

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

*In this series, we will take our inspiration from the Gospel of Luke, which, of all the gospels, presents Jesus Christ as the Saviour for the whole world, as well as the true Human, living the life which God designed for all of us to live. May we be inspired afresh by the greatness of our Saviour, and encouraged in our determination to follow his Way.*

### **Day 1 – Luke 1:1-4 ‘The certainty of our hope’**

So often faith is caricatured as a leap in the dark. If you were to ask a sample of people in the street what words they associate with faith, you’d get a whole range of responses, but it would include words like: wishful thinking, ignorance, control.

Not many people would use the word St Luke does at the start of his gospel: ‘certainty’. That doesn’t sound like faith at all, does it? Can we really be that sure?

Luke’s answer would be: absolutely, YES! Whilst we will all retain questions we can’t answer this side of heaven, there are solid truths we can rely on. Most importantly for Luke, there are *actual events in history which really happened*.

One thing you must never believe about the gospels is that they were primitive accounts written by unsophisticated ancient types. If you were writing a definitive account of the one thing you’d staked your life on, you’d probably take that pretty seriously; and in fact all of the gospels are very highly crafted pieces of writing.

Luke is no exception. He’s a medical doctor by training, so a man of science. Details matter. Accuracy matters. Yes, he has a story to tell – but he won’t embellish that story if it compromises the reliability of his source material. He knows his stuff, and having ‘carefully investigated everything from the beginning,’ he wants to write, as he says, ‘an orderly account’ based on this extensive research. He is also at pains to emphasise that the gospel narratives have been ‘handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word.’ In other words, his gospel is based on the testimony of people *who were actually there*.

Nowadays, we tend to distrust memory, because we have so many ways of capturing information. But before the advent of these aids, people’s memories were so much sharper, because that was often all they had. The fact that people are remembering things many years later does not invalidate them – especially if Luke has talked to many people, and synthesised their accounts.

As we begin looking at this wonderful gospel, let’s take heart that what we read is true, and real. And it’s written for all of us: Theophilus means ‘God-lover’ – so, if you love God, then Luke has written it just for you! And as we read, may we know again the certainty of our glorious hope in Jesus Christ. Why not pray, today, for God to place that assurance, that deep confidence of these amazing truths, in your heart again this season. ‘Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.’ Amen!

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### **Day 2 – Luke 1:5-17 ‘Your prayer has been heard’**

And so we begin at the very beginning – which, as Maria von Trapp never fails to remind us, is a very good place to start. It is perhaps the most famous story of them all: the Nativity. Most modern tellings of the nativity story begin with the Angel Gabriel appearing to Mary. But that’s not quite the beginning of the story – not even in Luke’s gospel itself. Six months before that historic encounter, Gabriel has another divine errand, to an old priest performing his duties at the temple in Jerusalem.

Zechariah was a righteous and blameless man, as was his wife Elizabeth (v6), and their lives were similarly about to be turned upside down, almost as much as Mary’s. It was another miraculous birth – only this time because of age. They had never been able to have children, and presumably had long since given up hope. But they remained faithful, and got on with the day-to-day business of living, and serving their Lord.

And into this pair of quiet lives comes the angel, with an extraordinary promise: ‘Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John’ (v13).

You see, there was one other prophecy in the bible that had to be fulfilled before the Messiah could come. It was one of the very last words in the Old Testament, given to the prophet Malachi: that Elijah would return *first*, preparing the way for the Messiah.

This is the divinely-appointed task that John – later known as The Baptist – would come to do. That’s why it’s so important that he comes ‘in the spirit and power of Elijah’ (v17), ‘to make ready a people prepared for the Lord’. John is that ‘voice calling in the wilderness’ (Isaiah 40:3): the herald announcing that the Messiah has come!

So there’s no time to waste – if Angel Gabriel is going to visit Mary, he has to visit John’s would-be parents *first*. So he does.

Yesterday we dwelt on the idea that God keeps his promises – which he does again here. But today let’s feast on this short but profound phrase in v13: ‘*Your prayer has been heard.*’

What a glorious thought! That Almighty God, the creator and sustainer of the universal, all-powerful and all-knowing – this God *hears our prayers*. He listens, his faced turned towards us, full of love: he knows who we are, and what we’re asking.

Many of us will have prayers we’ve prayed for a long time, just like Zechariah and Elizabeth. Let’s take heart today and seize this promise with renewed faith: God hears our prayers. Yes, yours! And let’s have courage to keep praying them. God has not forgotten you.

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### **Day 3 – Luke 1:18-25 ‘He has shown his favour’**

Poor old Zechariah. It’s easy to give him a roasting. All those years waiting hopefully and serving faithfully, and when his big moment comes...

But I wonder if Zechariah is not somewhat more like us than we care to admit. One of the great pointers to the truthfulness of the bible is that the characters are so much like us. There’s no massaging of egos or marketing jingo. The human characters are very... human. We can see ourselves in them – which reminds us that *the God of the bible is a God for people like us*.

People like Gideon, the mighty warrior who hides in the shed. Or Peter, the Rock who blows his mouth off and then runs away. Or, as here, Zechariah who doubted an angel, and temporarily lost his voice because he temporarily lost his trust.

Never is God’s love and mercy more greatly shown than in the people he chooses to use. Ordinary people, people who mess up and let him down. People that God gives a second chance to; and a third, and a fourth...

There is redemption in this story for Zechariah – just as there is for you and me. That’s who God is – and we’ll see Zechariah come good in a few days’ time.

But let’s also celebrate the faithfulness of Elizabeth today – one of the great unsung heroes of the bible. Mother of the Baptist, woman of faith – and encourager of Mary, who only sings *after* Elizabeth has welcomed her and prophesied over her. She may only get half a chapter, but her unique contribution alters the course of history: just as it has been for many people of faith through the ages. Her ‘appointed time’ was brief but brilliant.

*Our God is the God of second chances:* for Elizabeth, long after her childbearing years were over; for Zechariah, when their son was born; for us too, whatever falls, foibles, faults and failures we’ve had along the way.

God shows his favour to those who don’t deserve it. People like us. Give thanks for that beautiful truth today – and may it cause your heart to sing.

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### **Day 4 – Luke 1:26-33 ‘What’s in a name?’**

Names matter. They certainly matter in the bible. A name wasn’t just a parental preference, it was meant to signify something. We can learn a lot from names. Take Gabriel, for example. It means ‘God is my strength’ – a perfect name for an angel. Mighty as Gabriel was, he knew where his true strength came from.

Or take Mary as another example: in today’s reading we get the iconic encounter between the angel and the young woman. The name Mary is most likely from the ancient Egyptian name ‘mry’ meaning ‘beloved’. Beloved of Joseph, certainly; but also beloved of God.

So God-is-my-strength meets The Beloved One – and promises a miraculous child. Not surprisingly, his name is important too. Jesus means ‘God saves’ – it is the updated version of the Old Testament name Joshua, the great hero of the Israelites who led his people into the promised land.

*God was coming to save his people again.* Only this time he would do it himself: ‘He will be called the Son of the Most High... his kingdom will never end.’ A greater rescuer, an eternal king.

Tomorrow we’ll deal with Mary’s shock – and her remarkable faith. But today let’s rejoice that *Jesus lives up to his name.* God saves, and his salvation is glorious. All the promises to Israel – to the prophets, to those waiting, for generation after generation – are coming to fulfilment. There is a new way back to God, a new hope for the renewal of our broken world.

‘Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?!’ So jokes the disciple Nathanael 30 years later (John 1: 46). Today we have our answer and it is emphatically yes. The Beloved One is promised the gift of the Messiah – God’s Son, salvation made flesh. A saviour not just for then, but for now. A Saviour for you and for me – for the whole world. *It’s all in the name.*

And may that beautiful truth lift your heart today.

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### **Day 5 – Luke 1:34-38 ‘No word ever fails’**

‘How will this be?’ It’s not a bad question to ask, is it? You’ve just received some of the most extraordinary – and shocking – news anyone could imagine. Perhaps as you’ve read today’s passage, you found yourself remembering such a time in your own life, when you received news it was hard to take in. And Mary asks a natural follow-up: but what’s striking in her reply is that she doesn’t question the *fact* of it, only the process.

This is in stark contrast to Zechariah earlier. He asks: ‘How can I be sure?’ (i.e. ‘...that what you’re saying is true?’) Mary doesn’t doubt the message, only the method. And her faith is rewarded with a direct answer from the angel.

The text doesn’t tell us what she felt emotionally after receiving this visitation. The hundreds of portrayals of this scene in art through the ages tend to reflect the values of the society of the time. Mediaeval paintings picture her receiving it demurely, like a good lady of the court. Modern versions tend to emphasise the emotional shock and even pain, reflecting our more therapeutic culture.

In some ways, this is good – it means that we see Mary as fundamentally *one of us* – a real human being. And yet, we can so easily read into her response what she ‘must’ have felt. Luke cleverly avoids such guessing. Instead he tells us simply that Mary accepted the word, whatever it would cost: ‘I am the Lord’s servant.... may your word to me be fulfilled.’ (v38)

It is a remarkable encounter – and at its heart is a remarkable young woman showing even more remarkable faith. This single scene changes the course of history, and in its turn transforms this anonymous young villager into the most famous woman in history. Lady Di might have been photographed more often, but nobody has been captured more in art and literature over the course of 2,000 years. I do wonder what Mary herself would have made of that.

But let’s close with a glorious affirmation: *God’s word never fails* (v37). It didn’t fail for Mary – it doesn’t fail for us, too. The bible is full of promises – and ‘all of them are yes in Christ Jesus’ (2 Corinthians 1:20). Because God’s word never fails, we can say ‘yes’ to God’s love, to his salvation, to God’s gift of the Spirit to dwell in our hearts, bringing peace that passes understanding, joy that gives us strength, and hope in times of trial.

Christ comes into the world as the fulfilment of God’s word – today let’s spend a few moments reading any one of our favourite passages and choosing to rejoice in those promises again. ‘For no word from God will ever fail.’

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### **Day 6 – Luke 1:39-45 ‘Blessed are you’**

Shared experience is a powerful thing. So much of what binds us together as humans lies in what we can share – in a sense, we were made for it. It is particularly powerful when people who have experienced similar challenges or opportunities find comfort and inspiration in each other.

