

INTRODUCING JESUS : PART II

Luke 3:1 - 4:13

Three portraits of Jesus

Luke now presents three portraits, each of which creates a perspective that is central to his understanding of Jesus. Together they prepare the reader for a proper reading of the gospel. The first portrait is of John the Baptist (3:1-20), the prophet who prepares the way for Jesus. Jesus emerges from within the religious experience of Judaism, and John represents Israel in bearing witness to him (see Acts 19:14). Luke presents John as an example to the Christian community, which is also called to bear witness to Christ in the Greco-Roman world.

The focus of attention in the second portrait is Jesus (3:21-22), and precisely the intimacy of his relationship with God. As we watch Jesus throughout the gospel Luke wants us to see the action of God's Spirit at work in him. As we listen to Jesus' words we are to realise that we are hearing the word of God.

Luke prefaces the third portrait with a genealogy (3:23-38), the purpose of which is to present Jesus as being part of our human history. He traces Jesus' family tree back to Adam, thus highlighting the fact that he belongs to the whole human race. In his third portrait (4:1-13) Luke establishes the fact that Jesus, although truly God's son, is also one of us, experiencing humanity as we experience it. Jesus was flesh like us; he was born of woman; he suffered and was tempted. The wonder of his life was that, unlike us, he did not sin but remained perfectly open and responsive to God.

John the Baptist heralds the Messiah

It is in the context of human history, not merely that of the Jews, that God's saving action is revealed and effected. Luke's stage, therefore, is that of the Roman Empire. Tiberius was the adopted son of Augustus (see 2:1), and ruled as emperor 17-37AD. The fifteenth year of his reign was, by our reckoning, 28-29AD, about 32 years after the death of Herod the Great. Jesus was probably in his early thirties.

Lysanias administered Abilene, an area northwest of Damascus. His area of jurisdiction included Mount Hermon and the anti-Lebanon range.

When Herod the Great died in 4BC, his kingdom was divided among three of his sons. Herod Antipas governed Galilee and Peraea (sometimes called Transjordan as it was on the east side of the river). Philip governed Iturea and Trachonitis, areas to the south of the territory governed by Lysanias, and north and east of the territory governed by Herod. The bulk of Palestine, comprising Samaria, Judea and Idumaea, was ruled by Archelaus.

Archelaus was deprived of office in 6AD and Rome took direct control of his area, placing it under the governorship of a military prefect. Pontius Pilate was the seventh such prefect. His term of office was from 26 to 36AD.

Internal Jewish affairs in Samaria, Judea and Idumaea were placed under the authority of a Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, presided over by a high priest appointed by Rome. While Caiaphas was officially high priest from 18 to 36AD, the real power seems to have remained in the hands of his father-in-law, Annas (compare Acts 4:6).

These were the main characters in the political scene at the time. The main agent in human history, however, is not one of the political leaders. It is God, and God's word comes to John in the wilderness (see 1:76,80).

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,

² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins

The expression ‘forgiveness of sins’ has occurred already in Zechariah’s hymn (1:77). The word ‘baptism’ literally means being overwhelmed by or immersed in water. We find it used of Naaman, who is cured of leprosy by being immersed seven times in the waters of the Jordan (2Kings 5:14). Judith immersed herself in purifying waters in preparation for the mission God had for her (Judith 12:7). Metaphorically, the word ‘baptism’ can be used for being overwhelmed in other ways as well. In the Greek version of Isaiah, we find the expression ‘anarchy baptises (overwhelms) me’ (21:4).

John the Baptist challenged the people to go down into the river Jordan and to allow themselves to be immersed in the water. This was in order to dramatise what was happening in their lives and to help them realise their need for a saviour. It was from the chaos of the swirling waters that God brought forth the splendour of the heavens and of the earth (Genesis 1). It was through the waters of the Red Sea that the people had to pass to find freedom (Exodus 14:21-31).

It was customary to baptise Gentiles who converted to Judaism. John, however, is baptising Jews, asserting thereby that being a Jew is not enough. A complete purification is needed by all if they are to enjoy the new creation and the new redemption promised by God.

John’s baptism is described as a ‘baptism of repentance’. Repentance involves a change of mind and heart, and a turning to God (see 1:77). The people were being summoned in many directions by those who promised them salvation. The Sadducees were calling them to fidelity to the cult and to tradition. The Pharisees saw salvation as coming from fidelity to God’s will as expressed in meticulous observance of the Law. Another group, the Essenes, called for a withdrawal from the darkness of the world, in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

The Baptist stood out against all these groups. He called for a new way of looking at life, a change of mind and heart, a new vision. We are reminded of the promise of God as expressed by the prophet Ezekiel:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

– Ezekiel 36:25-26

Listen also to the exhortation of Isaiah:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice.

