

JOURNEYING
WITH LUKE

Reflections on the Gospel



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and Mark Pryce

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Preface: What is this book about?

The Revised Common Lectionary has established itself both in Anglican parishes and other denominations as the framework within which the Bible is read on Sundays in public worship. It follows a three-year pattern, taking each of the synoptic Gospels and reading substantial parts of them in the cycle of the liturgical year. While each of the three years is dedicated in turn to readings from Matthew, Mark and Luke, during parts of the year extensive use is also made of John.

All three authors of the present book have extensive experience of reading, preaching, leading, learning and teaching within this framework. We have worked in a variety of contexts: universities, theological colleges, parishes, chaplaincies and religious communities. We share a passion for theological learning that is collaborative, inclusive, intelligent and transformative. This shared concern brought us together across our participation in various aspects of the life of the Diocese of Birmingham in 2007. We started a conversation about how best we might help individuals and groups understand and use the Gospels. In busy and distracted lives we aspired to provide a short resource for Christians so that the Gospel narrative might be explained, illuminated and interpreted for discipleship and service.

This volume is the result of those conversations. We hope that it will enable readers (alone or in groups) to enter into the shape of the Gospel of Luke: to enter imaginatively into its life, its concerns, its message, and in doing so to encounter afresh the story of Jesus and, like Theophilus in Luke 1.1–4, to know ‘the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed’. The text of the book has emerged out of shared study and reflection in which we attended to the text and examined

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how best to unfold the character of the Gospel, with the intention of offering a mixture of information, interpretation and reflection on life experience in the light of faith. To this end, Paula Gooder provides an introduction to the biblical text, Mark Pryce through creative writing offers an imaginative response to each of the themes and James Woodward offers a range of styles of reflection. We have all been able to comment on and shape each other's contributions. We hope that the material will be used in whatever way helps the learning life of disciples and communities of faith. We expect that some of it will be used as a base for study days and preparation for teaching and preaching.

Such a short volume as this can make no claim to comprehensiveness. The criteria of choice of seasons and texts have been determined by our attention to the liturgical year. Our choice has also been shaped by our attempt to present some of the key characteristics of the Gospel.

First we offer a concise introduction to the main characteristics and themes of Luke's Gospel. Paula helps us into the shape of the Gospel through a discussion of the person of Luke, his storytelling technique, his vision as a historian and the main theological themes of the Gospel. This introduction is completed with a piece of poetry written by Mark which invites us into an imaginative reflection on the text. A similar pattern is followed in the subsequent eight chapters, which each pick up one of the major seasons in the cycle of the Church's liturgical year. Paula offers us material to expound the particular style of the Gospel. Mark's theology is distilled into poetry and prose, offering us imaginative spiritual insights grounded in the Gospel messages. In addition, James offers pastoral and practical theological reflections that hold together faith and experience. At the end of each chapter we ask readers to consider the foregoing material in the light of their own understanding and experience. These questions might form the basis of group conversation and study. A prayer shaped by the theme of the

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chapter invites further contemplation of the Gospel text as it is rooted in faith and discipleship.

Throughout the book we have wanted to wear our scholarship lightly so that the book is both accessible and stimulating. For the sake of clarity and brevity we have been selective in our choice of themes. At the end of the book we offer some resources for further learning.

We hope that you will find this book useful and that it will give you a glimpse of how much we have gained from our collaboration on this project. We thank Ruth McCurry, our editor, for her support. We also thank all those people and communities that have enriched, informed and challenged our responses to the Gospel.

James Woodward

Paula Gooder

Mark Pryce

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Advent

Exploring the text

Waiting for salvation

Advent encourages us to turn our attention to waiting for the birth (and second coming) of Christ. Unlike Mark's Gospel, the Gospel of Luke introduces us, his readers, to the theme of waiting through the various characters who themselves are waiting before Christ's birth. Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah and then, later in the story, Anna and Simeon are all waiting in different ways. Mary and Joseph (though Joseph only appears fleetingly in Luke) are of course waiting for the fulfilment of the angel Gabriel's prophecy that Mary will bear a child. The waiting of Elizabeth and Zechariah, Anna and Simeon has taken place over a much longer period of time.

