

Luke and Acts

Luke and Acts together form a two volume set, written by the same author, charting the story of the gospel from Jesus' birth at Bethlehem to Paul's imprisonment in Rome. Its author is Luke the doctor, the companion of St.Paul. Luke and Acts are therefore the only books in the Bible written by a Gentile, and he writes with the mission to the Gentiles very much in mind.

The two books were written for someone called "Theophilus" (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Nothing is known about who Theophilus was, but since the name means "lover of God" it could be a disguise for a well-placed Roman who did not want to be known as a Christian. Alternatively, it might be an address to any reader who loves God.

Luke probably had a copy of Mark's gospel with him as he wrote. He used it for many of his stories and for his overall plan. Like Mark he begins with Jesus' ministry in Galilee, leading to Peter's confession and the Transfiguration at Caesarea Philippi, followed by the journey to Jerusalem and Jesus' death and resurrection. But he is not slavish in the way he follows Mark, omitting and rearranging some of his material and adding much of his own.

Luke shows a special concern for the poor, women and outcasts. He emphasises the presence of women among Jesus' disciples (8:1-3). The material found only in Luke's gospel includes Jesus' words on humility and hospitality (14:7-14), the raising of the widow's son at Nain (7:11-17), the sinful woman at the home of Simon the Pharisee (7:36-end) and the call of Zaccheus (19:1-10).

Because of the amount of the gospel to be covered in each day's reading, the focus of these studies will not be on the message of each individual section and its application. Instead, the notes will concentrate on the way Luke has arranged his material and how the major themes of the gospel are developed. This means there will be less emphasis on Jesus directly and more on Luke's theology and understanding of Jesus' mission.

Day 95. Psalm 119:1-8; Luke 1:1-56

The Promise

Psalm 119:1-8

Psalm 119 is an acrostic poem; in each of the twenty-two sections all the eight verses begin with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a meditation on the Law, the Torah, and uses a variety of different words with different shades of meaning for the Lord's instruction: law, statutes, precepts, commandments, decrees, instructions etc. In the first section, the psalmist longs for the ability to keep the Law in its entirety and with a whole heart.

Luke 1:1-56

Unlike Mark, whose gospel begins with the ministry of John the Baptist and then that of Jesus, Luke begins by interweaving the stories of their births. This is a way of exploring the significance of both John and Jesus and showing the connection between their coming and the hopes of Israel for salvation. Luke weaves the meaning of the events into the story. While the manner of their birth shows that something of great significance is taking place, the angels' messages and the songs of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon tell us what that significance is.

Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary are righteous, God-fearing people (1:6, 2:22-24). Although Luke in his gospel strongly emphasises the call to sinners, he balances this by an appreciation of God's love for upright but humble people (the centurion Cornelius in Acts 10 is another example).

John is to follow in the long line of Israel's prophets, becoming the last and perhaps, since he is to be endowed with the power of Elijah, the greatest of them all. The angel's message to Zechariah recalls Hannah's vow in 1 Samuel 1:11 that her son would be dedicated to the Lord as a Nazirite. His being filled with the Holy Spirit from before his birth recalls God's call to Jeremiah, in which he tells the prophet that he was chosen from conception (Jeremiah 1:5). Like the promised Elijah, he will turn the hearts of the generations to one another (Malachi 4:6) and like the words of Hosea, he will set forth the wisdom of the righteous (Hosea 14:9).

Both Zechariah and Mary question the angel Gabriel, who brings them news of God's promise. But whereas Zechariah's question was, "How will I know?" Mary's was "How can this be?" Zechariah wanted proof before he would believe and commit himself, proof which was given in the form of his dumbness. Mary, on the other hand responded in willing obedience. Having understood the angel's message, she accepted it and all it might mean for her.

The coming of the Messiah was heralded by an outburst of the work of the Holy Spirit. John was to be filled with the Spirit before his birth (1:15), the Holy Spirit "overshadowed" Mary to achieve the conception of Jesus (1:35), Elizabeth and Zechariah were inspired by the Spirit to prophesy and utter blessing (1:41,67) and later Simeon was guided by the Spirit to meet Mary and Joseph with the infant Jesus in the Temple (2:27). The coming of the incarnate Word is prepared by the Spirit who will later anoint him for his ministry (3:22).

The stories of Elizabeth and Mary recall the experience of Hannah, another barren but humble and God-fearing woman, who was granted a child, Samuel, a prophet who led his people to freedom. Mary's song (1:46-55) contains echoes of Hannah's (1 Samuel 2:1-10). God is a God of mercy (1:50). He remembers the humble, the ones most people overlook (1:48), and will bring judgement in their favour and against the proud, the powerful and the wealthy (1:51-53).

Day 96. Psalm 119:73-80; Luke 1:57 - 2:40

The Birth of Jesus

Psalm 119:73-80

The psalmist prays that God will teach him his Law, so that he in turn may teach others.

Luke 1:57 - 2:40

Luke's emphasis throughout the birth stories is the way Jesus and John are coming to fulfil God's promises to Israel, going right back to Abraham (1:54-55,72-74). For the Jews of Jesus' day, this would have meant above all the promise of freedom in the promised land. He has come to bring about the salvation of Israel (1:16-17,32-33,69,77; 2:38).

The end of Zechariah's dumbness is a sign causing people to ask, "What will this child become?" His song, known from its Latin title as the "Benedictus", is the answer to that question. In the 6th. century B.C. the nation of Judah was defeated by the Babylonians, Jerusalem was taken and most of the people were sent into exile. Although they were allowed to return some 70 years later under Cyrus of Persia, many of the Jews stayed behind and those who made the journey back to Jerusalem still had to live under foreign domination. For the Jews of Jesus' time, the salvation of Israel would have meant the fulfilment of the many prophecies of the Old Testament of a final return from exile, freedom to worship without restriction and the end of foreign rule.

Zechariah speaks of the one who is to come as a Saviour in the house of David (1:69). Like Joshua, whose name means, "the Lord saves", he will bring his people into their promised land and, like David's house, he will rule over them there. God's people are to be saved from the nations which oppress them in order to serve him freely and without fear (1:70-75). Now is the time when the words of the prophets are to be fulfilled. The forerunner has arrived (1:76; Isaiah 40:3); the dawn has broken (1:78; Malachi 4:2); and the light has dawned on those who walked in darkness (1:79; Isaiah 9:2).

As an historian, Luke wants to present the birth of the Messiah as an event in history. Roman religions had all kinds of mythological birth stories, but

Luke distances his story from these by the mention of the Roman rulers and officials of the time. These rulers have another significance, too. Like Cyrus, who released the people of Israel from exile, the emperor Augustus is God's instrument to bring about the fulfilment of prophecy, the one whose decree ensures that the Messiah is born in Bethlehem as the prophets foretold (Micah 5:2).

At the coming of the Messiah there was "no room in the inn" (2:7). This is a parable of Jesus' later rejection by his own people (John 1:10-11). Yet although born in obscurity, Jesus already receives the worship of outcasts, the shepherds who were despised by the "righteous" because their occupation meant that they could not observe all the niceties of the laws of purity. Later, it emerges that Joseph and Mary are a poor family, who cannot afford the full sacrifice at Jesus' presentation (2:24; see Leviticus 12:6-8), while Simeon speaks of Jesus as a revelation to the Gentiles who will bring glory to Israel (2:32; Isaiah 40:5; 49:5-6).

Day 97. Psalm 119:137-144; Luke 2:41 - 4:30

Jesus' Agenda

Psalm 119:137-144

The psalmist endures trial because of his zeal for the Law, but his love for God strengthens him and brings him through it.

