

INTRODUCING JESUS : PART I

Luke 1:5 - 2:52

⁵ In the days of King Herod of Judea , there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

⁶ Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸ Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.

¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.

God's promise of salvation is about to be fulfilled

Luke opens his gospel in the heart of observant Judaism. We are in Judea, in the temple sanctuary in Jerusalem. From offstage we hear the murmuring prayer of 'the whole assembly of the people'(1:10), while on-stage we watch in silence as a priest offers their prayers to God with the incense which rises heavenwards from the altar.

The priest and his wife, who is also from a priestly family, are old. They are said to be 'righteous', a traditional term, used often by Luke, to describe those who hold firmly to God's promises, and who live in obedience to God's word.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are fitting symbols for those faithful ones of God's people who have spent their lives hoping for the fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham. God promised that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3; quoted Acts 3:25) – a blessing expected through the Messiah.

Zechariah's age and Elizabeth's condition mean that it is beyond their capacity to be the ones through whom the promise would be realised. Nevertheless, obedient to God's word, they wait on God. Their names are symbolic of their hope. Zechariah means 'The Lord (Yahweh) has remembered' and 'Elizabeth' means 'God (El) is fullness'.

Luke wants us to recall Elkanah and Hannah (1Samuel 1), the parents of Samuel, the prophet who anointed God's Messiah, David.

Luke has patterned this announcement on a model frequently found in the sacred Scriptures in passages where God, through the medium of an angel (thus highlighting God's transcendence), announces the conception of a person who is to play a significant role in God's design (Genesis 16:7-13; 17:1-22; Judges 13:2-20). We hear that Zechariah and Elizabeth have been praying for a son. Their prayer is being answered miraculously by God. The boy's name, too, is symbolic: John means 'The Lord (Yahweh) is gracious'.

In the presence of God Zechariah is overwhelmed with fear. As a sinner, he cannot avoid the purifying fire of God's judgment. We are reminded of the response of Isaiah:

Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips,
and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my
eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!

– Isaiah 6:5

Immediately, however, Zechariah is told not to be afraid. He is not to lose his awe and reverence, but he is to know that God has come to save, not to condemn. God has come not as a threat to Zechariah's life but to answer his prayer.

The 'joy and gladness' experienced by Zechariah and Elizabeth will be shared by many, for this boy is to be 'great in the sight of the Lord'. He is to be set apart as a Nazarite (1:15; see Numbers 6:2-4), abstaining from strong drink, the better to demonstrate that it is the Holy Spirit who fills his soul. The angel goes on to speak of the mission from God which John is to carry out. Like Jeremiah, he is to be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Jeremiah 1:5). He is the fulfilment of the promise made through the last of the prophets, Malachi:

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the
great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will
turn the hearts of parents to their children and the
hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not
come and strike the land with a curse.

– Malachi 4:5-6

¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.

¹³ But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,

¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'

¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.'

19 The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.' 21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. 24 After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 25 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the dis-grace I have endured among my people.'

Reference to this prophecy is found in Sirach:

Then Elijah arose, a prophet like fire, and his word burned like a torch ... You were taken up by a whirlwind of fire, in a chariot with horses of fire. At the appointed time, it is written, you are destined to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and to restore the tribes of Jacob.

– Sirach 48:1,9-11

John is to go before the Lord 'with the spirit and power of Elijah', preparing the people 'for the Lord'. The joy they will experience is that associated with the day of the Lord: a day terrible for those who obstinately resist God's saving love, but a day when those who have placed their trust in God and been faithful will be vindicated and experience all that God has promised.

Zechariah fails to entrust himself simply to God's word. The good news being announced to him proves too much for him, causing him to hesitate and to doubt. Neither this, nor Elizabeth's sterility, however, prove an obstacle to God's power. God's words 'will be fulfilled in their time'.

The angel identifies himself as Gabriel. The only book in the Old Testament in which he is named is the book of Daniel (8:16 and 9:21) where the coming of the Messiah is announced (9:25). Luke the historian is interested in linking Jesus with his historical roots. Gabriel is sent by God to announce that the time has come. This is the 'good news' of Luke's gospel. Zechariah's silence is symbolic. He was unable to pronounce over the assembled people the following priestly blessing:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

– Numbers 6:24-26

This blessing can now be given only by the Messiah. For this reason, in the final scene of the gospel, he has Jesus giving the blessing which Zechariah cannot give here (24:51).

The coming of the Messiah

This scene (1:26-38) follows the same structure as the previous one (1:5-25). This enables Luke to emphasise more easily the special significance of Mary's child.

