

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS: PREVIEWS OF SALVATION

WEEK 1: God is on the move.

First, she is not here tonight, but I want to thank Maggie for allowing me to use her lovely photographs of winter scenes for these slides. To me, these photographs alone set the atmosphere for our Christmas story. And talking about Christmas – the predictable Christmas rush, this year controversially captured by Asda who gives the woman of the house the credit for sorting out Christmas - Writing and posting the cards, sorting out what presents to buy for whom, doing the shopping, the cooking, the serving, not to mention Christmas trees, Christmas decorations, sorting out who's coming, who's going, when and, if we have to travel – gentlemen have you found out the odds on whether or not we are going to have a white Christmas this year so that we'll know what weather to expect? Seriously, men do a lot of the fetching, carrying, taxi-ing and help out in other ways. After all that the predictable vow that things are going to be different next year. Outside of our own preparations we also have the predictability of the media hype and TV repeats and, inevitably, the political correctness, scepticism, scorn and mockery of those who choose to see Christmas in a Christian light. But even here too, aren't we really predictable? The carols, the Nativity Plays, the preaching from the birth narratives in the Gospels or Isaiah's prophecy, are all part of the Christmas church programmes. Make no mistake about it, these things are exactly what the church should be focusing on at this time of the year for, let's face it, we would all begin to wonder about David's state of mind if he decided to preach on Luke 1-2 in June. But, especially for adults, many of whom who have grown up with these stories, although we may not say it out loud, we are inclined to think we have heard or seen everything there is to be said or seen about the Christmas story.

So that is why Bible studies at these times of the year are so handy. They give us the opportunity to explore a bit deeper and in more detail what is said in the New Testament about that first Christmas. It gives us the opportunity to talk about aspects of the information that can't be included in sermons because of time restrictions or because they don't meet the particular message of what a minister is led to preach on these few Sundays. So this Bible study is about the first Christmas according to Luke chapters 1-2 – what it meant for the people of the time and what it means for us today.

R. Tannehill, in a book published in 1959 decided to study Luke's writings from a literary perspective – that is, from the way you would study any literature. He started delving into the story that Luke started in the Gospel and continued into the Book of Acts. One consequence of his research was the conclusion that the first two chapters of Luke contained all the pointers to what would happen in the rest of the Gospel and Acts. In other words, these chapters were the 'trailers' for the whole works. Tannehill gave the first two chapters of the Gospel the title "Previews of salvation" and went on to explain what these were, through the lives of the people we meet and through mention of the locations and timings of the events Luke records. Some modern scholars disagree with some of the things he says, but in general, a careful reading of Luke's words reveal the world of the first Christmas in some ways that I found truly amazing.

Tonight I just want to start with some general points to set the scene. Four themes stand out and David pre-empted the first one when the first point he made when he taught us from Timothy was the importance of truth. The first thing that I want to ask is, "Can we depend on what Luke tells us?" That is crucial, for we know just how little belief, even inside the church, there is about the virgin birth, the chorus of angels etc. To answer that question we need to take a close look at the first 4 verses of chapter 1. These 4 verses make up a single

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sentence and the Greek words that Luke uses have a much more profound impact than their English translation would suggest. Scholars remark that these 4 verses display a very highly educated form of the Greek language and that in itself is a very telling statement. In these four verses we find a highly educated Gentile taking the time and making the effort, probably at his own expense, to tell a Jewish story to a Gentile audience. So what, you might ask. Well given that Greeks and Romans in general despised the Jewish race and the educated elites of Greece and Rome regarded them only a little better than barbarians, something had to have happened to Luke to motivate him to write this Gospel and its sequel Acts. In fact Luke's writings make up nearly one-quarter of the New Testament. Acts is the only record we have of the progress Christianity made in the aftermath of the resurrection. And, if this is the case, then we first need to be sure that Luke has got his story right – otherwise our beliefs are on shaky ground.

So Luke starts off by giving us that assurance in his first 4 verses. The Greek words he uses are not common in the New Testament. Two words in particular stand out. The NIV mentions “things handed down” by “eyewitnesses and servants of the word.” We accept that Luke is writing about the oral and written traditions about the Christmas story that were already circulating in Christian communities. But the Greek word used actually has the added meaning of handing down tradition as “authoritative teaching.” That immediately alerts us to the fact that Luke is not just writing to inform Theophilus of the events, but is doing so with the intention that lessons are to be learned from that information. Another word in verse 4 relating to what Theophilus has been “taught” backs this up because it highlights that what Luke is writing is not simply to inform people, but also to instruct them. In other words, Luke is telling Theophilus and those who also would read his work that his account of the life of Jesus had significant implications for their lifestyles, attitudes, hopes and fears. Whatever the individual circumstances, Christians were not left without some comprehensive ‘instruction’ on their doctrinal basis or the practical aspects of their lives as a result of it.

In these verses too there are many words that emphasise the accuracy and reliability of the information given. People who embarked on a Christian path needed to, according to the NIV, “know the certainty of the things you have been taught” which according to ‘The Message’ means to know it “beyond a shadow of a doubt.” So, the second point that this leads to is the evidence that Luke did not write from hearsay or what was already available. He tells us that he has personally and “carefully investigated everything from the beginning” - in other words in “close detail” from the very beginning. How do we know he was telling the truth?

Go back to what was said about the Greeks and Romans. Not to put too fine a point on it - no educated Greek or Roman would have been found dead reading the Jewish Scriptures – their social standing would have been seriously in question. Yet, we find the Old Testament permeating the whole of Luke's works. Bearing in mind that Luke was a Gentile and probably Greek, his knowledge and use of the Old Testament is a testimony to just how much he had immersed himself in this new faith. Luke was not an outsider looking in at the history of the emergence of a contemporary religious movement. Luke not only was on the inside, he was on the inside as a man who had become convinced of the truth of the events he was recording to such an extent that he was compelled – we would say by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – to spend time and effort making as full an account as he possibly could of “the things that have been fulfilled among us.” Luke makes plain by these words, that he knew he was not writing a new story, he was convinced he was continuing an old one. He was a writer

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who had taken every precaution to ensure the what he wrote was a truthful and dependable account because it was based, not on human memory or interpretations, but on the most solid of foundations –the Old Testament Scripture itself. Overall, in the first two chapters alone, there are allusions to and echoes of texts in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Micah and Malachi. Luke had done his homework.

When we move from these four verses into the rest of the two chapters, a third thing that distinguishes Luke’s account from the other Gospels, is that Luke sets the story of the first Christmas in its contemporary political and social context. Scholars, in fact highlight, the number of occurrences in Luke-Acts where political and religious authority figures are specifically mentioned, including those, like centurions, who are agents of the state. Although the actual dates of the first Christmas are disputed, Luke has provided us with enough verifiable information to show that the events he was recording did not happen in a vacuum. They were events that happened in an actual historical period and for that reason, would and did have an impact on how the world at that time would develop.