– Isaiah 1:16-17

Preaching ‘a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ is more than just a summary of John’s mission (compare Acts 13:24). Luke wishes his readers to recognise a continuity of mission from John to Jesus (4:18; 5:17-32) and then to Jesus’ disciples (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 26:20).

Luke goes to sacred Scripture to establish the context within which he wishes to introduce John the Baptist. The quotation from Isaiah 40:3-5 (Luke 3:4-6) is taken from the opening passage of that part of the scroll of Isaiah that comes from an anonymous prophet of the final years of the Babylonian exile (550-539BC). Hearing of the victories of Cyrus of Persia over the Babylonian armies, and witnessing the liberation which the conquering king was effecting throughout the crumbling Empire, the prophet in exile saw Cyrus as God’s instrument in liberating his chosen people from this new slavery.

The language of Isaiah is reminiscent of the Exodus (Exodus 14-15) and recalls God’s great act of liberation when, through Moses, he led the escaping slaves out of Egypt, and through the desert to the land of Canaan, the Promised Land (c.1250BC).

Just as the prophet in exile was preparing the way for the Lord, so John the Baptist is preparing the way for one whom Luke has already spoken of as the ‘consolation of Israel’ (2:26) – an expression drawn from the opening words of the same prophecy (Isaiah 40:1).

Much has to be done to ‘prepare the way of the Lord’ (see also 1:17,76). Luke is presenting John as a model for Jesus’ disciples, who also have the mission of preparing the Lord’s way (9:52; 10:1; see also 7:27). Luke’s special interest in the universal scope of God’s providential action is indicated by his inclusion here of the expression: ‘all flesh shall see the salvation of God’. This picks up the theme already expressed by Simeon (2:32).

⁴ **as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:**

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

⁵ *Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;*

⁶ *and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”*

compare Matthew 3:3
Mark 1:2-3

7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'

The crowds are coming to be baptised, but are unwilling to repent. They remind John of snakes attempting to flee from a forest fire.

The expression 'wrath to come' can also be found in the earliest work of the New Testament. Paul speaks of :

waiting for God's Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come.

– 1Thessalonians 1:10

To grasp the significance of the expression we need to recall that God is love and that we are created to experience without distraction the intimacy of divine communion. It follows that all that is impure in us has to be burned in the fire of this love till nothing remains but love.

This is a painful process, and though it is initiated by God's love and has the purification of love as its goal, it is experienced as 'wrath'. Paul writes:

Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

– Romans 2:4-5

Part of us resists this purifying love and our resistance disturbs us at the core of our being. Suffering the effects of our resistance to grace, we project anger onto God:

Gather together, gather, O shameless nation, before you are driven away like the drifting chaff, before there comes upon you the day of the Lord's wrath.

– Zephaniah 2:1-2

I will gather you and blow upon you with the fire of my wrath, and you shall be melted within it. As silver is melted in a smelter, so you shall be melted in it; and you shall know that I the Lord have poured out my wrath upon you.

– Ezekiel 22:20-22

John's words are strong, like the words of the prophets we have just quoted, because he wants the people to realise that, while they may deceive themselves and may succeed in deceiving others, they cannot deceive God. Evil and its effects must be 'thrown into the fire' to be burned away. This purifying will be done by the 'more powerful one' whom John is announcing.

compare Matthew 3:7

In seeing through the hypocrisy of the crowd, John the Baptist draws on a long prophetic tradition:

These people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote.

– Isaiah 29:13

They did not obey or incline their ear, but, in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels, and looked backward rather than forward.

– Jeremiah 7:24

Orchards are cleared of trees that fail to bear fruit (see also 6:43-44; 13:6-9). The wind separates chaff from grain. Chaff and useless trees are burned. So it must be for those who are making a show of repentance, but who fail to produce its fruit.

Looking back and claiming to belong to Abraham is not enough (compare 16:24,27,30). Indeed, as the Baptist says (using a play on words that is obvious in Aramaic, though lost in translation): ‘God is able from these stones (‘abanîm) to raise up children (banîm) to Abraham’.

The practical responses given by John to those who ask him for direction illustrate the key elements of his teaching as presented by Luke. In the tradition of the Old Testament, ethics centre on justice and care for the needy:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

– Isaiah 58:6-7

John’s preaching draws on this tradition, and in this, too, he prepares the way for the ‘good news’ (3:18) preached by Jesus (see 6:30-31; 12:33; 14:12-14; 16:9; 18:22).

⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

⁹ Even now the axe is lying at [is laid to] the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, What then should we do?

¹¹ In reply he said to them, Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, Teacher, what should we do?’ ¹³He said to them, Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.

¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, And we, what should we do? He said to them, Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.

compare Matthew 3:8-10

¹⁵ *As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,*

¹⁶ **John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.**

¹⁷ **His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'**

¹⁸ *So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.*

John knew that his contemporaries were suffering under all kinds of oppression. He knew that their only hope was to place their trust in God and to prepare like their ancestors for the journey on which God would lead them. To make this journey of liberation they needed the 'more powerful one who is coming'. He would overwhelm them, but not simply with water. He would immerse them in the Spirit with which he himself was anointed.

Luke has already in the infancy narratives established the continuity between John and Jesus. In focusing here on the baptism of the Spirit, he wishes to indicate how Jesus goes beyond John, and is, indeed, the fulfilment of God's promises. He will contrast the two baptisms again in his second book (Acts 1:5; 11:16; 19:4).

The coming Messiah is portrayed also as a judge (3:9,17) who will baptise 'with fire'. This is typical Old Testament imagery for God's judgment:

Our God comes and does not keep silence, before him is a devouring fire, and a mighty tempest all around him.

– Psalm 50:3

Jesus will reveal that the fire is a fire of love. We are invited to entrust to love whatever in us resists grace and we are assured that love will pursue us till we open ourselves to its power, until God is 'all in all' (1Corinthians 15:28).

How often we find ourselves struggling to find direction in a 'wilderness'. Tracks that we once followed now seem to go nowhere, or are swept away, and we find ourselves in a trackless waste. Loves that once sustained us have proved fickle and have gone. Worst of all, our own sins return to haunt us, and we are faced with our powerlessness to find direction and freedom. This happens to us personally. It happens to those we love and to communities that are significant to us.

Luke is inviting us not to lose hope but to realise that the desert can also be the place where a new life can be found and a new creation can begin. The prophet Hosea understood this when he had God say: 'I will now allure her [his people Israel], and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her' (Hosea 2:14). We too can prepare to encounter the one who is stronger than we are, the power and gentleness of whose Spirit can speak tenderly to us, and call us to journey with him to a deeper meaning and a fuller freedom.

Jesus was intimately connected with the history and the hopes of his own people. Saint Paul says: 'In him [the Son of God, Jesus Christ] every one of God's promises is a Yes' (2Corinthians 1:20). If Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel, he is also the fulfilment of the promises made to any and every people.

This was Paul's belief and Luke shares it. What, then, about the promises which God has made to us, personally and through the history of the people from whom we come? What about the promise made us when God imagined us into life with those unique and unrepeatable qualities that are ours; the promises made whenever anyone has responded to God's inspiration by mediating God's love to us; the promises that are made to us as the gift of life opens up for us with every new day. For all the insufferable pain he experienced, the author of the Book of Lamentations could still write:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.' The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.

– Lamentations 3:22-25

The one to whom we look for forgiveness and healing to find direction when we have lost our way is the one whom our souls recognise. We are made for God and Jesus attracts us because in his person he fills our senses with the perfume (the 'chrism') of God. We can share his life and his grace, and become, as Paul says, 'the aroma of Christ to God' (2Corinthians 2:15); but only when we have allowed Jesus to baptise us with his Spirit.

Are we ready for the change of mind and heart that this will require? Are we ready for the surprise that the good news will bring to our lives? Do we dare to believe that the news is, indeed, 'good'? Can we dare the desert journey, or will we continue to hunger for the times when self-reliance (that is, reliance on ourselves without recognising our dependence on God) seemed to work so well? If we are not yet ready for such a journey, let us read on, for Jesus, presented to us by Luke, may well attract us so that we will find ourselves captivated by him, and unable to resist the grace of companionship which he offers us, however high the cost might appear.

¹⁹ **But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done,**
²⁰ **added to them all by shutting up John in prison.**

compare Matthew 14:3-4
Mark 6:17-18

John is imprisoned

Luke concludes this section on John by mentioning John's imprisonment. He promised us 'an orderly account' (1:3) — orderly from the point of view of narrative theology, not chronology. He is about to retell the story of Jesus' baptism and though it is clear from the tradition that it was John who baptised Jesus, Luke wants to complete his account of John's ministry before beginning that of Jesus so that he can highlight the new beginning effected by Jesus. It is Jesus who baptises with the Holy Spirit and with fire (3:16; see also Acts 1:5, 11:16). It is through Jesus that God's reign is manifest (7:28) and the good news is proclaimed (16:16). Herod rejects John's word and is able to imprison him, but he cannot 'shut up' God's word.

Jesus is declared Son of God at his baptism

In the opening chapter, we stressed the importance of reading the text as poetic drama. This scene is a perfect example. The picture it gives us of Jesus is one which Luke wishes to remain before our eyes throughout the gospel. We would expect it to be striking, as indeed it is. The Spirit that brought about Jesus' conception (1:35) here comes down upon him from heaven, anoints him as the Messiah, and commissions him to bring about the fulfilment of God's promises.

