after town. He spoke to them in parables:

<sup>5</sup> 'A sower went out to sow his seed. As he was sowing, some fell by the road, and was trodden on, and the birds of the air ate it up. <sup>6</sup> Other seed fell on stony ground, and when it came up it withered, because it didn't have any moisture. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell in among thorns, and when the thorns grew up they choked it. <sup>8</sup> Other seed again fell into good soil, and came up, and gave a hundredfold yield.'

As he said this, he called out: 'If you've got ears to hear, then hear!'

<sup>9</sup> His disciples asked him what this parable was about.

<sup>10</sup> 'You are being let in on the secrets of God's kingdom,' he said, 'but to the rest it happens in parables, so that "they may see but not perceive, and hear but not understand."

<sup>11</sup> 'This is the parable: the seed is the word of God. <sup>12</sup> Those by the roadside are people who hear, but then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they don't believe it, and are not saved. <sup>13</sup> on the stony ground are those who hear the word and receive it with delight—but they don't have any root, and so they believe only for a time, and then, when persecution comes, they draw back. <sup>14</sup> The seed that falls in among thorns represents people who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and they don't bear proper, ripening fruit. <sup>15</sup> But those in the good soil are the ones who hear the word and hold on to it with an upright and good heart, and who patiently produce fruit.'

If Jesus was telling this story today, he might well include other categories as well. What about the seeds that were planted in good soil but were ruined by acid rain? What about the plants that were coming up nicely but were bulldozed by occupying forces to make room for a new road? There's plenty of room to develop different lines of thought.

But of course what Jesus was doing was not commenting on farming problems but explaining the strange way in which the **kingdom** of God was arriving. Many of his hearers were expecting something big and obvious to happen: for a new king to overthrow Herod, a new and legitimate priest to oust the present **high priest**, and in particular for a Jewish movement to get rid of the hated pagans who were their ultimate masters. None of that was happening, certainly not in the way they thought. Jesus was keen to open their eyes and ears to see and hear what God was actually doing.

Luke has already told us enough about Jesus' public career for us to be able to see the sort of people he's talking about. Here are the villagers in the synagogue at Nazareth, hearing Jesus' sermon on Isaiah, but unwilling to accept what he's saying. The word is trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air are snatching it away. Here is the **Pharisee** at table: he has invited Jesus to dine, and obviously wants to give him a hearing, but what Jesus does and says is so unexpected and shocking that he tries to distance himself from it as far as he can. The seed has

landed in among the stones of his prejudice, and nothing can get near it to nurture it and allow it to grow. Here are the people of 'this generation' (7:31), who have other things on their minds, and don't want a prophet like either **John** or Jesus. The seed has landed among thorns, and is being choked.

But here is a **Gentile** centurion who believes that Jesus has authority to command even serious illness to depart. Here is Levi the tax-collector leaving his shady business and following Jesus. Here is the unnamed woman whose extravagant behaviour shows that she has experienced God's forgiveness and new **life** deep within her heart. Here are many, many more, already in the first few weeks of Jesus' kingdom-project, who show that the word he is speaking is producing fruit. Here, indeed, are the **Twelve**, whom we shall gradually come to know in Luke's story. Though he doesn't highlight their weaknesses as relentlessly as Mark, he still shows them as muddled and puzzled, needing, often enough, help and new direction. The plants are growing up, but they are not yet mature enough to 'produce fruit patiently' ('patience' occurs here only in Luke: we may suppose that, from his perspective, the promised fruit did indeed take time to appear).

And here, too, is a group of women (8:1–3) whom the other **gospel**-writers don't mention until much later—until, in fact, they turn up at the foot of the cross, lend a hand with the burial, and then are the first at the tomb. They have heard the **word**, and been healed by it (Luke implies that they had all been healed, not simply Mary Magdalene). And they have done the unthinkable: they have left the well-defined social space of home and family, where they had a role and a duty, and have chosen to accompany Jesus and his followers on the road from place to place, looking after their needs and doing so, moreover, out of their own pockets.