Politically and socially, the events are taking place in a society dominated by the Roman Empire and its puppet king, Herod. Luke mentions Caesar Augustus (died AD14), the census and the naming of the Syrian governor Quirinius. Much scholarly debate surrounds the actual timing of the census but a general consensus is that Luke is correct in the use of these names in this period. But the introduction of these names and the imperial census places these chapters in a first century world political context where words like ‘saviour’, ‘lord’, ‘messiah’, ‘peace’ and ‘good news’ had imperial overtones. The first three were titles or attributes given to Emperor Augustus who had ‘saved’ the world from civil wars and had established the pax Romana, which apart from the Jewish revolts of AD70 and AD132 and some conflict on the borders of the Empire, lasted for nearly 200 years. The term ‘good news’ in Greek meant the means of distributing imperial propaganda and news. Hence the angelic announcement was potentially politically dangerous. Here another ruler has been born, one whose dominion is both universal and everlasting (1:33). Here was a rival ‘good news’ for ‘the world’ and that would not have gone down well in political circles. Matthew’s account of Herod’s slaughter of the children, is a graphic illustration of how this kind of news would have been received.

However, while Luke exploits the language of the day, the reference to ‘good news’ is reminiscent more of Isaiah 40-66 – how lovely are the feet of those who bring good news. The peace of the Pax Romana was simply the absence of external conflict. The ‘peace’ of which the angels speak is the Jewish notion of ‘shalom’ which is peace with God and the well-being and harmony of the whole person with God and his neighbour; peace with justice and universal healing. This is the peace God offers not just to a select group of people but in the birth of Jesus, God’s mercy has fallen on the world. Given the social conditions of the time, this was something the ordinary people craved.

The social world of the first Christmas was one in which the ruling classes are corrupt and greedy for power, the poor are oppressed, injustice is prevalent and the hope of the pious Jew is that a Messiah will come and remedy the political and social evils prevailing in Palestine. Many indications of this hope and expectation are apparent in these chapters. One indication is the identity of God’s messenger. I heard someone say once that Gabriel was the ‘fluffy’ angel - the ‘Good News’ messenger angel and we regard Michael as the warrior angel, but the name Gabriel means ‘Mighty Man of God’ or which has been translated as ‘Divine

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Warrior' and here it would remind Jews of the Warrior God of the Old Testament. This ties in with the Jewish expectation that the Jewish Messiah will overthrow the Roman yoke. In place of the finite earthly empire, Mary's son will be given David's throne and will reign over an everlasting kingdom. There will be a restoration of the kingdom of the Jews which will manifest God's standards of government. Mary's song in 1:50-55 is a summary of the ideal state where God's righteousness, peace, justice, mercy and compassion will reign in society. Proud and corrupt rulers will be overthrown and God will champion the cause of the humble poor.

So Luke is not some religious idealist who sees the supernatural events of the first Christmas as something just to be wondered but, at the end of the day, divorced from reality. Luke places the Christmas story solidly in the real world. It is not something isolated from the experience of ordinary people and we will find this as we look at the situations of the people Luke mentions in these two chapters. We will find, particularly in Mary's song, just how closely the Christmas story is connected to the real world as people of the time knew and experienced it.

The last and most important theme that emerges in Luke 1-2 is the extent to which it is God-centred – theocentric is the technical term. We have to remember that there has been no prophet – that is a person who spoke for God – in Israel for 400 years. There can be no doubt that Luke depicts God as the prime mover in the events he is narrating not only in these two chapters but in the whole of the dual work of Luke-Acts. – hence the title “God is on the move” God is once more moving and intervening in human history.

The first chapters highlight the theme of God's single design working itself out in all the circumstances of the births of these two children. In each case the initiative is God's, and humans are caught up in this purpose, their main role being to respond faithfully. In the three canticles of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon and also the words of Elizabeth and Anna, the most important theme is that of 'divine activity' – God is at work.

- My Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour
- Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us.....
- (as he said through his holy prophets long ago he has promised) salvation from our enemies
- For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in sight of all people.

The second part of Mary's song is about what God is doing and will do. The song points towards the 'fulfilment' of God's purpose, not just as an End time event but as the grace and power of God in action as a present reality because salvation has come through the birth of Jesus. Regarding the birth of John, Tannehill identified the very important point that the “the parallels between John and Jesus emphasises the unity of their task. They share roles in a single design of God which is working itself out in a consistent way.” In 1:14-17, Gabriel's description of John's vocation is thoroughly theocentric, emphasised by him being filled with the Holy Spirit. This, in Luke's dual work is an essential requirement for prophetic speech – some even say that the title Acts of the Apostles should actually be Acts of the Holy Spirit. Prophetic speech also came with boldness in proclaiming the Word of God and John will have the central prophetic role in proclaiming the advent of the Lord. Read 3:7-9 and see just how bold John did speak. In effect he calls the Jews a pack of poisonous snakes and that their ethnic and religious heritage means nothing – God could raise His children from stones.

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Can you imagine the kind of outrage that would cause. If you want the origin of hellfire and brimstone preaching, it might be an idea to start with John the Baptist.

And, when Zechariah speaks, it is of God's act of salvation for Israel of which John will be a part. What Zechariah says about God's activity is similar to the things mentioned in the Magnificat – mercy, freedom from the fear of oppression, righteousness.

Simeon's words are yet another reminder that the Messianic age – the age of salvation - has started. Simeon blesses God, as did Zechariah, and joyfully acknowledges the fulfilment of God's promise that he would see the Messiah. His anticipation emphasises God's intervention to deliver Israel from its enemies and so to usher in the epoch of peace under the peaceful, just dominion of God. (Green p145)

Within these speeches too there is the explicit reference to a Father-Son relationship which will become the foundation of Christian belief. Another remarkable thing about the first two chapters is also the agency and importance of the Holy Spirit for the Holy Spirit fades into the background after the first four chapters and only reappears in full focus again in Luke's continuing story in Acts. Thus, already in his first two chapters Luke has encapsulated and explained the relationship which Christians now accept as the doctrine of the Trinity.

We will come back to some of the things mentioned in the songs about God's activity over the next three weeks in a bit more detail, but I hope that what has been covered tonight/today will show you that as we take a closer look at Luke, we will see that in relatively few words he has created a bridge between the Old and New Testament by opening up for us the political, social and theological contexts of the first Christmas. He has shown us that God acted at a time when the world was ready for the coming of a Saviour. We already see from Luke's mention of contemporary authority figures that the worldview of God in the sending of the Messiah is on a collision course with the existing political and social worldviews. And we perhaps see why Luke felt compelled to start not with the birth of Jesus, but with the way God had planned and executed the event down to the last detail – putting everything and everyone in the place from which the future course of salvation history would unfold. But if we were to take only one fact from what has been said, I think we could all agree that it would be that Luke took great pains to make sure his readers understood, in Tannehill's words, **“that the child being born is Son of God, and that his destiny is to bring salvation to his people.”**

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WEEK 2: THE LORD IS COMING 1

When I'm preparing these talks my mind wanders off in every direction. I usually manage to get it back in line to come here on a Tuesday. This time I thought 'the First Christmas changed the course of world history. What would it take to change world history now?' A nuclear war, another Wall Street Crash, a 'Big Bang' of some sort?' Contrast that with that first Christmas. "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. As God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. And that world changing event started with life changing events for 6 ordinary people going about their everyday lives. Tonight we are going to take a closer look at two of them. We often forget or mention in passing Zechariah and Elizabeth, but 15 months before the birth of Jesus, God was already preparing for that event.