It is the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. We have left the temple behind and find ourselves in a humble town, in Galilee, a territory separated from Judah by Samaria and inhabited by a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. Instead of an old priestly couple, symbols of the ancient and faithful traditions of Israel, we now have a young couple looking to the future, preparing to enter into the promise and hope of marriage.

The previous scene took place in the sanctuary, the holiest place in the temple, the place where God reveals his presence. He revealed himself there to the priest Zechariah, but only in order to point towards another more sacred place where God has chosen to dwell. The 'ordinariness' of the place and of the people of this present scene takes on a special significance when we realise that it is here and to Mary that the announcement of the coming Messiah is made.

From the beginning of Luke's gospel, there is a reversal of expectations. Jerusalem, the temple, the priesthood and the cult have their place, but the Messiah cannot be limited to them. He belongs to us all. Luke wants us to find sanctuaries and prayer that respond to God's inspiring Spirit wherever there are people open to him and willing to listen.

The names of this young couple, too, are symbolic. Joseph means 'let him increase' and Mary, means 'bitter tears' (if its roots are Hebrew), or 'beloved' (if the name has an Egyptian origin). The significance of the names will emerge as the plot unfolds.

Gabriel is the dramatic link with the previous announcement. Mary's child is the Lord in whose sight John will be great (1:15; 7:28). He is the Lord before whom the prophet is to go (1:17; 3:16; 7:27).

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸ And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'

²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰ The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.'

³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Mary's response to the presence of God mirrors that of Zechariah. She, too, is told not to be afraid (see 1:13). She, like Elizabeth, is to conceive and bear a son. Her son, however, is the Messiah, the one in whom is fulfilled the promise made to David:

When your days are fulfilled ... I will raise up your offspring after you ... and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me ... Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

– 2Samuel 7:12-16

The name to be given to her son is symbolic: Jesus means 'The Lord is salvation'. The salvation promised of old by God will be effected through Mary's child. He will be called 'Son of the Most High', 'Son of God'. The title 'Son of God' occurs only three times in the Old Testament, referring each time to the Davidic king (2Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7; Psalm 89:27-28). It seems to be borrowed from the practice of the Egyptian court. It is used in Israel, however, only in the sense that the king is son by adoption, and only from the day of his coronation as king. It is a fitting title for the Messiah, and it is probable that it was one of the titles used of the Messiah at the time of Jesus.

From the beginning Luke is presenting Jesus as the promised Messiah. He is thinking of the risen and exalted Jesus, ruling as Lord from God's 'throne' in heaven over a 'kingdom' that has 'no end' (1:33). 'Son of God', as applied to Jesus, took on a deeper significance for his disciples, as they continued their reflections on the special relationship between Jesus and God. The nature of that relationship will be explored especially in the second half of Luke's gospel.

Now that God's anointed king is coming to bring about the reign of God's merciful love on the earth, no political entity can remain the same. A universal and all-encompassing kingdom is to be established in which God's will is faithfully carried out, and God's peace experienced. The term 'kingdom' is important for Luke. It will recur forty-six times in his gospel and a further eight times in the Acts. Belonging to this 'kingdom' in which God reigns and God's will is carried out necessarily has implications in the social and political arenas.

One of Luke's main themes throughout the Gospel and Acts is that 'nothing will be impossible with God'. In the previous scene we saw that Elizabeth's sterility could not thwart God's purpose. It was the same with Sarai (Genesis 11:30), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21), Rachel (Genesis 29:31) and Samson's mother (Judges 13:2). With the mother of the Messiah we find something even more wonderful. It was the Spirit of God that brought creation into being. Now that same Spirit creates anew in the womb of a virgin. Mary conceives because the Holy Spirit comes upon her, and the Power of the Most High overshadows her.

The image conveyed by the term 'overshadow' is that of the Tent of Meeting erected in the desert – the place where God's glory dwelt. Mary is drawn by God into his embrace. She is surrounded by his radiant glory, and the Spirit of God's love breathes life into her. This life is the fruit of God's love for Mary and her loving response. She is a virgin. Her first love, therefore, is offered to God. It is out of this holy communion that the child is conceived. He is 'holy' and 'will be called Son of God'. We are witnessing a new creative act of God. God has spoken his Word, and his Word finds expression in the child conceived in Mary's womb.

