



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
Diocese of St Edmundsbury
and Ipswich

Living Faith in Suffolk



Living Luke 1

Images

Front page: l – r from top

Sudbury © Peter Tarlton; Fields © John Parr; Orford Castle © Richard Croft; Passion Play © Christ Church Moreton Hall; St Edmund © St Edmundsbury Cathedral; Orford Ness © Ashley Dace; Orwell Bridge © Corinne Mills; UCS © Oxymoron

Copyright © 2015 by the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich

All rights reserved. This publication is intended only to be reproduced, free of charge, by local churches. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means for financial or commercial gain, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Living Luke 1 is one of the Living Faith in Suffolk resources produced by the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and available on www.cofesuffolk.org

It is written by Ruth Dennigan, 2015.

If you use this course, please let us know at lesley.steed@cofesuffolk.org.

Introduction

Living Luke 1 is a Living Faith in Suffolk course intended as an introduction to the key themes of Luke's gospel with a focus on their relevance for today. It is written under the following headings:

- Temple (page 4)
- Messengers (page 7)
- Mission (page 10)
- Journeys (page 13)

It can be used by individuals or by groups; if you are using it in a group setting then please see the information below.

For facilitators

The material provided here should be used flexibly to suit the needs of your group. The central element of each session is the Bible reading with the related questions underneath, enabling people to reflect on the passage and make decisions about its application. The surrounding material can be used as much or as little as is appropriate to your setting. It may provide useful background information for you as facilitator or further reading for those who wish to go deeper after each session. Some or all of it could be used to inform the discussion of the central questions or as additional discussion points. The important thing to remember is that there is no need to try to cover everything.

The session opens by reading the Bible passage[s] given. When meeting as a group there are a number of different ways of reading a Bible passage:

- read it more than once, from different versions of the Bible as used by different members of the group
- allow everyone in the group to take a turn at reading, each reading just one sentence before the next person takes over
- read slowly and meditatively
- read imaginatively; that is, allowing people to enter into the story in their imagination, to picture themselves present at the scene (either as themselves or by identifying with a character)
- read the passage and then allow a time of silence during which people can reflect, before reading the passage for a second time.

Session 1

Temple

Living in Luke's world

Read: Luke 19:45-48; 20:20-26;
24:50-53

- As you read these passages, what do you notice? What stands out for you?
- Each of these passages is set in the Temple. What are the different attitudes and behaviours demonstrated in the Temple? What implications might you draw from the contrast between those of the Temple officials and those of Jesus?
- What might verse 25, 'Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's', mean for you?
- For those who could not enter further into the Temple than the courts, the presence of traders and moneychangers was an obstacle to prayer. What do Jesus' actions and teachings tell you about his attitude to prayer and worship? What are some of the obstacles in your prayer life? How could you begin to drive these out?

BACKGROUND TO LUKE'S GOSPEL

The Gospel of Luke was written probably around 80-90AD. It was written anonymously but tradition ascribes authorship to Luke. The author was not an eye-witness to the events he described, but did his own research in order to produce an 'orderly account', written in the style of the ancient historians who wrote factually but with the intention of persuading the reader of a certain point of view. He writes to Theophilus: this may have been a specific person or, as 'Theophilus' means 'lover of God', it may be a generic term.

- Why is it useful to know a bit about the gospel's author and his reason for writing?

LIFE IN FIRST-CENTURY ISRAEL

At the time of Jesus, Israel was under Roman occupation. The Romans allowed the Jews to continue to practise their faith but there were tensions between that and the allegiance expected towards Rome. Within Judaism there were a variety of responses towards the occupation, from co-operation to unrest to total withdrawal from participation in society.

Many areas, such as Galilee where Jesus spent much of his ministry, were largely agricultural. The division between rich and poor was great. There was a constant balancing act between the needs of family and business, and the requirements of the state.

Jerusalem was an important centre, politically, economically, socially and religiously. It was the centre of the Jewish nation and the location of the Temple.

- What are the tensions, for you, between the practice of your faith, and participation in society?

THE TEMPLE IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

The Temple holds an important place in Luke's Gospel. The gospel begins there, with Zechariah the priest, who would become the father of John the Baptist, performing his priestly duties. In chapter 2 the infant Jesus is presented at the Temple as custom required. Later in chapter 2 is the story of the 12-year-old Jesus, separated from his parents at the Passover, eventually being found in his 'Father's house', the Temple. No doubt Jesus would have visited the Temple after that occasion for significant festivals; but the gospel then focuses on his return to the Temple at the end of his ministry, when he challenges those working there about how they are using it, and spends several days teaching there before his crucifixion. The gospel then ends with the return of the disciples to the Temple after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. This time, though, everything is different: Jesus is no longer with them in person, but at his death the curtain in the Temple - symbolising their separation from God - has been torn in two (chapter 23:44-46), and they have seen Jesus alive and so have the hope of a different future.