We are not told how old Elizabeth is, but Zechariah describes himself as an 'old man' (Luke 1.18) and the phrase 'advanced in years', translated by the NRSV as 'getting on in years', comes twice (1.7, 18), impressing upon us that Elizabeth may be too old for childbirth already. With Simeon and Anna, again the impression given is that they have been waiting for a long time. This is certainly true of Anna. The text of Luke (2.37) is not clear about whether Anna is 84, or whether she was married for seven years and has been a widow for 84 years (which would make her something over 100). She, Luke tells us, spent all her time fasting and praying and never leaving the temple. We assume that Simeon was also old, though the text doesn't actually say that he was. All it says is that once he greeted Jesus he

felt able to say that God could now let his servant go in peace. This is normally understood as a reference to death, and to imply that Simeon has been waiting to die.

Whether this is correct or not, by introducing Simeon and Anna Luke reminds us that waiting for Christ is not just waiting for a person but also for an event. Simeon and Anna have been waiting for ‘the consolation of Israel’ (2.25) or for the ‘redemption of Jerusalem’. This third story brings the person of Jesus firmly together with that event of salvation, reminding us that in the person of Christ salvation has, at last, arrived.

Luke draws us, then, into waiting by introducing three sets of two (Joseph and Mary, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna) alongside whom we can wait as we wait for the birth of Christ.

The Canticles: Singing an old new song

One of the striking features of these three couples is that one of each pair sings a song or canticle in response to the events before them. For Zechariah and Simeon, this song arises at the end of the time of waiting, whereas for Mary the song comes much earlier in the process, after she has gone to visit Elizabeth.

It is commonly recognized that these songs feel very familiar, and not just because we know them so well from the Gospels. They have a ring of the Psalms about them. In fact, even more than that, they bear a remarkable resemblance to psalms of praise, like Psalm 145, which declare God’s glorious acts of salvation and goodness in the world. This resemblance is made even clearer in Mary’s song which has substantial overlaps with Hannah’s Song of Praise in 1 Samuel 2.1–10. Phrases such as ‘My heart exults in the LORD’ (1 Samuel 2.1) and ‘the LORD makes poor and makes rich’ (2.7) suggest that there is some distinct connection between the two songs.

The question is, what kind of overlap? Some scholars argue that these songs were not sung by Zechariah, Mary or Simeon and were written instead by Luke. They argue that he also crafted

some of the key speeches in Acts, in order to place important pieces of theology in the mouths of his key characters. This was a very common technique in the ancient world, particularly among Greek historians like Thucydides, who used speeches as a way of reflecting on the events he was describing. If this is what Luke did, he placed these songs in the mouths of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon, borrowing from the riches of the Old Testament in order to make some profound theological statements about God and salvation.

Another option is that these really are the words of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon – even if they’ve been polished up by subsequent memory – and that the framing of them indicates an important relationship with the Psalms of the Old Testament (actually Luke’s inclusion of them indicates this, whoever first sang them). We so often treat the Psalms as though they are entirely static, finished products but evidence from the Psalter itself (which contains versions of the Psalms in slightly different forms) and from the Judaism of the Second Temple Period (where we find non-canonical collections such as the Psalms of Solomon) indicate that the Psalms were seen more as dynamic texts. They were not so much like our hymns, which we turn to and sing as they are, but were explored, reflected upon and then adapted to people’s own lives. So that using the phrases, theology and ideas of this treasure trove of worship, new songs could be created out of old ones.

These songs use the language and theology of the Old Testament to sing out in praise of the events of the New Testament. They are old, new songs of praise to God.

Before anything has happened?