In today's passage we see such a meeting. Mary 'hurries' to see Elizabeth, and although they find themselves at opposite ends of their journey in life – one is very young, the other very old – they find themselves in the same unusual situation: that of an unexpected pregnancy, and the enormous life-changes that will bring.

One senses that this is the main reason for Mary to visit Elizabeth. Whilst it would be common for relatives – especially female relatives – to pay their respects upon hearing of a new pregnancy, Mary needs to go somewhere, *anywhere*, that she feels safe, where she can share all her deepest hopes and fears with someone who gets it, who understands.

And there is a good deal of healing in this encounter. Elizabeth already seems joyfully reconciled to her new reality, praising God as early as v25 of Luke's narrative. However, Mary's position is more ambiguous. When the angel first visits, she is 'greatly troubled' (v29). By the end of the encounter she shows remarkable faith and composure in receiving and believing the angel's word (v38), but her emotions are veiled – at least not that Luke records. It is only in the company of this wise old mentor and friend that she is finally able truly to embrace her calling, and to burst out in a song of great joy – now known to us as the Magnificat, and the subject of tomorrow's reading.

It is surely significant that Elizabeth's first words to Mary are 'Blessed are you...!' It might have been the first time that Mary heard it put like that. The Messiah would bless the world, of course – but bless *her*? It probably didn't feel like 'blessing' at that moment: the scandal, the disgrace, the fear for her own and her family's safety. Elizabeth's divinely inspired utterance enables her to see it in a new light – *God was blessing her, too*.

Perhaps we too have faced – or are facing – great challenges, and have wondered where God is in the midst of it. It is hard to cling on to faith and trust in those times. And we may never get a complete answer this side of heaven. But today's story encourages us to dare to hope that, somehow, God is in what we face, and that he can bring good out of it.

May we too, like Mary, have courage to receive Elizabeth's words, this acclamation of God's healing presence with us in all things: 'Blessed are you...' And may the Lord grant us grace to trust again that he always fulfils his promises.

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### **Day 7 – Luke 1:46-55 ‘The great reversal’**

Blessed are the self-sufficient, for they will never need help from God, or anyone else. Blessed are those who have no problems, for they will avoid pain and discomfort. Blessed are the assertive, for they will usually get what they want. Blessed are those who don't want to be too good, for they will avoid moral dilemmas. Blessed are those who know their rights, for they will usually get what they want. Blessed are the cynical, for they know how life really works. Blessed are the competitive, for they will win out more often. Blessed are those who follow the crowd, for they will avoid unpopularity and blame.

Who is really blessed in this life? The list above – the ‘anti-beatitudes’ – might sound like a fairly blunt summary of modern culture: but to be honest it could have been written at most times in history. Life is full of winners and losers – and it's best, on the whole, to be one of the winners.

But what if God sees it differently? In today's famous passage, as Mary bursts into song, we see another dynamic at work. Maybe it's not the ‘winners’ who prevail after all. *God's intervention will reverse the natural order of things.* The humble are lifted up and the rulers are brought low (v52); the hungry are filled and the rich sent away empty (v53). God's mercy extends to those who fear him (v50), but the proud are scattered in their inmost thoughts (v51).

The kingdom of Christ is the great reversal – the world's values are turned upside down, ‘success’ is redefined, and the marginalised are suddenly at the heart of the story.

And God achieves this, as Mary recognises, not through a birth to a queen in a palace, but to an obscure young mother living in an unfashionable town. It starts how it intends to go on.

Thirty years later, someone else stood on the side of a hill and declared: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure, the peacemakers, the persecuted....’ Or to put it another way: *blessed are the losers in this world, for they are the winners in the kingdom of God.*

This is great news to all of us who have ever wished we were more than we are. Who've failed, or fell down, or felt low. Who wished we were louder, or richer, or funnier, or more popular, or more clever. God is for *you* – yes, you. This God is not interested in status or self-assurance. This God lifts up the humble, feeds the hungry and showers his mercy and love on all who know they haven't got it all together – as Brennan Manning beautifully put it: ‘weak, unsteady disciples, whose cheese is falling off their cracker.’ People like us.

Today, give thanks and claim afresh the love of this God – it's for people like us that Jesus came.

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### **Day 8 – Luke 1:56-66 ‘His name is John’**

I don't know about you, but it's not easy to name a child. It was a bit more straightforward with our first child Amelie, but for our second, we spent weeks batting around various names. We didn't know if it was going to be a boy or a girl, so we had to have at least one of each. All kinds of options were discussed: at one point for a girl we had 'Raymonda Ping' on the shortlist – well, the longlist.

In the end we settled on Isaac for a boy and Charis for a girl. One means 'laughter' and the other means 'grace'. That worked for us. And we got laughter.

We return today to Zechariah, who has been mute for 9 months after his debacle with the angel in day 5. And names come to the fore again. In this case, Zechariah and Elizabeth face strong encouragement to stick with tradition and name the new baby boy after his dad. But Elizabeth is having none of it: so they turn to Zechariah for his view.

And, with the help of a convenient tablet – not that kind of tablet – he writes four simple words, which in one moment restores both his voice and his relationship to God: 'His name is John.'

John – the child promised by the angel, the name given by God, the declaration that a new work of God was on its way. 'John' means 'God is gracious', which is spot on. Gracious to Elizabeth. Gracious to God's people. Gracious to a waiting world.

Gracious to us as well. *John comes to herald the arrival of God's grace in all its fullness.* A Messiah who sacrifices himself to win our forgiveness and freedom. To reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through the blood of his cross. To draw us back into the loving arms of Almighty God.

Grace. What Philip Yancey calls 'the last, best word of the English language': nothing we can do will make God love us more. Nothing we can do will make God love us less. The beating heart of our faith, and what inspires faith in our beating heart.

And it's all in a name.

His name is John. May his name's meaning be ours too.

'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.' Amen.



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### **Day 9 – Luke 1:67-80 ‘The great rescue’**

In 2018, the writer C.J. English published the bestselling book ‘Rescue Matters’. It charts the astonishing story of Keith Benning, who, using his own garage to house those rescued and with just a small team of volunteers, over four years rescued 4,000 dogs from terrible situations: unwanted, starving, mistreated. As the subtitle summarises: ‘An incredible true story of rescue and redemption.’

Today’s passage looks forward to another incredible true story of rescue and redemption – only this time, *it’s our own*. If Mary’s song describes the Great Reversal, Zechariah’s could be called The Great Rescue.

Rescue images are studded through the text of Zechariah’s song, but the literal and metaphorical centre is v74, which uses the word directly. And it promises a rescue in three dimensions:

*From our enemies* – for the Israelites of the time, that would mean the Romans and other nations around them, but for us today we might cast the net wider towards everything that stops us from enjoying the relationship with God that we were designed to have. It could be summarised as sin and death – our ultimate enemies – but might be anything that has a poisonous effect on our spiritual lives. God’s purpose is that we should be free, and the coming Messiah will rescue us from these enemies.

*From fear* – since time immemorial, humans have feared God. And there is something wise about that: God is God and we are not. But we were made for more than fear – we were made for *love*. God wants us to love him as he loves us – and, as St John says later, there is no fear in love.

*For righteousness* – it’s not just what we’re rescued from, it’s what we’re rescued *for*. The life we were made to have, living God’s way. To be holy is to be set apart, called to something better. Like Keith Benning’s dogs it’s not enough just to save us from death, but *to lead us into life*, to a true home, to wellbeing and wholeness.

This is what the Messiah comes to do! It is a story of redemption (v68), salvation (v71), mercy (v72), faithfulness (v72-73), wisdom (v77), light and peace (v79).

*This is our story*. The new baby John would grow up to declare it. And, thanks be to God, we get to live it. The great rescue is a story that hasn’t finished yet. Let’s pray today that others may find the joy of knowing and receiving this Great Rescue.

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### **Day 10 – Luke 2:1-4 ‘Our plans, God’s plans’**

If you’ll allow a brief return to a day we’d probably rather forget: on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, the UK entered a full national lockdown for the first time in 100 years. One immediate effect of this was that all church buildings were shut. No services of any sort could be held. What would happen to God’s Church?

From the very beginning, our pattern of faith has been built around physical gatherings – the very word ‘church’ is derived from the Greek word meaning ‘assembly’. Understandably there was considerable fear – yet in mid-April 2020, a survey of UK residents indicated that 25% of the population had accessed an online act of Christian worship within the last month. Given that the equivalent face-to-face figure for average monthly in-person attendance is around 10%, this was astonishing news.

*Humans decide, God acts.* So often things that might seem to be problems only unleash a new work of God in different ways. It took the forced shutting of our buildings by the current government to unleash a mighty new wave of mission that reached millions of people – and whilst 2021 has been immensely challenging for many churches, some of the ways we adapted continue to bear fruit: after all, you’re reading this on the church website right now!

God is not ‘apart’ from what happens on earth. He might give us freedom, but equally God is so great he is well able to use the calculated decisions of human leaders and authorities to achieve his purposes. In today’s reading, Caesar wants to raise money from taxing the populations he ruled – it is what powerful people have done since time immemorial. But in the midst of the process, God resolved a conundrum written into the biblical prophets for hundreds of years. How would the Messiah come from both Galilee and Bethlehem?

The answer – a census, at *just the right time in history* when fading Greek power nevertheless left the legacy of widespread use of the Greek language, allowing easy communication between people and therefore sharing of ideas/messages; when recently upgraded Roman infrastructure allowed the easy movement of people to spread a new message; and, crucially when a young descendent of King David had to travel from Galilee to Bethlehem with his young, heavily pregnant wife.

It doesn’t matter whether Caesar would have made the decision to tax anyway. The point is that God used it to birth something – *someone* – remarkable, that would change the world and the course of history.

God is good. God is also great. Let’s commit ourselves again today into the mighty and merciful hands of this amazing God. The future once again seems uncertain: let’s continue to trust in his capacity to achieve his good purposes in all circumstances.

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### **Day 11 – Luke 2:5-7 ‘The time came...’**

And so we get to the crucial moment in the nativity story – Jesus is born! Most of us know the story inside out... or at least we’re fairly sure we do.

Images of how the nativity happens are so full of our minds, *it’s almost impossible to imagine it any other way*. We’ve seen it so many times: Joseph and Mary travelling down to Bethlehem with Mary on a donkey (even though a donkey is never mentioned). Arriving late, with Mary’s contractions already starting. Joseph frantically dashing around trying to find an inn or guest house with a spare room. The last B&B in town offering them access to their stable just as Mary’s contractions get too severe to go any further.... a ‘modesty time gap’ fast forwards us a couple of hours to see Jesus in the wooden manger, with an exhausted but blissful Mary sat next to him, gazing lovingly at Jesus and then Joseph in turn...