Here, at the beginning of his entry into public life, we see Jesus mixing with sinners and choosing to identify with them. In seeking John's 'baptism of repentance' (3:3), Jesus must have been looking for a new heart and a new mind: a new vision of how he and his contemporaries might break free from sin. He himself — so those who knew him tell us — was sinless, but he certainly felt the weight of sin all around him, and, as we shall see, he closely identified with those who were its victims.

Jesus must have often experienced the burden of helplessness, as he found himself confronted with the despondency, pain and distraction surrounding him and the emptiness of religious practices that left people in their sin and in their misery. The intimacy of his own experience of God must have led him to believe that there had to be a better way, and so, hearing of John, he joined the pilgrims who listened to John's preaching and accepted his baptism.

Our attention is riveted on Jesus. Luke does not describe the baptism and does not even mention John. His interest is in the communication between God and his Son. Luke tells us that Jesus was praying. The divine revelation made to Zechariah was also at a time of prayer (1:9-11). It was the same for Anna (2:37-38). Luke will return, again and again, to Jesus' prayer (5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:28-29; 10:21; 11:1-2; 22:41-42; 23:34; 23:46). This focus on prayer is found also in Acts (Acts 9:11-12; 10:2-6, 10:9-16; 13:2; 22:17-21).

Jesus' baptism proved to be a turning point in his life. We know virtually nothing about him prior to this day. After it, he becomes a preacher and healer and an extraordinary example of love as he gathered disciples around him and began a movement that was still growing at the time Luke wrote his gospel.

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,

22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him *in bodily form* like a dove.

And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

compare Matthew 3:13-17
Mark 1:9-11

Jesus' Baptism

To portray the significance of that day Luke uses language drawn from some of the most powerful passages of the Old Testament. Jesus' experience at his baptism marked the beginning of the new creation, and he who stepped out of the river was, indeed the new Adam as Saint Paul tells us (1Corinthians 15:22,45; Romans 5:12-21).

Luke demonstrates this truth by recalling, in a few brief phrases, the swirling chaos of the primeval waters, the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, and the creating word of God that breaks the silence (compare Genesis 1:1-3). A secondary motif is that of the crossing of the Red Sea. He goes on to describe the heavens being opened. God is revealing the word that is to bring about the redemption of the world.

For a long time, the Jews felt the lack of prophets to speak God's word to them as in times past (Daniel 3:28). Nowhere is this more poignantly expressed than in the cry of those who, spurred on by the hope of returning from exile in Babylon, had given up everything, only to find themselves living among a people who had largely lost faith. Their cry is included in the scroll of Isaiah:

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down. ...
From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him...
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.
Your holy cities have become a wilderness. ...
and all our pleasant places have become ruins.
After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord?
Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?

– Isaiah 64:1-12

God's answer to that cry was to send the fullness of his creative Spirit down upon Jesus, to consecrate him as his Messiah. God's Holy Spirit has been directing the action of the gospel from its beginning. Elizabeth was 'filled with the Holy Spirit', as was her husband, Zechariah. The same was promised to their son, John. Simeon came into the temple 'guided by the Spirit', who we are told 'rested on him'. It was the Holy Spirit who brought about Jesus' conception in his mother's womb, and, immediately after Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit will lead him into the wilderness, and then into Galilee. Jesus' whole ministry flows from the anointing of the Spirit (4:18).

But what kind of Spirit was it that Jesus had so abundantly? A reading of the prophecies of the Old Testament might have led us to expect the spirit of the Messiah to be that of a warrior who would rid the world of sinners.

We might have expected his spirit to be likened to that of a roaring lion. From the preaching of John the Baptist, we might have expected his spirit to be likened to a fire scorching a forest, or an axe laid to the root of a tree! But such was not the Spirit that characterised Jesus. His was the spirit of the dove.

By stating that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus '*in bodily form like a dove*', Luke is stressing the fact that Jesus' dovelike spirit was something that was palpable in him. It affected his whole person. Those who came into contact with him during his public ministry saw and heard and felt the Spirit acting in him. The image of the dove reminds us of Noah's ark and the dove that brought the first signs of new growth on a world that had succumbed to the deluge (Genesis 8:11). We might also reflect on the following ode from the Song of Solomon:

My beloved speaks and says to me:
 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;
 for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.
 The flowers appear on the earth;
 the time of singing has come,
 and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.
 The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom;
 they give forth fragrance.
 Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.
 O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff,
 let me see your face, let me hear your voice;
 for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.'