- What places are significant in your life stories? Why?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEMPLE

In the ancient world, to be a nation-state gave assurance that the nation's god approved of the ruling power that was being established; this approval was indicated by the presence of a temple. So the Jerusalem Temple demonstrated God's presence in Jerusalem and his granting of the right to rule to, initially, the monarchy and, by Jesus' time, the priests.

- What status does this give to the priests in Jesus' time? What responsibilities might this entail?

The Temple was part of the administrative centre of Jerusalem; it had international significance because the workmanship used materials and skills from around the known world, and because it housed the Temple Treasury which contained the nation's wealth. The High Priest of the Temple was seen as head of the Jewish people, negotiating with governments and heading up the Sanhedrin (the ruling body).

- What do you make of the connection between politics and faith demonstrated in the role of the Temple?

The Temple represented architecturally the understanding of holiness as separation, an understanding which Jesus challenged. Its holiest place was accessed only by the priests, who made daily sacrificial offerings on behalf of the people. Once a year on the Day of Atonement the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies to sacrifice on behalf of the nation. Non-priests accessed the Temple courts which were crowded with people making offerings, sacrificial animals for sale, and the money-changers (only a particular kind of coin was allowed to be used for Temple offerings).

The Temple was the House of God, the place where God was present among his people and the symbol of his relationship with them. It was the heart of Jewish worship.

- What does the Temple say about how worshippers understood God's nature?

Session 2

Messengers

Songs of the Spirit

Read: Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you?
- This is quite a dramatic way of hearing from God. On what occasions have you received a message from God? How did your response compare to that of Zechariah?
- The outcome of this message was a life-changing event for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Both fear and joy are expressed as a result. In what ways does following God lead to fear, and to joy, in your experience?
- What are the beliefs, hopes and expectations expressed by Zechariah in his song? In what ways are these fulfilled?

ANGELS

Angels are supernatural representatives of God, created by God. They are not governed by our laws of time and space; they have supernatural wisdom, strength and discernment; and they appear in different forms, sometimes looking a bit like humans. The highest rank of angel is an Archangel. Angels appear throughout the Bible as messengers and protectors. Some have specific roles, such as ruling over a particular nation.

- How does this information fit with your understanding of angels?
- What difference might it make to you to understand angels as messengers and protectors today?

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Zechariah's song is inspired by the Holy Spirit (1:67). In Luke's Gospel it is through the Holy Spirit that God's purpose is announced, enabled, fulfilled and celebrated. It is by the Holy Spirit that Jesus is conceived (1:31-35). By the Holy Spirit Simeon and Anna are able to understand who the infant Jesus is (2:25-32, 36-38). It is Jesus' experience of the Holy Spirit at his baptism (3:21-22) which leads him into his wilderness experience (4:1-2), and then out into his teaching and healing ministry (4:14-15). Jesus anticipates the Holy Spirit continuing to play a role in the lives of his followers (11:13, 12:11-12, 24:49). In Luke's second book, The Acts of The Apostles, Luke tells the story of the Holy Spirit coming on all believers (Acts 2:1-4), and the impact that this event has on their lives.

- How does this description compare with your understanding of the Holy Spirit?
- What have been your experiences of the Holy Spirit?

RESPONDING IN SONG

Mary (1:46-55), Zechariah (1:67-79) and Simeon (2:29-32) all responded in song to what was taking place. Like many of the Psalms, their songs were songs of praise at what God was doing for his people, reflections on how God's actions were significant as a fulfilment of his promises. With the Holy Spirit in them, they saw their own individual circumstances as part of the bigger picture of God's interaction with the world, past and present. They identified the births of John and Jesus as important events in the process by which God would set his people free.

- Read each of these songs. What do they have in common?

This was not an unusual way of responding to God. When the Israelites were set free from slavery in Egypt, they sang (Exodus 15:1-18). After winning in a battle, David sang (2 Samuel 22).

- What makes you sing?