And it’s possible that this is how it went. Unlikely, but possible! And it’s a much better story than the more likely one: that, given the length of journey, Joseph and Mary travelled down several weeks earlier and stayed with relatives in Bethlehem. That they shared the single living area with these relatives for the time they stayed there, only relocating into the other adjoining room – small Palestinian houses of that time had two rooms joined together: one for people, the other for animals – to offer some privacy for Mary when it was time for her to give birth. That the female relatives would therefore probably have been with Mary for the birth, rather than Joseph, who probably joined them shortly after Jesus was born, like most fathers of the time would have done. That the makeshift bedding arrangement of the animals feeding trough (manger) was likely made of stone, not planks of wood.

It’s much less romantic, isn’t it? A planned visit, a stay with relatives, decent midwifery, stone bedding furniture.

But it’s real.

And that’s the point. The nativity is not a fairy story, but a gritty, real-life drama. A real baby is born into a real family with a real home and real problems. In other words, *when God comes to earth, this is a real God for real people*. People like Joseph and Mary. People like you and me.

We like the fantasy version – it’s visually much more appealing, and allows us to put tea towels on our heads with impunity for a couple of weeks. But let’s never miss the real joy of this scene: a real baby is born – a real Messiah for real people. ‘And he is called Emmanuel’ – God *with* us. Amen.

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### **Day 12 – Luke 2:8-12 ‘There were shepherds...’**

A young man sits round an open fire at night, warming his hands and dreaming of revolution. He needs to think to stay awake – his job means that he can't afford to fall asleep. By the standards of the time he's not particularly religious: can't afford to be, his work consumes all hours, and he's too much of a scruffbag to show his face on Saturday at the synagogue. His life is *here*, out in the open – just him, his friends and his animals.

But all the same, he dreams. The current lot that rule his small nation are much better than most of the previous ones, who were far more corrupt and far less competent. He's heard tales of the terrors inflicted by tyrants of old. But even so, they're not *his* people. And one day, his God, Yahweh – the one true God of the universe, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings – will ensure that they are free once more. He's read the prophets, he's heard the preachers. And still he dreams, of victory and freedom and prosperity. Of planting vines and sitting under them in summer.

His head starts to nod – he feels sleepy. He pinches himself: 'Not tonight, old son, not tonight...'

And then – LIGHT! Glorious, brilliant light. His mates are terrified – he pretends not to be, but really he is just as scared too. What is this? An angel?? You've got to be kidding....

Did someone just say good news? The Messiah is coming? After all these centuries? Never mind 30 years of hurt – how about 500? Really? Coming – now?

Oh yes. And what's more, you can see him. Just head into town – listen for the cries of a newborn bedded in with the animals. Just like you lot, really. Born to be a shepherd.

Imagine that. The divine shepherd visits us human shepherds, telling us to go and visit a newborn shepherd lying there with the animals. He really is one of us! Not just another posh tyrant: a normal lad, who lives like we do. Come on lads! Let's go and take a butcher's....

Good news: God comes as one of us. He meets those who are keeping watch, waiting for him. We don't always dream the right things – or perhaps we do, but in the wrong way or for the wrong reasons. But God is gracious. He comes anyway.

Keep watch. Good news is coming.

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### **Day 13 – Luke 2:13-14 ‘The heavenly host’**

We live in a spiritual world. Yes, it's material and physical as well – but we are also spiritual beings, able to connect with spiritual realities. We don't necessarily see those realities very often, but we remain attuned to it. Even in our secular culture, the continuing fascination with ghosts, horoscopes, superstitions and the like, while misguided, remind us that we are spiritual beings. We are made to make spiritual connections, one way or another.

Today's reflection is a counterpart to day 15. There we affirmed that a real God comes for real people. God enters our flesh-and-blood world, as a flesh-and-blood human. He laughs, he cries, he feels pain. It is earthy, grounded.

But let's beware making this amazing story all (or only) about this world. There is a spiritual reality to all this too. *Heaven is real*, and is populated by created spiritual beings – generally referred to as angels, though this broad term covers a number of words which might refer to different types of spiritual being.

The word angel itself means 'messenger' – their job is to do God's bidding, and, throughout history, Christian theology affirms that they *do* interact with our physical world. The nativity story is, of course, a key moment in this interaction, full of angelic activity – first Zechariah, then Mary, then Joseph, and now the shepherds.

What is the significance of all this? In essence, *heaven comes to earth*. The spiritual realm connects with our physical existence in new and deeper ways. It's not just Jesus – it's the whole machinery of heaven. Here the heavenly host appear in the sky – the shepherds were uniquely blessed to see them, and we can only imagine what that sight must have been like.

We are sometimes tempted to imagine that heaven is kind of empty, until humans are reconciled to God and able to fill it. But this passage reminds us that heaven is pretty full already! Angels abound, praising God eternally. And the amazing truth is that *we get invited into that*. One day, we'll join the fantastic heavenly party.

But it's not just 'for later', it starts well before that: whenever we worship God here, we are joining in with the eternal song of heaven, joining heaven with earth in our praises. And one day, we will get to do that forever. Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth!

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### **Day 14 – Luke 2:15-18 ‘They hurried off...’**

Just before Christmas a couple of years ago, I almost lost our car. I arrived for a school event at All Saints and parked up as the children were rounding the corner on the redway about a minute’s walk from the church. Although I was mostly set up already, I had about two minutes of final preparations to do. I grabbed my kit from the boot, waved to the class, asked the teacher to hold them at the gate for two minutes, and hurried into the church. As it happened, I left the car key in the boot lock, on show for all to see.

A couple of hours later, as I was finishing another meeting after the school had gone, a very kind local family popped into church asking if anyone had left their key in the boot-lock of a blue car. That was, of course, me. Thanking them profusely I retrieved the key, grateful that we lived in a safe and neighbourly area!

When events overtake us, and we have to act quickly, it’s easy do things like that. For the shepherds in our story, the golden rule was: ‘Never leave your sheep.’ Sheep were precious, and vulnerable to rustlers and predators alike. And yet here we find them doing just that: hurrying away from the fields and into town. Risking their livelihoods, and their reputation.

For good reason, it turns out. *They were on their way to visit the king!* And they, of all people, had been chosen to do just that. To be first on the scene. To represent humanity offering its worship and praise to the child in the manger. God had come down, and they had the ringside seats.

I imagine, in that moment, their business was the last thing on their minds. When God meets with us, *we crave more of his presence*. Something keeps drawing us back. We want to meet Jesus again, and again.

The shepherds are a great part of the story. They are people like us, and do things like we do. At least they had a heavenly host as their excuse, rather than thirty 5 and 6 year-olds. But their hearts had been ‘strangely warmed’ – they were filled with the excitement of God’s intervention in their lives. They got to meet Jesus – ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary story.

That is our privilege too. God is still meeting ordinary people. Often in unexpected ways. Always to draw us into his presence, and towards worship, hope and peace. May God meet with *us* this Advent, as he did the shepherds. And may it too cause us to ‘hurry’ once more to meet Jesus, and worship the new-born king.

***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

**Day 15 – Luke 2:19-20 ‘Mary treasured all these things...’**

Just a very short reflection from me today. I have always been struck by v19, and Mary’s capacity to *treasure* what she sees and knows. (In fact, she does it again in 2:51, so we can be sure this is not a one-off for Jesus’ birth, but a spiritual habit of Mary’s.) It is a great gift, and one we have largely lost as a society. Everything is instant, and we move from one experience or morsel of useful info to the next.

It was the old philosopher Plato who said that: ‘The unreflected life is the un-lived life.’ We all need to treasure more. I certainly do. To allow ourselves time to dwell on beautiful truths; to root ourselves in things that are solid and permanent; to drink deep of profound experiences.

Mary was perhaps privileged to share more than most. But her simple lesson lives on, and is pure gold. Here’s to treasuring.

Give yourself a few minutes to reflect and pray on this question: what will you ‘treasure’ today?

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 16 – Luke 2:21-32 ‘Moved by the Spirit’**

I love this story: Simeon has got to be one of my favourite characters in the Bible. He only appears in this one episode, but what a cameo! A lifetime of faithfully walking in God’s ways crystallised in this one moment.

I don’t know if you’ve ever got up one morning with an idea that there was something you absolutely *had* to do. Or perhaps you pass someone in the street and know you need to talk to them. Or maybe in this season it’s a phone call you’ve got to make. And you discover to your surprise and delight that you called at just the right time, or the person you approached needed help, or that thing you ‘had’ to do was something you would have missed if you’d left it till tomorrow.

If you’ve had that experience, you may well have been ‘moved’ by the Spirit. Our God is a God who speaks. *And still speaks today*. So we shouldn’t be too surprised to get these ‘urges’ every so often.

But let’s notice that Simeon’s crowning moment is not the first mention of the Spirit in this passage. Simeon’s whole life was infused by the Spirit – the text says simply that the Spirit was ‘on him’ (v25). God can speak to anyone: but it happens a lot more often to those with whom He dwells all the time. The more we allow God to soak our lives, the more these ‘divine promptings’ are likely to happen. Like picking out your family in a crowd, it’s much easier to spot things you’re totally familiar with.

Simeon’s moment was also preceded by a prior revelation. He already knew that he would see the Messiah one day. One of the gifts of the Spirit is the gift of prophecy – the capacity to see what God is up to. And Simeon clearly had this gift: and he believed what God had told him.

So when he got the ‘nudge’ one day that he had to go to the temple, his lifetime of spiritual soaking and seeing led him to one simple act of obedience which changed the world.

*You’re never too old to be used by God.* That would be a fine summary of Simeon’s story. Or to put it another way: if you’re used to walking with God – such that the Spirit is ‘on’ you too – some days you get to notice a significant step that you’re being asked to take. What might that be at the moment? We might feel like the most unlikely people to be ‘moved’ by God – so it’s just as well that it’s not up to us! Perhaps our great and gracious God still has work for you to do?



## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 17 – Luke 2:33-40 ‘The shaping of things to come’**

Studded through the nativity story are references to a darker, more challenging future for the infant Jesus: the Magi’s gift of myrrh; the response of Herod, as the Holy Family flees to Egypt; arguably even Mary’s song, prophesying a great reversal of the fortunes of the rich and powerful.