Regarding location, Luke starts his account and ends these two chapters, not in Bethlehem or Nazareth, but in Jerusalem. A visit to Jerusalem comes towards the end of these two chapters and if you remember back to Luke 24 – the Gospel ends in Jerusalem and that is where Acts starts. So from the very beginning of his Gospel, Luke is showing how Jerusalem will be a focus of the salvation story. And the first movement of God occurs in the most important building in Jerusalem for the Jews, the sanctuary of the Temple where Zechariah was carrying out the duty of burning incense. It was by adherence to all the Temple rituals laid down in the Torah that the Jews hoped and prayed for the long-promised Messiah to appear. The hope of that age, and indeed for Jews to the present day, was that God would send a warrior descendant of David to throw off the Roman yoke and restore the national sovereignty and authority of the Jews. The first part of their expectation becomes a reality when God breaks His silence and sends an angel to announce to a priest serving in the Temple, the birth of a son who would prepare the way for the Messiah. And expectation of the kind of Messiah they wanted was heightened by the choice of the messenger. As I mentioned last week, we often see Gabriel just as the 'Good News' messenger and Michael as the warrior, but that the name Gabriel means "mighty man of God" which some commentators translate as "Divine warrior." Gabriel is described in 'The Message' as a 'sentinel' which means a soldier or guard who keeps watch. So the very choice of this angel would have had quite a significant impact on Jews of the time. And in this visit, we find the first hint that the greatest opposition to the Messiah would come from the Temple authorities, because the first instance of lack of belief in God's message came from within the Temple. As a priest serving in the Temple, it would have been natural to assume that Zechariah would have accepted Gabriel's words without hesitation – yet he is struck dumb because of his unbelief. Luke doesn't give the grounds for his unbelief – one of the infuriating things Luke doesn't explain, but he does tell us about Zechariah and Elizabeth in other ways.

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When we consider Zechariah and Elizabeth as a couple, we get mixed messages. Socially a person's status was defined by religious purity, family heritage, land ownership, vocation, ethnicity, gender, education and age. Both of them rated highly as far as religious purity, family heritage, ethnicity and age – for age was respected in that culture - were concerned. For Zechariah, vocation and education would have placed him high on the social scale and as a priest his livelihood would have derived from the Temple and his duties in his local synagogue. However, Elizabeth's status as a woman gave her very little status and when this is compounded by the fact that she is barren, we find that Elizabeth would be on the lowest end of the social scale. This would have reflected also on Zechariah. There was status in having a son who would inherit the priestly office. As a priest, too, he would have been very much aware of the references in Deuteronomy which associated the gift children to a holy life. The barrenness of his wife would have signalled that she was under God's curse because of some form of disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:15, 18). So, at the outset of Luke's narrative we meet a couple with many of the advantages of life at that time, but with one major disadvantage – the lack of a son – that leaves Elizabeth in a place of shame, and hence, at the very least, an embarrassment to her husband. Elizabeth is isolated and what their neighbours would not see or choose not to see, was that Elizabeth's barrenness was not the result of an impious life. Luke makes this perfectly clear in verse 6. In addition to their ancestral purity they were said to be “upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.” What a testimony to the faithfulness of these people in spite of God's distance from Israel for over 4 centuries. Why then had this couple suffered the social stigma of being childless? Why did a bad thing happen to good people? In this case we do get an answer - to enable God to work a miracle to further His plan of salvation at critical turning point in world history. The plight of Zechariah and Elizabeth takes us back to Abraham and Sarah and brings us face to face with the fact, grounded in Israel's Scriptures that it is God who controls the womb. It brought home to Zechariah too that their situation was impossible and hopeless apart from miraculous intervention. And, isn't that exactly the state of the world without God.

Although Zechariah was struck dumb, he nevertheless was receiving a positive answer to his prayer (verse 13). Luke does not explicitly tell us that Zechariah had been praying for a son, but given the couple's advanced years, it is very possible that by this time Zechariah had stopped praying believing that God had said 'No'. Perhaps this was the underlying cause of his unbelief when Gabriel announced he would have a son. He simply could not believe this stupendous news. What was tantamount to his heart's desire, the greatest ambition of his life - was to be granted.

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But even more stupendous was that his son was going to be an extra-ordinary individual with an extra-special purpose in life. Gabriel tells Zechariah

- He will be a joy and a delight to you
- Many will rejoice because of his birth
- He will be great in the sight of the Lord
- He will never take wine or other fermented drink (Nazarite vow) (Numbers 6:3; Leviticus 10:9)
- He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth
- He will turn many of the people of Israel back to the Lord
- He will operate in the spirit and power of Elijah (the greatest prophet next to Moses) (Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6)
- He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children
- He will turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous
- He will do this to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Isaiah 40:3-5)

WOW! Don't we wish we could have been given such assurances about what our children would grow up to be and what they would do with their lives? It's speculation, but perhaps Zechariah and Sarah were given this information because it was unlikely that they would live long enough to see John fulfil these predictions when he reached adulthood. Certainly, they would know that God had entrusted a very special person to their care for John is set apart by God to serve God even before his conception. Having the Holy Spirit from birth indicates his will be a ministry authorised by the Spirit, but it also points to the age of the Spirit-endowed church in Acts. The last three predictions indicate the nature of his ministry. Turning the hearts from disobedience to wisdom of the righteous is a definition of repentance. Turning the hearts of the fathers to the children according to 'The Message' means that this will "kindle devout understanding among hardened sceptics for fathers, in this context may mean 'ancestors' and not biological fathers. We saw in the Pentateuch that the ancestors had turned away from God, and it is their descendants who will embrace the new covenant that will eventually emerge from these birth narratives. And we can perhaps see here too that God is the loving and faithful Father whose heart has once more turned towards His wayward children, by initiating this new phase of His redemptive purposes for their lives.

And what was Elizabeth's response to the news. In sharp contrast to her husband – delight and belief. "The Lord has done this for me...In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people." Can you just imagine the joy in that household when Elizabeth became pregnant?

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And Luke gives us further indications of the faith of Elizabeth. When Mary visits her, we see Elizabeth deferring to Mary. This was a reversal of the cultural norm where normally the younger woman would defer to the elder, especially given Elizabeth's age. Yet, we are told that Elizabeth was granted Holy Spirit inspired insight into her cousin's condition. Elizabeth called Mary the "mother of my Lord" and the baby leapt in her womb. We are so used to the Christmas story that this detail, if at all mentioned, goes in one ear and out the other. Elizabeth, at this stage, perhaps did not know how special her own child was to be because Zechariah was still dumb. But even, if it had been communicated to her in some other way, she recognised that Mary's child in some way would be divine and would be even greater than her own son. For a mother, especially in Elizabeth's situation, this was a staggering manifestation of faith. Even if Elizabeth did not realise the full significance of her words, with hindsight, we can see that this is the first explicit indication that the Lord is on His way.