When the prophets spoke of Israel as a 'virgin', they were saying that the people, because of their disobedience, were unable to give and nurture life. Not so with Mary. She is a 'servant of the Lord'. God offers her his love and she opens herself in complete trust to receive it. She believes in the word spoken to her, and responds with a simple and complete 'Yes'. Of herself she cannot conceive the life willed by God. This virgin, however, listens to God and obeys, and so God is able to make her a temple for his Word, a dwelling for his glory.

While nothing can thwart God's loving design, love will not force itself. With all her heart, Mary delights in being God's servant, and freely opens herself to the love which is offered to her. She is presented by Luke as the perfect model of prayer. God, as always, takes the initiative. When Mary is overawed by God's greeting coming to her through the angel, God comforts her, calling her by name. He then goes on to tell her of his special love for her and of the mission he has for her. He promises to draw her into his glory and to make fruitful their mutual love. All that is asked of her is that she believe in his love and allow him to carry out his loving design through her. The whole scene illustrates the essence of prayer.

³⁴ Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'

³⁵ The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'

³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.'

³⁸ Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

Then the angel departed from her.

³⁹ In those days
Mary set out and
went with haste to
a Judaeen town in
the hill country,
⁴⁰ where she entered
the house
of Zechariah and
greeted Elizabeth.
⁴¹ When Elizabeth
heard Mary's
greeting, the
child leaped in
her womb. And
Elizabeth was
filled with the Holy
Spirit
⁴² and exclaimed
with a loud cry,
'Blessed are you
among women, and
blessed is the fruit
of your womb.
⁴³ And why has
this happened
to me, that the
mother of my Lord
comes to me?' ⁴⁴
For as soon as I
heard the sound
of your greeting,
the child in my
womb leaped for
joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed
is she who believed
that there would
be a fulfilment of
what was spoken to
her by the Lord.'

The two mothers rejoice at what God is doing

There is a feeling of excitement as the narrative gathers pace. Mary hastens to be with her relative and Elizabeth's son leaps for joy in his mother's womb (see 1:15), as he senses the presence of the Messiah whose herald he is to be. Elizabeth, too, is 'filled with the Holy Spirit' and, representing all the women of Israel who have longed for the coming of God's Messiah, she praises God for the way he has chosen to bless her who is 'the mother of my Lord'.

The word 'lord' (Greek, *kyrios*), like the English 'sir', is used as a title of respect. It carries special weight when addressed to the king. However, it was also used throughout the Greek Old Testament to translate the divine name *Yahweh*, and Luke has already used it ten times with this significance. *Yahweh* is the God of Moses, the redeemer God who heard the cry of his people and came to deliver them from their distress (Exodus 3:14-15). Calling Jesus 'Lord' identifies him as the one through whom God is to bring about his ultimate act of liberation.

Elizabeth's cry on meeting Mary reminds us of the cry of David as the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's presence among his people, came into the holy city:

How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?'

– 2Samuel 6:9

Elizabeth goes on to express a truth that will emerge as a key theme in Luke's theology. God was able to bless Mary in this wonderful way because 'she believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord'. Mary was willing to place all her trust in God and to say Yes to God's revelation, through her complete acceptance of the love offered her. It was this that made it possible for God to achieve his will and fulfil his promise through her.

Luke now places on Mary's lips a hymn which seems to have been composed within the Jewish-Christian community to celebrate the risen Lord. It belongs within the tradition of the Old Testament 'poor of *Yahweh*' who, having cried out in their distress to the Lord, experience his redeeming action in their lives. The Jewish-Christian community saw in the risen Jesus the fulfilment of all God's promises to them and to their people. Who better to sing this hymn than her who is the mother of the Messiah and his perfect disciple.

From Mary's soul bursts a prayer of praise in which she celebrates the greatness of God. Her spirit delights in the communion of love which she experiences with the Spirit of God. Her prayer is reminiscent of the prayer of Hannah at the birth of the prophet Samuel (1Samuel 2:1-10). The mother of the saviour is speaking for the whole of her race that has laboured to bring forth the child of promise.

The first stanza (1:47-50) expresses Mary's joy at what God has done for her. God, the Mighty One, the Holy One (1:49) is a God of mercy (1:50). This is a key theme of Luke's prologue and is a conviction Luke shared with his mentor, Paul, who speaks of God as being 'rich in mercy' (Ephesians 2:4).