In today’s passage we get another hint – more than a hint, in fact, a clear prophetic word from Simeon to Mary and Joseph. If Simeon’s first words are among the most famous in scripture, a staple part of Evening Prayer and funeral services the world over, perhaps it’s no surprise that what he says next – just as important in terms of Jesus’ future life – are much less well-known. It’s hard-hitting stuff: ‘This child is destined to cause a lot of trouble!’ My paraphrase, but the message is clear.

Even Mary herself will have to bear the consequence of the upheavals Jesus brings: ‘a sword will pierce your own soul too.’ It can’t have been easy to hear those words. I suspect Mary had silently known this was the sort of thing to expect, right from the moment of Jesus’ miraculous conception. She had, after all, faced plenty of trouble already – and Jesus was only a few weeks old!

Nevertheless, this amazing, faithful family got on with the job. They did all that was required of them in religious and cultural terms (v39); but they also gave Jesus the best possible upbringing (v40). If they could not know the full shape of things to come – how could they? – they did as much as they could. God made a wise choice in picking those two.

Anna knew it, too: if Simeon gets most of the attention, Anna’s own contribution is significant. If Simeon spoke to the family, Anna spoke to *everyone else*. If Simeon was the prophet, Anna was the evangelist.

As we reflect on today’s remarkable text, may Anna serve as our inspiration. Who could we share the good news of Jesus’ coming with today, or this season?

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 18 – Luke 2:41-52 ‘Our true Father’**

This is one of those unique stories in the gospels isn't it? Apart from this one story, the entire history of Jesus' life from his birth till he turns 30 is silent: one theologian comments: 'It is as if the evangelists had agreed to respect the privacy of the Holy Family, and to allow the child to grow into the man undisturbed by our curiosity.' I like that.

So, we just have this one hugely significant snippet to go on, when the 12-year-old Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover. But it is a significant moment, because Jesus had turned 12: the age when a boy became a man in Jewish society, when he became 'a son of the law'. So here is Jesus, serving his first apprenticeship as a son of the law, learning from the teachers of the day. Enjoying it so much, in fact, that he stays and gets caught up in it, and the large party from Nazareth leaves without him.

After what must have been an agonising three days, finally his family find him, sitting at the feet of the nation's premier religious teachers – like any good apprentice – and Mary blurts out: (v48b) 'Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you!'

Jesus' reply is hugely significant, especially because they are his earliest recorded words – and what he does is transfer the parental role from Joseph to God: 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?' Joseph is not my ultimate father, Jesus is saying. I know who my Father is, and it's God. The 12-year-old Jesus understands this. Almost 20 years before his public anointing by the Spirit and the voice of God at his baptism, Jesus knows his divine identity.

And of course, what Luke makes clear later in his gospel is that his relationship to God can be passed on to us. It's why the prayer we say every week, or every day, still retains its power: 'Our Father...'. The great journey of our lives is to know God as our true divine parent, to know that we are his beloved children. It may take us much longer to grasp this, well beyond our childhood. I think I only really grasped it as deeply as I should when I became a parent myself. It's never too late to make that journey.

So, as we feast on this lovely story today, may the Lord grant us all grace to hear its meaning. And may we continue to dwell in our heavenly Father's house today and every day, drawing strength from his deep wells of love and grace. Amen.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 19 – Luke 3:1-14 ‘The herald of change’**

One thing that was striking about (relatively) recent accession of King Charles to the throne is the role of heralds in royal pageantry. It’s not something we see much of in day-to-day life: but the fanfares which accompanied the proclamation of Charles as king – both in September 2022, or at his coronation in May 2023 – have unwittingly acted as a reminder that every monarch usually has a herald, particularly when a new monarch assumes their authority.

This was especially important in pre-modern societies, when the lack of media meant that verbal proclamation to as many people as possible was vital in securing the attention, and therefore the obedience, of those who were to serve the new ruler. So, it is fitting that the story of Jesus’ adult life in Luke begins with a herald, too – one who reached a huge number of people with one simple message: that the King of kings was here, and his reign was about to begin! (And let’s note the role that the wonderful prophecy of Isaiah 40 plays, one we’ve looked at in detail in recent weeks.)

As Luke makes clear, though, this was not based on a set of human decisions or structures. The region in which all this takes place already had plenty of rulers, whom Luke names in v1. No doubt all were ‘heralded’: but this new proclamation was not an act of humankind. It was ‘the word of God [which] came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness’ (v2). God was declaring that a new King was coming; and John was his herald, fulfilling the promise of Isaiah many centuries ago: ‘prepare the way for the Lord! (v4)

But what sort of obedience was required? Not what we would normally associate with earthly rulers: whilst protestations of loyalty had their place, they were meaningless unless backed up with a lifestyle that matched the talk. John’s call was that every true subject of this new King would live a life of humble service and fair treatment of their fellow human beings, just as God had intended. To share generously (v11), to charge only what was right (v13) and not to abuse their power to treat people harshly or unjustly (v14).

John also says something more controversial to his listeners, namely that simply to be born in the right nation was not enough (v8) – this new thing that God was doing was much bigger than that. The new subjects of the King of kings would be drawn from across the world, to anyone who would lovingly and humbly submit to his kingly rule: thus ‘all people will see God’s salvation.’ (v6)

In our age of growing inequality and increasing poverty, John’s message for all would-be followers of this King strikes a powerful chord today: may God grant us all grace to love our neighbours as ourselves, not just with words, but with actions and in truth. What might that mean for you today, and in this Lenten season?

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 20 – Luke 3:15-22 ‘Anointed with fire’**

In a coronation service, always the most special part of the ceremony is the anointing. Even in our supposedly secular age, at King Charles’ coronation in 2023, the Act of Consecration was deemed so sacred, that it was the only part of the ceremony which was kept hidden from public view and the ubiquitous TV cameras; instead, a golden canopy, held by four Knights of the Garter, was suspended above and around the monarch. The King was disrobed of his crimson cloak and all his finery was removed, leaving Charles seated in King Edward's chair, wearing only a simple white tunic.

Then the Archbishop of Canterbury was handed the Ampulla, a flask in the shape of an eagle wrought in solid gold, which contained the holy oil. Concealed by the golden canopy, and alone with the King, the Archbishop anointed Charles in the form of a cross, on the palms of his hands, on his chest and on the crown of his head. In doing so, the Archbishop enacted a sacred ritual which goes all the way back to King Saul, who was anointed by the prophet Samuel as a sign of God’s blessing and empowering c.1000BC – or around 3,000 years before King Charles.

For Jesus, however, the anointing was far more public. As large crowds of people were being baptised in the Jordan by John (v21), Jesus too was baptised – with two significant differences to everyone else. First, Jesus was not repenting, since he was the only human being who had nothing to repent about: as John said to Jesus in Matthew’s account, ‘I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?’

Second, although I’m sure God blessed and empowered many of those who came to be baptised, only Jesus received a tangible anointing from heaven itself: the Holy Spirit visibly descended on him in the form of a dove, and the voice of the Father Almighty was heard to declare: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’ (v22)

Amazingly, though, thanks to the ministry of Christ, this anointing is not limited to Christ alone. The good news of the in-breaking kingdom of God is that it is now available to all who follow Christ too. John declares this quite clearly to everyone: ‘He [The Messiah, Jesus] will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’ (v16) What was previously reserved for rulers is now graciously poured on all who open their hearts to the King of kings.

Such an outpouring is not always comfortable – fire burns up our impurities, such as those John talked about yesterday. But it remains an extraordinary privilege. Thanks to Christ, God can anoint you with his empowering Spirit. Give heartfelt thanks for this wonderful reality today, and pray to be dipped (baptised) ever more fully with the Spirit of Jesus the King.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 21 – Luke 3:23-38 ‘The True Human’**

Ancestry is big business nowadays. Millions of us now regularly use ancestry websites to track down our family trees, and overall the genealogy market is now worth over £3 billion worldwide. Indeed, its popularity has even recently led to a change in the law. In 2021, the way marriages are registered in the UK was changed. Part of the reason for this was because vicars used to make too many mistakes – who knew?! – however, the major reason was so that more information could be recorded about our parents.

So, since May 2021, not just fathers are recorded on a marriage certificate, but you can also, if you wish, include mothers and even step-parents. Their occupations are also meant to be recorded more accurately – and this is all being driven by our thirst to know where we come from, so that, in a hundred years' time, your great-great-grandchildren can find out more about their family lines.

If you read scripture, you'll know that the Old Testament is full of genealogies. Implicit in this is the recognition that where we've come from says a lot about who we are and what we'll become. But it's also deeper than that. The bible is a book full of promises: promises made by a loving God to the world, and especially to his people. The genealogies in scripture are really all about *looking for the fulfilment of these promises*: when will all the nations be blessed? When will the anointed ruler come to save us, and set us free?

Jesus' own genealogy is told twice. In Matthew it starts with Abraham and moves forward; Jesus is presented as the true heir, both of Abraham and of King David. However, in Luke, he starts with Jesus and looks back, all the way to Adam. Why? Certainly not to contradict Matthew! Although Luke's genealogy inevitably has more names, as it covers a longer period, you'll find the same key ancestors in each.

Rather, what Luke is telling us is that *Jesus is the human being that each of us was always meant to be*: he is, if you like, the True Adam, the human who lives in obedient and loving intimacy with God forever, just like God intended. Jesus comes to put right what was lost by Adam and Eve at the Fall, and so to restore us back to wholeness and union with God.

That's the plan. And the rest of Luke shows how God achieves it, through Jesus – the fulfilment of all God's promises to us. As we close our week, give thanks that we are heirs and beneficiaries of the greatest of all family trees: the people of God. And pray that our generation might pass that blessing on to a hungry world, that they, too, may know the joy of joining this global family.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 22 – Luke 4:1-13 ‘The temptations of kingship’**

Today’s passage is one of the most famous in the bible. If you’ve been a Christian for any length of time, you will probably have heard lots of talks on it, and may feel that there isn’t much left to say! However, I’m not going to give you a general guide to this passage, or just re-visit the usual observations about resisting temptation – important though they are, of course.

Instead, I’m going to look at it from what I believe is the original lens through which to view this passage: Jesus as the King of kings. Whilst we can find great value in learning from Jesus how to resist temptation – especially in this season of Lent – the key point about these temptations of the devil is that *they are all ways of being king* – or rather, all ways of abusing royal power.