Then Luke moves on to describe the circumstances surrounding John's birth. When Zechariah's voice returns, he confirms his wife's choice of name – John meaning 'God is gracious'. Luke does not explain if Elizabeth had been given prior knowledge of the name to be given, so we cannot read too much into this intervention by her because women in that culture could name the child. What people of the time saw as unusual was that the boy was not given a family name and given that this was to be Zechariah's only child, the expectation would have been that the baby would have been named after him. What is also significant is that Elizabeth has now come out of seclusion. She is no longer socially isolated. She is among neighbours and relatives, her shame has turned to honour and the family are now seen as the recipients of a great divine blessing. So astonishing was this turnaround in status that it became a public talking point, people asking a key question "What then is this child going to be? For the Lord's hand was with him." Luke 1:66. And Zechariah told them. In a song of praise, which was actually Spirit inspired prophecy, John's future is made known. Today the Church refers to this passage 1:68-80 – the Benedictus

Surprisingly, given the circumstances of the birth, in Zechariah's speech we see not the words of a proud father who has been told how **great** his son is going to be; but the words of a man inspired by the Holy Spirit (1:67) to proclaim what a **great** God is going to do through the child that is born to him. The emphasis throughout is on the divine activity. The covenant making God of Abraham and David is now at work in human history. The possibility of divine salvation and acceptance is coming within the reach of ordinary people because God has started the process by raising up a Saviour – 'horn of salvation'. (1:69). The end result would be that people could come into God's presence and worship Him without fear, because they would be made holy through belief in God's

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Messiah. Verse 78 mentions the ‘rising sun’ –a new dawn – salvation is illumination – a movement from the realm of darkness and into the ‘way of peace’. And Zechariah’s son would be the herald of this new world order.

In other words Zechariah’s song makes the leap from what God has done in the past and takes the story on into his present and into an eschatological future. The story began in the Old Testament is now reaching its final stages. We can also see that Zechariah as a pious Jew bases his assertions about God on what God has done for his people in the past. In his current situation Zechariah sees the coming fulfilment of the covenants made with Abraham (1:55, 73) and David and the fulfilment of the prophecies of salvation for Israel. Two ordinary people and an unborn child become the channel for God’s blessing – not just on them personally – but through their child to the whole of Israel and eventually to the world. Amazing or what?

As a ‘preview of salvation’ was this prophecy accurate? Chapter three and further references to John in the Gospel and especially a mention in Acts, give us the answer.

The birth narratives, especially the Benedictus, make clear that God chose John as the herald of the new (and last) phase of salvation history. John was destined to be the ‘Prophet of the Most High’ and be instrumental in the restoration of Israel (1:14-17, 68-79). God had broken His silence. The birth narratives give us portraits of people – part of the remnant of the first covenant community who had remained faithful to God throughout that period of silence. But, with the birth of John, God once again spoke, not just to the Jews but to the whole world. Endowing John with the Holy Spirit from birth indicates that a God-given task is already in progress. And that task was the preparation for the coming of the focus of John’s prophetic ministry – namely, God’s Son, Jesus of Nazareth – and John’s primary function was the proclamation of that coming.

In directing people’s attention to the coming Messiah, John could be regarded as the first evangelist of the new era, although John himself did not live to see the outcome of Jesus’ life and ministry. John, therefore, is not an evangelist in the apostolic sense and because of that, perhaps the Church has not given John the Baptist the credit he deserves. We perhaps pass over the fact that John the Baptist is the only human being ever to have had the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit from birth to his death. While it is true that he did not have the message that was preached and taught in the post-Pentecost period, and that his baptism was subsequently superseded by Christian baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit, yet his mission was an essential link in the chain between the faithful remnant of Israel, exemplified by Mary, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon

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and Anna, and the Christian era. He forms the bridge between the Old Testament and Christian eras and as such, he is unique. He is the continuation of the Old Testament prophetic tradition and, at the same time, the herald and first 'convert', for the want of a better term, in the new community which will be inaugurated by Jesus.

And Luke shows us this for his stated aim (1:1) was to give an account of what has been "fulfilled among us." Luke quotes Isaiah 40:3-5 presenting John's appearance in the context of an age of redemption. Reading that text in Isaiah people would start to see John as the proclaiming voice in the desert. But Luke changes the prophecy slightly so that the paths are not being made straight for God but 'for the Lord' – a title which Luke applies in the gospel only to Jesus. It is thus made very clear that John is preparing the way for the appearance of the long awaited Messiah. John prepares the Lord's way by preparing a repentant people, whose hearts have turned and who are ready to receive their Lord. As we saw last week, Luke shows us that the destinies of these two children are to be linked, and as a 'preview of salvation, we later see that both John and Jesus preach the same message – the coming of the kingdom of God, a call to repentance so that sin could be forgiven and baptism as the outward sign of that inner change of heart.

Did John fulfil his destiny? Luke returns to the Old Testament to link John with Luke 1:17 with "the spirit and power of Elijah" Next to Moses, Elijah was Israel's most revered prophet and we other mentions of Elijah in the Gospel and, most prominently, at the Transfiguration. By giving us details of John's ministry we can gather that he made a huge impact on those who came to see and hear him.

If those who came to John were Jewish, they would have probably recognised the Old Testament parallels. If Gentiles, they would have seen an extraordinary and eccentric individual, who nevertheless had become a major public figure. In an age of messianic expectation, fuelled by itinerant preachers, John was undoubtedly an outstanding figure. John's personality and his message would have challenged all who came to John to either accept or reject his message - and he left them in no doubt as to the consequences of rejection of his message. In fact, John's boldness and fearlessness in speaking the truth, eventually cost him his head.

We don't know how long John had been preaching for before Jesus came on the scene. Some say only six months because they were born six months apart. But whether long or short, John carried out the task God had given him and this was confirmed by Jesus. When He came on to the public stage He preached

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and taught the same message as John and in 7:28 Jesus' own assessment of John is "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John".

And a final thought. As a preview of salvation, can we consider those who accepted John's ministry as Christians? We find the answer in Acts chapters 18 and 19. At Ephesus, Apollus and 12 other Jews were accepted as bona fide members of the Christian assemblies there on the basis of their faith in the message and their baptism by John (Acts 18 24-25 and 19:1-7) – testimony to the salvific effect of John's ministry.

So, when we read Luke's account of Zechariah's, Elizabeth's and John's stories, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that God was on the move and that the coming of the Messiah was imminent. The joy experienced by this couple and shared with neighbours and relatives is still one that they are sharing with those of us looking back at that first Christmas. Good News for them, good news for Israel, good news for the world. Wouldn't it be wonderful, if the world could see every Christmas in that way?

