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Diocese of St Edmundsbury
and Ipswich

Living Faith in Suffolk



Living Luke 2

Images

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Introduction

Luke's writings

We can safely assume that the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same person, though we don't know who that was. Luke's writings account for about a quarter of the New Testament – more than any other author's. Luke is unique in that he (we shall assume a male author, though again we have no proof) is the only evangelist to write a sequel to his gospel: the story of the spread of the Jesus movement from its roots in Galilee and Judea to the towns and cities around the Mediterranean.

Luke's purpose

Luke sets out his purpose in his opening paragraph (Luke 1.1-4), though the translations obscure his intention. According to the New Revised Standard Version, he wants Theophilus (someone else we know nothing about) to 'know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed' (Luke 1.4). But in the New Jerusalem Bible, he writes so that 'your Excellency may learn how well founded the teaching is that you have received'. Is Luke offering Theophilus the correct interpretation of what he has heard about (NRSV), or does he want him to be more confident in his faith (NJB)? The latter is preferable, because Luke seems more interested in helping his readers feel secure in their faith, rather than instructing someone with limited knowledge of it.

Luke's audience

Luke probably writes in the last quarter of what we now call the first Christian century. By this time the Jesus movement has become increasingly cosmopolitan – urban rather than rural, Gentile rather than Jewish. Though it is still a long way from being the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christianity, as it is now called (Acts 11.25), is attracting followers from across the cultural spectrum. Gentiles and Jews, Roman citizens (including soldiers), rich and poor people are being drawn to Jesus, not least through the efforts of his first followers and controversial figures like Paul. It is not surprising that a movement characterised by such diversity should raise some heart-searching questions. Where do Jews and Gentiles fit in a movement that is rooted in, but now increasingly separate from, ethnic and cultural Israel? What are Roman citizens to make of a movement whose founder was crucified at the say of a Roman governor? How can rich and poor people be part of the same community of disciples?

Luke the story teller

These are profound theological as well as pastoral questions. Luke addresses them not in the manner of Paul the letter writer, but in the story-telling style of the other evangelists, whose use of the journey motif he adopts and develops. Not only does he give an account of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and Judea, and its culmination in the Passover-tide events in Jerusalem, he also adds material of his own to the beginning of Jesus' story. To the end he adds his second volume, whose hero Paul eventually reaches the heart of the empire in Rome and preaches the gospel there. And to his account of Jesus the story-teller Luke adds some of his best-known parables: the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, to name but two, are only found in this Gospel. Luke sets his stories – and his narrative as a whole – in the journeys people make at the impulse of the Spirit, within and beyond the borders of Israel's ancestral lands.

Luke's characters

Living Luke 2 draws on the stories of seven of Luke's characters. Most of these are known from the other gospels, but Luke's treatment of all seven is distinctive, and he uses them to tell the story that threads through his Gospel and Acts.

How to use this material

Living Luke 2 is written with groups in mind, though some of what you'll find here can be used by individuals. The material on each character comes in five sections and can be read in any order:

- **A Bible passage** from Luke's gospel.
- **Background information** – connecting the passage to similar material in the other gospels, and the historical context. There are some questions for you to think about, which may form the basis of your group discussion.
- **The character tells his or her story** – how I imagine the character speaking. It is intended to illuminate Luke's account, and to invite you to imagine how the character speaks to you.
- **The character in Luke's wider narrative** – where he or she fits into the message of Luke's writings as a whole. Again the questions may be included in your group discussion.
- **Reflections** – for individuals and groups.

If you are using Living Luke 2 in a group, you will find it helpful to read the passage from Luke and the character's story before you meet. Some further supporting material is found in the appendices at the end of the course material.

Reading the Bible together

There is more than one way of reading the Bible together. Sometimes it's good to have one person read the whole passage, and at other times to read round the group. A popular way of reading that aids reflection is called *Lectio Divina* (sacred reading). This involves reading a passage slowly two or three times, separated by silence. At the end of the silence, each person is invited to share their responses to the passage. You can find out more about Lectio Divina at <http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/about-bible-society/our-work/lectio-divina/>

Reflective questions

These are found throughout the material, and are designed to draw out:

- what you notice about the character and his/her story
- how the story makes you feel – encouraged, challenged, uncomfortable
- what you think about the story, and what it reminds you of in your own world
- what you will do differently as a result of your reading and discussion.

These are open questions, which invite you to draw on your own experience in the hope that your life as a whole will be informed – and even transformed – by what you read and discuss.

Prayer

Prayer is an important part of time together in a group. Some will find it enough to begin and end in prayer. Others will want to devote more of their meeting time to prayer. If your group comes together in the late morning, early afternoon or evening, you may wish to use Prayer for the Middle of the Day or Night Prayer, from Common Worship. You can find these at <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/join-us-in-daily-prayer.aspx>

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Mary the Mother of Jesus

Read Luke 1.26-38

Beginning the session

Imagine that your usual, everyday routine is interrupted by a surprise meeting or contact, or an unexpected piece of news.

When have you experienced this? How did you react? What happened next?

You may like to use this prayer:

God of surprises,
whose messenger told Mary
that your promise to bless the world would be fulfilled
through the child she was about to conceive;
open our lives to your presence,
and give us courage to bear blessing and hope in our world.



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Annunciation

Background information

New beginnings

- Luke writes his opening chapters in the style of the Jewish Scriptures, to say that in the coming of Jesus, a new chapter begins in the life of God's people. God's ancient promises to bless all creation through the descendants of Abraham are now being fulfilled.
- Only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke include stories of Jesus' conception and birth. Their perspectives are quite different, though they are often woven together into what we call 'the Christmas story'.
- Luke's world was full of stories of great men who were conceived by gods – a way of saying that their later greatness was there from the beginning.
- The Gospel narratives draw heavily on the imagery of the Bible. Luke weaves a biblical tapestry to present Jesus as the fulfilment of the story that goes right back to the beginning. He is *named* after Moses' successor Joshua (which means 'God saves'). Israel's king is God's *son* (Psalm 2.7), as is the nation when God calls him out of Egypt (Hosea 11.1). God's *spirit* (the Hebrew word can also be translated as wind or breath) is the agent of creation in Genesis 1.2 and 2.7. God's glory *overshadows* the tent of meeting on the journey through the wilderness towards freedom (Exodus 40.35), and fills Solomon's newly consecrated temple in 1 Kings 8.10. Luke uses scripture to say: everything that flows from Jesus is entirely God's initiative.
- **What do you make of the beauty and the strangeness of Luke's account of the Mary and the angel Gabriel?**

Mary's world

- Mary is from Nazareth, a small and otherwise insignificant Galilean village with a population of about 2000, close to a major trade route to Egypt. It is not mentioned in the Jewish Bible or other major Jewish writings. Jesus' origins in Nazareth are mocked in John 1.46.
- When we first meet her, Mary is on the verge of womanhood and betrothed to Joseph. Betrothal was more binding than our engagement. The couple were as good as married, without yet living or sleeping together. Mary's father would have arranged the marriage.
- Mary's horizons stretch as far as Judea, where she has relatives - Elizabeth and the priest Zechariah. Together with Anna and Simeon, who meet the newly born Jesus in the temple (2.25, 36), Mary is surrounded by faithful Israelites whose lives are rooted in traditional Jewish belief and practice, and who share her joy at the coming of Jesus.
- Mary lives in the Biblical world of angelic messengers who link heaven and earth. Gabriel appears to Daniel as God's messenger and interpreter (see Daniel 8.15-26, 9.21-27). He also appears earlier in Luke, to Elizabeth (1.26-38).
- Like all the characters in Luke's writings, Mary also lives in the Roman world (for details see page 17). Luke reminds us of this in the words we often read at Christmas from the story of Jesus' birth (2.1-2).
- **What do these elements of Mary's world remind you of in your own experience?**

Mary tells her story

That's three months I've missed. I really am pregnant. And I'm starting to show. It can't be much more than three months since that morning. I can't get it out of my head. It's like it happened yesterday. I was alone in the house. Still waking up. My father was out in the fields with my brothers. My mother had taken my sisters with her to collect water.

At first I thought I was dreaming. I've always been a dreamer. My mother is always on at me. 'Wake up, Mary', she says, 'no time for daydreaming, there's work to be done'. I can't help it, though. I feel it's what I've been brought up to do. When I was younger, my mother and grandmother would tell scripture stories to us children, and we'd act them out. I loved being Hannah the mother of Samuel. My brothers preferred the one about David killing the giant Goliath. Once one of them played the angel Gabriel speaking to Daniel when he was praying (for some reason I got to play Daniel that day). I've always enjoyed the story of Solomon dedicating the temple, the way the whole building filled up with clouds of smoke when the glory of God came down. We were never quite sure how to act out that one!

Was I dreaming that morning? I heard a noise coming from the living area. At first I thought it was my mother coming back with the water, but she'd only just gone out and it takes a good hour to get to the well and back. I went in and looked round. I was sure there was a man there. Someone I didn't know. Don't ask me what he looked like. I was terrified - who wouldn't be? I made for the door, but before I could get to it I heard him call my name. He said he had a very important message for me. He told me I'd soon have a baby. A special child, a holy child, a son, the messiah, God's son. I blurted out that I wasn't married yet, then I heard something about God's Spirit overshadowing me like the clouds of smoke in the temple. And he mentioned Elizabeth, our relative, who's way past childbearing age, and she's now six months pregnant.