This is every bit as shocking, from a first-century Palestinian point of view, as the story of the woman letting her hair down and kissing Jesus' feet. (The fact that Mary Magdalene is mentioned in this way so soon after that incident may be Luke's hint that she was the unnamed woman, but there is no firm reason to say that she must have been.) One can only imagine the looks they would get, and the things people might say about such a company. But one can also imagine Jesus thinking of them not least as people in whose hearts and lives the word had had its effect, people who were already bearing fruit, putting life, reputation and property at the disposal of this extraordinary new kingdom-movement.

Look out of the window at the people walking by. What sort of soil is the seed being sown in today? What can we do to plough up the rough ground, to remove the stones, to weed out the thorns? What can we do to sow the word more successfully? The answers will vary from place to place and time to time. But perhaps the first and most important answer is to ask ourselves how much mature growth, how much fruit, the word is producing in our own lives. If we have ears, we must learn to hear.

## LUKE 8:16–25

### Jesus Calms the Storm

<sup>16</sup> ‘Nobody lights a lamp’, continued Jesus, ‘and then hides it under a pot or a bed. They put it on a lampstand, so that people who come in can see the light. <sup>17</sup> You see, nothing is hidden which won’t become visible; nothing is concealed that won’t come to light.

<sup>18</sup> ‘So be careful how you listen. If you’ve got something, more will be given to you; if you haven’t, even what you have will be taken away from you.’

<sup>19</sup> His mother and brothers came to him, and couldn’t get near him because of the crowd. <sup>20</sup> So they sent a message to him: ‘Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.’

<sup>21</sup> ‘Mother and brothers, indeed?’ replied Jesus. ‘Here are my mother and brothers—people who hear God’s word and do it!’

<sup>22</sup> One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and suggested that they cross to the other shore. So they set off. <sup>23</sup> As they were sailing, he fell asleep. A violent wind swept down on the lake, and the boat began to fill dangerously with water.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Master, Master!’ shouted the disciples, coming and waking him up. ‘Master, we’re lost!’

He got up and scolded the wind and the waves. They stopped, and there was a flat calm.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Where’s your faith?’ he asked them.

They were afraid and astonished. ‘Who is this, then,’ they asked one another, ‘if he can give orders to wind and water, and they obey him?’

The chairman of the board looked around the room. This was a big decision and everyone knew it. ‘Can we agree on this plan, then?’ he asked. ‘We need to decide.’ Twenty serious faces looked back at him, each with their own portfolio to consider, each with their own hopes and fears.

At that minute the secretary came into the room. ‘Sorry, Mr Chairman,’ she said, ‘but you told me you wanted to take this call as soon as it came.’

He left the room to answer the phone. Twenty pairs of eyes followed him. What could be so important as to make this decision wait? Five minutes passed.

‘It was my daughter,’ he explained cheerfully, as he returned. ‘She was in an under-nines swimming race this afternoon. And she won! It’s a great day!’ And, to a stunned silence, he continued the meeting.

Does that seem shocking? Perhaps a pleasant surprise? Certainly, in terms of the way business has been run in the Western world for the last century, it would be startling, to say the least, to have a senior businessman postpone a vital decision because of a child’s swimming race. It goes against the normal expectations.

And only when we’ve felt the force of that can we appreciate the shock waves that Jesus sent through his followers, and the whole society, with *his* response to a sudden request for attention from his family. If we, deep down, would like our families to be more important to us than sometimes they are, we can be sure that in Jesus’ world family unity and solidarity were far, far more important. But this just highlights the earth-shaking effect of his response when his mother Mary and his brothers—James and the others—came to see him.

Mark tells us at one point (3:21) that they were afraid Jesus was out of his mind. John explains elsewhere (7:5) that they didn't believe in him and what he was doing. Luke offers no such explanation. All we have is an apparently normal visit from the family, and a stunning slap in the face from Jesus. 'Mother? Brothers?' (Two of the most sacred relationships anyone, not least a Jew, could have.) 'Here they are—' looking around at the motley crew crowding into the house: 'Anyone who hears God's word and does it!'