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WEEK 3: The Lord is Coming 2

Last week we saw how God laid the preparatory groundwork for the coming of the Messiah. Now another announcement by the angel Gabriel brings us closer to the event. In many ways the two announcements are very similar. Both Zechariah and Mary are said to be ‘troubled’ by the angel, who in both cases, tells them not to be afraid. Both are promised a son and both state their objections as to how what he is saying can happen. Both are given a sign – Zechariah is struck dumb and Mary is told of her cousin Elizabeth’s pregnancy - and then Gabriel departs. In spite of these similarities, however, there are major differences.

Elizabeth was in need of a child to take away her disgrace. A child would bring disgrace upon Mary. Elizabeth’s age is against her, but Mary’s virginity is not seen as an obstacle. While both will have sons, there will be differences between them. For example, John will have the Holy Spirit from birth; Jesus will be conceived by the Holy Spirit. One announcement takes place at the centre of the Jewish world – the Holy Place in the Jerusalem temple; the other in Nazareth, situated in far off Galilee – a place of no account even in the Jewish world.

We could spend quite a bit of time just on the comparisons and contrasts in these two birth stories for Luke has written the chapters in such a way that there is a wealth of study just from this one perspective. But Luke wants us to see the information he is giving from a divine and not a human perspective and that is perhaps why Luke has very little to say about Joseph. Luke sometimes can be very infuriating. Why, doesn’t he tell us more about Joseph. Had we only his account we would have no knowledge of how Joseph took the news of Mary’s pregnancy. Only in chapter 2:4-5 does Joseph really come into the story and Luke only mentions him once more in 3:23. Even this verse is dismissive of Joseph for Luke says that Jesus was the son, “so it was thought”, of Joseph. From this human perspective, Luke appears to be very unfair to Joseph because in effect, he was being asked to ignore clear breaches of Jewish law and culture. In Jewish culture, betrothal was regarded as marriage in name, and for Mary to become pregnant before the official marriage rites, was a matter of dishonour for the man. It is Matthew who tells us that Joseph was prepared to deal with this matter as discreetly as possible, not wanting to expose Mary to public disgrace and possible stoning to death, for adultery was at issue during betrothal. True, Joseph could have been trying to save face, but exposing Mary would have satisfied his honour. On the other hand, a private divorce would have left Joseph blameless in the eyes of his contemporaries and his leniency would have gained him some measure of respect. At the very least, the fact that he didn’t take this path indicated that at heart he was a kindly man. It is

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Matthew who tells us that an angel's assurance, however, was enough for Joseph to go ahead with the marriage, again indicating some level of faith in God's word on his part.

But what Luke does tell us about Joseph opens up his importance from the divine perspective, for we are told that Joseph was of the house of David and his home town was Bethlehem. From this perspective, we see the importance of Joseph for his lineage takes us right to the heart of the Old Testament Davidic covenant, whereby the Messiah would come from the line of David and assume David's throne. And David came from Bethlehem. While Luke says very little about him, what is said gives Joseph a central role in this Christmas story. As far as the earthly life of Jesus was concerned, and as far as Jewish regard for ancestry was concerned, Joseph's credentials, ensured that Old Testament prophecy was being fulfilled. That God had placed Joseph in this position at precisely this time, is a further indication that God had truly prepared the ground in advance for the coming of the Messiah. Mary's shame is avoided by God speaking to Joseph. Joseph's acceptance of the situation gave Jesus the social connection He needed to operate within the Jewish society of the time. Only after His resurrection did the question of parentage become an important plank of the faith and practice of the new movement He started.

And what about Mary? Today, on the one hand we have the views of the Roman Catholic church which has practically deified Mary. On the other we have Protestant denominations who have very little regard for her. Both are distorted views of the central character in this first Christmas event.

Again, with Mary, Luke has no concern for irrelevant detail. We know absolutely nothing about Mary's family. It is almost as if she is an orphan. We know that she is of marriageable age and obviously some family members would have had to be involved in that arrangement. Two things that Luke does tell us, however, speaks volumes. We are told that Mary was a relative of Elizabeth's and since Elizabeth was of a priestly family, it could be assumed that Mary was too. Also, Elizabeth's greeting when Mary visited her flags up the fact that these two children will be interrelated, not just at a family level, but caught up in God's salvific plan.

Elizabeth's greeting is remarkable because in this encounter there is a definite distinction in social status. By age, ancestry, priestly wife status and now six months pregnant with a son, Elizabeth's status is way above that of a young, unmarried and pregnant girl, who is betrothed to a man who is not the father of her child. Thus, by all the status categories she is of very low status. While Mary, as a relative may have shared Elizabeth's ancestral heritage, we only find

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this out AFTER Mary has shown the faithful obedience which is more important to God than all the worldly status markers.

Considering the initial information we are given about both these women, when they meet we see a truly remarkable reversal in their respective circumstances. Elizabeth was socially superior to Mary according to the prevailing norms but her greeting of Mary is another indication of Mary's reversal in status. Elizabeth regarded Mary as her social superior because she was the mother of Elizabeth's Lord (1:43). We see this also in 2:16 where Mary is mentioned first – in Jewish culture whoever is mentioned first is of social significance. (Green p138). In fact, Elizabeth recognises that God has elevated Mary to the highest status of all – the chosen mother of the divinely conceived Saviour of the world. (1:47-49 especially 48b). God is turning social norms on their heads.

As a preview of salvation, this is a crucial theme in Luke-Acts. Entry to the Kingdom of God is not on the basis of wealth, power or social influence but on the basis of being 'poor in spirit' recognising the presence of sin in one's life and the need of a Saviour to take away that sin. Time and time again in Luke's writings we see this reversal in status. The story of the rich man and Lazarus. The poor man is dignified with a name, the rich man is not. The repentant tax-collector is commended, the self-righteous Pharisee is condemned.

And the example of Elizabeth and Mary illustrates for us that social disadvantages, which Jews regarded as evidence for God's disfavour, was not a barrier to acceptance by God. Both women submitted immediately to God's will and for Mary especially, this was a major feat. She was not only faced with shame and the humiliation of divorce but was potentially in mortal danger – as mentioned, hers was a stoning offence. Yet she willingly accepted God's plan for her life. Unlike Zechariah who asked God for a sign of the truth of the angel's words, Mary asked for an explanation. Mary's perplexity at how she is to conceive as a virgin is not unbelief, but the natural response of one who could not imagine how something like that could be achieved. And Gabriel gave her the same explanation, as God had given Abraham in Genesis 18:14 regarding the birth of Isaac "For nothing will be impossible with God (1:37).

And that brings us to the status of Mary's child. What did Gabriel tell Mary about Him?

- His name is Jesus
- He will be great
- He will be called the Son of the Most High
- The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David
- He will reign over the house of Jacob forever

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- His kingdom will never end.