The first temptation is to use power for personal gratification. ‘If you are the Son of God [i.e. the true King of kings], then tell this stone to become bread’ i.e. use your power over nature to manipulate it for your own ends. How many leaders start well but are undone by their own greed, and finish as tyrants who live in luxury while their populations suffer?

The second temptation is to seek power for its own sake rather than to use it for humble service. To make a deal with the devil is to trade integrity for narcissism, to serve darkness rather than light. It never ends well.

The third temptation is to use power for entertainment, for distraction rather than true human flourishing. As the Roman Empire declined, it was often said that its rulers relied on ‘bread and circuses’ to divert a population that was increasingly oppressed and disenfranchised. Such leadership inevitably tends towards the narcissism and tyranny of the other two temptations, since it seeks to avoid the real issues facing people in their real lives. It is a ‘big show’, and nothing more.

It is easy to over-spiritualise Jesus, to paint him as someone who essentially sits above politics and history and human activity. But Jesus comes as a real flesh-and-blood king into a world of competing kingdoms. His kingdom inevitably challenges and confronts all other expressions of worldly power. When we start to look at Jesus in this way, we can see that all the gospels – and especially Luke’s gospel – are studded with references to this ‘clash of kingdoms’. In Luke, see 1:32, 1:51-53, 1:71,74, 2:1-4, 2:34-35, 3:1-2, 3:31 – and that’s just the first three chapters before today!

Today, let’s marvel at Jesus’ faithfulness, at his integrity. This Jesus went into the wilderness ‘led by the Spirit’ (v1) and returned in the *power* of it (v14 – starts tomorrow’s passage!). It is not a worldly power – but it has the power to change the world.

And, of course, you and me.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 23 – Luke 4:14-21 ‘The anointed rescuer’**

To really understand a thing, you have to go back to its roots. This is good rule of thumb for life, and it's also true for plumbing the depths of scripture. 'The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is by the New revealed' – that's one way of understanding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments in the bible. I've also heard it expressed as: 'The New is in the Old contained; the Old is by the New explained': you can decide which you like best!

It's certainly true when we approach today's passage. Indeed, we've already seen several places in Luke's narrative where he (or Jesus) goes back and quotes something from the Old Testament to explain what's going on. Last week, John the Baptist was the fulfilment of Isaiah 40; and yesterday we saw Jesus reply to the devil by quoting bits of Deuteronomy. This is significant because Deuteronomy was Moses' sermon to the people of God on the threshold of them claiming their (earthly) kingdom. In the same way, Jesus is now about to claim his spiritual kingdom, and he does it in the relatively unremarkable setting of the synagogue in Nazareth.

Luke sets the scene for this world-changing moment with great aplomb. The young rabbi Jesus gets up to read the scripture (vv16-17), and then preach what we might call the sermon. Everyone is watching and listening (v20). What will he say?

What Jesus says confounds everyone's expectations. He's just read one of the greatest of all the Messianic prophecies, Isaiah 61. It is a vision of what every devout Jew was longing for: the renewal of the people of God through the ministry of an anointed servant/rescuer/king. This Anointed One (the literal meaning of Messiah) would bring good news, freedom for the prisoners and the oppressed, and ultimately would bring in a new and prolonged era of the favour of God.

How their hearts must have leapt as they heard it! And yet, also, how they might have shed a tear as well, since their lived reality must have seemed so far from this vision of dynamic blessing. And yet... 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' (v21) In other words, this new era is here! And more implicitly, Jesus is declaring: 'I am the Anointed One you've all been waiting for.'

Looking back, we know this to be true, and can praise God with joyful hearts today. But let's spare a thought for the small congregation of Nazareth trying to take this in. And perhaps we can also pray for those we know and love who struggle to take this 'good news' in, too – that they might have 'ears to hear'. May the Lord grant us grace to keep pointing them to the divine bringer of freedom and favour, the greatest good news there's ever been.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 24 – Luke 4:21-32 ‘Home is where it’s hardest?’**

I wonder what you think about your home town (or village or city)? On one level, we never really get away from it: if you have a passport, it'll be recorded as your place of birth for your whole life. And often our place of birth shapes us in ways we don't always expect, and maybe find it hard to articulate.

This was brought home to me in 2012, at the time of the London Olympics. I was born and brought up in London, subsequently worked there, and overall have lived about 27 years of my life in various parts of the city. But I moved away in 2008 and four years later was happily living in Bristol. Then came the Olympic Opening Ceremony: I remember watching with Alise in our lounge and feeling this overpowering sense of homesickness – ‘that’s *my* city, why am I not there to be a part of it?’ You can take the man out of London, but can you ever take London out of the man...?

Jesus faces a similar challenge today. He’s just announced to his home town the in-breaking rule of God through his anointed rescuer, which is pretty big stuff: how will the congregation react? Initially, the response is favourable: ‘all spoke well of him’ (v22); but then it turns into something more like patronising surprise: ‘Isn’t this Joseph’s son?’ In other words, can the Messiah really be a carpenter’s son? From Nazareth?? The same Jesus we saw grow up, who got lost at the Temple, who has lived quietly here all these years, until just a few weeks ago?

Familiarity breeds contempt, so they say. And Jesus feels it. Ironically, the fact that they’ve known him all his life should make it easy for them to see the qualities that will define his ministry as the Messiah – instead, the reverse is true: ‘Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’ Give us a real sign!

So Jesus challenges them by reminding them that God’s blessings are not automatically conferred on those who happen to live in the right area: whilst God has consistently blessed Israel, in previous times of national disobedience, God quite happily blessed others too, in Sidon and Syria. Being the birthplace of the Messiah is no reason for a sense of entitlement.

Sadly, the Nazarenes weren’t ready to listen, and whilst Jesus got away unharmed (v30), he only returned on one more occasion to his home town, where he received a similar reception (Mark 6:1-6) – and, from this point, settled in Capernaum just down the road.

As you look back at your ‘home town’, some of you may feel gratitude for what it gave you; others may feel relief that you got away! Perhaps many of us feel a mixture of both. Our past matters: but it does not entirely define our present, nor our future. God anointed Jesus’ ministry elsewhere: might he do the same for you?



## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 25 – Luke 4:31-37 ‘Supernatural authority’**

Our culture has a strange relationship with the supernatural. On the one hand, there is plenty of scepticism about the existence of the spiritual world; on the other, there has also been a significant resurgence of interest recently – there’s never been so many TV programmes about angels or demons or ghosts.

This ambiguity is partly a ‘Western issue’: most cultures around the world accept the existence of the spiritual world as a given; certainly, most people in the world of Jesus’ day would take that view. So, when Jesus encounters an unclean spirit in the synagogue (v33), the crowd were fascinated to see how he would respond.

They were already impressed with his teaching (v32): but does Jesus have the spiritual authority to back up his words? The answer, of course, is yes. The demon itself was quite right to be alarmed: Jesus was indeed there to destroy the work of the devil in people’s lives, just as the demon vocalised (v34). And Jesus promptly deals with this spiritual being with a word (v35). No elaborate rituals or special liturgy – a simple command is enough.

Not surprisingly, the people are even more amazed (v36): not only does he teach with authority, he backs it up with deeds. The demonised man is one of those oppressed who has now been set free, just as Jesus promised in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth (v18).

Jesus is also demonstrating his authority over one of the things that humans cannot control, thereby proclaiming through his ministry that he is The Anointed One, the Messiah, the King of kings.

In the UK today, there is relatively little emphasis on this kind of deliverance ministry: but it does still happen. The name of Jesus still has authority and power (v36). Why not pray today for those who are called to this very specific form of healing ministry? And give thanks, too, that the all-powerful name of Jesus has marvellously set each one of us free. The One who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world. Amen!

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 26 – Luke 4:38-44 ‘The main thing’**

The well-known evangelist J. John is fond of saying: ‘Always remember that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.’ It’s good advice: whilst we long to grow in wisdom, such that we might have the mind of Christ to apply our faith to the whole of life and of society, the heart of the message is very simple. The kingdom of Jesus is good news! And we are called to proclaim and live this good news in our lives to the best of our ability, and by the grace of God’s Holy Spirit.

In this, we take our inspiration from Jesus. In today’s passage, Jesus’ ministry is now in full swing. Having settled back in Capernaum (v31), and having set a demonised man free in the synagogue, in full view of the town’s amazed worshippers (vv33-36), news about him is spreading fast (v37).

Jesus’ first stop, though, was much more personal: he goes to his friend Simon’s home – the Simon who would become his key disciple – and heals his mother-in-law (vv38-39). A useful reminder that *ministry is always personal*: our heart is to bless particular people and not just ‘the world’ or ‘the church’.

Thereafter, it all goes a bit crazy. Jesus’ growing reputation means that people from all over are now seeking him out for a miracle. And Jesus, in his great compassion, attends to each one (v40). The implication is that this goes on through the whole night, and an exhausted Jesus needs some quiet time on his own (v42). However, the people find him and try to get him to stay longer.

Jesus’ reply is telling (v43): ‘I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.’ Always remember that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. Jesus has good news to share: good news not just for a whole nation but a whole world. So, he won’t stop in one place: he must go on to bless others, too.

We may not be called to the sort of itinerant life that Jesus had: but we are called to be bringers of good news where we are, in word and deed, to keep the main thing the main thing. How can each of us share, and be, good news today?

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 27 – Luke 5:1-6 ‘Because you say so...’**

I wonder if you’ve had the experience of God asking you to do something surprising? Something that at the time didn’t make a lot of sense? I remember Brother Andrew – who passed away recently after a remarkable life of courageous witness – telling the story of once smuggling bibles into the Eastern Bloc and sensing God ask him to leave them uncovered, rather than well hidden.

Sure enough, he was stopped and the policeman opened the boot. Andrew describes praying this simple prayer under his breath: ‘O Lord, you who made the blind to see, make seeing eyes blind.’ The bibles were there, right in front of the official, but he didn’t ‘see’ them and waved Brother Andrew on his way! God was teaching Andrew to trust him implicitly.

Today’s passage takes a similar turn. There’s no reason for Jesus to get in the boat in order to teach people, so we have to assume that he had another plan in mind – which becomes clear as the story unfolds. Jesus, who has recently got to know Simon and his family (4:38-39), now has Simon next to him in the boat, and makes a very odd request: ‘Put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch.’ (v4)

Humanly speaking, this is basically a daft idea – fish only came to the surface at night; during the day, in deep water, they would be near the bottom of the lake and nowhere near the nets. In other words, Jesus was basically telling a professional fisherman: ‘do something completely pointless which you know will never work!’