Luke 2:39 - 4:30

Twelve was the age of Barmitzvah, when Jesus became an adult before the Law and assumed adult responsibilities. His questions to the Jewish teachers show how deeply he had studied the Law in his childhood. At that important time, Jesus began to recognise a special mission from God. When in 2:48, Mary calls Joseph his father, Jesus replies that his Father is God and the Temple his home (2:49). Nevertheless, although he recognises a greater loyalty, he is obedient to human obligations (2:51).

In 3:1-4, Luke the historian carefully locates Jesus' ministry for a Roman audience. John the Baptist had come to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah for a return from exile. His message of forgiveness fulfilled Isaiah 40:1-2, but in order to receive it the people of Israel had to accept baptism, which was normally reserved for Gentile proselytes. Already in John's ministry, the hopes of Israel were being given a different form. John warned that being children of Abraham conferred no privileges; rather Israel was to be the first to experience God's judgement. The true people of God is broader than Israel and may even include Roman soldiers. They are known by their behaviour: contentment, generosity and love for their neighbour.

The Messiah, when he comes, will bring a new baptism, not simply repentance but the Holy Spirit and fire. John alludes to Malachi 3:1-2, in which the Lord's messenger comes to prepare his way and when the Lord comes he comes as a refiner's fire, to purify the Temple in particular.

Before he could baptise with the Spirit, Jesus must first be baptised himself and live under the Spirit's direction. With the Spirit came divine assurance of his sonship (3:22). But to be the Son of God meant to inherit the vocation of Israel. As Israel went through the Red Sea and then the wilderness, Jesus was sent from the Jordan into the wilderness, where his vocation was tested and refined. Not only did Jesus reaffirm his sonship in reply to the devil,

but all the Scriptures he quoted are taken from passages in Deuteronomy that sum up the lessons from Israel's wilderness experience. In temptation, Jesus took his stand on the faith of Israel.

In contrast to both Mark and Matthew, Luke highlights the story of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth. Not only is it placed at the beginning of his preaching, but his sermon is a summary of his entire message, and the rejection of his own people looks forward to his rejection by Israel as a whole. Jesus has come to fulfil Scripture by proclaiming the final return of Israel from exile. In the passage from Isaiah 61, it is Israel who is poor, blind, oppressed and in prison, still waiting for liberation from foreign oppressors (see Luke 1:69-75). But Jesus introduces an entirely new interpretation of Israel's long-held hope. This release from oppression is not for Israel but for all, Gentiles included. No wonder the synagogue audience, upright Jewish men, were furious. But their rejection amplifies the prophecy of Simeon in 2:34-35.

Day 98. Psalm 119:17-24; Luke 4:31 - 6:11

Teaching and Healing in Galilee

Psalm 119:17-24

The psalmist prays to be able to understand God's Law better. He prays for protection from the scorn of powerful people who look down on him because of his devotion.

Luke 4:31 - 6:11

In this section, Luke follows closely the outline of Mark's gospel (Mark 1:21 - 3:6). On the assumption that Luke was writing with Mark's text in front of him, a comparison of the two highlights some of Luke's special concerns.

The fact that he was a Gentile writing for a Roman audience comes out in the geography. He adds "a town in Galilee" to explain the whereabouts of Capernaum (4:31). Despite the mention of Judea in 4:44, everything Luke records about Jesus' ministry at this stage takes place in Galilee. To a Roman, "Judea" would mean simply "the land of the Jews." Luke is also much less exact about points of Jewish ritual. Writing for an audience unfamiliar with the law of the Sabbath, it makes more sense for people to have come to Jesus "as the sun was setting" (4:40) than "after sunset" (Mark 1:32). In 5:33, he explains the routine fasting of the Pharisees and disciples of John in accordance with the Law as a sign of special devotion.

As a doctor, Luke has a special interest in the healing miracles. In 4:33 he adds the word "demon" to be more specific about the "evil spirit." He describes Jesus "bending over" Simon's mother-in-law (4:39) and laying hands on each of the crowd in the evening (4:40). In the synagogue one Sabbath it is the man's "right hand" which is withered (6:6). Interestingly, he mentions the presence of power as the source of healing (5:17). In 6:19 power comes from Jesus to heal and in 8:46 Jesus is aware that power has gone out of him when someone is healed (compare Matthew 9:20-22). But Luke is either less interested in or less confident about Jesus' own feelings and omits the references in Mark altogether (5:13, 6:10; compare Mark 1:41, 3:5).

Luke also portrays Jesus as a man of prayer, who spent much time in prayer and whose prayer life particularly impressed his disciples (4:42; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18,28; 11:1).

Above all, Luke's emphasis is on the Word of God. Jesus has come to preach the good news and his teaching has authority (4:31-32,43). The story of Peter's call begins with the crowd flocking to hear "the word of God" (5:1). It is this word which brings about the miraculous catch of fish as Peter lets down his nets at Jesus' command. This word convicts Peter of his sinfulness, assures him of forgiveness and commissions him for service. "From now on you will catch men," (5:10) is not so much an invitation as a statement. Peter's response is to leave everything and follow, just as Luke himself probably did on meeting Paul and hearing the word preached.

Later in the chapter, Levi the tax-collector responds in the same way and Jesus is found with tax-collectors and sinners (5:27-30). He has come to call sinners to repentance (5:32). Peter himself only came to Jesus on realising his own sinfulness. Later in the gospel we meet the sinful woman at the house of the Pharisee (7:36-end), the penitent thief on the cross (23:39-43) and hear the story of the Prodigal Son (15:11-end). The gospel as good news for sinners is a major theme, especially close to Luke's heart

Day 99. Psalm 119:41-48; Luke 6:12 - 7:35

The Sermon on the Plain

Psalm 119:41-48

The Law is a way of life which is a delight to keep.

Luke 6:12 - 7:35

The "Sermon on the Plain" is so called because Jesus comes down from the mountain to a level place (6:17). Many of Jesus' words are similar to those in the "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew's gospel. It is possible that both Luke and Matthew used a written collection of Jesus' teaching, which, because it did not have a context, they felt free to arrange as they saw fit. If so, each has given his own distinctive interpretation to the "Beatitudes" (Luke 6:12-26, Matthew 5:1-12). On the other hand much of Jesus' teaching may have circulated and been passed on by memory. In this case it is perfectly possible that Jesus himself gave two versions of the Beatitudes on different occasions and that Luke selected this rather than the other. Jesus was a travelling preacher and would have used the same stories and sayings many times, adapting and changing them as the occasion demanded.

For Luke, the gospel is good news for the poor and the unregarded. It is the ones no one expects who are accepted by God, while the ones confident of their standing find themselves outside God's favour (see also 18:9-14). Here, it is the poor, hungry and persecuted who are assured of God's favour while the rich, well fed and well regarded are warned.

The heart of Christian behaviour is mercy (6:36). This is shown by those whose love knows no boundaries and no limits (6:27-36). As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is the person who has mercy who acts as a true neighbour (10:36-37). But the one who judges will be condemned, and this is clearly directed at the Pharisees and teachers of the Law, who have already judged Jesus (5:21; 6:2,7; 7:29-30). They are blind guides, who will lead others astray (6:39-40), hypocrites who see the faults of others clearly, but not their own (6:41-42), bad trees whose words show what is inside (6:43-45). True justification comes from hearing Jesus words and doing them, as already demonstrated in the call of Peter (6:46-49; 5:1-11).