What does all of this mean? The name 'Jesus' means 'God saves' so even this name points to the fact that this event is the result of God's initiative. The statement in verse 32 that He will be great and be called the Son of the Most High" taken together with "the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" in verse 35 points to this child's very special relationship to God. The term 'Most High' shows Luke's sensitivity to the fact that Jews regarded using the name Yahweh as blasphemous; but the term 'Son of God' was a common term at the time given to people regarded as especially close to or favoured by God, and, of course, this is exactly how the Jews would have regarded David. But Luke sees Jesus' Father-Son relationship with God, not as a result of him being a descendant of David, which would be the human interpretation of the term. Instead Luke sees the Father-Son relationship as a result of conception by the Holy Spirit. It is noticeable that after the first two chapters, the virgin birth has no further mention in Luke. While the virgin birth is an indication of God's purpose and power at the very beginning of Jesus' life, for Luke the influence of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life and ministry is far more significant especially in His baptism, the temptations in the desert and the sermon at Nazareth which follow in chapters 3 and 4. And the Holy Spirit is a key player in Acts.

Neither does Luke see these statements about the Father-Son relationship as contradicting the last three statements that Jesus is the Son of God as a Davidic king. The last three statements immediately point us back to God of covenant, back in fact Nathan's oracle to David in 2 Sam 7:12-16, where David's successor is called God's son and God promises that his "throne" will be established "forever." So in these simple statements not only do we have the promise of the Jewish expectation of a Messiah born from the line of David, but a Messiah who will be much greater than David and who will be a Son of God in the sense that David never could have been. In Acts chapter 2:32, Peter gives voice to this fact when he reminds the Pentecost crowds of David's prophetic words – "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet...'"

That was for the future. How did Mary respond to this news? We have seen her willing acceptance of God's plan for her life. We don't know her thoughts in the immediate aftermath of Gabriel's visit, but we do have a reaction when she meets with her cousin Elizabeth which would appear to reflect her thinking. As a devout Jew, Mary would have had knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures and there are precedents of songs in those writings. We can point, for example to Miriam and Deborah but scholars believe that Mary's song closely resembles that of Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2.

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Both songs begin on a personal note with rejoicing in the Lord. While Mary does not have the fear of childlessness that Hannah had, like Hannah, she nevertheless recognises God at work in her circumstances.

In response to Elizabeth's statement that both she and the child are blessed of God, Mary in effect says "I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that in Christian circles that statement was truly prophetic, but in Mary's situation, the claim to never be forgotten in the history of this world is an awesome claim and, coming in any other context, would appear as excessive human pride and arrogance. But if we read the rest of that personal testimony, we see the extent to which Mary's condition is attributed to God alone. Mary's soul and spirit, the very depths of her being, rejoices in giving God the glory. We can almost sense the joy that Hannah and these two women share as a result of their pregnancies. In the Message, Eugene Petersen paraphrases Hannah's song which brings out in a graphic form that joy. "I'm bursting with good news! I'm walking on air...I'm dancing my salvation."

Just as Hannah dedicated her son Samuel to the service of God, so Elizabeth and Mary's joy could perhaps be attributed to both firmly and unequivocally believing everything Gabriel had said about the God-given tasks that their children would carry out. Both Hannah and Mary make reference to God's holiness and mightiness but Mary goes further than Elizabeth when she refers to God as her 'Saviour' whose very character is holy and merciful. Mary uses the term 'Saviour' in the Old Testament sense. For example David (Psalm 24:5), Habakkuk (3:18) and Isaiah (12:2).

When the two songs are put side by side, we also find that all that Hannah says about the actions of God are echoed by Mary. Hannah speaks of God smashing the weapons of the strong, and "blasting His enemies out of the sky" = thundering against them from heaven. Mary speaks of God baring His arm which is a show of great strength and scattering the proud and bringing down rulers from their thrones. This is a picture of the Old Testament 'Divine Warrior' who does battle with the enemies of His people. Scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful and the rich anticipates a major theme in the rest of the Gospel. God's action is not because people may be rich and powerful, but because power and riches lead to a pride which rejects the need to rely on God. In the rest of the Gospel we find that the opponents of Jesus are usually those who grasp for social respect and positions of honour like the Pharisees. Such kinds of people exclude the less fortunate and socially unacceptable from their hospitality and use their power to exploit and oppress the poor. There could also be a political implication here because Israel, which is mentioned in verse

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55 is in a very lowly, despised and oppressed position in relation to the mighty powerful, rich and proud Roman Empire.

Hannah also refers to God's mercy and compassion to the poor and hungry stated in the NIV as "raising the poor from the dust and lifting the needy from the ash heap." Mary's song too shows this contrast between God's actions against such opponents and those who really need His help. To those who turn to Him for support, His mercy is unbounded. All of this previews what we find in the Gospel. Time and time again in the Gospel Jesus comes to the aid of those despised and rejected by 'respectable' society. I mentioned before, the case of the rich man and Lazarus – the poor man dignified with a name, the rich man remaining anonymous. The sick, the poor, the demon-possessed, women and children – even Roman centurions, a symbol of imperial oppression - came within Jesus' merciful attention.

Mary's song is therefore telling us that God is at work in the individual lives of servants like Mary and in the social order as a whole. When we realise that wealth, power, privilege and health were all regarded as evidence of God's favour and the opposite was evidence of God's disfavour, we begin to see how revolutionary Mary's claims were. Her child was going to challenge the existing political and social status quo. I mentioned Verses 1:50-55 a couple of weeks ago as the summary of the ideal state where God's righteousness, peace, justice, mercy and compassion will reign in society. Proud and corrupt rulers will be overthrown and God will champion the cause of the humble poor. Compare this with what Jesus proclaimed he came to do in 4:18-19. Note within those verses God's exaltation of the humble poor and his judgement on the ruling and wealthy classes. This is a major theme in Luke – see especially the 'woes' in 6:24-26.

Perhaps, she expected it to happen in accordance with what the Jews expected of their Messiah, but whatever idea she might have held at the time, the main point is clear – this child was going to be a major force for change in the world. While verse 55 only refers to God's mercy to Abraham extending to descendants in Israel forever, there is the hint that all who were considered to be descendants of Abraham would be similarly blessed.

Even if this song stood alone, with no reference to Mary, we would still have a hymn that echoes much Hebrew thought on the effect of God's judgement at the Last Days. Through Mary's inspired song, Luke is pointing us towards how God is once more acting decisively in human history; that He is in control of human affairs and the era of the peace, protection and provision promised in the old covenant is being inaugurated in a new way. Mention of Abraham by both Mary and Zechariah emphasise that all these events are connected with God's

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covenant promises. The birth of Mary's child would take those promises into their final phase for as the writer to the Hebrews tells us 'in the past God spoke through the prophets, now in these last days, He is speaking through His Son.'