Was I dreaming that morning? Was I re-living the stories my mother and grandmother told us? Girls my age are always dreaming about having babies. People say that every Jewish girl dreams of being the mother of the messiah. We need a messiah even more now, with the Romans ruling over us, taking away our freedom and taking all our money in taxes.

Is this real? Am I dreaming? Is it all in my imagination? Before I could work it all out, he was gone. That's all I can remember.

Something must have happened that morning. Somebody must have spoken to me. I must have said 'yes' because my time has passed again, for the third month. A life is growing inside me. The question is, what do I do now? Should I tell my father? What will I say to Joseph? Not long before all this happened, my father arranged for me to marry him. He's a good man. I can't imagine what he's going to make of it.

I'm sure they'll send me away once they know. The news will soon get round the village. People will stare at me. What will they think of my family and Joseph? Some time away from Nazareth will give everyone a chance to get used to the idea. Maybe I could stay with Elizabeth and her husband in the south, near Jerusalem. Perhaps Joseph and I could get married quietly while I'm there. And then come back to Nazareth with the baby. That wouldn't look quite so bad.

My mind is racing away, as usual. I'm sure everything will make sense when we've had time to talk and think and pray. You're wondering how I feel right now. I can't really find the right words. I'm going to have a baby. I'm going to be Mary, the mother of the messiah. I may have said yes to the messenger, but you won't be surprised when I tell you, I need time to get used to all this.

Mary's story in Luke's story

Singing God's Salvation

- As she shares her story with her relative Elizabeth, Mary's joy overflows in her *Magnificat* (1.46-55). Luke uses it to introduce a series of songs that have been used for centuries in the church's liturgy: Zechariah's *Benedictus* (1.68-79), the angelic host's *Gloria* (2.14), and Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* (2.29-32).
- These songs tell us something about the way Luke sees Jesus and the salvation he brings. God works in unexpected ways to fulfil his ancient promises to Israel, through people who are of no great standing. In the coming of Jesus, the creator Spirit starts to renew the world by turning ideas about greatness and power on their head. Peace comes, not through a powerful Roman emperor but a child born in obscurity. And God's purposes embrace all people, Jew and Gentile alike.
- Over the next week or so, listen to some different versions of the Canticles in Luke. If you don't have these on CD or record, you can find them on a music streaming site like Spotify or iTunes.
- **How important for your faith are the words you sing in worship?**

Holy Spirit – the power of God's new creation

- Luke includes more about the Holy Spirit in his Gospel than any of the other evangelists. The Spirit is responsible for Jesus' conception (1:35), and anoints him at his baptism (3:22). Jesus identifies himself as Isaiah's Spirit-anointed prophet (4:18), and promises the Spirit to those who ask in prayer (11:13). And as Jesus dies, he commends his spirit to his heavenly father (23.46).
- For Luke, the presence of the Spirit in Jesus is doubly significant. Looking back to the prophets, it fulfils their expectation of the coming of the Spirit in the age of salvation. Looking forward to the era of the church, it anticipates the outpouring of the Spirit from Pentecost onwards.
- **What helps you to be more open to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in your life, your church and the wider world?**

There is more on Mary in Appendix 1 at the end of this booklet.

Reflections

Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.
(Soren Kierkegaard [1813-1855], Danish philosopher and theologian)

I wonder how true this was for Mary and those who cherished her story, and Luke the evangelist, who drew out its significance in one of the most memorable narratives in the Bible.

One of the marks of ancient storytelling was to read a person's later greatness into the account of their origins. What he or she became was there from the outset. We do the same when we acknowledge the significance of genetic inheritance.

According to Luke, what Jesus became was in some mysterious way present from the very beginning. The crucified, risen and ascended Jesus could only become the source of God's life-

giving Spirit because he came into the world as the Holy Spirit's initiative. Responses to Jesus as he lived his life forwards suggest that little of this was evident to those around him, including his family and closest followers. It is only with the backward view – illuminated by the light that Easter and Pentecost shed on Good Friday and all that led up to it – that understanding dawns.

- **What appeals to you most in Mary's story? What do you find most puzzling, or disturbing, or challenging in it?**
- **When have Kierkegaard's words been true for you?**
- **When have you said 'yes' to something or someone – maybe even God – without really knowing what you were agreeing to?**

Ending the session

You may like to end by being quiet for a minute or so, and using the silence to think about what you will take away with you from your reading and discussion.

Ask yourself (and share with each other if there is time):

What difference will hearing Mary's story make in the coming week?

You may wish to say this prayer together:

God of Mary's Magnificat,
you show your strength
in raising the lowly and filling the hungry;
let the praises of Mary move us beyond comfort
towards those on whom your blessing rests.

Simon Peter the Fisherman

Read Luke 5.1-11

Beginning the session

Imagine that you are telling someone whom you've only recently met about yourself, and you start to discuss something or someone you know a lot about – perhaps from your working life, or related to one of your interests. Out of the blue, the person says something that calls your knowledge into question.

When have you experienced this? How did you react? What happened next?

You may like to use this prayer:

Challenging God,
you come to us where we are
and invite us to offer ourselves in your service:
open our lives to your presence,
and give us courage to live with your call.



Fishing Boat at Aldeburgh

Background information

The call of Jesus' first disciples

- The accounts in the Gospels vary. John suggests that Jesus first met the fishermen Andrew and Simon, plus Philip and Nathanael, when they (and he) were disciples of John the Baptist (John 1:35ff), most likely in Judea. Matthew follows Mark in the story of Jesus' first meeting with two pairs of brothers – Simon and Andrew, James and John – who were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:16ff; Matthew 4:18ff). As soon as Jesus called them to become 'fishers of people', they left their nets and followed him.
- This is not the first time Jesus meets Simon Peter in Luke's Gospel (see 4.38, when he heals Simon's mother-in-law). Luke's account of their lakeside meeting has several points of contact with Mark and Matthew: the location, the brothers, the call to a different kind of fishing, the sudden break with their livelihood. But Luke has significant differences: he does not mention Simon's brother Andrew; Jesus uses a boat as floating pulpit (as in Mark 4.1); Jesus tells the fishermen to go out fishing again, resulting in a surprising catch; Simon Peter tells Jesus to 'depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord'.
- Simon, Andrew, James and John are included in the list of the twelve apostles in Luke 6.13-16. This mentions Simon's new name 'Peter', which is used throughout Acts of this apostolic leader of the church in Jerusalem.
- **Why do you think Peter sees himself as particularly 'sinful' in Luke's account?**

Catching people rather than fish

- Simon and his companions respond to Jesus' words and the surprising catch of fish by leaving family, community and livelihood. This would have been regarded as unusual, and would have been much more traumatic than moving house or changing job today. They are called to a new beginning, from now on investing their energy and ingenuity in 'catching people'.
- We find clues to the meaning of this colourful phrase in the prophets. In Jeremiah 16.16ff fishermen are God's agents of judgement on the idolatry of his people. Amos 4.2 declares that the rich who oppress the helpless poor will be carried away in fish baskets. Jesus calls his first disciples to join him in 'bringing good news to the poor' and 'release to the captives' (Luke 4.18) by liberating Israel from the oppressive idolatry of wealth and power. This can only mean turning their world upside down, as Mary declared in her Magnificat (Luke 1.52-53).
- Was 'catching people' a full-time occupation? The only time we read of Peter and the others returning to fishing is in John 21, an account with several similarities to this one. Verse 11 is the first time Luke uses the word 'follow', which often referred to the relationship between a teacher and his disciples in contemporary writings.
- **How do you think following Jesus allowed Peter and the others to continue to support their families?**

Simon Peter tells his story

I sometimes feel I know every drop of water in this lake. There's hardly a day when I'm not out on it. And it's been like that ever since I was a boy. My family have fished this lake for generations. It makes me what I am.

We make a reasonable living from fishing¹. These waters are teeming with fish. We'd make a lot more though if we didn't have to pay so much in taxes to the Romans. What do we get in return? I suppose the roads improve trade, and their soldiers keep the peace. But we pay a high price. People here often say it feels like we're living in a land that doesn't belong to us anymore.

We can't afford many trips like that one. All night we were out on the lake - my partners James and John, and the men we'd hired to help us. We caught nothing. All we had in the nets were tiddlers and weeds. We still had to wash the nets out before we could put them away and go home to bed - and dream of better luck next time. While we were clearing up, the rabbi Jesus came up to me and asked if he could borrow one of our boats. A lot of people wanted to hear him. He wondered whether he could speak to them from the boat. He reckoned they'd be able to hear him better if he was a few yards away from them in the shallows.

I'd met him before in Capernaum where I live, though I can't say I knew much about him. He was good to my wife's mother when she had a fever. It was the least I could do to return the favour. I don't much go for rabbis, though. They're good at telling us what we should and shouldn't do - a bit like the Romans - but they don't talk fishermen's language. I sat next to him in the boat while he was speaking to the crowd. I could understand why there were so many of them. If only we'd caught as many fish, I was thinking as he started to speak.

He didn't dress up what he had to say in clever language. A lot of it came straight out of the Scriptures. He told stories, and talked in pictures. What he said made sense to people like me. Even in that short time I was listening to him I could feel myself moved by what he had to say, despite struggling to stay awake after a long, hard night.