Luke arranges his stories of Jesus' works alongside his words so that the two complement and reinforce each other. Jesus has said that it is those with no reputation who are blessed. He now receives a deputation from one whom the Jews think is worthy of a healing miracle (7:4). But the centurion himself insists that he is not worthy (7:6-7). Instead, it is because of his faith that Jesus responds. The healing of a high status Gentile's slave is balanced by the raising of a widow's son. The raising of the widow's son at Nain shows Jesus' compassion for a woman in distress, who, without either husband or adult son, would have no one to provide for her. It also provides an example of the raising of the dead mentioned in the next section (7:22).

Jesus is performing the works expected of the Messiah, but despite this there are those who refuse to acknowledge him. The least in the kingdom are greater than John, because they believe whereas John doubts and needs a definite answer (7:23,28). The ones who respond to Jesus in faith are those who accepted John's baptism, who repented of their sins and are looking for forgiveness. But the Pharisees who rejected John also condemn Jesus. They are the ones who judge others, but who will themselves be condemned (7:31-35; 6:37)

Day 100. Psalm 119:65-72; Luke 7:36 - 8:end

The Parable of the Sower

Psalm 119:65-72

The psalmist thanks God for the experience of affliction, which has led him to a closer study and deeper understanding of the Law.

Luke 7:36 - 8:end

The story of the sinful woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee illustrates the themes of judgement and mercy which have been the subject of Jesus' teaching from chapter 6. Simon is an example of that quickness to condemn which is blind to the mercy of God. Until then at least, he had failed to recognise God's purpose (7:30). But Jesus recognises in the actions of the woman either the desire for forgiveness or the consciousness of forgiveness received. Her extravagant loving action could have been a gift of thanks or a cry for help; either would have been a demonstration of faith in Jesus as the source of forgiveness. In either case, she needed to know that her action was accepted, and Jesus gave her more than this, comparing it favourably with the Pharisee's reception, assuring her of forgiveness and commending her faith.

At this point, Luke mentions some of the women who accompanied Jesus and provided for him and his disciples. There could hardly have been a greater difference in background between Mary Magdalene and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, but in the eyes of the strict Pharisees both would have been outsiders.

The parable of the sower links the Word of God to the theme of judgement and mercy - mercy on those who hear the Word, judgement on those who reject it. As the quotation from Isaiah emphasises, the parables separate those with faith from those without: some who fail to believe the Word when they hear it, others whose faith is shallow and still others in whom faith is choked by the cares of this world. But still others receive the word and hold on to it until it produces fruit. The Pharisees should have been a light to the world (Isaiah 49:6). Instead they were hiding God's light, denying it even to those they despised in Israel. Jesus' teaching gives them a chance to repent, but if they do not they will lose what they think they

have (8:16-18). The right response to Jesus' teaching is to put it into practice (8:21, see 6:47-48).

For the word to bear fruit in someone's life, they need faith. Luke follows the parable of the sower with four stories illustrating Jesus' power over nature, the spirit world, illness and death and showing him doing what no one else was able to do. The calming of the storm and the raising of Jairus' daughter speak for themselves in demonstrating Jesus' exceptional power, while in the case of the Gerasene demoniac the demons had previously been uncontrollable and the woman with a haemorrhage had been ill for twelve years without anyone being able to heal her. These stories also contrast fear and faith in the response to Jesus. The disciples are rebuked for their lack of faith, while the people of Gerasa send Jesus away in fear. But the woman with the haemorrhage is healed because of her faith and Jairus is encouraged to believe for his daughter to be well.

Day 101. Psalm 119:97-104; Luke 9:1 - 10:24

The Mission of the Disciples

Psalm 119:97-104

Studying the Law results in a wisdom nothing else can match.

Luke 9:1 - 10:24

In this section, Jesus sends out two sets of disciples in mission, first the twelve, then the seventy. In between are the stories of Peter's confession of faith and the Transfiguration. Together, these stories look forward to the time when the risen Jesus at his Ascension sends out his disciples to continue his work of healing and preaching the Kingdom of God. The Ascension was the final stage of the "departure" which he was to accomplish (9:31), which also included the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus' instructions to his disciples here highlight the effect his death and resurrection were to have on the style and overall approach of Christian mission.

The first mission was that of the Twelve, preaching the gospel from village to village, healing and driving out demons (9:6). Later, the feeding of the 5,000 interprets the apostles' mission. Just as they had taken his message to the villages, the apostles feed the crowds with the bread which Jesus had broken. Here, as in Mark's account of the miracle, as well as in John 6 and in Luke 24 where Jesus breaks bread after his resurrection, the eucharistic actions of taking the loaves, blessing, breaking and distributing them are linked symbolically with the preaching of the word.

The question of Herod the tetrarch (9:7-8) prepares the ground for Jesus' question to his disciples at 9:18, in response to which Peter recognised him as the Messiah. Immediately, Jesus began to warn his disciples of his destiny (9:22; 24:25-27), and the call to his followers to suffer with him (9:23-26). His words have an immediate application to the coming journey to Jerusalem, which would both lead to his own death and also put the disciples at risk. But before the journey came the Transfiguration, whose significance is similar to the baptism and temptations in which Jesus' call was first affirmed and then tested and refined. The words from God the Father at the baptism (3:22) are now repeated with an added testimony to

Jesus' authority (9:35) and Moses and Elijah appear to speak with Jesus' about his "departure."

The word translated "departure" is literally "exodus" or "going out." It refers immediately to Jesus' imminent departure on the journey to Jerusalem but beyond that to his death, resurrection and ascension (9:51), which are the real "exodus". As at the baptism and temptations, Jesus took the role of Israel. He was to accomplish a new exodus and by so doing lead his people to freedom.

Despite their previous success, the disciples now found themselves unable to drive out a demon (9:40). Nor did they understand what Jesus meant when he spoke about his coming betrayal and death (9:45). They were not yet ready for the next stage of the mission. First, they must learn humility, openness to those of no power or standing (9:48), gracious acceptance of all those who acknowledge Jesus' name (9:49-50), forbearance in the face of hostility (9:51-56) and face up to the cost of the task in hand (9:57-end).

The second mission, although commissioned by Jesus in similar words, involved seventy rather than the twelve and foreshadows the mission of the whole Church beyond the boundaries of Israel. In Acts 8 the believers were scattered as far as Samaria and preached the word wherever they went; only the apostles stayed in Jerusalem and it was Philip, one of the seven deacons appointed in Acts 6, who was the first to preach in Samaria (Acts 8:1-8). Several times in Acts, Luke stresses the point that the refusal of the Jews to receive the word opens the way to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46-49; 28:25-end). Here, Jesus announces judgement on the Jewish towns which have rejected him (10:13-16), and acceptance for the humble whom God chooses (10:21 refers back to 9:48 and forward to Acts 2:47 in which the Lord adds to the number of the Church).

At the end of the gospel and the beginning of Acts, the link between Jesus' departure and the Church's mission becomes explicit. Having explained to his disciples the meaning of his death and resurrection, Jesus was taken up to heaven, commissioning them to preach the word in the power of the Holy Spirit (10:1-2; 24:45-51; Acts 1:2-9).

Day 102. Psalm 119:161-168; Luke 10:25 - 12:12

Jesus under Attack

Psalm 119:161-168

Through his love for and obedience to God's commands, the psalmist finds peace in the face of persecution.