Simon’s reply is extraordinary: ‘Because you say so....’ (v5) In other words: ‘I’m doing this for you, Jesus: I trust you because you’ve already shown me your wisdom and authority. Even if I’m wrong, I’d rather be wrong trusting you than put my own judgement above yours.’

We know what happens! Jesus does another astounding miracle (v6), the effects of which we’ll see tomorrow. But today, let’s just spend some time reflecting on what it means to trust Jesus – especially when trusting seems like the harder thing to do. Perhaps Jesus has never asked you to do something daft for him: but either way, this story invites us to trust in the Lord, whose ways are higher than our ways, and whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Is 55:9). As this week concludes, may we all choose to place our trust – in every circumstance – in this wise, loving and powerful Lord.

**Day 28 – Luke 5:4-11 ‘Humbling holiness’**

Being in the presence of a truly holy person can be an uncomfortable experience. Back in 1995, I recall meeting one of the holiest people I’ve ever met – someone who really lived the apostolic life we read in the pages of the New Testament – and feeling both terrified and strangely drawn into their presence. The authority of Jesus practically radiated from them, and it was an awesome thing.

That day, I think I understood a fraction of what Simon must have experienced in the boat in today’s famous story. He’s just been told by Jesus to do something which no fisherman would ever do, and witnessed an extraordinary miracle. Add that to the hundreds of people gathered to listen to Jesus while the Messiah is in *his* boat, and the spontaneous healing of his mother-in-law recently, and the ‘divine encounters’ are multiplying rapidly. Jesus is clearly on his case, and, like most of us, he just can’t see why. ‘Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man!’ In other words: ‘why on earth would you want to spend time with a wretch like me?’

It is an awesome thing to be befriended by Jesus. Sometimes we can get a bit cosy with that idea: but Simon’s encounter sets us straight. Simon knows who this extraordinary human being is: he calls him ‘Lord’ – the Almighty God, the divine ruler of the universe. Jesus is inviting him to nothing less than to be friends with the king.

Very few of us ever get to be friends with an actual earthly monarch: but the amazing news of our faith is that the King of kings invites all of us into friendship. Not just terrified submission, but real, intimate, loving relationship. Jesus sees, and embraces, not just who we are, but (as he does with Simon) who we can become. This was what Simon found so awesome, and Jesus reassures him: ‘don’t be afraid’. He says it to us, too, today: however unworthy you feel, don’t be afraid. I desire *your* friendship.

Jesus, of course, goes further: he gives Simon a life-changing task. That, too, is a typical outcome of becoming Jesus’ friend. Our call may not be as big as Simon’s: but we can likewise find a new – or renewed – purpose as we grow in our friendship with the Lord.

May God grant us all a renewed vision today of just how amazing – and awesome – it is to be invited into Jesus’ friendship. And may we, too, find our true and inspiring purpose as we journey with our divine master and friend.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 29 – Luke 5:12-16 ‘I am willing’**

If you're anything like me, much of the time (or at least, more than we'd like to admit) you have to make yourself do the right thing. We know what we *should* be doing, and quite often we don't really want to: but, on the other hand, we don't want others to think badly of us, so we do it – but maybe a bit reluctantly. It's holiness through gritted teeth, rather than a genuine, joyous smile on our face.

There's a phrase which has become very much used, even over-used, in our time: 'compassion fatigue'. It means to get weary of doing good: either because we feel overwhelmed by the limitless needs; or because we need some more 'me time' and/or someone to look after us instead; or we just run out of love for our fellow human beings. Again, if you're anything like me, you'll feel tempted towards this disposition on a regular basis.

At times like these, I find it helpful to think about the example of Jesus. If I get compassion fatigue, can you imagine what Jesus must have experienced? The relentless demands for something important: for a wise word, a miracle, a mediation in a dispute. If we were living Jesus' life, how quickly would any of us hit that point when we might just say: 'sorry, but no! I've had enough – find someone else to help you.'

In today's passage, one of society's outcasts comes face-to-face with Jesus (v12): or rather, he can't even look Jesus in the eye, but throws himself face-down on the ground before Jesus. And he's not sure if Jesus even *wants* to help him: which, in the context, is little wonder, since his diseases are infectious, and traditionally holy people would normally avoid such encounters, as it might make them unclean as well.

But with Jesus the power works in reverse. The man does not make Jesus unclean; instead, Jesus makes the man clean. He is healed! But what is so striking here is that Jesus does not do this reluctantly, as "the 34<sup>th</sup> person he's healed today"; rather, he says one of the simplest but most profound and beautiful words God ever speaks in the whole of Scripture: 'I am willing.'

Jesus is not a reluctant Saviour, but an enthusiastic one. When Jesus looks at this man, he does not see what most others in society see; he sees this man as special, uniquely made in God's image, with a hope and future. And this is how he looks at you and me, too. However unclean we may feel, he reaches out to us, touches us, and makes us whole.

As a final aside, at the end of the passage we get a glimpse of what fires Jesus' 'compassion fuel': time alone with God (v16). Compassion runs on energy tanks: those tanks need topping up, enabling us to receive what we need, that we might pass it on to others. We get 'filled' in numerous ways: adequate rest, healthy relationships, positive testimonies; but, most of all, time with the Lord. As the Lord's compassion fills us, regularly, so it can flow out, through us, to others.

*Jesus is willing.* Hallelujah! And, as his grace fills us, may we be willing, too.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 30 – Luke 5:15-20 ‘True friendship’**

If you ever attended Sunday School, you’re very likely to be familiar with this story! As one of the most visually striking stories in the life of Jesus, it’s a favourite with Sunday School leaders everywhere. The little Israelite house crammed full of people, the friends battling their way up the steps on the outside of the property, then removing the branches which acted as a de facto roof (Luke interestingly adds tiles, which is possible, as a covering on top of the foliage mentioned by Mark and Matthew) and lowering their friend down through the ceiling right next to Jesus.

Tomorrow, we’ll think about Jesus’ encounter with the man himself – but today, let’s give a moment’s reflection to the unsung heroes in the story: his friends. Note that it was *their* faith – not the man’s – that touched Jesus’ heart. Not to mention the huge physical effort needed to climb up on the roof, then make a hole, then manoeuvre their friend safely and slowly down to the ground again: that is friendship in action.

Ultimately, though, what we learn today is that the greatest gift of true friendship is to bring someone to Jesus. It’s what Andrew did with his brother Simon (John 1:42): a simple invitation which not only changed Simon’s life but changed the course of history. It’s what the paralysed man’s friends do here. They didn’t have to preach, promote or pray out loud, they just had to make the introduction, to bring him to the gathering.

Some of us may be called to bear witness with our words, and certainly we can all pray for our friends in our personal prayer time. But what’s so encouraging about this first part of the story is that, even if words are not your strong suit, and we feel inadequate to give wise answers to hard questions or to share inspiring stories about your faith, we can *all* invite someone to something.

That’s what the friends did, and it was enough. Jesus did the rest; he did – and does – do the heavy lifting in the story. It is not our job to ‘convert our friends’: we can safely leave that to Jesus. What we can do is make the introduction, invite them to a gathering, and then keep praying and trusting that our great Lord does the rest.

So why not spend a few moments today praying for a few people you love, and also for courage for yourself: to know when, and how, to do what the man’s friends did today. It might not feel like a lot – but in God’s economy, it may very well be more than enough.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 31 – Luke 5:17-26 ‘Our greatest need’**

In his 1943 paper ‘A Theory of Human Motivation’, American psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed a hierarchy of human needs. These were arranged in five ascending tiers, beginning with basic Physiological Needs (food and shelter) and culminating with the highest tier of ‘Self-Actualisation’.

The theory has been widely adopted and much of it makes intuitive sense. But there’s one huge gap: despite the many needs mentioned – and breaking the model down in detail, more than twenty are listed – forgiveness is missing.

How do we know this is a fatal flaw in the model? Because Jesus thinks it is. As we pick up the story from yesterday, the paralysed man has been brought to Jesus by his friends, who’ve made considerable efforts to get him there. His greatest need is obvious... isn’t it? ‘When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.”’ (v20)

Sometimes followers of Jesus are accused of over-spiritualising things, of ignoring practical needs and making everything about ‘eternal’ stuff, as if this life doesn’t matter. And we have to admit that sometimes those critiques are valid, not least because Jesus does not ignore the man’s practical wellbeing. He ends the encounter by healing the man, thereby blessing him both spiritually and physically. It follows, then, that this is our model, too: we care for the whole person.

However, we must also beware the opposite temptation: of being so caught up with physical and material things that we ignore the state of a person’s soul. From Jesus’ perspective, this would be a grave mistake. His assessment of the man’s greatest need was to be right with God first – and then to be healed physically.

As he makes this point to the Pharisees, he also points them (and us) towards the source of this forgiveness: none other than Jesus himself. What Jesus claims here would be blasphemy... unless it was true, and he really was the divine son, with the authority to forgive everything that separates us from God.

As we reflect on this story today, let’s bring our deepest need to the Lord; and let’s do that with a heart full of joy – because we too can know, like the man in our story, that our deepest need has been met. We have been forgiven, for all eternity – praise God!

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 32 – Luke 5:27-32 ‘Good news for everyone’**

‘Let me tell you how it will be: it’s 1 for you, 19 for me.’ So sang the Beatles as the first lyrics on their iconic 1966 album ‘Revolver’. The opening song is ‘Taxman’ and is essentially a rant about the 95% top rate of income tax for high earners in the UK, which of course included all four of the Beatles, who by this time were multi-millionaires. Apart from being a great song and an interesting perspective on the current debates about taxation, it’s a salutary reminder that tax officials have never been very popular!

However, if we moan a bit about HMRC today, it’s nothing compared to the status of ‘taxmen’ in 1st-century Israel. This is because Israel was part of the Roman Empire and tax collectors were effectively Roman state officials; to a devout Jew, whose homeland is sacrosanct, the Romans are usurpers and anyone who works for them – especially ‘one of their own’ – is at best a collaborator and at worst a traitor.

This sense of national betrayal was augmented by the fact that many tax collectors took a cut for themselves, so they weren’t just traitors but corrupt and greedy ones at that. So it is, frankly, scandalous that Jesus goes up to a tax booth and invites the chap sitting there to follow him. In today’s terms, we would definitely be talking about ‘reputational risk’ and ‘bad optics’ for the Jesus movement!