The Greek word *eleos* translated here as 'mercy' is used in the Bible to translate three Hebrew words, each of which expresses a central idea concerning God. The first is *hesed* which speaks of God's faithful commitment to his promises and to the covenant love he has for Israel. The second is *hanan* which speaks of the favour which God shows to those whom he loves. The third is *raham* which derives from the word for 'womb' and speaks of the tenderness of God's love. When we read 'mercy' in Luke, we should reflect on each of these three aspects of God's love.

In the Old Testament God is spoken of as 'merciful' hundreds of times. Two examples will suffice. The words in italics are translated *eleos* in the Greek Bible.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and *be gracious* [Hebrew *hesed*] to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

– Numbers 6:24-26

With everlasting *love* [Hebrew *hesed*] I will *have compassion* [Hebrew *raham*] on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer. ... For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my *steadfast love* [Hebrew *hesed*] shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who *has compassion* [Hebrew *raham*] on you.

– Isaiah 54:8,10

⁴⁶ **And Mary said,**
⁴⁷ **'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,**
⁴⁸ **for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;**
⁴⁹ **for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.**
⁵⁰ **His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.**

51 'He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

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

The second stanza (1:51-55) opens out to a universal horizon, portraying the 'Mighty One' (1:49), the Holy One (1:49), as overturning the power structures that appear to dominate our world: a theme that runs through the ministry of Jesus (the gospel) and the ministry of Jesus' disciples (the Acts). The similarities between this and the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, are striking.

The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. ... The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour.

– 1Samuel 2:4-8

Mary proclaims her belief in God who is faithful to his promises. Those who benefit from God's mercy are 'those who fear him'. This is not the fear that sees God as a threat and recoils from him in terror. Zechariah (1:13) and Mary (1:30) have already been told not to be afraid of God – a message that is dramatically reinforced by Jesus himself later (12:7,32).

The fear which opens us to God's mercy is a reverential awe before the wonder and mystery of God. It includes a recognition of our total dependence on God, and an entrusting of ourselves to Him. There is no place for pride in God's presence.

Even opposition and obstinate rejection by those who are 'proud in the thoughts of their hearts', 'powerful', and 'rich', cannot ultimately thwart the saving action of God (1:47). What he has done for Mary his lowly servant (1:48; see 1:38) demonstrates his power to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. The values commonly exalted by the powerful of this world are completely overturned when God acts in history and hears the cry of the poor. Note Luke's special interest in the promise made to Abraham.

I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

– Genesis 17:5-7; see Genesis 12:3

Like his teacher Paul (see Romans 4), Luke finds hope in that promise, not only for Israel, but for all the nations of the world.

The birth of John the Baptist

As promised by the angel Gabriel (1:13), Elizabeth gives birth to a son who is a source of joy (see 1:14). In obedience to God's command (1:13), Zechariah names him John. God is, indeed, remembering (the meaning of 'Zechariah'), but now he is doing more: he is actually bringing about the grace which he promised (the meaning of 'John').

Zechariah's obedience opens him to the action of God's Holy Spirit 'and he began to speak, praising God'. The words he is inspired to utter are recorded in the verses immediately following this passage.

Luke wants his readers to pick up the excitement, awe and amazement of the neighbours and to ask themselves: 'What will this child become?'. From the beginning it is clear that 'the hand of the Lord was with him'.

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.'

⁶¹ They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him.

⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed.

⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

**⁶⁸ 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear,
⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.**

Zechariah's hymn of exultation

This hymn is carefully constructed: verses 73-79 mirror verses 68-72; verses 72-73, which speak of the covenant, form the hinge. The key themes are God's loving action in history (1:68,72,73,78-79), God's prophetic word (1:70,76), and the promise of salvation (1:69-71,74-75, 77). The promise made to Abraham is recalled (1:73; see 1:55), as is the promise made to David (1:69; see 1:32-33).

It is a hymn praising God's mercy (1:72,78) and faithfulness (1:72). The birth of the prophet who is to go before the Lord's Messiah holds out the promise of Israel being at last 'redeemed', 'saved from our enemies'. Then it will be possible to 'serve him [the Lord] without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days'.

People will experience this salvation 'by the forgiveness of their sins'. The Greek word translated here as 'sin' is *hamartia*, which literally means 'missing the mark'. One thinks of an arrow veering away from the desired direction, or a person lost in a forest, having missed the marked way. The Greek word translated here as 'forgiveness' is *aphesis*, which literally means 'a casting away'.

The casting away of all that would distract us from reaching our goal is an important theme in Luke. The good news is that God loves us. The word spoken through the power of God's Spirit and conceived in Mary's womb will make it evident that God wants to remove from us all that distracts and burdens us.