Luke 10:25 - 12:12

On the road to Jerusalem, the conflict with the Jews begins to grow fiercer. The mission of the seventy implied a judgement on the Jewish people because they refused to accept Jesus. As the lawyers and the Pharisees argue with him, that refusal becomes more explicit. The lawyer who put Jesus to the test in 10:25 was only the first of many (11:16,53-54). Jesus' answer, given in the parable of the Good Samaritan, is that mercy is the heart of the Law. Whoever keeps the Law by showing mercy is "my neighbour" irrespective of his origin. God is raising up children of Abraham for himself from those outside the covenant people (3:7-9; 4:25-27; 11:29-32; 15:32; 19:9-10). The Samaritan and not the priest or Levite did what the Law required, but works of the Law on their own are not enough. What is required is attention to Jesus' words (6:46-49; 8:15,21; 10:38-39; 11:28).

The parable of the Good Samaritan is balanced by the story of Martha and Mary. Martha's good works distract her from her proper focus, Jesus himself and his words. Mary is an example to us of the receptive attitude that we need, uncluttered by the desire to justify ourselves by service. In teaching his disciples about prayer, Jesus put the emphasis on the same attitude. The heart of prayer is to come to God as a child to a Father, expecting to receive good things. The greatest gift is the Holy Spirit; the fact that the Holy Spirit is poured out on all God's people is a sign that the long-expected Kingdom has come as foretold in prophecies such as Ezekiel 36:26-27 and Joel 2:28-29. It is being received by the humble, who like Mary, listen to Jesus' words.

Ironically, while Jesus' opponents accused him of deriving his power from the devil, they themselves were acting as the devil had at the temptations, by putting him to the test and asking for a sign (4:9-12). Jesus' answer is

that his own miracles are evidence of the "finger of God" (11:20). This is a phrase which occurs at Exodus 8:19, where Pharaoh's magicians recognise the difference between what they can do by their magic arts and the greater power of God. In other words, the Jewish exorcists are like Pharaoh's magicians, while Jesus has come, like Moses, to set his people free.

Then follows a series of judgements on the Jews who reject Jesus. They may have been cleansed from evil by the Law, but their failure to receive Jesus will mean that their final condition is worse than the first (11:24-26). They will be judged by the Gentiles because of their failure to listen to wisdom or to repent (11:29-32, compare 7:29-35 for the themes of repentance and wisdom). They should be a light to others, but in fact they are darkness (11:33-36). Their piety is external, they keep the Law to themselves rather than offering it to the world. They have failed to fulfil their divine calling as a light to the nations and as a result they will bring upon themselves the judgement due to all Israel for rejecting God's word through prophets and messengers (11:37-52).

Luke himself had first hand experience of the way the pious Jews persecuted the Church; he was with Paul in Jerusalem when he was arrested and nearly killed. So in his next section, he applies some of Jesus' words to his fellow-Christians facing persecution. He reminds them that Jesus himself faced persecution (11:53-54), warns them to be on their guard against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (12:1-3), urges them not to be afraid even of facing death for Jesus' sake (12:4-7) and to stand firm under cross-examination (12:8-12).

Day 103. Psalm 119:81-88; Luke 12:13 - 13:end

The Call to Decision

Psalm 119:81-88

Longing for the fulfilment of God's promises.

Luke 12:13 - 13:end

Jesus called his disciples to follow him to Jerusalem (9:21-26) and these chapters are punctuated with reminders that he was on his way to a final showdown (12:40,49-50,54-56; 13:24-25,31-end). A day of decision was coming, in which his followers would have to stand firm in their allegiance and those who opposed him would meet God's judgement.

Jesus first mentioned the dangers of wealth in the Sermon on the Plain (6:24-26), and in the parable of the sower he warned against the worries, riches and pleasures of this life which can choke the word (8:14). Now the time of decision is drawing near and his followers must sort out their priorities. The rich man, whose life was governed by his wealth, was not ready when God called him (12:20-21). Rather than material wealth, we should be seeking God's Kingdom (12:31) by using our wealth to provide for the poor and looking forward to wealth in heaven instead (see Deuteronomy 15:1-11 as an example of the way the Jews were expected to care for the poor and 2 Corinthians 9:8, in which Paul applies this teaching to a largely Gentile church).

Jesus' words on watchfulness have often been taken to apply to his Second Coming and the need for Christians to be ready for that event. In fact their application was much more immediate. Jesus was warning both followers and enemies alike that the day of decision was fast approaching. In verses 35-40 he was saying that his followers should always be ready for service at his command. This links with the previous section on avoiding the distractions of worldly cares and concerns. It is in this way and no other that we can be ready for the second coming, since none of us knows when that will be. Verses 42-48 refer indirectly to God's people today who know his will, but their immediate application is to Israel. They are stewards of the things of God and have been unfaithful; entrusted with much, much will be required of them and they will be found wanting.

The time of decision will bring division; some will be loyal to Jesus and others to Israel (12:49-53). But God is ready to haul Israel off to trial and unless she settles with him she will be punished (12:54-end). Judgement will strike at the heart of her worshipping life, the Temple, where those sacrificing will perish and the tower will fall on them (13:1-5; in verse 3 N.I.V. leaves untranslated the word *homoioōs*, which means "in the same way"). Israel is living on borrowed time (13:6-9).

The healing of the crippled woman is a reminder of why the judgement is coming. Israel's rulers are preventing the healing of the children of Abraham by their rigid adherence to the Law. They bind heavy burdens on people's backs, and only Jesus raises a finger to lift them (11:46). While they lock the door to the kingdom, Jesus is opening it (11:52). The kingdom may be insignificant and unnoticed now, but it will grow (13:18-21).

Again Jesus warns that the time of decision is approaching. The door is narrow, but his hearers must try to enter because the time for doing so is short. Those who think they are sure of a place in the Kingdom will be thrown out while many others who don't expect it come in (13:22-30). Finally, Jesus looks forward to the coming showdown. His ministry has only a short time left to run; soon he will be at Jerusalem, to die as prophets before him have died. But the result of his death will be the destruction of the Temple. This is the "house" which will be left desolate because it refused to receive him.

Day 104. Psalm 119:169-176; Luke 14 - 15

Invitations to the Feast

Psalm 119:169-176

The writer looks to the Lord to rescue him, like a lost sheep.

Luke 14 - 15

These chapters begin with Jesus sharing a meal at the house of a Pharisee and end with the story of a banquet given for a returning son. They deal with the question at issue between Jesus and the Pharisees: What were the boundaries of the true Israel? Who will be welcome at the heavenly banquet?

The Pharisees believed that only the "righteous" who consciously strove to keep the Law in all its points were acceptable to God. In contrast, Jesus was teaching that God welcomes all, including "sinners." His own actions in sharing table fellowship with such people are a foretaste of the heavenly banquet (5:29-32; 15:2).

The healing of the man with dropsy immediately contrasts the attitudes of Jesus and the Pharisees. Whereas they refused to rescue the fallen, that is precisely what Jesus came to do (5:32; 11:46). Jesus' words in 14:5 introduce the theme of the lost son, taken up in the parable of 15:11-end. That lost son is Israel and Jesus has come "to seek and to save" them (19:9-10; see Exodus 4:22-23; Hosea 11:1).

Words of advice about etiquette at a meal have overtones about the heavenly banquet. Jesus had already told the Pharisees to beware looking for places of honour (11:43). Now he adds a warning: they may not receive the place of honour in the Kingdom of God which they expect (14:7-11). Again, he warns them that their generosity is too limited in its extent (6:32-36; 10:29; 14:12-14).

The parable of the Great Feast amplifies the warning of 13:28-30. Those with a claim to first place at the feast are excluded and their places taken by the blind and the lame from both town and countryside, the people Jesus had warned his host to include on his hospitality list. In the double commission of the master to his servants is a hint that once the numbers

from Israel are complete and those previously unregarded welcomed in, there is still room for more.