We shouldn't miss the echoes of the **parable** of the sower in the previous passage. These ones sitting around him are the people who are like seed sown on good soil, who hear God's **word**, and produce fruit. That's how important the **kingdom** is: it's even more important than the claims of family, which are themselves the most important normal claims a person can have. It isn't that Jesus is being like a careless businessman who undervalues his family because he's so focused on the next big decision. Jesus is like the most caring family person you can imagine, who nevertheless knows that hearing and doing God's word is even more important. Woe betide preachers, pastors or theologians who make this saying an excuse for neglecting their families because they're busy with God's work. Often that's just an excuse for careerism and selfish attention to 'my work', as though one's work was the principal source of identity and status. But there is danger in store, too, for those who allow any claims whatever to modify or water down the absolute claim of God's word on their lives. Jesus, knowing that his family didn't understand his vocation (but hoping that they would come to do so in time), couldn't allow them to distract and divert him from the vital and urgent work he was undertaking.

This shocking tension between the old world of family ties and the new world of the **gospel** lies underneath the warnings at the start of this passage. God is doing something new, and it mustn't be hidden away or kept in secret. Even if you try, it won't work, because the time is coming when secrets will be published, when dark becomes light, when God's kingdom is unveiled in all its glory, and then things at present hidden will be known to all. From Luke's point of view, the events of Jesus' cross and **resurrection**, of the gift of the **Spirit**, the mission and consolidation of the church, and the fall of Jerusalem—all of these are the unveiling of what was hidden in Jesus' early ministry. This is what God was doing all along, and the truth—who was really listening, who was really following?—would emerge all too soon.

The lesson is made plain for the **disciples** on the lake, as it is for us whenever we come to the end of our own resources and discover that we have to throw ourselves on the mercy of Jesus because there's no one and nothing else that will help. The choice of **faith** is absolute. Either we trust him or we are left at the mercy of the storm. Luke uses this story to take one further step with the question, 'Who then is this?', which reaches its first main answer in the next chapter. But this story also poses the question of faith. We will only give the right answer to the question of who Jesus is when we realize that to give it commits us to total trust and obedience.

## LUKE 8:26–39

### The Healing of the Demoniac

<sup>26</sup> They sailed to the land of the Gerasenes, which is on the other side from Galilee. <sup>27</sup> As he got out on land, a demon-possessed man from the town met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he didn't live in a house but among the tombs. <sup>28</sup> When he saw Jesus he screamed and fell down in front of him.

'You and me, Jesus—you and me!' he yelled at the top of his voice. 'What is it with you and me, you son of the Most High God? Don't torture me—please, please don't torment me!' <sup>29</sup> Jesus was commanding the unclean spirit to come out of the man. Many times over it had seized him, and he was kept under guard with chains and manacles; but he used to break the shackles, and the demon would drive him into the desert.

<sup>30</sup> 'What's your name?' Jesus asked him.

'Regiment!' replied the man—for many demons had entered him. <sup>31</sup> And they begged him not to order them to be sent into the Pit.

<sup>32</sup> A sizeable herd of pigs was feeding on the hillside, and they begged him to allow them to go into them. He gave them permission. <sup>33</sup> The demons went out of the man and entered the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep slope into the lake and was drowned.

<sup>34</sup> The herdsmen saw what had happened. They took to their heels and spread the news in town and country, <sup>35</sup> and people came out to see what had happened. They came to Jesus, and found the man from whom the demons had gone out sitting there at Jesus' feet, clothed and in his right mind. They were afraid. <sup>36</sup> People who had seen how the demoniac had been healed explained it to them. <sup>37</sup> The whole crowd, from the surrounding country of the Gerasenes, asked him to go away from them, because great terror had seized them. So he got into the boat and returned.

<sup>38</sup> The man who had been demon-possessed begged Jesus to let him stay with him. But he sent him away. <sup>39</sup> 'Go back to your home,' he said, 'and tell them what God has done for you.' And he went off round every town, declaring what Jesus had done for him.

I have a photograph, framed above my mantelpiece, of the sea of Galilee seen from the top of the Golan heights. I took it on a sunny day in late autumn: the scene is tranquil and clear, with the town of Tiberias just visible on the opposite shore. You would hardly think that fierce battles have raged up there in our own day. It looks like a place you might go for a country holiday, to get away from it all.