– Song of Solomon 2:10-14

In spite of the image of God so often presented by many of the religious leaders of his day, Jesus knew that God's voice was 'sweet'. He knew that the face of God was 'lovely'. His prayer to hear that voice and to see that face was heard in a remarkable way on the day of his baptism. Jesus' questions were answered, and he felt impelled to begin his public ministry. At the same time, it was an answer that confirmed in him that spirit of gentleness and peace that his disciples found so attractive and so convincing.

To capture for his readers the essence of Jesus' experience, Luke drew on the thirty or more years of prayerful reflection of those who had watched Jesus closely, and had come to know him intimately. We can assume that Jesus had known a special intimacy in his prayer from his childhood (see 2:49). His practice, even as an adult, of calling God 'Abba', a word he would have used as a child in speaking to Joseph, would seem to indicate that. On the day of his baptism, however, he was to experience this intimacy in such a way that it caused him to go out to share with others what he had come to know.

When the king was consecrated the assembly, echoing God's words promising that he would be a father to David's son 'and he a son to me' (2Samuel 7:14), proclaimed the words: 'You are my son; today have I begotten you' (Psalm 2:7). This cry had not been heard since the consecration of the young king Jeconiah during the siege of Jerusalem in 598BC. By quoting this psalm here, Luke wants us to understand that God himself is consecrating Jesus as his Messiah.

Jesus' Baptism

But what kind of a Messiah is he to be? This will begin to emerge in the following scene, but is already indicated in the words which follow. They remind us of the words God spoke to Abraham when he seemed to be calling for the sacrifice of his only son, Isaac: 'Your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love' (Genesis 22:2).

The words used here by Luke to describe the intimacy of Jesus' communion with God echo the opening words of the first song of the Servant of the Lord, a servant through whose suffering the people would find redemption. The song is worth quoting at length for it captures the essence of Jesus' baptismal experience as understood by Luke:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice ['a just verdict'] to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice ['a just verdict'].
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice ['a just verdict'] in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

– Isaiah 42:1-9

This ancient song expresses well the essence of Jesus' mission in the years between his baptism and his death, as he opened people's eyes to the wonder of God. His mission was to liberate them from the darkness and captivity that is the lot of those who fail to make connection with God, and who fail, therefore, to understand themselves or the world. Human ignorance, pride, insecurity and fear had distorted religion. Jesus set about declaring God's 'verdict' on humankind, a surprising verdict, and one welcomed by Jesus' disciples as 'good news'. What was it?

It is expressed in the opening words of the above poem, transformed by Luke into the even more intimate 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased'. We have been prepared for this moment by the account of Jesus' conception (1:28-35).

The intimacy experienced by Jesus during his Nazareth years was the intimacy of one whom God was 'taking by the hand and forming'. Only now, in his early thirties, was he ready for his mission to preach, teach and heal. Only now is he ready to challenge his contemporaries and to take the side of the poor against their oppressors. He had been waiting on God; or rather God had been waiting on him: waiting for the moment when his heart was broken enough, open enough, to receive the fullness of the Spirit that his Father was wanting to pour out upon him.

The moment comes at the Jordan river when Jesus is overwhelmed by an experience of profound intimacy with God. It is an experience of being in a special way the son of the God whom he had come to address as 'my Father' (2:49), of being loved and delighted in by the Transcendent One for whom he yearns.

That the song from Isaiah expresses the essence of Jesus' mission will become obvious from the remainder of the gospel. It is important to note here that Jesus recognised that his baptism experience was not simply meant for himself. Yes, he was the beloved son of God, and God did delight in him. But he realised that this experience was one that was meant for everyone. The verdict passed by God on the people of this broken and discouraged world was that each and every person is a son or daughter of God, and that the God who creates us does delight in us. The idea is not new. We find it in the promise made through Isaiah:

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married.

– Isaiah 62:4

We find in the prophecy of Zephaniah:

The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.

– Zephaniah 3:7-8

We find it also in the psalms:

The Lord takes pleasure in his people.

– Psalm 149:4

What is new is the intimacy of this delight as seen in the life of Jesus, and the way in which Jesus drew others into this intimacy.

Jesus' Baptism

True, it is up to us to accept the companionship that is offered. God's delight is in being with us. If we choose to reject God's offer, God does not and cannot force his love. Hence the call for faith. We must believe in God's love and the call for repentance. We must turn to God and open our hearts to receive his love. As the author of the Letter to Hebrews says, quoting from Habakkuk 2:4:

My righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.

– Hebrews 10:38

When we shrink back from communion with God, we harm ourselves and others. God wants to delight in us, as a father or mother delights, and he continues to offer his love unconditionally to us. What Jesus knew is that the reason for much of the sin in the world and much of the despondency that he witnessed was that people did not know how deeply loved they were. It was his determination to tell them so, and his conviction that God was sending him to demonstrate God's love to them, that provided the energy behind his public ministry. Jesus wanted others to know what he came to realise so powerfully that day at the Baptism. He wanted, as John has already promised, to baptise them, as he had been baptised, with the Holy Spirit (3:11).