To balance his emphasis on the breadth of God's welcome, Jesus now reminds his would-be followers of the costs of discipleship (see also 9:57-end; 13:23-27). The invitation is open, but the conditions are tough. They will have to leave their families and go with him to Jerusalem to face death. The words about "hating" one's family (14:26) are an emphatic way of making a comparison; the meaning is simply that Jesus must take a higher priority. Israel, which has missed its vocation, is the salt which has lost its flavour; the same fate may befall the would-be followers unless they begin with the intention of giving up everything for Jesus (14:33-35).

In chapter 15, Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. The banquet at which all are welcome has symbolically begun, but it is sinners and not the righteous who have the honoured places. Jesus has come not to reward the righteous, but to seek and to save the lost (15:7,10; 19:10).

The parable of the prodigal son presents a picture of a gracious God welcoming home the sinner. The son was the worst of sinners. He had treated his father as if he were dead, separated himself from him and squandered his property. Yet when he repented and returned, his father welcomed him home, and gave a feast in his honour. The call to Israel to repent and return and the picture of God's forgiveness Jesus gives here has its origins in the prophecies of Hosea and Jeremiah (Hosea 11:1-11; Jeremiah 3:11 - 4:2). The character of the elder son holds up a mirror to the Pharisees, asking them to reconsider their opposition to Jesus' gospel of grace.

Day 105. Psalm 119:9-16; Luke 16 - 17

Distractions

Psalm 119:9-16

Study of God's word moulds a person's life.

Luke 16 - 17

As always, Luke balances his emphasis on the grace of God with a reminder of the demands of God's Kingdom. Those who, like the prodigal son, are welcomed freely into the Kingdom, need to bear fruit worthy of repentance (3:8). In the parable of the sower, Jesus commends those who hold on to the word with a noble and good heart, persevere and bear fruit (8:15). Talking to Martha about her sister Mary Jesus had said, "One thing is needed; Mary has chosen what is better," (10:42). In these two chapters he gives some examples of what he means and the distractions which can arise.

The key verse in chapter 16 is verse 13, which binds the two stories and the teaching together. The steward's dishonest actions show that he had rightly estimated his master's character. The message for Jesus' followers is not that dishonesty is acceptable, but rather that we should rightly understand God's character and allow him to mould our values and priorities. We are to use our money as shrewdly as do the children of this world, but for eternal purposes. All we are given here belongs to God and we are stewards; our real inheritance will not come to us until we enter the Kingdom.

Being lovers of wealth, the Pharisees mock him, so Jesus assures them that what they reject is the message of the Law, which can never pass away (16:14-17). The rich man failed to win friends and be welcomed into eternal dwellings, but he should have known from the Law what God expected of him. There is no divorce between the Law and the Kingdom (16:18); the requirements of the Kingdom include those of the Law (10:25-37).

Throughout the stories are overtones of warning to the Jews. When asked to give an account of their stewardship, they will be found wanting (16:1). They will not be welcomed into eternal dwellings or invited to the feast in

heaven (16:9,23). It is because they do not listen to the Law and the prophets that they will not listen to Jesus (16:31).

Distractions can also arise from within the household of faith. Lack of care for another's faith (17:1-2), condemnation of the weak or sinful (17:3-4), a desire for the spectacular rather than persevering service (17:5-6), pride in one's good works or position of responsibility (17:7-10). As with the Law (10:25-37), it is a Samaritan who demonstrates the correct attitude, one of humble thankfulness (17:11-19).

Finally, we can be distracted from the one thing needed by a preoccupation with the coming of the Kingdom. We do not need to wonder about times, Jesus says, because the Kingdom is here now, "within" or "among" us, like the word of God in the parable of the sower. The "day" of the Son of Man is like the "day of the Lord" in the Old Testament. Prophets like Amos warn that the "day of the Lord," which Israel expected would bring their vindication, will in fact bring judgment (Amos 5:18-20). The same will be true for Israel at the day of the Son of Man, and for those followers of his who, like the people of Noah's day and Lot's, are distracted by the cares of this life (17:26-29). Those who try to save their lives, will lose them; only those who lose their lives will keep them (17:33).

Day 106. Psalm 119: 33-40; Luke 18 - 19

Entry into Jerusalem

Psalm 119:33-40

If we yield our lives to God, he himself will take a part in turning us towards his teaching. The writer also prays for protection in persecution.

Luke 18 - 19

Despite Jesus' warnings about what would happen to him in Jerusalem, the disciples still expected the Kingdom to come in power when he got there (19:11; Acts 1:6). The focus of the teaching Luke collects in these chapters is on the need for Christians to wait patiently for the Kingdom to arrive. Again the foundation for what he says here is laid in the parable of the sower, with its contrast between those who give way under persecution, those for whom the cares of life choke the word and make it unfruitful and those who display patient endurance (8:13-15).

The qualities Jesus highlights are perseverance in prayer (18:1-8), humility (18:9-14, 15-17) and the need to avoid the love of money (18:18-27). In these last two respects, they are to avoid the sinful attitudes of the Pharisees (14:7-11; 16:14-15). Unlike that of the lost son, where in the figure of the father Jesus gives us a word picture of God's grace (15:22-24), the parable of the unrighteous judge (18:1-8), like those of the friend at midnight and the unjust steward, use contrast to show us what God is *not* like (11:5-8; 16:1-9).

As usual, Luke uses two stories to comment on and amplify Jesus' teaching. The disciples are blind to the destiny awaiting Jesus, but a blind man calls on him as Son of David, receives his sight and follows him. A rich ruler finds parting with his wealth in order to gain eternal life too difficult, but a wealthy tax collector gladly gives away half his possessions and receives salvation and a place among the children of Abraham.

The parable of the ten "talents," pounds or minas is another warning of the dangers of unfaithfulness. 19:26 is a parallel to 8:18, which immediately follows the parable of the sower. Nothing is to prevent the seed of God's word from bearing fruit.

The parable is also a warning to the Jews to bear fruit before it is too late. Approaching Jerusalem, the focus of attention begins to shift back to the fate of the city. As he enters, Jesus warns his enemies of the fate in store for them if they continue to reject him (19:27,41-44). The words of prophecy in 19:44 are reminiscent of Psalm 137:7-9, a prayer of Israel for vengeance against their enemies. The vengeance they prayed for falls on them because they have refused either to love their enemies or to share the grace of God with them (6:35-36; 12:47-48). In the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus acts out the coming judgement.

Day 107. Psalm 119:89-96; Luke 20 - 21

Jesus in Jerusalem

Psalm 119:89-96

The word of God is eternal and will never pass away. The psalmist takes refuge from his enemies in study of the Law.

Luke 20 - 21

In Galilee and on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus used in his teaching many images drawn from country life. In Jerusalem, he was meeting the chief priests and Jewish leaders. With them, he used arguments of a different type. The parable of the vineyard is based on a recognisable scriptural image, as the priests and scribes knew (20:19); the Sadducees recognised only the five books of Moses as fully authoritative, so Jesus went to Exodus for a proof of the reality of the resurrection (20:37-38); 20:41-44 is a typical rabbinical argument. As a teacher, Jesus adapted his presentation to the background of his hearers.