Zechariah's contemporaries, and the contemporaries of Luke, were overwhelmed by all kinds of oppression. They were in danger of seeking release by following the many false directions offered to them. Their only hope was to place their trust in God and to prepare for the journey on which God would lead them.

Zechariah praises God for the miracle of his son's conception, and prophesies that it will be his mission to 'go before the Lord to prepare his ways' (see 1:17), preparing them for the experience of having their sins forgiven.

The hymn ends with the dawn about to break. The Messiah is about to be born. He will enlighten not only the people of Israel but all who live in 'darkness and the shadow of death' – an allusion to Isaiah 9:1 which refers to 'Galilee of the *nations*'. He will show people how to live in such a way as to experience God's peace, a peace offered to everyone who is open to grace (Acts 10:34-43).

⁷⁸ **'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'**

⁸⁰ **The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.**

¹ In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn [guest room].

The birth of the Messiah

Luke's interest in the universal extension of the grace offered in Jesus becomes obvious in this scene. Our horizon moves from the kingdom of Herod (1:5) to the empire of Augustus, honoured throughout the world as saviour and peacemaker. The Roman armies had established a form of peace throughout the empire. God was causing 'the dawn from on high to break upon us'(1:78) with the birth of the one through whom God's salvation and God's peace were being offered to the whole world.

In Luke's narrative, Jesus' parents are portrayed as obedient subjects of the emperor. We will find that, throughout his gospel and the Acts, Luke is at pains to present the Christian church as being a gift and not a threat to the Empire. In mentioning that Jesus is Mary's 'first-born son' Luke is alluding to the deliverance from Egypt and the ritual that consecrated the first-born son in a special way to God (Exodus 13:1 -16). Luke tells us that Mary 'wrapped him in bands of cloth'. Jesus shared the need for care and protection of every newborn baby. The Book of Wisdom places the following words on the lips of king Solomon:

I am a mortal, like everyone else ... I was nursed with care in bands of cloth, for no king has had a different beginning of existence; there is for all one entrance into life, and one way out.

– Wisdom of Solomon 7:1,4-6

She then 'laid in a manger' the child who was to be God's response to the hunger of his flock:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel.... He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.

– Micah 5:2-4

The guest room (*kataluma*, see 22:11) was full. It is no place for Jesus, for he has not come as a guest. God is answering the plea of Jeremiah:

O hope of Israel, its saviour in time of trouble, why should you be like a stranger in the land, like a traveller turning aside for the night?

– Jeremiah 14:8

Jesus is not born in the place where travellers stayed for the night, but in a manger. Isaiah writes:

The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's manger;
but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.

– Isaiah 1:3

Will the people recognise in Jesus their Lord and Saviour?

One of Luke's key themes is that the good news is proclaimed to the poor, for it is those whose only hope is in God who are open to the surprise of God's revelation and respond to it. This was true of Zechariah and Elizabeth who were faithful in observing God's law (1:6), and who, in their need, pleaded with God to make it possible for them to have a son (1:13). This was true of Joseph and his wife Mary, the lowly servant of the Lord (1:48). Here it is the 'shepherds' to whom the 'good news' is announced.

Once again (see 1:19) we see the 'angel of the Lord'. Jesus is called 'Saviour' (see 1:47,69), 'Lord' (see 1:43), and 'Messiah'. This is the first time we have met this last title, though the idea has been there from the beginning of the gospel (1:17,31-33,69).

Messiah ('Christ') derives from chrism, an oil used for anointing. Associated especially with festive celebration, it had a special cultic use in the consecration of the king. As the chrism flowed down over the head and beard of the king, the Spirit of God anointed him. As the perfume filled the air around him, so did the glory of God radiate out from him throughout God's Holy Land. We read of king David:

The Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

– 1Samuel 16:12-13

Chrism came to be associated also with the consecration of a priest (Exodus 29:7), and perhaps also of a prophet (Isaiah 61:1; Psalm 105:15). In different ways these, too, were responsible for making the Spirit of God effectively present in people's lives. The kings, priests and prophets, however, carried out their divine commission imperfectly. This gave rise to hopes that one day the Spirit would come down and anoint the perfect Christ, the shepherd who would finally bring about the fulfilment of God's promises (Ezekiel 34:23).

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

14 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.'

16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

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

The revelation by the angel of the Lord that the promised Saviour, Messiah and Lord has appeared on the earth forms the climax of Luke's prologue. We might have expected a magnificent sign, unmistakably demonstrating divine power. What we have instead is a sign that speaks of human frailty and dependence: 'You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger' (2:12). This does witness to divine power, but in a way that upsets and reverses common human expectations of God. Indeed God has 'lifted up the lowly' (1:52).