If we have been baptised, the grace offered Jesus at the Jordan has been offered to us. For some, this came as a result of a personal commitment resulting from a journey of faith. For others, baptised as infants, it happened because of the love of parents and the welcome of the Christian community. In every case, baptism is a gift, coming not as a result of anything we have done but from God's gracious love.

We recall the experience of David when he was anointed by the prophet Samuel:

Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed David in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

– 1Samuel 16:13

Baptism is something God does in overwhelming us with his love, pouring out his Spirit upon us, and entrusting us to the community which believes in his Son, Jesus. We are born innocent but, like a fish in a polluted river, we are born into a world of sin. Obviously, baptism does not free us from being affected by the oppression caused by sin any more than it freed Jesus. It does, however, make it possible for us to do as Jesus did: to say No to sin and Yes to the love offered us by God. It does so by welcoming us into the community of faith which keeps alive for us the memory of Jesus and mediates to us his redeeming love.

In baptism, God pours out upon us that Spirit which was enjoyed by his Son, Jesus. It is God's pledge to us of his enduring love. Adult baptism highlights the necessity of our personal acceptance of the gift. Infant baptism highlights the fact that what we are receiving is sheer grace and not anything we can earn of ourselves. At some time, all of us, whether gradually or suddenly, need to make this gift our own and respond to God in personal gratitude for the wonder of the delight he has in us. The recognition of this will bring about in us what it brought about in Jesus: a wholehearted response to God's call for us to go out to others in a mission of love directed and energised by God's Spirit.

Those of us who have not been baptised may experience the desire to know what Jesus knew on the day of his baptism, and to join with that community of people who, while constantly struggling with sin, know that there is forgiveness and believe that God does indeed delight in us. The following call, found in the Isaiah scroll, can be read as a call to follow the attraction of our heart in drawing close to Jesus:

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant.

– Isaiah 55:1-3

²³ *Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli, ²⁴son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Melchi, son of Jan-nai, son of Joseph, ²⁵ son of Mattathias, son of Amos, son of Nahum, son of Esli, son of Naggai, ²⁶son of Maath son of Mattathias, son of Semein, son of Josech, son of Joda, ²⁷son of Joanan, son of Rhesa, son of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, son of Neri, ²⁸son of Melchi, son of Addi, son of Cosam, son of Elmadam, son of Er, ²⁹son of Joshua, son of Eliezer, son of Jorim, son of Matthat, son of Levi, ³⁰son of Simeon, son of Judah son of Joseph, son of Jonam, son of Eliakim, ³¹son of Melea, son of Menna, son of Mattatha, son of Nathan, son of David, ³² son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon, ³³son of Ammi-nadab, son of Admin, son of Arni, son of Hezron, son of Perez, son of Judah, ³⁴ son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, son of Terah, son of Nahor, ³⁵son of Serug, son of Reu, son of Peleg, son of Eber, son of Shelah, ³⁶son of Cainan, son of Arphaxad, son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Lamech, ³⁷ son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan ³⁸ son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.*

Jesus belongs to the human race

There are seventy-seven names in Luke's list. They are blocked into eleven groups of seven. The only other genealogy in the gospels is found at the beginning of Matthew (Matthew 1:1-17). It is very different from the one given here by Luke. Both have Jesus descending from David (Luke 3:31; see Matthew 1:27,32,69). However, Matthew has Jesus descending via the kingly line of Solomon, whereas Luke traces Jesus' line back to another of David's sons, Nathan (3:31, see 1 Chronicles 3:5).

From Joseph back to David the only two names which are included in both genealogies are Zerubbabel and Shealtiel (3:27; see 1Chronicles 3:17-19). We have no evidence of the source from which Luke drew any of the other names between Joseph and Nathan. Presumably he was using a non-biblical Jewish source from the Hellenist period.

The line from David back to Abraham is, for the most part, identical with the list given in Matthew. It comes from the First Book of Chronicles (1Chron. 1:34 and 2:1-5, 9-15). Whereas Matthew begins with Abraham, Luke uses the First Book of Chronicles to trace Jesus' ancestry right back to Adam (1Chronicles 1:1-4, 24). This is in accordance with his desire to present Jesus as belonging, not only to the race of Israel, but to the whole world (see 2:32). Jesus, the son of God, belongs to us all, and 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God' (3:6). Adam being the 'son of God' (3:38) places the whole human race in a special relationship with the creator. As Paul says:

In him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your poets have said, for we too are his offspring.