Jesus' ministry and that of John were linked together from the beginning (1:17,76; 3:15-17; 7:26-27). The authority behind them was the same and it was because the Jewish leaders did not accept the authority of John's preaching that they refused to accept Jesus (7:29-30). Jesus' answer thus went to the heart of their question (20:1-8). Following up, Jesus tells a story about a vineyard, which would have been instantly recognisable to the leaders as an image for the people of Israel. In Isaiah 5:1-7, the prophet had spoken of Israel as the Lord's vineyard and announced the Lord's judgment because they had not produced the fruit he expected. The same theme appears in Psalm 80:8-end. In Jesus' story, the tenants are not only unfaithful but rebellious. John was the latest of the prophets to have been killed, and Jesus expected soon to follow him. But he also expected to be vindicated, so he added the quotation from Psalm 118 (20:17-18).

As before (11:53-54), the Jewish leaders tried to catch Jesus out in what he said, but as before (5:22; 6:8; 7:39-40; 11:17; 14:1-5) Jesus saw through them. The question about taxes went to the heart of Jesus' claim to be Messiah. If he really was the Messiah, the Jews would have expected him to oppose taxes to the Romans. They believed he had come to set Israel free from

foreign rule. But Jesus' answer left open the question of what rightly belonged to Caesar and what to God, leaving them astonished, unsure what he meant (20:26). In his later question, Jesus again challenged their expectations; they called the Messiah the Son of David, but David himself expected a greater person (20:41-44).

From 20:45, as Luke makes clear, the teaching is for the disciples, and Luke would have been thinking of the Church, of which he was a part. In contrast to Mark, from which most of the words of chapter 21 are taken, at the time Luke was writing, Jerusalem had already been destroyed by the Romans. Luke is therefore recording Jesus' words in the light of what had actually happened. He knew there would be a period of persecution by the Jews, which would be brought to an end by the destruction of the Temple. This Luke saw as judgement on the Jews and vindication for God's people, the Church. The images of global destruction, drawn from the prophets (21:25-26) referred originally to the fall of Babylon and the coming of the Son of Man to the vindication of God's people (Daniel 7). Now Jerusalem is Babylon the persecutor and the Church God's people.

The message for God's people is to stand firm under persecution (21:12-19) and to avoid the anxieties of this life (21:34). Again, the parable of the sower provides the foundation (8:13-14).

Day 108. Psalm 119:153-160; Luke 22:1-62

The Last Supper and the Arrest

Psalm 119:153-160

A prayer for protection

Luke 22:1-62

At the Last Supper, Jesus is conscious that the hour of his final trial has come. Throughout the chapter, there are continual reminders of the inevitability of his suffering and death (22:15,22,37,53) but at the same time hints of his final victory (22:16,28-30,32).

Of the three gospels which record the words of institution, Matthew, Mark and Luke, Luke alone has two cups of wine, one at the beginning of the meal and a further cup at the end. This is closer, in fact, to the Passover ritual, where the meal both starts and finishes with a cup of wine. The four-fold action of taking, giving thanks, breaking and giving is carefully preserved (22:19).

The words of institution are firmly set in the context of Jesus' sufferings by his words both before and after. Jesus is on his way to betrayal, suffering, death and resurrection. These words, constantly repeated in Christian worship, are to serve as a reminder to the Christian community of who they are to be, the servant people of God. So Luke moves the words about servanthood, which in Mark occur in chapter 10, to the Last Supper to emphasise the connection with communion. As the disciples sit at table, Jesus reminds them that the greatest among them is the one who serves.

The Supper is also a reminder of the heavenly banquet; in heaven, Jesus assures his disciples, their seats will be thrones. But first they must endure persecution (see Romans 8:17-18). Jesus' disciples share his vocation to suffering. The difference is that we have not the strength to stand on our own. Peter is the representative disciple, not only as the leader, but as the one who will fall away and need to be restored. But because this will happen to Peter, it means that any who fall away under persecution can also be restored (22:31-32).

In Gethsemane, Jesus' warning is acted out; the disciples have not the power to stay awake. While they fail the test, Jesus wrestles alone and submits to the will of God. Gethsemane is his time of trial; from this point on, having defeated the temptation, Jesus goes to his death calmly, trusting in God. He faces the hour of darkness in love, not resisting his enemies but forgiving them and even healing the high priest's servant's ear, while Peter finds his natural strength inadequate.

Day 109. Psalm 69; Luke 22:63 - 23:49

The Crucifixion

Psalm 69

The writer prays for help in the midst of persecution. There are several similarities between this psalm and the experience of Jesus: surrounded by enemies (69:4); cut off by his family (69:7-8); zeal for God's house (69:9); mocked by onlookers (69:10-12); scorn instead of comfort (69:19-20); vinegar instead of wine (69:21). But unlike the psalmist, Jesus did not need to acknowledge his own fault (69:5-6), and whereas the psalmist accused (69:22-28), Jesus forgave his enemies (Luke 23:34).

Luke 22:63 - 23:49

The crucifixion is the culmination of Jesus' life's work and the focus of all that God was doing for us through him. He was the final prophet, rejecting whom the people of Israel were bringing judgement on themselves (Luke 20:14-16); he died to save his people from their sin (Matthew 1:21; 26:28); he was giving his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45); he was undergoing the depths of suffering (Isaiah 53:4; Matthew 8:17); he was defeating Satan and the evil heavenly powers (Colossians 2:15); he was sharing his life with men and women (John 6:51); he was drawing together the scattered people of God (John 12:32-33); he was demonstrating the love of God (Romans 5:8).

Because of this the different gospels emphasise different aspects of Calvary. Mark shows us Jesus' agony and the experience of abandonment through his cry of desolation (Mark 15:34). But for Luke, the struggle against temptation took place in the garden of Gethsemane. Thereafter, Jesus goes to his death in perfect trust in God, forgiving his enemies (23:34) and committing his spirit into God's hands (23:46). He is an example of trust in God in the face of persecution and death, and in Acts, Luke shows us his disciples following his example (Acts 5:40-41; 7:59-60).

As well as Jesus' perfect trust in his Father, Luke also emphasises his innocence. It is recognised only by Pilate (23:4,14,22), the penitent thief (23:41) and the centurion (23:47). Although innocent, Jesus is dying for the sins of guilty people such as them. Adam's sin locked the gate of Paradise

against the whole human race (Genesis 3:24), but Jesus' death opens it again (23:43).

At his birth Jesus was given the titles Son of God, Messiah and king of the Jews (1:32-33; 2:11). At his trial, the Jews reject these titles and refuse to accept him (22:67,70; 23:3,35). Under these titles, he is finally executed (23:38-39). Throughout his life, Jesus had been warning of judgment on the Jewish establishment for its unfaithfulness to God's call and welcoming sinners into God's kingdom. Now, at the point of his death, he continued to do both (23:28-31,39-43).

Day 110. Psalm 16; Luke 23:50 - 24:end

The Resurrection

Psalm 16

The writer thanks God for all his goodness. Not only is God the giver of blessings, he is also the Lord of life and death. So the psalmist looks confidently for God to keep him from the grave and instead to give him joy in this life.

Luke 23:50 - 24:end

Throughout his life, Jesus predicted not only his death but also his eventual vindication (12:32; 13:28-30,31-35; 17:24-25; 18:28-30; 20:17-18; 21:27-28; 22:15-18,67-69; 23:43), but only twice does he speak specifically of his resurrection (9:22; 18:31-33). When it came, the disciples were completely unprepared and slow to believe (24:11,25,41).

Like the birth stories, in which the coming of God's Son is announced first by angels, it is angels who first announce the resurrection (24:4-7,22-23). Like the birth stories, the resurrection begins a new stage in the history of the Kingdom of God. Then Jesus came to live on earth, now he is risen and returning to his Father, leaving the apostles to carry on his work (24:46-49).