But that’s the point: what this simple episode tells us is that Jesus’ kingdom is for *everyone*, and wide open to all who would be a part of it. When we talk about those on the outside, we don’t just mean those who are poor and exploited, but also those who are ostracised for other reasons. Jesus’ arms remain open for them, too.

And so, Levi – who becomes Matthew, one of the twelve apostles and the writer of the gospel – joins Jesus (v28), and, in overflowing gratitude at his welcome into the fold, throws a big party (v29). Not surprisingly this party is attended by lots of other outsiders: not just his tax-collecting friends but others who are also referred to by the religious elite rather dismissively as ‘sinners’ (v30). And Jesus is there: no doubt welcoming and blessing these ‘sinners’, too.

As Jesus replies to his questioners: it’s not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Levi knows his moral failings and gratefully receives a second chance and a new life. We, too, are given that same invitation by our loving Lord Jesus – who knows what we’re like but invites us anyway! May God grant us grace to keep saying ‘yes’ – and to give heartfelt thanks that Jesus’ arms still extend in welcome to you, too.



## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 33 – Luke 5:33-39 ‘The shock of the new’**

We’ve lived in our current house for ten years, and I’ve started to notice some places on the walls which need a bit of touching up – nothing major, some minor marks here and there, but where a dash of paint wouldn’t go amiss. The problem is that, even if we buy some new paint which exactly matches the colour in theory, we all know what happens when a dab of fresh paint is applied to a wall which was painted a few years ago. The slight fading of the colour over time means that the new dab of paint will stand out worse than the slight mark it was covering over!

Jesus refers to something similar in today’s passage: or rather, two examples which would be easy to recognise among his hearers. You don’t sow a new patch on an old piece of cloth, he says, and you don’t put new wine into an old wineskin. Try either of those things, and disaster awaits.

The underlying issue here is that Jesus appears to be breaking all the religious rules – at least, as far as the Pharisees’ understanding of their religion went. In the previous episode it was: Jesus, why are you eating with all the wrong people? Today, it’s: why aren’t your disciples fasting enough? On Monday, we’ll see them asking another question: why are you breaking the Sabbath rules (as we understand them)?

At this point we need to be clear that Jesus is not de-bunking the law. Elsewhere, he is very clear that God’s law is good and right, and is not being re-written. Rather, he is challenging their human interpretation of the law.... and also making the point that when God breaks in and does a new thing, suddenly our eyes are opened to new ways of understanding God’s will and ways. Jesus is the ‘new wine’, and it’s too vibrant, too fresh to be held within the old wineskins.

He admits that this new thing God is doing is going to challenge expectations: if you’ve been brought up with the old ways, then you’ll naturally think the old ways are better (v39). Nostalgia isn’t what it used to be! But what he wants is for his listeners to open their minds, to be willing to embrace God’s in-breaking kingdom and accept that something new and incredibly exciting is happening.

Today, this week, let’s also resolve to stay open to whatever God has in store for us. It might not be revolutionary, as it was for Jesus’ contemporaries; but there’s always more to learn about Jesus, new ways to grow in our relationship with him. Even if you’re teetotal, this kind of new wine is for all of us. And may we drink deeply of it daily – Dear Lord, of you three things I pray: to know you more clearly, to love you more dearly, and to follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 34 – Luke 6:1-5 ‘Sabbath – back to basics#1’**

It’s easy to miss the wood for the trees. We all do it at times – and it’s just as likely to happen in matters of faith, too. What is the point of the Sabbath? That’s the million-dollar question here: why did God command every human to rest for one day in every seven? What is ‘the wood for the trees’ here?

The theological answer goes back to creation: God rested on the seventh day, so that forms the pattern for us, too. However, it’s worth noting that God’s Sabbath post-creation doesn’t end: there isn’t a second week, as it were! Rather, from that point, he invites all of us into his rest. One day we’ll enjoy that eternally – but for now, we’re invited to sample it once a week.

If that’s the ‘big picture’ reason, the Ten Commandments give us the practical reasons: the point of having a day’s complete rest every week is (a) for worship and time with God, and (b) for justice and fair treatment – if we rest, then others can rest too. The particular people mentioned in both Exodus and Deuteronomy are household servants, whose conditions are dependent on the goodwill of others – and God reminds his people quite pointedly that they know what it was like to have been slaves, so they of all people had good reason to respect the Sabbath for their workers.

But what is the definition of ‘work’? This is where the human debates and interpretations come in – over the years, lots of things got added to that definition, including almost all forms of preparing food. This is why the Pharisees challenge Jesus’ followers about eating grain which they had to pick off the plant. The act of picking constituted ‘work’ according to the complex regulations they had devised for the Sabbath (as an aside, had it already been picked it would have been fine!).

It’s a classic ‘wood for the trees’ moment. Human regulations make great servants but lousy masters – and in their noble quest to try and obey the law the Pharisees had lost sight of the point of the law in the first place. Jesus replies by reminding them that the greatest Jewish king there’d ever been did something much ‘worse’ – so maybe they needed to revise their thinking!

He finishes with something even more controversial: this is not just about a true understanding of Sabbath, but also a true understanding of *who* gave the Sabbath to us, too – in claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus is making a clear reference to his divine identity. For us, though, today and tomorrow are a healthy reminder of the importance of rest – and also of remembering that it’s the spirit of the law that matters most. Jesus desires our hearts, not anxious rule-following. May God grant us all grace to enjoy our Sabbaths wisely – and may Jesus be the Lord of our Sabbaths, too.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 35 – Luke 6:6-11 ‘Sabbath – back to basics#2’**

If yesterday’s story needed a bit of explanation – why was rubbing grain an issue? – today’s passage is rather more straightforward. We’re still looking at Jesus’ encounters with the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath, and the fundamental question we posed yesterday still applies: what is the point of the Sabbath? Why did God give it to us? And, therefore, how can we use it wisely?

Yesterday, the disagreement with the Pharisees centred around complex rules regarding what constituted ‘work’ when it came to preparing food. Today, it is more direct: Jesus is asked to heal someone on the Sabbath. Bearing in mind that he’s in the synagogue (i.e. worshipping the Lord, as the Sabbath is designed for) and he’s not getting paid to heal anyone, it almost beggars belief that this act of kindness could be classed as ‘work’ and therefore breaking the fourth commandment. But there it is – that’s why he’s under scrutiny.

Jesus’ reply once again gets to the heart of what we might call the spirit of the law. Can it possibly be wrong to do good on the Sabbath? Surely loving our neighbour in simple but practical ways is *exactly* the sort of thing God would encourage us to do?

It’s a healthy reminder to us that we, too, can use our days of rest in a number of beneficial ways. Generally, as a society we’re paying a heavy price for abandoning our commitment to a day of rest for most of the country at the same time, and it’s right to keep challenging ourselves to find ways to make sure we rest appropriately...

...however, rest does not have to mean total inactivity – that’s the trap the Pharisees had fallen into. Serving in the worshipping community on the Sabbath is a good thing to do; doing something simple which blesses another human being – if it isn’t our paid employment on our ‘Sabbath’ – is a good thing to do. If it restores our wellbeing (and many of us find simple acts of blessing restorative) then it’s using the Sabbath as it should be used.

As we reflect on Jesus’ life-giving teaching over the last couple of days, take a moment to review your ‘Sabbaths’. Are there any changes Jesus is prompting you to make? Whatever your reflections on that question, pray today for a renewed commitment to practising healthy Sabbaths, that it might command a blessing for you, and those around you.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 36 – Luke 6:12-15 ‘The team’**

Things work better in a team. It’s pretty much universally true: whether in companies or organisations, and certainly in churches. We need people to journey with, to share life with, and also to work with.

Jesus might be the Son of God, with all the authority in the universe and a mission to save the world – but even he doesn’t plan to do it alone. He needs a circle around him: and so, he spends the night in prayer (v12) and then chooses twelve (v13). Presumably these are all people who’ve been part of his team for some time, and we’ve met some of them already.

Neither Jesus nor the gospel writers reveal how he made his choice – but Mark gives us an extra insight in his version of this passage as to what being part of the team means: ‘that they might be with him, and that he might send them out to preach’ (Mark 3:14). Notice how relationship is the priority: first and foremost, their calling is to *be* with Jesus.

That’s true for us, too. Before we are given useful work, what Jesus desires is simply that we want to be with him. From that, everything follows. We may not have the big calling of these twelve – and the word apostle means ‘sent one’ so the clue is in the name! – but whatever Jesus calls us to do will flow of out spending time with him, getting to know him, enjoying just *being* with him.

In the future, these twelve will continue the work after Jesus goes back to heaven, so there’s a long-term plan here. In the medium term, they will also get the chance to cut their teeth doing what Jesus does a bit later in the gospel (Luke 9 and 10), all the while being mentored by Jesus. But let’s note, even then, that he sends them out in pairs: it’s still about team and relationship. The God who is relationship within himself – Father, Son and Spirit – has fashioned us to work in a similar way.

You may still be in paid work, or retired; you may be part of clubs or voluntary organisations; you may have a good group of friends that you journey with; you may be part of a group at church. If any of those apply to you, give thanks today for your ‘teams’. And re-commit to the joy of just being with Jesus – from that, may all that God has for you flow, and grow.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 37 – Luke 6:17-23 ‘A radical manifesto’**

So Jesus has just picked his cabinet – if you’ll pardon the political analogy – and it’s time to set out his manifesto. The crowd that has gathered is remarkable, not least for its geographical breadth: Jerusalem and Judea are in the southern part of Israel, Tyre and Sidon are so far north that they are in modern day Lebanon, more than a hundred miles north of Jerusalem.

It’s interesting to speculate where this ‘level place’ might have been to cater for a crowd from such a wide area, because Samaria is right between the two – a place which is effectively off-limits to the orthodox Jews of the day. It would have been near the coast, though, as the east of the country is more hilly (or even mountainous).

Not surprisingly, many of the crowd long for healing – word about his miracles has spread far and wide. However, at some point Jesus chooses to speak. ‘Looking at his *disciples*,’ Luke says, Jesus gives the most extraordinary manifesto any leader has ever given. Who is really blessed in this life?