– Acts 17:28

Jesus contends with evil

In this portrait Luke is ensuring that we do not misunderstand what it means for Jesus to be the beloved son of God. To be loved by God and to respond to this love as Jesus does means to want to be part of God's concerns. God loves the human race and so wants to pour his Spirit out upon us in the wilderness where we find ourselves as we journey to our promised home.

It is the same Spirit who has just come down upon Jesus who leads him into this wilderness. Jesus is totally immersed in our human condition and so is challenged to face squarely the evil that he encounters there.

When we are tempted by evil, so often we fail the test. He remained sinless, refusing to be distracted from the obedience which, as a beloved son, he willingly gave to his Father.

Jesus had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect ... Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

– Hebrews 2:17-18

We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

– Hebrews 4:15

The 'wilderness' with its lack of order was thought of as the dwelling place of demons. The people of Israel were tested there for forty years:

The Lord made them wander in the wilderness for forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord had disappeared.

– Numbers 32:13; see 13:25; 14:34

'Forty' is symbolic of a generation, a lifetime. Jesus was tested, as we all are, right through to his death. He was never free from the struggle that is the lot of every human being.

The desert is a place of testing. It is also a place of special intimacy.

I will now allure Israel, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.

– Hosea 2:14

Surely the Lord your God ... knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing.

– Deuteronomy 2:7

¹ **Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,**
² **where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.**

compare
 Matthew 4:1-2
 Mark 1:12-13

Jesus is tempted

The number forty symbolises a life of struggle. It symbolises every person's journey to the mount of God (see Elijah in 1Kings 19:8). It symbolises also a time of prayer, as when Moses spends forty days and forty nights in communion with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:17-18; 34:28).

People in New Testament times were very conscious of the spirit world — those forces of good and evil that influence our human existence, but that lie beyond our control. This is still true of many cultures today. If some of us imagine these forces in ways other than as angels and demons, it remains true that God's grace is mediated to us in many mysterious ways, and that we find ourselves influenced towards good or evil in ways that lie beyond our comprehension.

The key message for us in this passage is that Jesus' mission was to defeat evil in all its manifestations, by the power of the Spirit of love that graced him so beautifully at his baptism. This conflict and Jesus' victory is a theme which permeates the whole of Luke's gospel.

Luke dramatises the testing of Jesus by drawing on catechetical material that had been developed within the Christian community as a result of reflection on the classical temptations of Israel in the wilderness. A precedent for this can be found in the Book of Deuteronomy, which Luke quotes at the conclusion of each of the trials. There, we are told:

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart.

– Deuteronomy 8:2

Having passed through the waters (3:21-22), just like his ancestors, Jesus is tested, like them, in the wilderness. In this testing we find what is 'in his heart'.

We have just been told that Jesus is the beloved Son of God (3:22,38), the one on whom the Spirit of God has descended, the Messiah designated by God. In this scene, Luke continues to explore the question: What kind of Messiah is he? What does it mean for Jesus to be God's Son?

The first test of the Israelites in the desert occurred just after they had passed through the waters of the Red Sea. They experienced hunger and were tempted to go back to Egypt. There they could prepare their own food, thus guaranteeing security against starvation (the account can be read in Exodus 16). They failed to trust that God would provide them with what they needed for their journey. Reflecting on this failure, the writers of Deuteronomy concluded:

He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

– Deuteronomy 8:3

There is a hunger that goes beyond the hunger of the body: it is a hunger for God. It is this hunger that Jesus experiences and it is this hunger in people that he has come to satisfy. We cannot do this by our own power but only through trust in God, and by living ‘by every word that comes from the mouth of God’.

Every word! Jesus has just experienced beautiful words: God has said that Jesus is God’s Son, that he is loved. God is delighted in him (3:22). But in sharing our human condition Jesus, like us, will hear painful words that will cause him sorrow and demand all his courage and trust.

Here he tells us that we must place our trust in God, in the dark as well as in the light, in agony as well as in ecstasy. Luke wants us to watch Jesus doing this throughout the whole of his life among us, throughout the ‘forty days’ in which he shares with us our journey in the desert of this world towards the promised land of full communion with God.

So much of our life is spent in a desert. We are made for God, and, as Saint Augustine prays: ‘Our hearts are restless till they rest in You’ (Confessions 1.1). Yet God remains transcendent, beyond our direct grasp. Everything is graced, for the God who loves us is always inspiring us to respond in love, and giving us his Spirit to enable us to do so.

But how difficult it is to keep believing this, and to avoid the distractions that promise us a more immediate fulfilment of our longings! In our desperation we want to be out of the desert and we are tempted to build oases for ourselves that give us some respite from the journey. However, that is all they can do, and they do so at the cost of our failing to move on.

² He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.