GOD'S MESSENGERS

Throughout Luke's Gospel we find people acting as God's messengers. Sometimes they are conveying a message to individuals - see, for example:

- Simeon in chapter 2:33-35
- The women in chapter 24:1-11

On other occasions they are sent to the general public:

- The healed man in chapter 8:27-39
- The 12 disciples in chapter 9:1-6
- The 72 in chapter 10:1-17

In Luke, more than in the other gospels, some of God's messages are conveyed by angels. It is an angel who tells Zechariah of John's forthcoming birth (1:11-17); an angel who tells Mary that she will carry Jesus (1:26-31); angels who tell the shepherds of Jesus' birth (2:8-14); and angels who tell the women of Jesus' resurrection (24:1-8).

Sometimes, as with Zechariah in today's reading, the recipients of God's message then go on to become messengers themselves:

- The shepherds in chapter 2:8-18
- On what occasions have you acted as God's messenger? How would you describe these experiences?

Session 3

Mission

Rolling out the kingdom

Read: Luke 4:14-37

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you?
- What picture of his ministry does Jesus paint? What feelings and reactions does this evoke in you? Why?
- For what reasons might a prophet not be accepted in his home town (verse 24)? When have you known something similar?
 - How do you understand the reasons for the reactions provoked by Jesus? Where would you have been in the crowd?
 - What do you understand by the description of Jesus' words as having authority (verses 31 and 36)?

LUKE'S KINGDOM OF GOD

Luke understands the Kingdom as good news, a transformed version of the present order. God is King over all people, both Jews and Gentiles. His rule is evidenced by justice and healing, a radical inclusion of the 'outsiders', an acceptance of God's love, power and authority. This Kingdom is demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus but is only partially present until Jesus returns. It therefore includes the dynamic of hope, as Jesus' return is anticipated.

- What evidence do we see today of the presence of the Kingdom?
- What might it look like for you to live out this hope?

BACKGROUND TO THE PASSAGE

Having received a positive reaction to his initial teaching (4:15), Jesus causes controversy by identifying himself with the verses he reads from Isaiah 61:1-2. Jewish people understood Isaiah's prophecy as referring to themselves and the way in which God would save them from their oppressors by sending someone to set them free. Jesus claims this role as his own and, identifying himself with the ancient prophets Elijah and Elisha, applies God's saving actions to all people, not just Jews - in the stories to which he refers, neither the widow of Zarephath nor Naaman the Syrian are Jewish. It is this which angers his hearers.

- Why might Jesus' hearers be unwilling to share God's promised freedom with those who are not Jewish?
- On what occasions might we find ourselves feeling that same unwillingness? Why?

Jesus goes on to include Gentiles (non-Jews) throughout his ministry - for example, the centurion and his servant in Luke 7:1-10. At his crucifixion it is a Gentile who identifies him as undeserving of crucifixion (Luke 23:47).

- How might we demonstrate the inclusivity of Jesus' mission? What might be the challenges in doing this?

OUTSIDERS IN JESUS' MINISTRY

In an attempt to remain pure and to keep its identity distinct, the society in which Jesus lived had in place firm social boundaries. Association with Gentiles was limited; women had the status of possessions; respectable people did not associate with 'sinners' (those who behaved immorally and/or broke religious laws); the sick and disabled were viewed with a degree of suspicion (ill-health being thought to be associated with sin)...

Jesus disregarded these social norms, focusing much of his ministry on these outsiders. Luke demonstrates this as happening from Jesus' birth, when his first visitors were shepherds, who generally had an unsavoury reputation.

- Why do you think Jesus was not willing to reinforce these social boundaries? How would you sum up this aspect of his ministry?

SALVATION

In Judaism, every fiftieth year was designated as the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-12): a year of freedom, the cancelling of debts and the setting free of prisoners. The 'year of the Lord's favour' proclaimed in Isaiah 61 and quoted by Jesus is thought to refer to this Jubilee year. Salvation, for Jesus, like the prophets before him, was all-embracing.

Salvation, or being saved, is a term referring to safety, deliverance, freedom and wholeness. The Jewish understanding of salvation was that it was a feature of the end times: the Day of the Lord would encompass both judgement and salvation. Notice that Luke leaves out the reference to the day of vengeance in Isaiah 61:2. Luke, however, understands salvation as being present in Jesus. He portrays Jesus as removing the barriers which excluded people from the community (5:12-13), healing to incorporate forgiveness (5:17-26), and undoing Satan's power (4:33-35).

- Look at the three passages referenced here. How do you understand what is taking place? In what ways do these events fulfil what Jesus has said in his quote from Isaiah 61?
- How do you understand this in relation to your own ideas about salvation?