When he'd finished, I was just about to jump out of the boat and pull it ashore when he said we should go out onto the lake again, and make up for what we'd missed during the night. He must have noticed that we'd caught nothing. No-one goes fishing during the day. And we were all so tired. I protested at first. I may have said things I shouldn't. But it was the way he spoke, as if he knew about fishing. Unlike mine, his words were full of energy and power, just like the prophets. I didn't want to do what he said, but I couldn't really resist. And anyway, what was there to lose, except an hour or so's sleep?

We struggled to land the catch. We had to call for help from our other boat. We were weighed down by the number of fish we caught. Who is this rabbi? What does he want with people like us? I felt ashamed that I'd been so abrupt with him, especially when he said he wanted us for a different kind of fishing. I told you he spoke my kind of language. But what did he have in mind?

¹ For more about fishing on the sea of Galilee, see <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/related-articles/fishing-economy-in-the-sea-of-galilee.aspx> (accessed on October 14th 2015)

Simon Peter's story in Luke's story

Peter the pioneer mission leader

- From acknowledging his unworthiness in the presence of Jesus, Simon Peter goes on to become one of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples (8.51, 9.28). He declares his faith in Jesus (9.18-20) and unlike the Peter of Mark and Matthew, offers no resistance when Jesus goes on to speak of the cost of discipleship. Peter's recognition of his own shortcomings in Luke 5.8 is an early reminder of things to come in Luke's Gospel. In the upper room, he is more confident, perhaps too much so (22.31-34).
- Peter's most vocal support for Jesus in his hour of greatest need evaporates all too quickly (see 22:33-34, 54-62). Yet Jesus' faith in him does not falter, and after Pentecost Peter is one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Later he becomes one of the trail-blazers of the church's mission to Jews and Gentiles, once the idea that God has no favourites comes home to him personally (see Acts 10-11, especially 10:34 and 11:17, which is sometimes called 'the conversion of Peter' rather than 'the conversion of Cornelius').
- The call of Simon Peter to the mission of Jesus is important in another way. Here we have a companion of Jesus from his days in Galilee, a Galilean Jew himself, who represents both the Gospel's roots in Judaism and its embrace of the Gentile world. Jewish and Gentile converts among Luke's first readers would be reassured by a disciple with whom they could identify, not only in his unworthiness and failure, but also in his commitment to a gospel for all people.
- **Who are the people who best show you the breadth of the gospel's appeal?**

Repentance

- Repentance is an important gospel theme, not least in Peter's apostolic preaching (see Acts 2.38, 3.19). Luke's story of Jesus' lakeside encounter with Simon Peter can help us towards a richer understanding of the meaning of repentance. During Lent, we often trivialise repentance by seeing it in the negative sense of giving something up. But repentance is more of a turning towards God than a turning aside from ourselves. Simon showed repentance, not primarily by facing up to his own unworthiness, but in embracing Jesus' message of the coming kingdom of God.
- Carlo Carreto is an Italian monk who lived in the desert for a while. He encourages us to consider creating a 'desert space' in our lives, turning towards God by giving more time to prayer (see his *Letters from the Desert*, 30th anniversary edition, Orbis Books 2002). That way the fruit of repentance, which Simon Peter displayed as a disciple and apostle, may be found in us.
- **What does repentance look like in your own and your church's life?**

There is more on Simon Peter in Appendix 2 at the end of this booklet.

Reflections

- **What do you find most encouraging or challenging in Jesus' choice of Peter?**
- **Despite Peter's judgement of himself, Jesus sees his positive and hopeful side. How does Luke's story help you to re-assess what you have to offer to Jesus' continuing ministry and mission?**
- **Jesus meets Peter in his everyday world of work. What do you think Jesus would say to you if he were to meet you where you are at 11am tomorrow?**

Ending the session

You may like to end by being quiet for a minute or so, and using the silence to think about what you will take away with you from your reading and discussion.

Ask yourself (and share with each other if there is time):

What difference will hearing the story of Peter make in the coming week?

You may wish to say this prayer together:

All-knowing God,
you see in us more than we can ever imagine:
help us to trust ourselves
to your wise and searching judgement,
and give us the courage to follow
in your just and true ways.

The Centurion at Capernaum

Read Luke 7.1-10

Beginning the session

Look carefully at this picture.



'Passengers must not cross the line or pass this point'

How many boundaries can you see?

What does the picture say about the boundaries you experience in your world?

You may like to use this prayer:

Creator of all
whose life is not held back
by restrictions we impose:
open our lives to your presence,
and give us courage to cross the line when you call us.

Background information

Roman occupation

- The Romans captured Jerusalem in 63BC. Extending their empire to the eastern end of the Mediterranean brought buildings, roads, language, coinage, taxation and of course soldiers to Jewish Palestine – all signs of the double occupation of Roman rule and Greek culture. Jewish reaction to the Roman presence was mixed. Some were prepared to compromise (Sadducees), some found ways of accommodating (Pharisees), and some were strongly opposed (Essenes, a reform movement with headquarters by the Dead Sea). Only a small minority resorted to violence, until the Jewish Revolt in AD70. Roman taxation was particularly unpopular, and those who collected taxes for the Romans (like Zacchaeus) were despised.
- Throughout the empire, Caesar was worshipped as the divine bringer of peace. The earliest Christian confession – ‘Jesus is Lord’ – was a sharp challenge to this imperial ideology, as we can see in Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth (Luke 2.1, 11, 14).
- **What are the most powerful forces that shape your world? Who or what do you associate them with?**

A healing at Capernaum

- There are three versions of this story in the gospels; Matthew 8:5-13 is virtually the same as Luke’s account. Both have a centurion who is very concerned about his slave’s serious illness, but some of the details differ. Where Matthew has the centurion approaching Jesus directly, Luke has local Jewish elders interceding with Jesus on behalf of a man who has been very generous towards their community (vv 3-5). Matthew includes a saying about the patriarchs (8.11-13), but Luke has something similar elsewhere in his gospel (Luke 13.28-29). In John’s account (4.46-53), the man is a royal official, or even an aristocrat, and he asks Jesus to heal his son.
- In none of the stories does Jesus get to meet the sick person. Luke and Matthew have him healing at a distance, to highlight the centurion’s faith in the authority of Jesus’ word. John magnifies this by having Jesus in Cana, about 20 miles west of Capernaum. Even at that distance, his word is powerful.
- **When Jesus seems particularly far off, what helps you to bring him nearer?**

The centurion tells his story

I didn't choose to live in Capernaum. I'd never heard of the place before I was sent here with the army. The locals have always been friendly to me. Over the years they've made me feel welcome. That means a lot to someone like me. A foreigner. A soldier in an occupying army. Rome takes a lot from these people. We tax them very heavily - too much, I think, but I'm here to obey orders not to question them.

When I first came here, I thought it was important to get to know the people. I learned about their beliefs and customs. I talked with the men after they'd been to the synagogue. I was struck by their attitude to Caesar. They had no truck with the idea that he was divine, and that people should worship him. But they prayed for him and for the empire. I was impressed by that, and what they said about their God listening to everyone's prayers, whatever their race or language.

Their synagogue was in poor shape, though. It needed knocking down and re-building. But there was no way they could afford it. So I got some of the builders who worked for us to help them out between jobs. All above board. I paid for the materials and labour. But then I can afford to. I've done well financially from being here. I wanted to give something back.

I have quite a big household, with several slaves. Last month my most trusted slave suddenly developed a fever. He would sweat and then go cold. There was no end to it. Nothing we did made the slightest difference. I brought in the best doctors that money could buy, and they couldn't do anything either. My slave's life was slipping away. It was all we could do to make him feel comfortable.

Then I heard that Jesus of Nazareth was back in Capernaum. He has quite a reputation as a healer. And such a holy man. People say he brings God very close to them, and he has the common touch too. Not like some of their rabbis, I have to say, who are so full of rules and regulations they make you feel judged all the time. I wanted to ask Jesus for help. Could he heal my slave? But it didn't feel right asking him directly. I wasn't sure how he'd respond to a foreign soldier speaking to him in public. So I asked some of the Jewish leaders I know from the synagogue if they'd mind approaching him for me.

I don't know what they said to him, but they seem to have had no problem persuading him. I stood outside my house, and I could see Jesus from a distance, with a crowd heading my way. I began to feel uneasy. I didn't want my slave to be upset by people crowding in on him. It would have been too much for him - he was growing weaker by the hour. So I sent some friends to speak with Jesus. I know how powerful words can be. I do what my superiors tell me. I tell others what to do and they obey without question. "Tell him all he needs to do is to say the word, and I know my slave will get well".

How did I know? I've wondered about that since, as I've seen him recover and grow stronger. Was it wishful thinking? Sheer desperation? Much more than that. The Jews here have taught me about a God whose kindness extends to everyone. Their God hears our prayers, whoever we are. I said earlier that people reckon Jesus brings this God very close to them. That's what I hoped. And what I trusted. It's what I now know.