³ The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’

⁴ Jesus answered him, It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’

compare Matthew 4:2-4

Jesus is tempted

So it is that the Spirit of God keeps leading us, too, into the desert, so that in coming to know the power of God who nourishes us with the bread from heaven and quenches our thirst from the only spring that can satisfy us, we will come to know ourselves as we really are.

The great sin is the sin of relying on ourselves without reference to the source of our life. Dependence on God is not a substitute for responsible action. It is going to the source of love so that all our actions will indeed be inspired and empowered by God's Spirit. There is no other way to enjoy our heart's desire or to really contribute to the joy of others. Jeremiah saw this when he gave expression to God's complaint:

My people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns that can hold no water'.

– Jeremiah 2:13

Our longings are infinite, our capacity without measure. We are made in God's likeness, and are capable of being transformed by God into 'the image of his Son' (Romans 8:29). Let us face the reality of the desert, and dare the journey, believing that it is God's Spirit that is leading us into it. Like Jesus, we will experience whatever comfort God knows we need. Even if all seems dark, there will be nothing to distract us from seeing the true light that shines in the darkness, guiding us to our goal.

It is from his many experiences of deprivation, when all he could do was remain trusting in God and obedient to the Spirit that guided him — experiences dramatised here in the first trial — that Jesus could say: 'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat ... Strive for his [the Father's] kingdom and these things will be given you as well ... Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (12:22,31,34).

We see from his overcoming of the first trial that his heart is with his Father. He needs 'bread', he needs sustenance, but he knows that his greatest need is for love, and this love is received as a gift, with empty hands, from the one to whom we pray: 'Give us each day our daily bread' (11:3)

The second temptation alludes, once again, to the Book of Deuteronomy which concludes with Moses on the mountain looking out over the Promised Land and hearing the promise of God:

I will give it to your descendants. I have let you see it with your own eyes.

– Deuteronomy 34:4

Already in Deuteronomy we have been told the only way to enter and stay in that intimate communion with God of which the Promised Land is a symbol: it is the way of obedience, the way of love:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

– Deuteronomy 6:4-9

The authors of Deuteronomy go on to give the following warning:

When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors ... to give you ... and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.

– Deuteronomy 6:10-13

The story of the golden calf demonstrates the failure of the people to heed God's warning:

They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!

– Exodus 32:8

Jesus' response to the first temptation demonstrates that his trust is in God his Father. The same point is being made here in an even stronger way. We worship that to which our heart is ultimately directed. Jesus' heart never strays from God in whom he places his trust. More than the Promised Land is at stake. Jesus' mission has a universal scope, so he is shown 'all the kingdoms of the world'. The devil offers Jesus 'their glory and all this authority'. Jesus, the 'more powerful' one promised by John, refuses to serve evil or to receive anything except from the hands of God. Jesus wants to win the world, but he will do so only with love and only in reliance on his Father's will.

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

⁶ And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.'

⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'

⁸ Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'

compare
Matthew 4:8-10

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you," ¹¹and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."¹² Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

compare
Matthew 4:5-7,11

This brings us to the third test. Having been fed with the manna, the Israelites presumed they had a right to expect from God whatever they wanted. They demanded that God prove that he cared for them by meeting all their needs. Experiencing thirst, they demanded water, failing to trust that he, the source of living water, would care for them. He did care for them. As Paul says:

What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

– Romans 3:3

In a dramatic gesture Moses strikes the rock, symbol for God, and water gushes forth for the people to drink (Exodus 17:6). The people, however, sinned in failing to trust:

He called the place Massah ('trial') and Meribah ('contention'), because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

– Exodus 17:7

The authors of Deuteronomy concluded:

Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.

– Deuteronomy 6:16

Jesus knows that being God's son means placing all our trust in God. The devil tempts him with words from Psalm 91, which is, indeed, a beautiful expression of this trust:

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust'. ... he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge ... For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. ... Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honour them.

– Psalm 91

Jesus resists this temptation. To trust in God is not to trust that God will adapt to our demands. Rather, it is to live one's life simply and honestly, waiting on God and obeying God's will, trusting God on his terms and not on our own. Assured of God's love we are to be alert to the ways we tend to deceive ourselves. In the name of trust we can leave everything to God, washing our hands of any responsibility.

We can also be presumptuous. Jesus teaches us the need for a listening heart that waits on God and acts only on God's inspiration.

It is not without reason that the final clash with evil occurs in Jerusalem. Luke is preparing us for the victory which Jesus will win on the cross. After this victory won in the desert, Luke presents Jesus' public ministry as victoriously challenging the powers of darkness and establishing God's reign on earth. He does not let us overlook the humanity that Jesus shares with us. It will be startlingly manifest when the 'opportune time' comes, when 'Satan enters into Judas'(22:3), and the 'power of darkness' has its hour (22:53).