One of the other features that seems to join all three canticles together is that their content seems out of proportion with what has actually happened at that stage in the story. Mary declares, while Jesus is still in her womb, that the mighty have been put down and the rich sent empty away. While we know

that this is to be one of the major characteristics of Jesus' life and ministry, Jesus has not yet been born and none of these events has actually happened. Again Zechariah blesses God because 'he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them' (Luke 1.68), when all that has happened is that John the Baptist has been born. Simeon, perhaps most surprisingly of all, declares that his eyes 'have seen . . . salvation' (2.30) when all he has seen is Jesus as a tiny baby, who has had no chance of doing anything yet.

What each of the canticles points us to is that Mary, Zechariah and Simeon were, in their waiting, able to see beyond the events immediately before them and to understand their significance. They were able to see that the events surrounding Jesus' birth heralded a new future in which the poor and lowly would find hope and God's people their redemption. They began to comprehend that God's future had already begun to break into the world. It is this kind of vision that Advent encourages us to recapture, so that in our waiting we might begin to see the world through the eyes of God.

Imagining the text

The opening two chapters of Luke's Gospel are full of divine disturbance and of praise. This next poem explores the different responses which God's salvation evokes in Luke's characters. God's redeeming action is faithfully awaited by expectant Israel, but it becomes apparent in ways which are disruptive, extraordinary, 'outside the box'. The traumatic character of divine grace as Luke portrays it overwhelms some, and inspires in others an outpouring of joyful praise.

Zechariah's sacred duties as priest in the temple are interrupted by the angel Gabriel with the unsettling message from God that he and Elizabeth will be parents to a long-awaited child. Zechariah is stunned into a dumb silence, but Elizabeth

and her neighbours are full of praise (Luke 1.1–25). Then in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy her cousin Mary also receives Gabriel's extraordinary call: to be the mother of the Saviour Jesus! She hurries up to the hill-country to visit Elizabeth; Elizabeth's child in the womb leaps for joy and Mary breaks out into her song of praise, *Magnificat*, for all that God is doing in and through her for his people Israel (1.39–56, Advent 4). In these exclamations of fearful wonder and praise, Luke allows the praise of women earlier on in the story of salvation – the songs of Hannah the mother of Samuel (1 Samuel 2.1–10), Sarah the mother of Isaac (Genesis 18.9–15; 21.1–7), the women friends of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 4.13–17) – to resonate around the birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus. At the birth of John, Zechariah breaks out into praise (Luke 1.67–79); at the birth of Jesus the shepherds hear the angels sing God's praise (2.8–20). When Simeon and Anna encounter the infant Jesus with his parents in the temple at Jerusalem they recognize him as the Christ, and pour out their praise to God who is fulfilling through this child his ancient promises to Israel (2.22–38).

The songs from these chapters of Luke's Gospel are set through the Sundays of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany in Year C: Zechariah's song (1.68–79) for Advent 2 and Christmas Eve; Mary's song (1.46–55) for Advent 4. At Christmas the angels' song is the Gospel for Christmas Day (Set I and Set II readings); Simeon's song and Anna's praise (2.22–40) come later in Year C, at Epiphany 4 and at Candlemas.

The disturbance of praise

What begins in the temple,
interrupting sacred custom with a strange rhythm of promise
and purpose,
sealing the lips of an uncertain priest
until his heart learns the beat,

blows like warm breath through chill Judaeen hills
to a tidy, silent home,
sets curtains and shutters flapping and rattling,
the wretched lingering lodger Shame evicted
with a shout from the guts:
'Elizabeth is pregnant!'

What follows on
is disgrace ripening into song:
Elizabeth is singing, her neighbours are singing, and panting
up from the plains
cousin Mary is singing too
the songs of Hannah, Sarah, Naomi, Ruth;
these ancient songs like succulent fruit
fresh in the mouths of those who trust.

You might have thought we'd reached the end of it
when even muted Zechariah sings
responsory to the circumcision cries of John,
calling him the name which contravenes convention!
But there is more at Bethlehem:
the songs of angels luring shepherds to abscond.
And back in Jerusalem
Simeon finds a tune in the light of the child's face,
and sounds exquisite baritone
for Anna's lyric ecstasy
as the shaded colonnades of temple fill with the bright
melody which all nations will come to sing.

Reflecting on the text

[Mary] treasured . . . all these things . . . in her heart.