Session 4

Journeys

Stories of salvation

Read: Luke 18:35-19:27

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you?
- Imagine you had been with Jesus in the journey described here. How might you have reacted to each of the events and to the harsh ending to the story? What feelings might you have expected to encounter amongst the crowd?
- How might witnessing each of these events move people on in their faith journeys? How might the blind man, and Zacchaeus, have moved on in their faith journeys?
- Jesus' story makes clear that God's kingdom includes judgement. How do you understand the basis for judgement in Jesus' parable? What does this have to say to you?

FAITH JOURNEYS

In the Old Testament journeying forms a part of what it means to follow God. God called Abram to set out on a journey (Genesis 12:1-5). The Israelites, on leaving slavery in Egypt, embarked on what became a forty-year journey (Deuteronomy 8:2-5). Jonah was sent on a journey to preach in Nineveh (Jonah 1:1-2). Often the physical journey mirrors the spiritual journey that is taking place: in both there are twists and turns, decisions about direction to be made, guidance needed, wrong turns, discoveries, encounters... Even without a physical journey, we are all taking part in a spiritual faith journey.

- What are the guides, maps, signposts and encounters which have supported you on your faith journey?
- How do you ensure that you continue to journey, rather than standing still or setting up camp?

STORIES OF SALVATION

There are two stories of salvation here. In one the blind beggar receives physical healing, restoring him to his place in the community: once healed, he can earn a wage, he can participate in his faith community without constant confrontation with the belief that ill-health stems from sin. He has taken steps on his journey to wholeness. In the other Zacchaeus was counted a 'sinner' because of his position as an untrustworthy tax collector. He receives a welcome and the opportunity to change, resulting in him taking action to make amends and restore people's trust. He too has taken steps on his journey to wholeness.

For both these characters, their story involved an encounter with Jesus and a choice about how to respond. The blind man chose healing; Zacchaeus chose openness and generosity. In these stories, the Kingdom of God is demonstrated.

- What factors might be taken into account when choosing how to respond to Jesus? What similar choices have you had to make?

THE STORYTELLERS

Set in the context of journeys, Luke places great importance on the stories of Jesus – both the stories about Jesus and his encounters, and the stories that Jesus told. Luke, as storyteller, tells many stories of the Kingdom breaking into people's lives. He also includes the largest collection of the stories that Jesus told.

Jesus uses stories as a significant tool in his teaching. He takes settings and occurrences that would be familiar to his hearers and uses them to illustrate a point, to make people think, to draw comparisons or to pull people up short. They are not meant to be taken literally or to be analysed in detail, but rather each story should be read for the underlying message it contains. The context of each story is important: in the Parable of the Ten Minas, in the face of the expectation that the Kingdom of God would immediately be fully present, people are warned of the need to work for the Kingdom until Jesus' return.

- Why are stories such a good teaching tool?
- What can you relate to in Jesus' stories?

JOURNEYING THROUGH THE GOSPEL

Journeying is a constant theme throughout Luke's Gospel. Early in the gospel comes Mary's journey to Elizabeth (1:39-40), Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem (2:1-7), the shepherds travel to Bethlehem to see the new-born Jesus (2:8-20), Mary and Joseph travel with the infant Jesus to Jerusalem and back to Nazareth (2:22, 39), each year they travel to Jerusalem for festivals (2:41), John travels on a preaching tour (3:3), Jesus travels into the desert after his baptism (4:1), and from there he sets out on his preaching ministry which is set around a journey. From the desert he goes to Nazareth (4:16), then to Capernaum (4:31) and travels around that Galilean area for some time (chapters 4-8). He sends his disciples out on a similar mission, travelling from village to village (9:1-6). After his transfiguration he sets out on a journey towards Jerusalem, around which the rest of his ministry is based (chapters 9-19). This is a significant destination; it is the appropriate place for a prophet to die (13:33). He travels through various towns and villages along the border between Samaria and Galilee, through Jericho, Bethphage and Bethany. Having journeyed into Jerusalem (19:28-44) where he continues his ministry, his final journey is with his cross to the outskirts of Jerusalem (23:26-33). The disciples then have three further journeys of their own: on the road to Emmaus (and back to Jerusalem)(24:13-35), to Bethany for his ascension (24:50-51) and back to Jerusalem (24:52-53) to wait for the Holy Spirit).

- In what ways are journeys as important as their destinations? How could this be said to be true in some of the examples given above?