The joy is not just for the shepherds. The stars of heaven, angels forming God's heavenly army, burst into a cosmic hymn of praise. As Peter makes clear in his sermon to the Gentile household of Cornelius, the peace celebrated here is meant for all:

The message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all.

– Acts 10:36

The excitement continues as we see the shepherds go 'with haste' to see the child. They add their praise to the hymns of exaltation that have been rising to heaven throughout this prologue, and, in their jubilant confession, are for Luke a symbol of the missionary communities for whom he is writing.

Mary, already portrayed by Luke as the perfectly obedient 'servant of the Lord' (1:38), shows us how we should receive God's favour. She 'treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart'. The word translated 'pondered' in this verse is the Greek, *sympallein*, from which we get our word 'symbol'. Mary held all that had happened in her heart, knowing that the meaning of it all would one day come together, as God's purpose unfolded through her and through her child.

She is presented as the one who most perfectly lives out the qualities expected by Jesus of his disciples. Here it is the quality of faith. She is asked to trust that God will enlighten her in time as to the meaning of the mystery in which she has become involved. She has said yes to God. Now she must be attentive to every word that comes from God's mouth, every event that happens in her life. The initiative always comes from her Lord and it is God who will achieve his will through her.

The 'heart' for Luke, as for the New Testament generally, is a person's inner centre whence all thoughts, desires, affections, hopes and decisions arise (see also 1:17,51,66; and 2:35, 2:51). Mary has given her first love to God, and her heart is open, listening for the movement of God's Spirit, eager to comply with God's purpose in her life, and believing 'that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord' (1:45).

21 After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, Every first-born male shall be designated as holy to the Lord), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.

26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

Jesus' circumcision

Mary's first-born son (2:7) is incorporated by circumcision into the chosen race, and named Jesus because of the mission he has from God the Saviour (1:31,47,69).

The Messiah enters God's temple

Jesus' parents go to the temple in accordance with the law which required a mother to undergo a rite of purification one month after the birth of a male child (Leviticus 12:1-8). Since Jesus was also the first-born, his parents had to consecrate him to God (Exodus 13:2,11, quoted Luke 2:23).

The origin of this custom seems to go back to the time when the first-born son was responsible for carrying out the family religious rituals. When the order of Levites was established for this purpose (Numbers 3:12-13), the custom arose of the first-born being bought back from God, as it were, by an offering made to the temple (Numbers 18:15-16). Mary and Joseph can afford only the offering of the poor (Leviticus 5:7; 12:8).

Luke may want us to see in this scene the fulfilment of the prophecy of Malachi:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming says the Lord of hosts.

– Malachi 3:1

God's Spirit guides Simeon to the temple. Simeon stands for all righteous and devout Israelites, and he is to see with his own eyes the 'consolation of Israel'. The Greek word, translated here as 'consolation', is *paraklêsis*. It appears also in the opening words of the prophet of the exile: 'Console my people' (Isaiah 40:1). The consoler ('paraclete') is the 'Lord's Messiah' (see 2:11). In taking the child in his arms, Simeon represents those Jews who welcomed Jesus as the one promised them by God.

The inspired words spoken by Simeon prepare Luke's readers to see in Jesus the salvation which God has prepared 'in the presence of all peoples'. He is, indeed, as we have been told from the beginning, 'the glory of Israel'. He is also 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (compare Isaiah 42:6). Soon we will hear Luke quoting Isaiah: 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God' (3:6 = Isaiah 40:5). Luke, the Gentile doctor writing for a largely Gentile church, wants to emphasise this 'catholic' perspective from the beginning (see also Acts 15:14-18; 28:25-28).

In Mary's hymn of praise upon meeting Elizabeth (1:46-55) we have been introduced to the reversal that God is going to effect through the Messiah and his herald: the proud will be scattered, the powerful brought down and the rich sent away empty. Simeon's words to Mary declare that God's judgment applies to the people of Israel and not only to their enemies. Jesus will cause many in Israel to rise, but many will fall, too, and Mary's child will be 'a sign that will be opposed' (see 11:27-32).

Isaiah, too, recognised that salvation, while offered to all, would not be automatically effective for all. God respects our freedom to reject his love. If we do reject it, we will fail to understand, fail to repent, and so fail to find healing. God's prophet must be prepared for this, as the following text ironically indicates:

And the Lord said, Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.