(Luke 2.19, NIV)

In this reflection we direct our attention to the person of Mary, the mother of the Lord. We think of Mary against the background

of the whole history of the longing and expectation of the people of Israel as they look forward to the coming of the Messiah. We see her as a living representative of all that history, the one in whom it reaches its culmination. Mary stands for continuity and history, she is faithful to all that has been handed on from the past in the history of God's people. At the same time and at the same moment she inaugurates an era which is altogether new, a new creation.

As Luke tells us, Mary treasures and ponders all these things in her heart; things new as well as things old. And just as so often in the life of an ordinary family it is the mother who acts as the remembrancer, keeps in touch with the family's scattered memories, remembers birthdays and anniversaries, so, in a mysterious way, it is with the person of Mary. She is in some way the memory of the Church, its inner sanctuary where the most intimate secrets of God's dealings with his people are pondered and treasured.

I've come to know the spiritual reality of Mary through the Sisters of the Love of God at Fairacres, the Anglican community whose vocation is that of prayer, silence and contemplation. Perhaps the Church in its wisest moments has seen that the mysteries of Mary are somehow hidden, inner mysteries to be pondered and discerned in prayer and silence and not to be proclaimed from the housetops.

Mary's prayer and faith and expectations sum up the whole history of God's people in the centuries before the Incarnation, so that constant pondering and treasuring of the things of God remains at the heart of God's people through all the centuries of the history of the Church. And here I feel constrained to reflect that despite all the controversy and division which has surrounded the Church over these past years, I cannot believe that God is any less with us now than he was before. I reflect, too, that we have something to learn about what is the heart of faith – into what we are calling people through service and worship, through prayer and struggle. In your community

perhaps you might use Advent to discern the way into which you are being guided, amid hesitations and uncertainties, the particular strengths and weaknesses of place and people. In this there can be a discernment of the way in which God wishes us to walk, a way which in the end will enlarge and deepen, not destroy or impair our realization of the unity, the holiness, the catholicity and the sheer wondrous beauty of God.

All of us might wonder where the future is taking us. We might ask how we are to sing an old new song. If we are living through times of change and controversy, that is all the more a call to us to treasure and ponder in our hearts all those inward riches that God has granted to his people in the centuries of Christian history. It is all the more a call to us to seek to enter into the silence and faithfulness of Mary, to share more fully in her response of obedience and love, so that the new may come to birth in us as it came to birth in her. We are called to listen carefully to the story of Luke and to allow the text to draw us into a deeper and richer apprehension of the possibilities of praise.

That mystery of Mary's childbearing which we ponder in the Gospel is itself nothing more than the mystery of the Incarnation which we will celebrate at Christmas. It is the mystery of the true calling and dignity of our human flesh, the true mysterious dignity of our human life, ours and that of every one of our fellow human beings. How necessary and how vital it is for us to dwell in our thoughts and prayers on the true dignity of that human nature, when in so many parts of the world we see violent manifestations of inhumanity, contempt for human nature into which we all fall when we give up our lives to the power of destruction and fall out of the loving kindness of God.

In Advent we wait and ponder and reflect. What makes us sing? What brings us to life? How might we call others into a fuller life with God? This life is possible now, it is breaking into our living and loving as we ponder how in our waiting we might begin to see the world through the eyes of God.

Action, conversation, questions, prayer

Action

Read the 'songs' in the early chapters of Luke: Mary's song (1.39–56); the song of Zechariah (1.57–80); the song of the angels and the shepherds (2.8–20); the song of Simeon (2.25–35); the song of Anna (2.36–38).

Conversation and questions

- If you were to write your own song of praise, what would you give thanks for? How do you express your thankfulness?
- Who holds the memories of significant events and people in your family, church or workplace?
- What kinds of music or songs help you to express your praise? In this context, which hymn or worship song is most meaningful for you?

Prayer

We praise you, O God,
For the endless songs of thankfulness
Sung by your faithful people
Through the ages.
As we ponder the mystery
Of your Son born among us,
May we join our praise with theirs.
Amen.