The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus has all the feel of a first-hand account, and probably came from Cleopas himself. In that respect, it is very like the story of Peter's release from prison in Acts 12, where the maid Rhoda is also named and may have been Luke's source. The other disciple may well have been Cleopas's wife, Mary, mentioned in John 19:25. But Luke tells the story in such a way as to show how the risen Jesus is present to his disciples, not just in the period after the resurrection but in the present.

At first, the two are walking alone, then Jesus joins them, but they fail to recognise him. However, their understanding of all he has done grows and their faith is kindled as he explains the Scriptures to them. Finally, he breaks bread with them, in the characteristic manner which was remembered in the eucharist, and they recognise him. Luke is showing us that we too may be unaware of the presence of the risen Lord with us in our daily lives. But in reading the Scriptures, he can open our minds to

greater understanding, and in the breaking of bread we recognise his presence with us.

The purposes of Jesus' appearances to his disciples were, first, to prove to them that he was really alive (Acts 1:3). This he did by eating with them and showing them his hands and feet. Luke does not tell us, as John does, why his hands and feet should be significant (24:38-40; John 20:25-27). The fact that Jesus' risen body bore the marks of the nails must have been well-known to the Christian communities for whom the gospel was written. Secondly, Jesus explained the Scriptures to them, helping them to understand what they had failed to grasp before (18:34; 24:45). Thirdly, he prepared them for their coming task as witnesses to his crucifixion and resurrection in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thus in the last chapter of his first volume, Luke emphasises the continuity between Jesus' ministry and that of the Church. The message of the angels on Easter morning inaugurates a new stage in the progress of the gospel, in which the risen Christ is present to his Church in Word and sacrament, and the Church bears witness to his crucifixion and resurrection and continues the call to repentance.

Day 111. Psalm 87; Acts 1 - 2

Pentecost

Psalm 87

People from all nations acknowledge Israel's God and he acknowledges them as citizens of Jerusalem.

Acts 1 - 2

At the beginning of his second book, Luke links the history of the early Church, which he is about to tell, with that of Jesus. A new stage in the kingdom of God is beginning, characterised by a new baptism, the baptism with the Holy Spirit (1:5). During this time, the apostles are to be witnesses of Jesus, beginning at Jerusalem but going to the whole world (1:8). The book ends with Paul preaching while under house arrest in Rome, but Luke is obviously looking beyond Rome to the evangelisation of the whole known world. This period is the "last days" (2:17), the time immediately before the end. When the disciples ask about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, Jesus does not answer them directly. He tells them to wait for the time set by the Father (1:6-8). The mission of the Church takes place in the expectation of a final decisive intervention of God, when Jesus will return (1:11).

Before the Holy Spirit came, Peter proposed the restoration of a twelfth apostle. Matthias, when he was chosen, was to be a witness to the resurrection, his qualification that he was one of those who had been with Jesus from the beginning (1:21-22). This means there must have been several among the hundred and twenty to choose from. At that stage, the institutional number 12 seemed important. It has been suggested that it was intended by Jesus to correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel (see Luke 22:28-30). But we soon find deacons such as Philip and Stephen witnessing to the resurrection with great power (6:8-10; 8:4-8) and James, the Lord's brother, joins Peter and John as one of the main leaders in the Jerusalem Church (Acts 12:17; 15:13). Later Paul becomes an apostle "out of time" (1 Corinthians 15:8), and names others of his companions as apostles (Romans 16:7). As pillars of the Jerusalem Church, the twelve remained important for a while, but the dynamic of the Church's mission in the power of the Holy Spirit made titles like "apostle" fluid and threw up other leaders.

Just as the story of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth is programmatic for the understanding of his preaching and ministry, the story of Pentecost is programmatic for understanding the preaching and life of the early Church. The apostles receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire in fulfilment of the prophesy of John the Baptist (Luke 3:16). Led by Peter, they witness with great power to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and the way it fulfils Scripture. The response of those who hear is to believe and be baptised, for forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift available to all generations and all peoples (2:39). The Church meets for a fourfold purpose: the apostles' teaching, the common life, the celebration of the eucharist and prayer (2:42). The effects of the Church's life are to create awe, wonder, generosity and joy among the believers and to attract others, among whom are those whom the Lord himself saves and adds to their number (2:42-end).

Apart from the gathering of men and women from all over the known world, as a foretaste of the world-wide mission which was beginning, Pentecost has another significance. For the Jews, the festival commemorated the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. With the Holy Spirit, God inaugurates a new covenant, in which the Law is to be written on people's hearts (see Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:24-28). The Spirit himself is a new law, enabling us to keep the written Law from our hearts (Romans 8:1-4).

Day 112. Psalm 95; Acts 3 - 5

Preaching and Persecution

Psalm 95

A call to worship God the Creator coupled with a warning against ignoring his voice.

Acts 3 - 5

Having begun by preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles now begin a ministry of healing in the name of Jesus (3:6,16), and run into persecution, just as Jesus did.

Peter's speech in chapter 3 shows most of the same features as the one in chapter 2: Jesus has been crucified by the Jews, but raised by God, according to Scripture. The way to respond is to repent (there is no mention of baptism this time) and receive forgiveness and "times of refreshing" (where we would expect him to mention the Holy Spirit). Jesus is now reigning in heaven and waiting to give his people time to repent before returning at the time when God will restore everything. In this speech, Peter calls Jesus the "author of life" (3:15) and the words "times of refreshing" (3:19) literally mean times of "revivifying" or new life. The healing of the lame man was evidence of life given in the power of Jesus' name.

Peter also reminds the rulers of the vocation of Abraham's descendants to become the means through which God will bless all nations. The blessing Jesus offers is to be shared with the whole world (3:25-26). But with their hearts and minds set against God's call to bless the nations the rulers refuse the blessing offered to Israel.

It was the Sadducees, who believed there was no resurrection, who took exception to Peter's words (4:1-2). The persecution of the Church began as a rather heavy-handed attempt by one section of Judaism to maintain its standing in the Temple and Jerusalem. At this stage, however, the Jews were both puzzled and divided, unsure of what to do (4:14,21; 5:33,40), while the apostles displayed courage (4:13), eloquence and the power of the Holy Spirit (4:31,33).

At the same time, the infant Church continued to grow spontaneously, through the power and grace of the Holy Spirit and its own unity of mind and purpose (4:32-33). The judgment on Ananias and Sapphira showed that such unity, and the openness and generosity that went with it, had divine sanction. Although the Church's fellowship was a gift from God, it was possible for men and women to subvert it by greed and dishonesty. Later in the Church's life, many causes of disunity and lack of love had to be sorted out by painful decision making, but at this early stage a direct intervention of God made clear the importance of the common life.

Day 113. Psalm 57; Acts 6:1 - 8:3

The Martyrdom of Stephen

Psalm 57

Praise in the midst of persecution

Acts 6:1 - 8:3

In these early days, the Church was clearly a sect within Judaism, based in Jerusalem and worshipping in the Temple, although there must have been some Christians elsewhere among those converted on the day of Pentecost who afterwards returned to their homes (2:9-11). Furthermore, it was treated by the authorities as a movement within Judaism, and as a result they were unsure exactly how to respond (5:33-40). But already strains were appearing: hostility from the authorities and then disagreement within the Church. God used this situation to begin the process of disengagement from Judaism and the spread of the movement beyond Jerusalem.