– Isaiah 6:9-10; quoted in Acts 28:26-27

On the other hand, perhaps the falling and the rising in this text refer to the same people. The fact that 'falling' comes first, and the fact that for 'rising' Luke uses *anastasis*, a word reserved elsewhere for resurrection from the dead, may indicate that Simeon is referring to those 'many' who will share in Jesus' dying and rising. Luke will stress the need for suffering with Jesus (falling) if we are to rise with him. Mary is warned that this will be true for her.

²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law,

²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and

the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed

³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.

³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Luke concludes this scene with a woman prophet who draws us again to praise God as our hope for Jerusalem's redemption is rekindled (see 1:68). Like Zechariah and Elizabeth in the opening scene, Simeon and Anna symbolise all that is best in the traditions of Israel. They see and hold the one whom their ancestors have long awaited, their hearts filled with joy as they praise God.

Luke has modelled his account of Jesus' birth partly on the biblical narrative of the birth of Samuel. We have already noted that the Magnificat closely resembles the prayer of Hannah [Anna], Samuel's mother. The final words of this present scene come from the same tradition:

Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people.

– 1Samuel 2:26

Jesus is God's Son

This scene projects us forward to Jesus' public ministry. Jesus is twelve and so just entering his maturity as a Jewish boy, expected now to begin taking on his responsibilities as a member of God's chosen people.

For the third time in this prologue (see 1:9 and 2:22) the scene is set in the temple. He who has been introduced as God's Son (1:32,35) utters his first words, and speaks of God as his 'Father'. Already he has a sense of his mission in which concern for the things of God must take precedence over any other consideration, however sacred.

The words 'I *must* be about my Father's affairs' introduce us to an expression, 'must', which Luke uses throughout his work to indicate God's ultimate purpose. People, by their obstinate refusal of grace, can fail to be part of this purpose. The purpose itself, however, will ultimately prevail.

Mary, the perfect disciple, is portrayed here as experiencing the absence of her Son. She and her husband are anxious. They find him 'after three days' in his 'Father's house'. It was on the third day that God revealed from the thick cloud his presence on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:9-11). So it is that Jesus' parents, like all Jesus' disciples, have to search for him in darkness.

John of the Cross expresses this experience beautifully in the first stanza of his Spiritual Canticle:

Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag after wounding me.
I went out calling you and you were gone.'

They find him in his 'Father's house'. Luke uses the temple as a symbol of the community of believers. It is within this community that he wants his readers to find Jesus.

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴²

And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival.

⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it.

⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends.

⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

⁴⁸ When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.'

⁴⁹ He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' (or 'about my Father's affairs') ⁵⁰ **But they did not understand what he said to them.**

⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.

His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years (stature), and in divine and human favour.

Jesus' parents fail to understand. Later we will see the same reaction from Jesus' disciples (9:22,44-45; 17:25; 18:31-34; 24:25-26). Only by remaining with Jesus throughout his ministry and right through to the cross and resurrection, can we come to know the mysterious ways of divine providence.

That Mary came to understand is clear from Luke's presentation of Mary in the midst of the disciples when Jesus finally departed from her (Acts 1:15). Already the sword begins to pierce his mother's soul (2:35). Already she and her husband are being asked to let Jesus go, without understanding what is being asked of him, or of them.

Conclusion

Jesus has come to the temple in obedience to God's command (Deuteronomy 16:16; Leviticus 23). He does not, however, stay there. His consecration to God requires of him that he return to be part of the world to which he is soon to be sent to reveal the good news.

Once again, the one who is closest to Jesus 'treasures all these things in her heart' (compare 2:19). Luke wants us to do the same, for the profound meaning of Jesus' intimacy with God and his obedience will emerge only under the guidance of God's Spirit.

The conclusion echoes earlier material (see 2:19 and 2:40). It echoes also Paul's words in which he speaks of:

building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

– Ephesians 4:12-13

Luke's prologue in the GrecoRoman world

It is not without significance that Virgil (70-19BC) writes that shepherds heralded Augustus's birth, or that he speaks of the birth of Augustus as 'good news' ('euangelion'). Augustus the new born child is proclaimed saviour (soter) and described as lord (kyrios). He is seen as the bringer of a new age of peace. He is called the son of God. He shows exceptional qualities at the age of twelve, etc.