The centurion's story in Luke's story

Boundary-crossing faith

- Jesus is moved by the soldier's faith. He might not yet have found it in Israel, but this is the kind of faith he expects from the children of Abraham too. But not only from Israel. This Gentile soldier points forward to the duty centurion at Jesus' execution, who sees something in Jesus that his colleagues and the Jewish leaders miss (Luke 23.35-36). And he also paves the way for the story of another centurion in Luke's writings, Cornelius, who is also devout, generous and humble (Acts 10:2). The account of his turning to Jesus is clearly important to Luke, because he tells it twice in Acts 10-11. We often refer to this as 'the conversion of Cornelius'. It might also be called 'the conversion of Peter', who is as moved as Jesus by the generous, humble and hospitable faith of a Roman soldier.
- The faith of these foreigners is far more significant than their race, social status or wealth. It undermines the boundaries that divide Jew from Gentile because it 'cleanses the heart' of those who belong to God's people, Gentiles as well as Jews (Acts 15:9).
- **How do you and your church use faith to cross boundaries in your world? What would encourage you to do more of this?**

Humble, obedient faith

- Luke is fond of highlighting the characteristics of faith. He draws examples from across the human spectrum – older and younger people, women and men, people of low and high status, Gentiles and Jews.
- The centurion's humility and obedience are remarkable, given his authority over others. Luke may well intend to present him as a model believer for Roman officials.
- **How appealing do you find the qualities of humility and obedience? What are their strengths? Where do you think they can they be abused?**

Reflections

- **What impresses you most about the centurion? Where do you find his story most challenging?**
- **Who does the centurion remind you of in today's world?**
- **What would your faith look like if it were more like his?**

Ending the session

You may like to end by being quiet for a minute or so, and using the silence to think about what you will take away with you from your reading and discussion.

Ask yourself (and share with each other if there is time):

What difference will hearing the story of the centurion making in the coming week?

You may wish to say this prayer together:

God of Galileans and Romans,
you reveal the reach of your love
in the humble obedience of a foreigner:
give us a faith like his,
that we may be instruments of healing and reconciliation.

Mary Magdalene

Luke 7.36-8.3

Beginning the session

Look carefully at the picture below, taken in the New Forest. Use it to help you to reflect on things being 'out of place'.



Out of place

We can find it quite a challenge when thoughts and feelings are out of place. When have you experienced this? How did you react?

You may like to use this prayer:

God whose voice stills the storms
that rage around and within us:
open our lives to your presence,
that we may find and make peace
in ourselves and our world.

Background information

What we know about Mary

- Mary is called after her village, Magdala, a fish-processing centre on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, south of Capernaum. Luke names her as one of Jesus' women disciples (8.2). The passage suggests that they and the 12 men formed the core of his followers. A rabbi accompanied by independent women, at least one of whom was married, would certainly attract attention, not all of it approving.
- Mary is linked with women who had experienced illness and distress (v 2). Luke writes that 'seven demons had gone out her'. In his day, and in traditional cultures today, mental and emotional distress are often attributed to evil or unclean spirits. 'Seven' might be metaphorical, like 'Legion' in Luke 8.30, to indicate severe distress, or what we might call multiple personality.
- Only Luke mentions Mary in the main body of his Gospel. She reappears at the end, where Luke implies that she was one of those who saw Jesus die from a distance, and where he was buried (23.49, 55 cf 24.10). He names her (and Joanna from the disciple group) as one of the women who went to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body after the Sabbath (24.10). She is a source of what Peter and the other men initially regarded as the 'idle tale' of the empty tomb (Luke 24.11, 22-24).
- Mary is always mentioned first in every list of Jesus' female disciples, and she is named 12 times in the New Testament, more than most of Jesus' male apostles. In John's Gospel, she is the first apostle of the resurrection (John 20.18).
- **What makes Mary Magdalene so important to Luke?**

A legendary woman

- The tradition that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute and therefore a penitent sinner comes from confusing her with the anonymous woman who anoints Jesus in Luke 7.36-50. This is how she features in art and literature in Western, though not Eastern, Christianity.
- In some of the apocryphal gospels from the second and third Christian centuries, Mary appears as Jesus' favourite disciple, with a deeper understanding of his teachings than the men.
- According to medieval legends, Mary visited Western Europe and died in the South of France. Confusing her with the Mary the sister of Martha in Luke 10.38-42 turned her into a symbol of the contemplative life (ironically this so-called 'composite Mary' reminds us of the multiple personality of the Mary healed by Jesus). Devotion to her peaked in the 14th century, though she was a favourite saint during the Catholic Counter-Reformation of the 16th century.
- William Blake re-introduced her to English literature as a prostitute, and the noun 'Magdalene' came to mean 'penitent prostitute'.
- More recently Mary features strongly in the musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*, where she is almost as important as Jesus. She is a symbol of erotic temptation in Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, she is Jesus' wife and successor, the archetype of the so-called 'sacred feminine'.
- **Why do you think the legendary Mary Magdalene is so appealing?**

Mary Magdalene tells her story²

My father can be kind at times, but mostly he's harsh. He rules the family. I am his only daughter. My name is Mary and I come from a village called Magdala. I have five brothers, all older than me. I grew up feeling he preferred them. Especially my eldest brother Reuben. He's always been the favourite. He married last year. His wife said I was odd.

When I was growing up I hated being stuck at home with my mother while my brothers went to school. They learned to read. I wanted to learn how to read. 'Why should you want to read?' said my mother. 'You don't need to be able to read to help me cook for the men and keep the house clean'. In the end one of my brothers taught me. No one else knew. But it was hard keeping secrets at home.

So I invented my own world. My father made figures out of wood for me to play with. I spoke with them. They told me their secrets. I heard their voices. They were my friends. My true family. I lived with them in their world.

When my brother Reuben married, his wife came to live with us. My mother said how helpful she was - much more helpful than I'd ever been. Other girls of my age in the village were getting married. My father said it was about time he found a husband for me. After all I was nearly 14. Soon no-one would want me, he said. Especially if I continued to be so unhelpful to my mother.

I didn't want a husband. I didn't want to go and live with another man's family. So I spent more and more time in my secret world. By now my best friends were in my head most of the time. We would run together through the village streets and into the fields, laughing and shouting and singing. They told me things no-one else knew. I kept their secrets and they kept mine. They started waking me up in the middle of the night, and leading me out of the house.

At first we were quiet. No-one else knew about our night-time adventures in the woods. I enjoyed being out of the house in the woods. I met even more friends there. More secret friends. We talked and laughed and sang. Then my best friends would take me back home, and I usually managed to creep back into bed without making a noise. But then some of my new secret friends said I should run through the streets to the woods at night, and sing and shout and laugh and wake up the whole village. So I did. But when I got to the woods, they said my singing wasn't loud enough. I hadn't made enough noise. Their voices were harsh. My best friends told them to be quiet. They led me back to the village. Everyone was waiting for me. They stared at me as if I was odd. My father was angry with me. 'You'll not do that again', he said.

But I did, the next night, and the night after. I ran and ran in the middle of the night. Spirits were chasing me into the woods and all the way back home. My father was very angry this time, and said he would make sure I didn't go out of the house alone ever again. I would have to be more helpful to my mother, he said. I would have to learn how to control myself so that he could find me a husband. Then I could go and live somewhere else.

My safe little world that I made for myself, with my secret friends that only I knew about, had gone. Now others were controlling me, thinking and speaking for me. They told me not to bother about washing myself. They said I looked better in dirty clothes. They made me think I was

² I have drawn on descriptions of the pathology and treatment of mental and emotional distress in traditional cultures here. See Richard Warner, "The cultural context of mental distress", in Tom Heller et al (eds), *Mental Health Matters. A Reader*, Macmillan 1996.

someone else. I started telling people that I had lots of names - Deborah and Judith and Ruth - and that I didn't really live in the village, but in a big house in the woods. One day when I went with my mother to collect water from the village well, the other women stared and pointed their fingers and said I was strange, full of unclean spirits. When my mother reported this to my father, he said he'd ask someone from the synagogue to drive out the spirits. Then he would find me a husband.

The very next day - I remember it so well - the rabbi Jesus from Nazareth came to my village. I saw him in the village square when I went with my mother for the water. There was a crowd around him. As he was leaving I shouted after him - or was it my noisy spirits? My mother tried to shut me up, but I shouted even louder. I ran after him, laughing and singing. People told me later that I caused quite a disturbance.

When I caught up with Jesus, he stopped and turned and looked straight at me. He touched my shoulder and asked me my name. I laughed. 'Sometimes I'm called Mary and sometimes Ruth and sometimes Deborah and sometimes Judith'. I remember telling him all about my spirits, and the way they talked to me in voices no-one else could hear, and chased me into the woods at night. He came back home with me and my mother. My father was there. I learned later that after talking with my father, Jesus told him he could help me.

He gathered the family together around me, and each of them touched my shoulders and my head. He looked up to heaven and said some words, then one of his companions - a woman - led me gently towards his followers. Then they gathered round me, and each of them touched my head and my shoulders. He looked up to heaven again, and said some more words. And I went with him and his companions.

We are like a family - women and men together - who take care of each other and pray together and tell stories from the Scriptures. Though we follow Jesus around, there are always places to stay, always enough to eat. Now my spirits no longer come to me. My secret friends have deserted me. Tomorrow I am visiting Magdala again for the first time since I left. I'm no longer afraid of my father. I don't resent my mother or my brothers or Reuben's wife. I want them to see I have no need of a secret world. Because now I belong to a new family, among the companions of Jesus. Here I am Mary. Only Mary.

Reflections

- **What do you find most encouraging, and most challenging, in the story of Mary Magdalene?**
- **What do you think would happen if you and your church raised the profile of Mary Magdalene?**
- **How does your church care for people like Mary who experience mental and emotional distress? What would give you more confidence in this?**

Ending the session

You may like to end by being quiet for a minute or so, and using the silence to think about what you will take away with you from your reading and discussion.

Ask yourself (and share with each other if there is time):

What difference will hearing the story of Mary make in the coming week?