What Luke has done is to present a Christian version of Hannah's song which again emphasises that Luke sees these events as a continuation of the story of salvation history started in the Old Testament. But Mary's words go far beyond those of Hannah and that is perhaps the reason why this canticle is today known as 'The Magnificat.' The preview of salvation given in Luke's account of Mary's response to Gabriel's message and her own reflection on the significance of the birth of this child revealed in her song, is multi-dimensional. It embraces the past, the present and the future. Past covenant promises which will come to fruition in the promised Messiah are now becoming a reality for Mary, and for her's and future generations of Israel. We can only speculate about Mary's thoughts about what that future might be during her pregnancy. Certainly, the account shows us that both Elizabeth and Mary had the sense of something new and momentous coming to pass, but with the birth of Jesus, Luke starts to hint at just how new and momentous and world-changing that event would be. Zechariah's new dawn had arrived.

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WEEK 4: The Lord is Here

The introduction was written before news of Kate's pregnancy was announced.

Can you imagine the hoo-hah there is going to be if and when this lady (Duchess of Cambridge) becomes pregnant? Can you just imagine the even greater media scrum there is going to be when the birth is imminent and when the baby arrives. Why, because this child is destined to become the future king or queen of what still might be the United Kingdom. Like John and Jesus, the child of William and Kate has a pre-determined destiny. But, unlike John and Jesus, its destiny will be determined by the lifestyle expected from a 21st century royal family of a single nation, not by the plan and purpose of God for the whole world. The publicity that will surround the birth of this future monarch will stand in stark contrast to the birth of the Child who is already the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. True, Jesus' birth was announced in spectacular fashion, but when we look at the context, we get a mixed message.

What the angels sang was what might be termed a 'high profile' proclamation of a world-changing event. As far as the size of the location and the people to whom the proclamation was made were concerned, it was a very 'low-profile' affair indeed. For example, unlike the other two angelic announcements to Zechariah and Mary, the angel who announced the birth is not even identified by name, although most commentators assume that it is Gabriel. And, in many ways, it is the locations mentioned or implied in Luke chapter 2 which open up a whole new way of looking at the first Christmas story. Luke's account of the birth of Jesus begins, not in Bethlehem, but in imperial Rome and to a governor's palace in Syria. From the realm of the mortal ruler of the known world the scene shifts to the heavens – to the realm of the immortal ruler of the whole world. We cannot help but see that the birth of this child is going to have political implications and this becomes even more apparent in the angel's description of this child and where He will be born. "Saviour", "Christ the Lord" born in the town of David. We have already seen the references to David in Zechariah's and Mary's story, now the association of the birthplace of David with the titles given to the child, becomes a public announcement of the birth of one who will not just be a rival to earthly rulers, but will be the supreme ruler of all. I mentioned before that, with the exception of "Christ" the titles used were those attributed to Caesar Augustus. But when we realise that the "Christ" means "Messiah = one appointed by God" we can see that even the emperor's claim to divinity is being challenged by the use of this title. Also in stating that his message is "good news of great joy" the angel is making, what in those days would have been considered an imperial announcement. We can see, however, that the angel's message comes from a much higher authority. Glory is given to God and peace to the earth to those upon whom God's favour rests. Within these words is the question of where real peace comes from. Caesar Augustus was the man credited with establishing the Pax Romana. Here, his achievement is by-passed by a child who will herald a new era of peace – a peace not made or enforced by man, but a peace coming from God. The Jewish word 'Shalom' comes nearest to the New Testament meaning of peace. It is a holistic peace of body, mind and spirit, in harmony with God, and by virtue of that, peace with one's fellow man. The peace of the kingdom of Caesar and the peace of the Kingdom of God rest on different foundations. Thus, already in these few verses we see glimmers of the conflict with political authorities that will see Jesus tested about whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar and His eventual crucifixion by agents of that power.

Like us, it would only be with the benefit of hindsight that the shepherds might one day realise that they had been given a preview of One who would be a thorn in the side of

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political authority and change the very concepts upon which real power was based. To the shepherds, the association with David may have heightened their image of the Davidic Messiah who was expected to overturn all that Rome represented. But, if that was the case, then they were quickly disabused of that notion, for Luke changes the scene from one of the seats of earthly and divine power, to the poorest and bleakest of locations – fields outside a small town and a place where animals were kept. There could be no greater contrast in social terms between the positions of divine and earthly rulers and their dwelling places than the social setting of the birth of the Saviour of the world.

I hate to spoil the nice cosy image of a stable but scholars do not believe that commercial inns existed in a small place like Bethlehem at this time. They believe it is more likely that Mary and Joseph found lodging in a peasant home which consisted of a room where the people lived and a lean too area where the animals were kept. Or sometimes a two story building, people living on the upper floor and animals kept below. Probably because of the influx of people to the town because of the census, living space for people was already overcrowded, hence Mary and Joseph having to remain in the area reserved for the animals. Regardless, however, of whether it was an actual stable or the part of a peasant dwelling where animals were housed, the birthplace of the Christ is a revolutionary development. And Luke was given the inspired insight to see this from a divine perspective. God's concern for the poor permeates Old Testament prophecy and just from this scenario, we see the statements in Mary's song about God uplifting the poor coming to pass. This will be re-emphasised by Jesus Himself in His sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth when He states He has come to preach good news to the poor, freedom to prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, release for the oppressed – that the time of God's grace has arrived. Throughout the rest of the Gospel, we will see Jesus identifying with and ministering to those in greatest need. In so many ways Luke shows us how God works contrary to human wisdom and human expectations fulfilling in Jesus' words that 'the last shall be first and the first shall be last.' (13:30).

That the announcement is made to shepherds is also significant for Luke. Shepherds were on the lowest rung of the social scale in that day and age. Yet they are the ones who respond. They go to Bethlehem, they see the baby wrapped in swaddling bands and lying in a manger as the angel said, and in spite of appearances to the contrary, the shepherds believed the angels' message that this baby was a royal descendant of David, Saviour of the world, Messiah and Lord. Their response was "glorifying and praising God". But they did even more- they spread the news. In this sense shepherds were the first evangelists. They broadcast the 'good news' they had been given to the amazement of all who heard their story. Again throughout the Gospel, we find that it is the ordinary people who flock to John and to Jesus – some maybe just out of curiosity, some hoping to see a miracle or have a miracle performed for them but many, many more because they saw in Jesus the love and compassion of God for people regardless of their social status and His willingness to welcome them into His Kingdom through belief in His Son. The babe of Bethlehem was destined to bring to all the people what the religious authorities and practices of the day had failed to provide – a means of coming back into a new covenant relationship with God.

And then another change of scene. Luke once again switches locations in this chapter and introduces a time factor into the events. The scene now focuses on the centre of Jewish religious life – the Temple in Jerusalem. Two situations in this place once again point us to the centrality of that city in the mission of Jesus. Firstly, we meet Simeon and Anna who take us a stage further in anticipating what the birth of Jesus means for not only the Jews, but the world at large.

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Scholars are amazed at the wealth of information in these short encounters in the Temple. Joel Green's commentary fills out for us what can be said about the characters of Simeon and Anna.