Although the sharing of possessions began spontaneously as a response to the grace of God, it not only required organisation but had the capacity to produce conflict. The Hellenists were Jews who spoke Greek and had adopted Greek culture, while most other Jews spoke Aramaic and remained loyal to Jewish culture. Incorporation of members of both groups in the early Church had not reduced the suspicion between them. The solution proposed by the apostles was the differentiation of tasks. A new order of ministry was created in response to the need of the community: that of deacon, which literally means a "servant" or "attendant". The apostles saw their main tasks as prayer and teaching but outstanding gifts of the Spirit were needed even for the administrative role taken by the seven deacons.

Appointment as a deacon brought Stephen to prominence within the Church, and he began to exhibit the characteristics of Jesus: to perform miracles and signs and to argue with words no one could answer (see Luke 20:26,40). Later he follows Jesus as falsely accused (6:12-13) and dies as Jesus did, forgiving his enemies and commending his spirit to Jesus (7:59-60; Luke 23:34,46).

The charge against Stephen was that he was speaking against the Law of Moses and against the Temple (6:13-14). His speech answers the charges in two parts. First he goes back to the Law and tells the story at some length of God's promise to Abraham. This enables him to portray Moses not simply as the giver of the Law but as the one raised up by God through whom the promise to Abraham was to be fulfilled. Twice, God's people rejected Moses, the first time before his call (7:23-28), the second in the desert, rejecting the Law along with him (7:39-41). Moses predicted that God would send a prophet like him to lead Israel (7:37; Deuteronomy 18:15) and Jesus is that prophet, sent by God to fulfil the promises made to Israel but rejected by them just as Moses was (7:35,39,52).

In the second part of his defence, Stephen turns to the Temple and again goes back to the Law and its Tabernacle tradition, showing that the Temple is successor to the Tabernacle. In the wilderness, even though they had the Tabernacle, the Israelites were worshipping foreign gods (7:42-44). He then quotes Solomon's words at the dedication prayer: no earthly house can contain God (7:48; 1 Kings 8:27); and he backs this up with a further quotation from Isaiah 66:1-2. The implication is that even in their zeal for the Law and the Temple, the Jews are rejecting the purposes of God.

The result was to bring the incipient conflict out into the open and spark off wholesale persecution, which forced the believers to scatter and thus took the gospel the next stage in its journey, from Jerusalem to Samaria and beyond.

Day 114. Psalm 139; Acts 8:4 - 9:end

The Conversion of Saul

Psalm 139

God knows us through and through and knows the course of our lives.

Acts 8:4-end

Jesus predicted that the apostles would witness for him first in Judea then in Samaria and finally to the Gentiles (1:8). Chapter 8 records the next stage in the progress of the gospel, from Judea to Samaria beginning with the preaching of Philip. This is not Philip the apostle, since the apostles remained in Jerusalem, but Philip the deacon, later known as the evangelist (21:8).

The story demonstrates some important features of the earliest Church. First, baptism took place immediately on confession of faith (2:41; 8:16,36; 9:18; 16:33). Lengthy "catechesis" or instruction developed later. Secondly, receiving the Holy Spirit was a definite and recognisable experience (8:18; 9:17; 10:44-46; 19:2-7). The Spirit was neither automatic nor an optional extra, but an integral part of Christian experience. The gift of the Spirit was a recognisable fact, from which doctrinal conclusions could be drawn (11:15-17; Galatians 3:2-5). Third, conversion and baptism nevertheless had to be followed up by the change in a person's whole outlook. Those previously involved in the occult, such as Simon, might still be influenced by ways of occult thinking, desiring power and influence over others (8:18-24).

Despite his role at the centre of a scene of great joy and growth, Philip obeyed the Lord and went into the desert, where he encountered the Ethiopian. Virtually all the New Testament writers identify Jesus as the suffering servant of Isaiah, the one whose suffering and death bring life to many (see also Matthew 8:17; Mark 10:45; John 12:38; 1 Peter 2:21-24; 3:18). The Ethiopian's conversion is generally believed to explain the origin of the Ethiopian Coptic Church.

Acts 9

Even though it began to spread beyond Judea, Christianity was still regarded by the Jews as a sect of Judaism. However, the first brief period of

persecution was brought to an end by the conversion of the persecutor. Jesus' words to Saul showed that he was identified with the Church; to persecute them was to persecute him (9:4-5).

Like Philip in his meeting with the Ethiopian, Ananias was given specific instructions to lead him to Saul. Although the Lord's chosen instrument, Paul was first welcomed as a brother by an ordinary disciple, and indebted to Barnabas for his introduction at Jerusalem. 9:23-26 conceal a gap of three years, during which Paul also went to Arabia. Writing in Galatians, Paul also says that he met only Peter and James at his first visit (Galatians 1:17-19).

The raising of Dorcas shows us Peter practising what he had seen Jesus do in the case of Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:51-55).

There is probably also a gap of some years at 9:31. The events which led Peter to Lydda and then to Joppa prepared the way for the call to the Gentiles at Caesarea. Tanning was an unclean trade (9:43), since it meant touching dead animals, so Peter was already partly freed from strict adherence to Jewish Law.

Day 115. Psalm 30; Acts 10 - 12

The Conversion of the Gentiles

Psalm 30

The writer praises God for rescuing him from death.

Acts 10:1 - 11:18

The first century world was one in which many religions co-existed side by side. Few of them were actively engaged in making converts from the others. The early Church began as a sect of Judaism, their aim to convince fellow Jews that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God. They would not have expected their gospel to have been received by Gentiles at all. But as an associate of Paul, and a convert of his, Luke the Gentile wrote his book precisely to show that the Gentiles were included in God's purpose, against those who still believed Christianity was exclusively for the Jews.

Cornelius was a devout adherent of another religion; as a soldier it would probably have been the worship of Mithras. But his prayers and generosity to the poor, were received by God (10:4). Although his conscientious following of his religion was acceptable to God, God's response was not to leave him in his false religion, but to arrange for his conversion.

The meeting with Peter was one of far-distant cultures. Peter himself did not expect to have to preach the gospel; his hesitation to speak (10:29) is in marked contrast with his previous boldness (2:14, 3:12) and he clearly did not expect Cornelius and his company to change their religion (10:35). But although God accepts devout people from every nation, his plan for some at least is that they hear the gospel, respond in repentance and faith and receive the gift of the Spirit. On this occasion, he had to give the Spirit before Peter was ready, since Peter had gone as far as he was going to without further prompting.

As soon as the news reached Jerusalem, Peter came under suspicion (11:2-3). In Peter's absence, out of touch with developments in Samaria, the Church in Jerusalem, now led by James, the Lord's brother (12:17), was following a very conservative line. Although he represents the Jerusalem leaders as being won over, Luke's summary in 11:18 is certainly over-

optimistic. Pressure from the exclusive Jewish Christians continued and led to open hostility to Paul (Galatians 2:11-13).

Acts 11:19 - 12:end

The mission to the Gentiles in Antioch appears to be independent of Peter, but Antioch became the first Church to include both Jews and Gentiles. It became the base for the missions of Paul, Barnabas and Silas to the Gentiles. From the start, Saul and Barnabas were concerned to maintain fellowship with Jerusalem. The gift at the time of the famine was a practical expression of this. Later, Paul organised another gift from the Gentile churches (Romans 15:25-27; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4).

There is a mystery as to why one believer should face martyrdom and another escape. James the son of Zebedee was killed in Herod's persecution, Peter rescued from prison. The story of Peter's escape is told from the point of view of someone inside the house of John Mark's mother. Mark, who was probably the author of Mark's gospel, became an associate of Paul for a time (12:25), but was closer to Peter.