You may wish to say this prayer together:

All-calming God,
you embrace the chaos of our lives
with gentle strength and unshakeable peace:
let the restoring of Mary inspire our compassion
and renew our hope.

Mary the sister of Martha

Luke 10.38-42

Beginning the session

Look carefully at this painting of Jesus with Martha and Mary by the contemporary Chinese artist He Qi.



He Qi © 2014 All rights reserved

What do you notice in the way the artist depicts Martha and Mary?

You may like to use this prayer:

Hospitable God,
your world is our dwelling place,
and you make your home among us:
open our lives to your presence,
that we may extend your welcome to all.

Background information

Martha and Mary

- The story of Jesus' dining with Martha and Mary is only found in Luke's gospel. There may be links with John's account of Martha and Mary, who live at Bethany with their brother Lazarus (John 11). After the raising of Lazarus, Jesus shares a meal with them (John 12.1-8), and Mary anoints his feet (in Luke she sits at his feet).
- Luke places this story after the lawyer's question about eternal life and the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37). Like the wounded man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, Jesus and his disciples are on a journey (v38). They too receive hospitality and attention. In their world, Martha and Mary are low-status people, but not as low as the Samaritan.
- It is significant that the sisters are named - perhaps they are well-known disciples - and that Martha is the householder, with no mention of any men. Perhaps Martha and Mary are typical of the independent women found in the Jesus movement. Luke mentions others: Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna (Luke 8.2-3); Dorcas (Acts 9.36-43); and Lydia (Acts 16.14-15). By accepting hospitality from women, Jesus is prepared to cross social boundaries, like the compassionate Samaritan in his parable.
- **How do Mary and Martha help you to picture the role of women in today's church? What do they say to men in the church?**

Sharing meals in Jesus' world

- In Jesus' world, the meal table was more than a piece of furniture around which people gathered for refreshment. Meals nourished social bonds, and people were careful about what they ate and who they ate with. Eating was surrounded by important rituals such as washing hands and vessels. Devout Jews would not eat with non-Jews and avoided pork. In the cities of the Roman world they refused to eat meat from the market place, because the animals it came from were offered to the gods when they were killed.
- A typical Jewish dining room was open to the outside world, so that the host could use the guests to display his or her social standing to the public.
- Anthropologists see these attitudes and actions around food and eating as evidence that the body is seen as a symbol of society. What happens at the boundaries (eating, washing, decoration, clothing, sex) shows how people relate to each other and the wider world.
- When Jesus ate with a wide range of people – Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners, disciples, friends – he was not simply being sociable, but making a clear statement about his inclusive, welcoming vision of God's reign. He gave out the same message in his teaching and healing.
- **How do Jesus' eating habits shape the way you understand and celebrate the eucharist?**

Mary tells her story

This is not the first time Jesus has eaten with us. He visits us whenever he's passing through our village. He's become a good friend to my sister Martha and me. We see ourselves as disciples, though we don't follow him around like those men and women. Ours is a different kind of discipleship. We open our home to him - and a lot of people from the village always turn up to hear what he has to say, and bring people for him to bless and heal.

All these people - it's quite a strain having them here. It's not as if ours is the biggest house in the village. I sometimes wonder what it would be like to have Jesus to ourselves for a few hours. Just to sit and listen - and eat, of course - without anything getting in the way.

I almost managed that last time he came. There weren't as many people as usual, and Martha seemed to have the kitchen under control. She's taken charge of the cooking ever since our mother died. I always offer to help, but she seems to know what she's doing. I've learned not to make a nuisance of myself. I keep my head down as much as possible. That day I spied my chance and sat at Jesus' feet and just listened.

I love his stories. He's not like some of the other rabbis, who seem more interested in showing how good they are at quoting the scriptures and applying the most obscure details to everyday life. Jesus talks about God in the most down to earth ways. His stories always bring God to life. I just get drawn into them and find myself wondering what they're saying to me and my village.

I think Martha would have been happier if I'd been more drawn into the kitchen that day! I think I may have kept my head down too much. She was so annoyed with me, and she even had a go at Jesus: "Don't you care that my sister has left me with all this work?" It wasn't his fault. If anyone was in the wrong it was me.

Was I in the wrong, though? We don't get much chance to listen - I mean really listen, and think how we should live as God's people in our world. And it's not as if Jesus visits us every week. I wish he did. I'm not sure Martha would agree - but perhaps I shouldn't say that!



At the entrance to the guest chapel at the monastery of St Andrew, Brugge – 'Listen'

Mary's story in Luke's story

Different kinds of hospitality

- Martha is well aware of her obligations as a host. She is understandably annoyed by her sister's readiness to leave all the work to her. Jesus' reply to her complaint suggests that this is one of those occasions when serving him by being busy is inappropriate. A simple meal would be enough. By sitting at Jesus' feet, in the characteristic position of a disciple, Mary acknowledges that their guest is a rabbi whose teaching is worthy of her full attention.
- Mary is extending a different kind of hospitality – that of listening. If Martha and Mary are both being hospitable, Luke shows how different kinds of hospitality compete with each other for the limited resources of time and attention.
- Hospitality is a leading theme in the spread of the Jesus movement. Notice how often it is used to celebrate and extend the gospel (see Luke 5.29; 7.36ff; 14.1-24; 15.2; 19.7; 22.14ff; 24.30, 41-42; Acts 2.46; 9.19, 43; 10.23; 16.15, 34; 18.7; 27.33-38; 28.7, 14, 23, 30)³.
- **What kinds of hospitality do you and your church offer? How do you balance being busy and being attentive?**

Stillness and compassion

- By placing the story of Mary after the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke brings love for God and neighbour together (10.27). The Samaritan shows what love for the neighbour involves; Mary reveals what is essential in our love for God. The Samaritan's love brings him to the body of a half-dead man. Mary's love sets her at the feet of Jesus.
- Meditation is said to make people more capable of empathy. This may be because it helps us to sustain attention, overcome distraction and broaden our focus of attention⁴. When Mary sat at the feet of Jesus she may not have been meditating in the accepted sense, but her attentiveness certainly helped her to overcome distraction.
- Mary's example can encourage us to meditate on the compassionate Jesus. Luke has a fund of stories and images that we might use – see the parables in chapter 15, and his image of the dying Jesus in 23.32-43. We can only meet God in others if we also meet him in the words and stories of Jesus and the place of prayer.
- **Try spending five minutes quietly meditating on the compassionate Jesus every day for the next week. Make a note of how this affects you.**

Charter for Compassion

The writer Karen Armstrong launched this in 2009. It invites people to commit themselves to living by the principle of compassion, and is a major peace-making initiative. "We believe that all human beings are born with the capacity for compassion, and that it must be cultivated for human beings to survive and thrive". See www.charterforcompassion.org for more details.

³ Rowan Williams writes movingly of Jesus' practice of giving and receiving hospitality, and relates this to Eucharistic hospitality in his *Living Faith. Baptism, Bible, Eucharist and Prayer*, SPCK 2014, chapter 3.

⁴ See Fraser Watts and Mark Williams, *The Psychology of Religious Knowing*, Cambridge University Press 1988, chapter 6.

Reflections

- **Which of the two sisters do you identify with more strongly, and why?**
- **What do the sisters' different responses to Jesus remind you of in yourself and your church?**

The Rule of Benedict, one of the main influences on Christian monasticism, opens with the word "Listen". The same word greets those who enter the guests' chapel in the Benedictine Abbey of St Andrew in Bruges.

- **What helps you to listen to God? What gets in the way?**

Ending the session

You may like to end by being quiet for a minute or so, and using the silence to think about what you will take away with you from your reading and discussion.

Ask yourself (and share with each other if there is time):

What difference will hearing the story of Mary make in the coming week?

You may wish to say this prayer together:

God of action and stillness,
you call us to give ourselves time
to sit at your feet and listen;
teach us how to make space for compassion
to grow in us and live through us.

Zacchaeus the Tax-Collector

Luke 19.1-10

Beginning the session

Someone you meet for the first time introduces himself to you as a tax inspector. How do you react?

Which other professions or groups of people produce the same response in you?



You may like to use this prayer:

Risk-taking God
you seem not to worry about
the company you keep:
open our lives to your presence
and our hearts to our prejudices.

Background information

Jesus in the company of tax collectors

- Luke, like Mark and Matthew, has Jesus mixing with tax collectors, but this is the only account of his meeting with Zacchaeus. Notice the similarities with the story of the call of Levi in Luke 5.27-32. Jesus' critics associated tax collectors with 'sinners', i.e. those who fall short of their strict interpretation of the Law's holiness requirements, rather than sinners in a general sense (Luke 15.1ff).
- We are not told why Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but clearly he gets more than he bargains for. The story reads as if Jesus comes looking for him, like those who search for the lost in the parables in chapter 15. Zacchaeus' joy (v6) also reminds us of these parables. The crowd's complaining (v7) puts them in the position of the older son in the parable of the prodigal son (15.25ff).
- Jesus' eating with Zacchaeus is another example of hospitality, one of Luke's favourite themes (see also Luke 5.27-32, 7.36-50, 10.38-42, 14.1ff, 22.7ff).
- **Why do you think the crowds disapproved of Jesus' eating with Zacchaeus? Where does your church offer scandalous hospitality?**



A Roman denarius, stamped with the emperor's head and a symbol of foreign rule, used for paying taxes to Rome.