Simeon's status is denoted by "his piety, his status as an agent of the Holy Spirit, his physical location in the Jerusalem temple, and his capacity to borrow heavily from Isaiah to express his praise to God – Simeon is presented as a reliable witness." (Green p144)

Anna's status is derived from her being a prophet – therefore endowed with the Holy Spirit, her family heritage and her great age which she has reached as a widow. The last mentioned "exemplifies the ascetic ideal of marrying once and devoting oneself only to God in widowhood." Furthermore her habit of fasting may have been a sign of mourning but her presence in the temple suggests that her abstinence is an expression of her hope, a form of prayer entreating God to set things right. (Green p151)

Simeon and Anna remind us that even in the politicised and worldly religious establishment, God had not left Himself without a witness and here again we see the extent to which Luke's insight has led him to select and include highly significant events in his account. Firstly, it is from this occasion on that we can start to refer to the Child as Jesus, for He was not given His name until the eighth day when He was taken to be circumcised in the Temple. Secondly, Simeon's words are another major example of how Luke sees the birth of Jesus as the continuation of the Old Testament story. As Joel Green points out, Simeon's words are heavily dependent on several verses from Isaiah.

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

- 40:5 And the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind together will see it for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.
- 42:6 I the Lord have called you in righteousness. I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.
- 46:13 I am bringing my righteousness near; it is not far away and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendour to Israel.
- (49:6). It is too small a thing for you to be my **servant** to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.
- 52:10 The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.
- 56:1my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.
- 60:1 Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

Simeon's message is firmly rooted in the Isaianic vision of divine restoration and salvation not only for Israel but for the whole world. When Simeon says he sees God's salvation he is referring not just to the baby in his arms but to the life and ministry that Jesus would one day dedicate to the service of God, thereby fulfilling another of Isaiah's images of the Messiah being the Servant of Yahweh. Simeon's words are totally theocentric and there is a sense in which it picks up on all that Zechariah and Mary have said. It is a Spirit enabled prophetic

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utterance (2:25-27) by another representative of expectant Israel. Simeon, testifies to the central place Jesus already occupies in God's redemptive plan. Like Mary in the Magnificat he refers to himself as a 'slave'. Being dismissed 'in peace' is an indication of the peace with God of the Messianic age. Simeon, however, goes further for in his words Luke also includes the Gentiles. The salvation for 'all people' in Luke would seem to include Israel and the nations together. Thus we are to receive the clear message that the saving purpose of God, which is the chief motive for this story of Jesus is universal in scope.

At the same time Simeon indicates that there will be major opposition to Jesus' mission and heartache for Mary.

This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too. (vv34-35)

Falling and rising suggests that a combination of judgement and grace will cause great upheaval in the way people view Jesus and the effect that a positive or negative view will have in the lives of individuals. A sign that will be spoken against could refer to the cross but it also indicates fierce opposition perhaps because thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. This might suggest that Jesus will be able to penetrate into the hearts and minds of people and throughout the Gospel we see Him doing just that – discerning the thoughts of those who sought to trap Him into making a treasonous answer to the question about taxes; exposing the vested interests in the Temple business, and on so many occasions, directing His words and actions against the hypocrisy of the religious establishment. And we see this discernment too when He recognises the faith of those who come to Him for healing. There is disagreement among scholars about whether or not Jesus met the centurion at Capernaum face to face. Given the social norms of the time and the centurion's sensitivity to them, it is more likely that they did not meet. If this is the case, then Jesus' recognition of the faith of the centurion is even more remarkable – He had found no greater faith in the whole of Israel – at a distance!

Another infuriating example of what Luke doesn't explain is Simeon's words to Mary. Later in the Gospel we find Jesus saying that He did not come to bring peace but a sword. In that case, clearly the image of the sword relates to the segregation of those who accept God's salvific purpose in Jesus and those who do not. But how would this apply to Mary? Some have suggested her heartache at the opposition Jesus faced and His humiliating crucifixion. Some suggest, in relation to Jesus' visit to the Temple as a 12-year old, that it is her heartache that family is of secondary importance in the life of her child. We simply do not know what these words meant for Mary. All we can say, is that a sword piercing her heart, meant she would suffer great anguish over the fate of her new-born child.

Yet this ominous statement is balanced by the arrival of Anna. She makes only one statement – that Mary's child was the One all had been looking to for the redemption of Jerusalem. Like all the other characters in these narratives, Anna starts by praising God thus emphasising that all that is happening is of God. He is the One now moving in accordance with not just what was planned in eternity, but what had been the message of the Old Testament prophets, the message that the faithful remnant of Israel had hoped and prayed for for so long. While Anna's statement confines Jesus' redemptive purpose for Jerusalem – another indication of the motif in Luke – we already know that His mission will go way beyond that city. His earthly ministry will start and end there for we can perhaps see the start of that ministry when

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the 12-year old Jesus goes to Jerusalem and astonishes the religious leaders with His knowledge and understanding of the Jewish Scriptures. His responses are accompanied by a remarkable wisdom. In both the Jewish and Graeco-Roman world, wisdom was a highly regarded and believed to be a divinely bestowed virtue, so Luke is already giving us a hint of a quality that will become a key hallmark of Jesus' character which is confirmed when, as an adult, He told the people that One greater than Solomon was amongst them (11:31).

And it is here, by His own statement we have the confirmation of all that was predicted by the central characters in the first Christmas event – as the KJV puts it – Jesus had to be about His Father's business. Jesus' mention of this relationship to God was a bold claim. What can be asserted is that Luke is not telling us that this was the moment Jesus realised that He was the Son of God – only that Jesus was ready to accept God's will for His life, regardless of where that took Him.

We will not meet John or Jesus again until they begin their public ministries, but Luke has left us at the end of chapter two with a sense of anticipation that things will never be the same again.

So as we look back at that first Christmas, we can see that by their words and actions Zechariah, Elisabeth, Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna exemplify the "faithful remnant" of Israel. Their various reactions to the divine activity indicate their belief that God is active in the lives of his people and their willing obedience is testimony to their piety and faith which are firmly grounded in Israel's Scriptures. The numerous Old Testament references in the two chapters show the substance of their beliefs. Mention of covenants and promises indicate that they believe that what is happening in the present is a continuation of what God has done in the past, and as the canticles will also affirm, the future which will come as a result of these births. All of these elements point to the overriding theme in Luke's Gospel – that of salvation – of the God who sent his Son into the world to seek and to save the lost. That is the preview of salvation given in the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel. That is the message of the first Christmas and it is the message of every Christmas that has been and ever will be. It's the 'Good News' the world is more in need of today than ever before. And I think its only fitting that we should end by doing what these three couples in our story did - to give heartfelt, grateful, honour and glory to God by remembering and celebrating the fact that 'Jesus is the reason for the season.'

JESUS, Name above all Names

Beautiful Saviour, Glorious Lord

IMMANUEL, GOD IS WITH US

Blessed Redeemer, Living Word

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS: PREVIEWS OF SALVATION