We don't know why Jesus decided to go there, across the lake from the main part of Galilee (the word 'Galilee' referred to various parts of the area, depending on how the borders were redrawn with successive political settlements; but it mostly meant the area to the north and west of the lake). Then, as now, the area to the south and east of the lake was disputed territory. In Jesus' day, the north-east shore of the lake was part of 'Gaulanitis' (the same root word as 'Golan'), and the south-east was the area of the Ten Towns, in Greek the 'Decapolis'. There is still disagreement over exactly where the present incident is supposed to have taken place, but we assume the **gospel**-writers are thinking of either the southern part of Gaulanitis or the northern extremity of the Decapolis. Either way, it was on the eastern side of the lake, and for most of that shore the land does indeed rise steeply from close to the water.

The point of all this is that the area was largely **Gentile** territory, though many Jews would live there as well. Jesus had chosen to cross over on to foreign soil, perhaps to escape the immediate pressure of travelling around under the nose of Herod Antipas. There was, however, to be no peace there either. This violent man, possessed, it seems, by a multitude of spirits, at once confronts him and fills the air with screaming and yelling. The **disciples** must have wanted to get straight back in the boat and head for home again.

Jesus remains calm before this human storm, as he had before the wind and the waves on the lake. The same quiet authority will deal with the one as with the other. The bizarre scene with the pigs (another sign of Gentile territory; Jews didn't eat, or keep, pigs) has sometimes been seen as picture-language for what many Jews, and other inhabitants of the region including perhaps the possessed man, wanted to do with the hated foreign Romans: drive them back into the sea. To dismiss a 'regiment' or 'squadron' of Roman soldiers in that way was the dream of several revolutionary leaders in the first century. But Luke's focus in telling this story is on the man himself, and, as always, on Jesus.

For Luke, what has happened to this man isn't just a remarkable healing; it is 'salvation' (verse 36). The salvation which God promised long ago, which has appeared in Jesus, and which has already reached many in Israel, is now starting to spread further afield.

But the real point of the story comes at the close. The man, quite understandably, wants to be allowed to stay with Jesus. Not only is he now bonded to him by the astonishing rescue he has experienced; he may well assume that things would not be easy back in his home territory, where everyone knew the tragic tale of his recent life. There might be considerable reluctance to accept him again as a member of a family or a village. He would have to stand up and take responsibility for himself; he couldn't rely on being able, as it were, to hide behind Jesus. He is one of those to whom Jesus does *not* say 'follow me' in any literal sense; he is one of those (the majority we may suppose) to whom he said 'go home and tell them'. Having experienced the **good news** in action, he must now tell it himself.

Luke reserves the real point for the last words—in Greek, the last word of the story. 'Go home,' says Jesus, 'and tell them what *God* has done for you.' And the man goes off and tells everyone what *Jesus* has done for him. Luke is not offering us, or not yet, any formula, or carefully worked-out doctrine, of how 'God was in Christ'. At the moment it is simply something people discover in their experience: what Jesus does, God does. Or, to put it the other way round, if you want to tell people what God has done, tell them what Jesus has done. The best brains in two thousand years of Christianity have struggled to find adequate words to explain how this can be; but it is a truth known to many, at a level too deep for mere theory, from the moment they discover God's saving power in the person and work of Jesus.

## LUKE 8:40–56

### Jairus's Daughter and the Woman with Chronic Bleeding

<sup>40</sup> Jesus returned. A large crowd was waiting for him, and welcomed him back. <sup>41</sup> A man named Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, came and fell down in front of his feet. He pleaded with him to come to his house, <sup>42</sup> because he had an only daughter, twelve years old, who was dying. So they set off, and the crowd pressed close in around him.

<sup>43</sup> There was a woman who had had an internal haemorrhage for twelve years. She had spent all she had on doctors, but had not been able to find a cure from anyone. <sup>44</sup> She came up behind Jesus and touched the hem of his robe. Immediately her flow of blood dried up.

<sup>45</sup> 'Who touched me?' asked Jesus.

Everybody denied it. 'Master,' said Peter, 'the crowds are crushing you and pressing you!'

<sup>46</sup> 'Somebody touched me,' said Jesus. 'Power went out from me, and I knew it.'

<sup>47</sup> When the woman saw that she couldn't remain hidden, she came up, trembling, and fell down in front of him. She told him, in front of everyone, why she had touched him, and how she had been healed instantly.

<sup>48</sup> 'Daughter,' said Jesus, 'your faith has saved you. Go in peace.'