High and low status

- As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have bought the franchise on local tax-collecting services. He would have farmed out the rights to collect the taxes to others, at a price. His wealth and associations with Rome would have given him high status in the authorities' eyes, but low status among his own people, especially those who were concerned to keep Gentiles at a safe distance. Not only did he and his kind collaborate with the occupying foreign power in creaming off Israel's wealth, they also made a handsome profit for themselves by overcharging their clients. A wealthy chief tax collector would be deeply resented.
- Sociologists call the experience of people like Zacchaeus 'status inconsistency' – high status in some areas of life, low status in others. This can make life very stressful.
- **Who else experiences this in today's world? What does Christian faith and community offer to help them live with this?**

Zacchaeus and the law of restitution

- Unlike the respectable man in Luke 18:18-23, this 'sinner' is prepared to share his wealth with the poor, and even go beyond the legal requirements for restitution after robbery (see Leviticus 6:5; Numbers 5:7). No longer will money be allowed to separate Zacchaeus from the rest of the family of Abraham. He promises to use it to 'win friends' (to borrow the language of 16:9).
- **What do you think are the most effective ways of sharing wealth with the poor in today's world?**

Zacchaeus tells his story

My name is Zacchaeus and I work for the government. The Emperor is my boss. I'm the chief tax collector for the Romans in the Jericho area. They prefer to employ locals. That way we get all the aggro. Nobody wants to pay taxes, especially to foreigners. All that hard-earned money going out of the country, keeping them in their big houses and theatres and roads – and armies, of course. Soldiers are meant to keep occupied people like us quiet. I can assure you, most of the time they do.

I have a lot of men working for me. They do all the hard work, and I cream off the profits. As long as Rome gets what it wants, we can charge what we like – within reason of course. We can't afford to upset the locals too much.

Am I a happy man? Yes and no. I enjoy what I do. I'm good with figures. I get a strange sort of pleasure out of seeing the way the Romans have improved things around here. All that building they do employ a lot of people, and that means more taxes to collect, and bigger profits for me. But I'm getting tired of the hassle. Only last week I was punched in the face by a wine merchant who accused me of ripping him off. Where are the soldiers when you need them?

I've been thinking for a while of getting out of tax collecting. I've made enough money to take things easy. Maybe I'll go and live by the coast, where nobody knows me. But then the other day I met this rabbi from Nazareth, Jesus. I don't usually have much to do with rabbis. They don't earn enough to pay taxes. And I keep away from the synagogues. I break too many rules to feel welcome there. Anyway, Jesus - I was walking through the market place, keeping my head down as usual, but I couldn't help hearing what he was saying to this crowd he'd gathered. Something about there being a place for so-called scum like me – only he didn't use that word – when God's new world comes. Hope for the future if only we'll change our ways. No need to go to the temple to pay your dues, said Jesus, because God is on the lookout for people who've lost their way in life. People like me, I thought.

I could see he was about to head for the main street, so I ran ahead of him. I don't know why but I wanted to hear more. Being a bit on the short side I couldn't really see him through the crowd, so I climbed the nearest tree, and would you believe it, he stopped right underneath and invited himself round to my place. What could I do? The people in the crowd weren't best pleased. No surprises there. Fortunately there was plenty in the larder, and he sat down with the family and a few of his friends for a good meal.

One of them was a tax collector. "Tell me more", I said to this Jesus. Next thing I knew I was promising to give back all I'd cheated people out of, and more besides. The wife was not pleased, I can tell you! I know I've been mulling this over for a while, but since I met Jesus I can't avoid the question any longer. What am I going to do with my life now?

Zacchaeus' story in Luke's story

Salvation

- Luke uses the story of Zacchaeus to demonstrate how salvation embraces outcasts. Though he is a son of Abraham, his selfishness and greed had effectively severed his ties with his wider family. In this he reminds us of the prodigal son (15.13, 28ff). Jesus draws him back into the family of Israel, like the woman finding her lost coin, the shepherd his lost sheep and the father his lost son.
- Like the rest of the Bible, Luke's writings see salvation as God's vision and purpose for all creation. It embraces our outer as well as inner worlds – body and soul, community and individual, social and spiritual. Zacchaeus' experience suggests that salvation transforms relationships at all levels: emotional, spiritual, religious, social, economic, political, ecological. We do not have to turn our backs on everyday life to experience salvation.
- **How are you and your church 'working out your salvation' (Philippians 2.12)?**

Luke on wealth and poverty

- The story of Zacchaeus illustrates one of Luke's most important themes, the relationship between wealth and poverty. Mary's Magnificat anticipates a world in which God 'fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty' (1.53). Jesus sees himself as Isaiah's prophet who 'brings good news to the poor' (4.18). In the opening words of his 'sermon on the plain' he declares God's blessings on 'you who are poor and hungry now' (6.20-21), with corresponding woes on 'you who are rich and full' (6.24-25).
- For all this, Luke does not show Jesus keeping his distance from wealthy people. He heals the servant of a wealthy foreigner (7.5), and includes rich women in his core group of disciples (8.3). Simon the Pharisee and the sisters Martha and Mary are wealthy enough to include Jesus in their hospitality (7.36ff, 10.38-42). The Samaritan traveller in Jesus' parable is rich enough to pay for the injured man's care (10.35). The rich and foolish farmer in Jesus' story is not condemned for being successful or wealthy, but for looking no further than himself rather than being 'rich towards God' (12.21). The same is true of the rich man who fails to see the poor man Lazarus at his gate in another parable (16.19-31). Jesus expects wealthy people to find fulfilment in living lightly with their riches (18.22), something he realises is not at all easy (18.24-25).
- Luke shows the transforming power of Spirit-inspired generosity in his cameos of the Jerusalem church after Pentecost (Acts 2.43-47; 4.32-37). Perhaps this is how he imagines Jesus' blessing on the poor turning the world upside down.
- **What do you think being 'rich towards God' looks like today? How can you and your church increase this kind of wealth?**

Reflections

- **Which characters in this story do you find it easiest to identify with? Why do you think this is?**

In their book *The Spirit Level. Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, Penguin 2010, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett argue that it is more important to tackle inequality rather than poverty alone. Evidence gathered from all over the world suggests that the more unequal a society, the less healthy it is.

- **How could you and your church use your wealth (relative or absolute) and the power it brings to do something about the results of inequality?⁵**

Wealth is not an evil in itself: 'the love of money is the root of all evils' (1 Timothy 6.10). Jesus teaches that wealth affects us 'on the inside'. If we put our basic trust in our wealth, we can easily come to rely on it for our security.

- **What are you doing to reduce your dependence on your own resources, and become more dependent on God?**

Ending the session

You may like to end by being quiet for a minute or so, and using the silence to think about what you will take away with you from your reading and discussion.

Ask yourself (and share with each other if there is time):

What difference will hearing the story of Zacchaeus make in the coming week?

You may wish to say this prayer together:

All-searching God
you look for those who lose their way
and rejoice when they come home:
let the joy of their salvation
draw us into heaven's celebrations.

⁵ You may find it helpful to look at Britain Uncovered, a survey carried out by The Observer in April 2015 – see <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/19/observer-view-on-britain-today-celebrate-hope-and-altruism> (accessed on 5 October 2015)

The Centurion at the Cross

Luke 23.32-49

Beginning the session

Look carefully at this picture, taken in St Edmundsbury Cathedral in October 2015, during the work on the north aisle roof.



Let it help you to reflect on the cross of Jesus as God's 'construction work in progress'.

You may like to use this prayer:

God our creator and redeemer,
you use the cross of Jesus
to re-build the world in your image:
open our lives to your presence,
that we might be living stones in your building.

Background information

Comparing the gospel accounts

- Luke omits the name 'Golgotha'. The place where Jesus and the others are crucified is simply called 'Skull', perhaps because executions regularly happened there, or because the place was shaped like a skull.
- All four evangelists agree that Jesus was executed as a messianic pretender, 'the King of the Jews' (v38; see 23.2).
- Jesus' words from the cross differ from one gospel to another. 'Father forgive them' (v34) is missing from some manuscripts, but it is typical of Jesus' concern for others. Even as he dies, his ability to reach out is undiminished. The Son of man provides the pattern for his followers: Stephen, the first martyr, also asked God to forgive those who murdered him (Acts 7:60).
- In Luke, the spectators stand in silence, unlike those in Matthew and Mark. Only the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers mock Jesus, exploiting the irony of a so-called messiah now stripped of clothes, followers and reputation.
- The scene in verses 39-43 is only found in Luke, and refers back to 22:37. The first criminal may be right (according to popular expectation, this is no way to do the messiah's work), but the second is more perceptive. The 'penitent thief' sees that Jesus really is the Christ. This is no mockery of the saving power of God, but its truest revelation. Only through crucifixion does God's messiah come into his kingdom.
- This criminal wants to be included when God's kingdom comes. Again Jesus finds the strength to reach out, with the promise of 'Paradise', a Persian word meaning 'park' or 'garden' and an image of God's coming kingdom in Jewish texts. So the end will be like the beginning: Paradise is Eden restored. In the promise that 'today you will be with me in Paradise' Jesus assures the penitent, perceptive criminal that he will share in the fruits of his sacrifice without delay.
- Luke places the tearing of the temple curtain before Jesus' death (v 45 - in Mark it comes afterwards, at the climax of the narrative), and reduces its symbolic significance. Though Jesus has announced the end of the temple, it continues to play a key part in the life of the church in Jerusalem. But it does not occupy the place in the new order that it had in the old, as the symbolic centre of God's covenant people.
- There is no cry of desolation ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?') in Luke, as there is in Mark and Matthew. Jesus' last words are taken from the prayer of another righteous sufferer (v 46; Psalm 31:5), on whom 'the scorn of all my adversaries' has fallen. However drained and humiliated he may be, nothing can diminish Jesus' faith in his heavenly Father. The same spirit he commits to his Father is poured out on the day of Pentecost, to allow Jesus' work to continue.
- In Luke the duty centurion is so moved that he praises God when he sees Jesus die. 'Certainly this man was innocent' (v47) echoes the verdicts of Pilate, Herod and one of the criminals (23.4, 15, 41). But the Greek word *dikaios* means 'righteous', not just innocent, as in Psalm 31:18. The way Jesus dies – praying for those who drove in the nails and showing compassion towards the dying criminal – shows that he is worthy of God's blessing and honour.