Suetonius (69-122AD) Suetonius in his *Lives of the Caesars* says that there were prophecies, portents and prefigurements before the birth of Augustus. His was a miraculous conception. It took place in the context of worship at a temple. Upon his birth, Augustus was declared to be a King and a Ruler.

Luke takes a clearly political stance against Emperor worship and so against the Empire and its religion. He knows the 'god-words' it used for the Emperor. He applies them not to the Emperor but to Jesus. He is saying that faith in Jesus, not Emperor worship is the only way to find salvation. When Luke writes, he is trying to find a place for Jesus in this broad matrix of Greek-Roman imperialist life at this time.

Luke copied the going stories about Augustus and constructed parallel stories about Jesus. He wrote Jesus up that way. He gave Jesus the sort of Greek-Roman biography that Augustus had. But he highlighted the simple humanness of Jesus at all points. This is his greatness.

Concluding comment on Luke's prologue

The prologue sets the stage for the gospel and Acts and functions as an introduction to the major themes that govern the plot of Luke's dramatic narrative. From the beginning it is the Spirit of God who is the main agent in the events that are to have crucial significance for the whole world (2:31-32).

It is from God (1:11) that Zechariah learns that his wife has miraculously conceived the one who is to herald the long-expected day of the Lord, when all God's promises will be fulfilled (1:20).

It is from God (1:26) that Mary learns that she is to give birth to the Messiah, and we are assured that 'nothing will be impossible with God' (1:37).

Mary is praised because she believed that there would be a 'fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord' (1:45) and she praises God for his faithfulness and his power (1:47-55).

Zechariah's hymn of praise is inspired by the 'Holy Spirit' (1:67) as he, too, gives thanks for what God is doing in our world to demonstrate his mercy and faithfulness in bringing about the promised redemption and salvation of Israel (1:68-79).

It is from God (2:9) that the shepherds hear of the birth of their Saviour, Messiah and Lord (2:11).

The dominant mood of the prologue is one of ecstatic joy and praise, celebrated within the awe and mystery that accompany the presence and action of God. Luke organises

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his material with consummate skill and artistic beauty as he presents John and Jesus as belonging together in God's design. He fills his prologue with allusions to the sacred writings of Israel to demonstrate the historical continuity between what is happening through Jesus and the action of God in the history of his chosen people.

Luke and his community knew the experience of failure, and the crucifixion of Jesus himself was the measure of the extent to which people would go in opposing God's grace. Luke prepares us for this, too. Simeon holding the child represents all the hopes of Israel at last finding their fulfilment (2:28), yet, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, he turns to Jesus' mother and warns her: 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be sign that will be opposed'(2:34).

Luke is preparing us for those characters of his narrative who express our human resistance to grace and who represent the sin in all of us who fail to believe. This resistance will mean that God's purpose was not achieved in the lifetime of John or Jesus, and Luke's community saw this failure, too, in the early post-crucifixion years of the Christian community.

Yet the failure was only partial for already, in the final scene of the prologue, we see that Jesus is committed to God (2:49), just as his mother had been (1:45), and throughout the gospel and the Acts we will find many who continue the remarkable faith and openness to grace that has characterised the main characters of the prologue . Nothing is impossible to God. God will fulfil his word and bring about his promised salvation of establishing a Messianic kingdom for Israel, a salvation that will extend to the whole world in spite of and through human rejection .

The tragedy of human rejection is always present in the real world in which God acts. The good news on which Luke focuses our attention is that God integrates this rejection into his merciful and saving purpose. This is Luke's key theme.

Throughout the prologue – and it will be the same for the gospel and the Acts – Luke directs our contemplation to Jesus. Far from presenting us with a small number of incidents to satisfy our curiosity concerning the early years of Jesus' life, Luke has anticipated the gospel in a rich and compelling way by the manner in which he has portrayed Jesus.

He is the saviour (1:31; 2:11), the son of God (1:32,35; 2:49), the son of David (1:32), the Messiah (2:11,26), the Lord (1:43), the one in whom, and through whom, God's promises are fulfilled (1:54), the one who brings peace and joy (2:10,14), the one who is with us (2:7,40,51), the one who brings good news to the poor (2:8), the glory of Israel and the light of the whole world (2:32). We will be judged by the way we have related to him (2:34).

Having introduced the main themes of his work and introduced us to Jesus, Luke is now ready to draw on the traditions of his community to 'write an orderly account'(1:3) of Jesus' public ministry: what he did and what he said, how people responded to him, and especially what it is that Jesus revealed about God that continued to inspire Luke and the communities for whom he was writing.