<sup>49</sup> While he was still speaking, someone arrived from the synagogue-ruler's house. 'Your daughter's dead,' he said. 'Don't bother the teacher any longer.'

<sup>50</sup> 'Don't be afraid,' said Jesus when he heard it. 'Just believe, and she will be rescued.'

<sup>51</sup> When they got to the house, he didn't let anyone come in with them except Peter, John and James, and the child's father and mother. <sup>52</sup> Everyone was weeping and wailing for her.

'Don't cry,' said Jesus, 'she isn't dead; she's asleep.' <sup>53</sup> They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead.

<sup>54</sup> But he took her by the hand. 'Get up, child,' he called. <sup>55</sup> Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. He told them to give her something to eat. <sup>56</sup> Her parents were astounded, but he told them to tell nobody what had happened.

We don't know for sure that Luke was a doctor, though there are several things in his work that make it likely, as well as Paul's mention of him as 'Luke, the beloved doctor' (Colossians 4:14). But if he was, there must have been a wry smile on his face when he wrote verse 43. Perhaps he knew of patients like that, who had spent everything they had on medical attention and it still didn't make any difference. In a world without modern medicine, and also without any form of state-funded medical aid or private insurance schemes, good health was a precious but fragile commodity. If you didn't have it, you might easily find that sickness and poverty followed each other in a downward spiral from which no return was possible.

Luke has followed Mark in fitting the story of the woman and her 12-year ailment inside the story of Jairus's 12-year-old daughter. (Is there, perhaps, an echo of Luke's own earlier story of the 12-year-old Jesus?) The two parts of the story are joined in several other ways, too, particularly in Jesus' command to Jairus to have **faith**, which comes immediately after he has told the woman that her faith has brought her salvation. If Jairus's faith was to help in the healing of his daughter, then that faith was itself helped by seeing Jesus declare that power had gone out from him even before he knew who had been healed. (The phrase itself is striking, and says a lot about what it was like for Jesus to be instrumental in so much healing.) If touching

Jesus could have that effect, who knows what might happen if Jesus himself came and touched a dead little girl?

Of course, touching was itself very important in both cases. In the world before modern hygiene (soap as we know it wasn't invented until the Middle Ages, and of course many things we take for granted today, such as running water and proper drains, were barely thought of then), purity taboos were vital simply to maintain public health. The Jewish scriptures and subsequent traditions had codified and elaborated them into almost an art form. And two of the most obvious sources of pollution were: corpses, and women with internal bleeding.

In other words, a first-century reader coming upon this double story would know very well that Jesus was, apparently, incurring double pollution. In the first case he couldn't help it; the woman came and touched him without his knowing either that she was doing it or what she was suffering from; but officially he had become 'unclean' none the less. That is partly why the woman hoped to remain hidden, and why she was shy about coming forward, and then crushingly embarrassed when eventually she had to. In the second case, though, Jesus deliberately went and touched a dead body. As we saw with the widow's son at Nain (7:11–17), that very act was breaking through a taboo; and in this case as well the result was instant and breathtaking.

In both cases, the woman and the girl, we find further signs of Luke's care about, and interest in, the stories of women; as is well known, he highlights their role more than the other **gospels**. But in both, as well, we also find foreshadowings of what is to come in Jesus' story. Luke has been patiently pointing out, through one story after another, who Jesus really is. He is also, at the same time, opening the way for his central explanation of what Jesus has come to achieve. When Luke tells of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, and his arrest and death, his main theme is of how Jesus, innocent of anything that would condemn him to crucifixion, takes the place of the guilty, those who had courted that fate all along. Already in these incidents we see the same pattern emerging. Jesus shares the pollution of sickness and death, but the power of his own love—and it is love, above all, that shines through these stories—turns that pollution into wholeness and hope.

This is the message that Luke would repeat to us today, in whatever problem or suffering we face. The presence of Jesus, getting his hands dirty with the problems of the world, is what we need, and what in the gospel we are promised. As we live inside Luke's developing story, we find Jesus quietly coming alongside us in our own muddle and fear. He welcomes our trembling touch, and responds with that central biblical command: 'Don't be afraid.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, [\*Luke for Everyone\*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 78–105.