The centurion tells his story

All in a day's work. Nothing unusual.
This is what soldiers like me are paid to do.
Fight battles. Kill people. Make sure there's no trouble.

We always have crucifixions at this festival.
Keeps these people in their place.
Stops them getting above themselves.
All their talk about Moses and freedom just puts ideas in their heads.
They start thinking that Romans are just like Egyptians.
That they're slaves again.
Nothing of the sort.
In Egypt they really were slaves, in somebody else's country.
Now we're in their land.
But they're hardly slaves.
We give them a lot of freedom.
Sure, we get their kings and priests to do our work for us.
And we take a lot off them in taxes.
But look what we've given them in return.
New roads and cities and theatres.
Look what we've done for trade and employment.
We've opened up a whole new world to them - *our* world.
And Caesar is Lord.
Don't you Jews forget it!

Three crucifixions today.
Bandits, dagger men, if they're anything like the usual crew.
We round them up, rough them up, wear them out, make them carry their own cross beam.
By the time they reach this godforsaken place,
they're practically begging us to put them out of their misery.

No room for sentiment, not on these occasions.
I've seen too much to be sentimental.
Most of these men would slit your throat as soon as look at you.
I'll spare you the gruesome details.
Let's just say I can't imagine a more shameful a way of dying.
And I've seen plenty of death.
They don't go quietly.
They kick and shout and curse and spit.
I've known their friends try to get them down,
that's why we always have a heavy guard.
And they don't go quickly.
I've seen some of them struggling for days to stay alive.
For heaven's sake, why? It does them no good at all.
Their lungs always give out in the end.
Why fight it?

Nothing out of the ordinary, I said.

But that's not quite right.
I remember one of them we crucified last Passover.
Charged with being 'king of the Jews'.
A less likely looking king you have never seen, I can tell you.
No followers, no weapons, completely alone,
except for a few people standing well away.
Not much of an army of liberation.
Usual routine.
My men made fun of him.
So did the leaders of his own people.
They don't usually turn out for an execution.
One of the others we crucified with him had a real go at him:
"If you're the messiah, save yourself, save us".
But the one on the other side of him told him to lay off.
"We deserve this, he doesn't".
And then he turned to the man - Jesus was his name –
and said something about remembering him when he came into his kingdom.
And then this Jesus said he'd be with him in Paradise that very day.
Was that the wine we gave him talking?

I don't know where he got his strength from to speak.
He was about the most exhausted prisoner we've ever had.
He couldn't even carry his own cross beam.
But that wasn't all he said.
No cursing his abusers or his god.
And just before he died, he looked up to heaven.
"Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing".
Forgive them! I've never heard that from a cross before.
No fighting to hold onto his life.
He just shouted out with his last breath to his god:
"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit".

It's just a job to me.
I do as I'm told.
People like me are not paid to have an opinion.
But this time I'll tell you what I think.
He was different from the others.
The one next to him was right.
He'd done no wrong.
He was no bandit, no dagger man.
There wasn't an ounce of violence in him.
He was innocent. It's the truth.

And now they're saying he's not dead after all.
Well I can tell you for sure, he was when we took him off his cross.
They all are. We make sure of that.
Not dead?
Well, what could possibly live on from a crucified man?

The centurion's story in Luke's story

When I survey the wondrous cross

- Jesus' death as the faithful witness to the reign of God (and so a martyr in the true sense) makes a strong impression on those around the cross: the criminal crucified next to him, the centurion and the crowds drawn to the spectacle. In Luke's account these crowds do not mock Jesus. They stand and watch, returning home full of sorrow. It may be that some of them were among the three thousand Jews in Jerusalem who repented and were baptised on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:22-41).
- Jew and Gentile, a criminal and a Roman official are all drawn towards salvation by the dying Jesus. If Jesus makes such a profound impression on human beings when he is at his weakest, how much greater is the impact of one whose life has been vindicated by God in the resurrection and released into the whole world.
- **Which hymns come to mind as you reflect on Luke's account of Jesus' death?**

Solidarity

- Luke achieves something unique among the evangelists. By picturing Jesus as the faithful martyr who remains true to his cause, he brings out the way that his death is of a piece with his life. On the cross, he reveals a commitment to the will of God and the good of others that led him to make the final journey to Jerusalem. His love is undiminished, even in death. His cross seals his willingness to give himself and to suffer, in loving solidarity with all.
- Several of the speeches in Acts highlight the reversal of the defeat and shame of the crucifixion. 'This Jesus, who was crucified, God raised up' is a regular refrain (see Acts 2.23-24, 4.10, 10.39-40, 13.28-30). Here the resurrection is understood as God's vindication of all that Jesus lived and died for, an act of divine solidarity with his faithful Son.
- God's verdict on Jesus – anticipated, perhaps, by the centurion's 'truly this man was righteous' – is reproduced in the patterns of faithful living and dying found among his followers, enabled by the Holy Spirit. The earliest churches in Jerusalem and their leaders met with the same response from the authorities there as Jesus had: opposition, rejection, persecution and in some cases martyrdom (the account of the death of Stephen in Acts 7.54-60 recalls Luke's crucifixion story – see Luke 22.69, 23.34, 23.46). Luke draws many parallels between the experience of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, and Jesus (see especially Paul's journey to Jerusalem and then to Rome, in Acts 21-28).
- Jesus' loving solidarity with all Israel draws out God's loving solidarity with his faithful Son, and inspires his followers' loving solidarity with him. The trinitarian pattern in this suggests that for Luke, solidarity provides the clue to the mystery of God and our calling as human beings.
- **'Solidarity' does not find a natural place in the language of British Christianity. We are more used to words like 'communion' and 'fellowship'. What do 'holy communion' or 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' look like if we see them as expressions of the solidarity Luke describes?**

There is more material on the crucifixion of Jesus in Appendix 3.

Reflections

According to the Latin American Franciscan priest Leonardo Boff⁶, the cross of Jesus shows us what love can achieve when it is prepared to enter into the sorrow and suffering of the world. The crucified Jesus not only invites our contemplation and wonder, he also asks us to be moved by his living and dying, to take up our cross daily in the same committed love which we see in him and discover to be at the very heart of God. Only in this way can we and the whole world be saved.

- **What do you find most compelling in Luke's account of the centurion's response to the dying Jesus?**
- **As you reflect on the centurion's story, what does Jesus' call to 'take up your cross daily and follow me' (Luke 9.23) mean to you and your church?**

The end of Jesus' life takes us back to the beginning. At his birth the angels announce the good news of 'peace on earth' (Luke 2.14). Unlike Caesar's peace – which is only ever established through violence, intimidation and oppression – God's peace comes through self-giving, service and sacrifice.

- **'Let us pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life'. How do your celebrations of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus transform you into people of peace?**

Ending the session

You may like to end by being quiet for a minute or so, and using the silence to think about what you will take away with you from your reading and discussion.

Ask yourself (and share with each other if there is time):

What difference will hearing the story of the centurion at the cross make in the coming week?

You may wish to say this prayer together:

God of the god-forsaken,
you show your way of redeeming the world
to a soldier surrounded by death:
inspire us by what he saw in your Son,
that we might be moved by the power of his sacrifice.

⁶ See his *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, Orbis Books 2011

Appendix 1

Mary – Virgin Mother of God

- For many Christians, Mary's conception of Jesus without the help of a human father is part of the miraculous appeal of their faith, guaranteeing Jesus' divinity and revealing one of the many ways in which 'nothing will be impossible with God' (Luke 1.37).
- Others are uneasy with a literal interpretation of Luke's account. For them, the absence of a human father undermines Jesus' true humanity. They point out that Mark, John, Peter and Paul manage to preach the gospel without reference to the 'virgin birth'. Luke's emphasis lies with God's initiative. What takes shape in Jesus from the beginning is God's desire to renew the world in ways that are faithful to his own character and purpose.
- Mary's virginal conception is the basis of later belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary, despite reference to Jesus' brothers in Mark 3.31 and 6.3, John 7.3 and Acts 1.14. Traditionally this approach to virginity associates God's favour and holiness with sexual purity, and has been used to promote the idea that the body and sex are unclean.
- Later Christian writers fill in the gaps in the gospel accounts of Mary, and provide the basis for beliefs about her that go beyond the New Testament. Mary's 'immaculate conception' (the idea that she too was conceived without sin) and 'assumption into heaven' after she died draw clear parallels between the earthly and heavenly Jesus and his mother. Advocates of these beliefs argue that they further strengthen orthodox Christian faith in the divinity and humanity of Jesus. Critics see them as distractions from the unique role of Jesus.
- **What role does the mother of Jesus have in your faith?**

Mary – model of faith

- Mary drops out of Luke's gospel after the opening two chapters. Luke omits Mark's account of the family's attempt to restrain Jesus and softens his later remarks about his true mother and brothers (Mark 3.21, 31-35), and John's mention of Mary's presence at the crucifixion (John 19.25). Mary re-appears in the upper room with Jesus' brothers between Passover and Pentecost (Acts 1.14).
- Mary's favour in God's sight (1.28) and her 'let it be' response to the angel's message (1.38) identifies her as a positive female role model, one of many in this gospel. This is a strong theme in much contemporary spirituality, including the mainly Roman Catholic Latin American liberation theology.
- The 'Hail Mary' is a prayer based on Gabriel's greeting, asking for Mary's prayers. It is found in a number of versions, and has been used for at least 1000 years by Christians in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and other traditions. It is included in a form of contemplative prayer using prayer beads (the Rosary) and in the Angelus prayer (for more about the Anglican rosary see <http://www.franciscan.org.au/anglican-rosary/>).
- This is a version of the Angelus adapted from the Benedictine Community of the Salutation of Mary at Mucknell Abbey, Worcestershire:

The angel of the Lord spoke to Mary
And she conceived by the Holy Spirit

Holy God,
whose Son became incarnate for us and for our salvation
from the womb of Mary:
hear the prayers of your faithful people;
have mercy on us now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Behold the servant of the Lord
Let it be to me according to your Word.

Holy God, whose Son became incarnate

The Word was made flesh
and dwelt among us.

Holy God, whose Son became incarnate

We beheld his glory
full of grace and truth.

Pour your grace into our hearts, Lord,
that we who have known
the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ,
announced by an angel to Mary,
may by his cross and passion be brought to the glory of his resurrection;
through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

- **Pray the Angelus, perhaps with prayer beads, in the traditional or an alternative version. If this is new to you, give yourself time to get used to it.**

Appendix 2

Connections between Luke 5.1-11 and John 21.1-11

- There are obvious connections, as well as differences, between these accounts. John 21 seems to be an appendix, following the natural ending at 20.30-31. At an unspecified time after Jesus' resurrection, Simon Peter and six other disciples go fishing on the sea of Tiberias (another name for the Sea of Galilee, which Luke calls 'Gennesaret' here), and catch nothing. When a mysterious figure on the shore tells them to try again, the catch is so big – 153 fish, yet the nets are not damaged – that they can hardly land it. The figure turns out to be Jesus, who has cooked breakfast for them on a charcoal fire. He goes on to speak to Peter about shepherding, rather than fishing for, people. The scene alludes to Peter's earlier denial of Jesus, and culminates in Jesus' renewing his call to Peter: 'follow me'.
- **In both accounts of the surprising catch of fish, Peter is called to invest the experience he gained in one area of his life in something new. When has this happened to you?**

Appendix 3

Crucifixion⁷

- Crucifixion was widely used in the ancient world as a method of execution. With the spread of the Roman empire into Palestine in the 1st century BCE, it was used to keep Jewish nationalism in check. There is evidence that the Jews occasionally used crucifixion.
- Descriptions of actual crucifixions are rare. The brief and restrained accounts of Jesus' crucifixion in the gospels provide important historical evidence for some of the details of crucifixion.
- The Romans had their victims flogged and stripped before being crucified in a public place, where they were ridiculed by spectators. Victims might be impaled on, or hung from, a wooden stake. Sometimes they were bound and nailed to this, with hands extended over the head. The Romans usually forced victims to carry a wooden beam, to which their arms were fastened at the place of execution, either by ropes or nails through the wrist or forearm. In mass executions the beams were fixed to a scaffold of vertical wooden planks.
- Victims were not always crucified upright. When they were, the beam was raised on wooden forks and slotted into a groove, cut either into the top of the upright, making a T-shape, or lower down, making a † - shape. Once crucified, the victim's feet might be no more than 30 centimetres above the ground. Sometimes a small wooden crossbar was fixed to the upright for the victim to sit on.

- While this provided support and helped breathing, it only prolonged the agony by preventing the collapse of the lungs.
- Because crucifixion neither damaged internal organs nor resulted in excessive bleeding, death was slow and painful. Breathing became increasingly difficult, and the victims eventually died through a combination of asphyxiation, shock, hunger and thirst. Sometimes they were left unburied, and their bodies fell prey to birds and animals.
- The Jews found crucifixion particularly horrifying in view of Deuteronomy 21.23: "a hanged man is accursed by God". Though it referred originally to a body left hanging on a tree, by the 1st century CE it was applied to the victims of crucifixion (see Galatians 3.13). Crucifixion was so shameful that it never became a symbol of martyrdom and resistance among the Jews.
- **Why do you think that the gospels' accounts of the details of Jesus' crucifixion are so brief and restrained?**

The bones of a man in his late 20s who was crucified before 70CE were found in an ossuary in Jerusalem in 1968. An iron nail was still in place through his right heel, and at its sharp end were traces of olive wood. The bones of his hands and forearms were undamaged. The victim's arms appear to have been tied to the crossbeam, while his feet were nailed to either side of the upright. The olive wood is thought to be from a plaque used to prevent the man freeing his feet from the nail.

⁷ This material is adapted from the author's article in John Bowker (ed), *The Complete Bible Handbook. An Illustrated Companion*, Dorling Kindersley 1998, pp 358-9..

What crucified Jesus?

- Jesus is the only known Jew to have been crucified in Judea between 6 and 40 CE. Though the evangelists leave us with some uncertainty over the date (John has him crucified a day earlier, on the Day of Preparation for Passover), they agree that he was executed just outside Jerusalem during the Passover Festival. Only Luke makes the charge of sedition explicit. The Jewish leaders brought Jesus before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and accused him of “perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay tribute to Caesar and saying that he himself is Christ a king... He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place” (Luke 23.2, 5).
- Although Jesus’ crucifixion alongside two bandits echoes this accusation, there is nothing in his ministry to give rise to the charge. He did not encourage rebellion against Rome, and often spoke out against the use of violence. Yet his ability to draw crowds, and his teaching about the coming of the new order of the kingdom of God, made him a potential menace. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, who were responsible to Rome for maintaining law and order, were able to convince an initially indifferent Pilate that Jesus was enough of a threat to the peace of Jerusalem to merit execution. Had he been seen as the leader of an insurgent group, his followers would also have been arrested and executed. The authorities seem to have assumed that the crucifixion of Jesus would be enough to remove an irritant from the system, and deter his followers against causing trouble.

Fulfilling Scripture

- The accounts of Jesus’ passion are shot through with biblical allusions and quotations, especially from passages that refer to the lot of the suffering righteous person (e.g. Psalms 22 and 69, Isaiah 53).
- In Luke, the presence of criminals on either side recalls the words Jesus quoted from Isaiah 53.12 at the supper (Luke 22:37). The soldiers’ mercenary practice of dividing up clothing reflects words from Psalm 22:18. The mockery of the soldiers and leaders alludes to Psalm 69.19-21.
- Some see this as an example of Old Testament writers predicting the precise details of Jesus’ suffering and death. Jesus’ career then conforms exactly to God’s pre-determined programme. But that implies that he is simply acting out a script written in advance for him. Knowing all along what will happen only undermines his vulnerability and trust in God. Alternatively we may see Jesus’ death weaving the pattern of faithfulness into the fabric of God’s dealings with Israel, narrated in the Scriptures. Those who proved faithful to God in the past faced hardship, abuse and rejection. On this understanding Jesus fulfils Scripture by matching perfectly the biblical pattern of faithful response to God’s call.
- Jesus also weaves the pattern of God’s faithful love for his people. In all that brings about his crucifixion, Jesus embraces the abuse, suffering and rejection that is so often God’s lot in the Old Testament. Execution is the supreme price Jesus pays for all that flows from his baptism and anointing with God’s Spirit.

'He saved others'

- In the eyes of those who taunt Jesus, the shame of crucifixion ridicules any claim to be God's Messiah, because he is under God's curse (see Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 4:13). But for Luke's readers the mockery is heavily ironic: the fact that Jesus *cannot* save himself from the cross is the clearest evidence that he really is God's Messiah.
- What his adversaries don't realise is that he has reached this point precisely because of the exercise of his Spirit-given power (Luke 4:18-19). In his loving solidarity with all Israel he did indeed 'save others', but at the same time he exposed himself to the risk of rejection and suffering. Establishing Israel's salvation has brought about his execution, because he has faithfully refused to abandon the Spirit-inspired vision of liberation which provoked such determined opposition from the authorities. And he was determined to the end to use his power 'as one who serves' (Luke 22.27).

The end of an era

- Luke brings out the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion by the way he pictures what happens around it. Darkness symbolises God's judgment on the world's injustice (Amos 8:1ff; Joel 3.15). Here the three hours of darkness are caused by an eclipse (v 45), a sign of doom in the ancient world, as if the sun were turning away from what was happening. Jesus spoke earlier of 'signs in the sun and moon and stars' that would signal the end of the unredeemed world order and herald the coming of God's kingdom (see 21:25f). The crucifixion marks the point at which one era gives way to another.
- The tearing of the Temple curtain picks up Jesus' earlier words in 21:6. Though the end of the Temple era is not as marked in this gospel, its days are numbered. Luke leaves the first martyr Stephen to spell this out in his speech to the Jewish ruling council in Acts 7.