Jesus looks around at those who have chosen to follow him (the disciples are a larger group than the twelve apostles) and commends those who hunger for him: as they must do, having travelled so far to listen to him; those who weep, as many who had come with diseases and spiritual oppression must have done; those who are poor, which is more than just a material poverty, but a recognition of spiritual need as well; those who are hated for their beliefs, as Jesus’ increasingly testy encounters with the religious elite indicate will be an inevitable consequence for those who follow this radical Messiah.

He reminds them that the heroes of the faith have usually been despised in their own generation (v23). (As an aside, this is a striking challenge to the way we elevate particular church leaders today – dare I say that we might sometimes be looking in the wrong directions? Every leader, myself included, should occasionally reflect soberly on this!)

I don’t know if you particularly identify with one of these groups – if you do, then may today’s extraordinary teaching be good news: yours is the kingdom of heaven! If not, this may be a day to pray for all those, especially in the Suffering Church, who are poor or hungry or weeping or hated, that the Lord Jesus might raise them up – not just at the last day (which is a sure promise – v23), but in spirit this day, too.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 38 – Luke 6:20-26 ‘Strange woes’**

Yesterday we looked at Jesus’ groups of people who are blessed. This was revolutionary enough – however, it doesn’t end there. Jesus goes on to describe four other groups who are the opposites of those blessed (vv24-26). What are we to make of these?

The context here is a long-standing misunderstanding of the Law by much of the people of God. When Israel was about to enter the Promised Land, God presented them with a similar idea of two paths: blessings and curses (Deuteronomy). Holiness – i.e. faithfulness to God’s law – would produce blessing, unholiness would lead to curses. The blessings God describes are broadly in two categories: fruitful harvests (and therefore food security), and peace and safety from their enemies. In contrast, ungodliness would negate either or both of these blessings.

The problem is that the link between godliness and these particular blessings became extended to the idea that *all* wealth was a sign of God’s blessing. It’s a subtle distinction, but God did not promise a faithful Israel excessive riches or comfort, only plentiful food and physical security. The ‘rich’ here are not, therefore, godly (or blessed) by definition: some may be, but the implication here is of wealth beyond what is needed. These are the ones who have prioritised (idolised?) material comfort in this life, rather than ‘true wealth’ in the next.

Similarly, poverty was not, in and of itself, a curse. As the Old Testament progressed, more of its content came to address the idea that many people were poor not because they were ungodly but for precisely the opposite reason: because they *were* godly, and were exploited by the unscrupulous rich. It is this latter group who we can imagine being ‘well fed’ or ‘laughing’ at others’ expense (v25). They have climbed the greasy pole, courting popularity rather than principled godly living (v26) – and it these to whom Jesus addresses the woes.

We, too, must beware a similar temptation to apply this text beyond its limits: however, it is a healthy reminder that God’s values are not ours. Jesus came for those who have been aptly described as ‘the lost, the last and the least’ – which is good news for most of us! So, today, give thanks for this extraordinary, radical Saviour. And pray for grace to hold lightly to the trappings of this world.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 39 – Luke 6:27-28 ‘Divine wisdom’**

When I used to work in London, I had a very difficult client, who for a while made my life a misery. Nothing was ever good enough, and whilst the work we did for her was generally of a high standard, I remember one particular occasion when I made a small mistake and got a real dressing-down.

I'd never experienced quite this level of ferocity before with any client, it was almost vindictive in its rage. Despite having been in the role I was in for nearly ten years, and thinking (naively) that I'd seen most things under the sun when it came to the work I did, I was at a loss to know how to deal with it. I was tense and unhappy, and – as we'd signed a long-term contract with this client – this feeling persisted for some weeks.

Then, one morning, as I was waiting on the platform for the train into work, I sensed the Lord say: 'Pray for her.' I didn't like this at all! Lord, why on earth should I do that? I grumbled away inwardly to myself for a few minutes and then decided that I should, reluctantly, have a go.

So I prayed. I forgave her and then I asked God to bless her. Almost immediately I could sense my whole attitude to her change. This thought suddenly came into my mind: can you imagine how unhappy she is, that she treats people like this? What pain or sadness must there be? At once I began to see her differently, and even to feel the stirrings of something I thought I could never feel for her: compassion.

Over the weeks and months that followed, I got into the habit of praying for her every week. I don't know if my prayers for her made a great difference, though our relationship did improve: but they certainly made a great difference to me. That compassion I felt on the platform never left me.

Today's passage is one of those extraordinary pieces of Jesus' teaching that's so crazy that only God could have thought of it. Loving your enemies? Doing good to those who hate you? Blessing and praying for those who ill-treat you? What strange ideas these are! And yet.... and yet, anyone who's tried it will know that, bizarrely, it works. As we pray for these people, a remarkable thing happens. Our hearts change. And as they change, we become more like Jesus, whose heart always seeks to bless, even those who hate him. We enter the very centre of Christ's own heart.

As you reflect today, you may not have a real personal 'enemy': but is there someone you could pray for in the way that Jesus commends? In faith, we trust that it will make a difference to them; but I can testify that it will certainly make a difference to you.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 40 – Luke 6:29-31 ‘The golden rule’**

We live in a society that loves making laws. We pass between 25 and 50 new Acts of Parliament each year, and rarely repeal the old ones – although one major clear out in 1867 took 1,300 statutes off the book. This love of creating rules and laws runs throughout every area of society – just to give two examples: I understand that the current UK tax code runs to 2,000 pages – and that’s just tax... or, in the area of justice, between 1983 and 2009 Parliament approved over 100 criminal justice Bills, and over 4,000 new criminal offences were created – *4,000* new offences! Can you try to imagine what all of those might be – 4,000 new ways to break the law? I suppose when you have tens of thousands of laws, then it gets easier and easier to break them!

In the kingdom of Jesus, however, you can reduce the whole moral law – the way that God wants to live among our fellow human beings – to just *one golden rule*. Imagine that: just one rule! And we find it here in today’s passage, v31: ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you.’

If we actually obeyed this rule, then we wouldn’t need any other laws. If we truly treated others the way we would like to be treated, then our society would be one of perfect equality, peace and justice. Love would indeed reign supreme, in every dimension of our society.

We wouldn’t gossip or slander or tell lies, because we wouldn’t want gossip, slander or lies being told about us. We wouldn’t cheat or steal because we wouldn’t want to be cheated or stolen from. If we had something hard to say, we would say it gently and lovingly, because that’s how we’d want someone to say that to us. The prisons would be empty, the courts would have nothing to do, and we could stack tens of thousands of pages of laws in the middle of Parliament Square and burn them, because they would all be redundant.

But Jesus knows our hearts. He knows that the way most of us live is: ‘Do to others as *has been* done to you.’ Tit for tat. Eye for eye. We know that two wrongs don’t make a right – but we kid ourselves that it’ll make us feel better.... which of course it doesn’t.

This is why he gives us these bizarre sounding instructions about turning the other cheek and giving away more than we should: it breaks the cycle. Tit doesn’t become tat. Eye does not take eye, for then, if it continues (as Gandhi said), the whole world is blind.

This golden rule is the simplest and also the hardest thing in the world. We need help! We need the constant grace of God to enable us to do it – more on that tomorrow. But today, pray for grace to break the cycle, to treat others as we would like to be treated. It’s the way of Jesus, and, ultimately, the way of life.



## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 41 – Luke 6:32-36 ‘As your Father is merciful’**

We all want to be like someone. When I was a child, I wanted to be like John Robertson. John was a skilful winger who played for my favourite team. For my 6<sup>th</sup> birthday I got my very first team kit – a visual feast of red nylon, for those who pine for the heady days of the late 1970s – and I would practice in the garden for hours, trying to be like John. Even though I was right-footed, I even forced myself to play with my left foot as much as my right, because John Robertson was left-footed, and I wanted to glide past defenders like he did. Not that I ever did, obviously.

The point is, we become what we worship. Our lives and our behaviour change to copy the people we aim to be. The stakes were pretty low for me as a child – if I failed to kick as well with my left foot as with my right, my life wouldn't be much affected. But it's much more important in the spiritual life. Who do we want to copy, to emulate, to be like?

Jesus' teaching today is that our ultimate goal is to be *like our heavenly father*. This is not the serpent's lie of Genesis 3, designed to give us a false view of ourselves: 'Then you will be like God...' Rather, it's the reverse: we were made in the image of God, so of course our ultimate goal is to be like God – as he really is, not as the serpent painted him to be.

*This God* is generous and merciful, and kindness is at the very core of his being. Therefore, this is the rationale for Jesus' extraordinary teaching of the last few days: why should we love our enemies, be generous to our persecutors, give sacrificially? Because *that's what God is like*: 'he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.' (vv35-36)

It's also why it's not enough just to be nice to people who are nice to us; as Jesus says, everyone does that! It's the classic human temptation of setting our moral bar low, and patting ourselves on the back for doing just enough to achieve it. No, true divine love goes beyond: it loves and gives and blesses people who may not be nice to us, who don't deserve our giving or blessing.

The implications are uncomfortable, not just for us as individuals but for our world. If we want to take Jesus at his word, it means that we pray for both sides in a conflict – including those we might consider to be the aggressor or the 'enemy'. It means we welcome and care for those crossing the channel in boats, regardless of whether they 'deserve' it (and in 2022 three-quarters of UK asylum claimants were granted refugee status, so the vast majority do, in fact, deserve it). It also means that we embrace and respect those who disagree with us, because our common humanity – as those made in God's image – trumps our divisions.

This is what it means to be a child of the Most High. I, for one, am profoundly grateful that Jesus promises his Spirit to help us live like this – because none of us can do this in our own strength. Lord, transform me from the inside out. Grant me grace to be merciful, as you are merciful. Amen.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 42 – Luke 6:37-38 ‘The measures we use...’**

One of my all-time favourite Christmas films is ‘It’s a wonderful life’. It tells the story of George Bailey, a man who gives his life to helping others, but falls on hard times. Despairing of everything, he thinks about ending it all, when he happens to meet an angel, Clarence Oddbody, who shows him, in a series of visions, how his life of service has changed the community in which he lives, and made so many lives better.

George returns to his town and his home and finds people crowding round to bless him in return. It’s the ultimate feel-good, heart-warming story, and its message is simple: what goes around, comes around. What George gave out to others for all those years was paid back to him when he needed it.

As it happens, this simple proverb is not just found in Christmas films – it’s also right here in the teaching of Jesus. You could say that Jesus invented it! ‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you.’ (v38) It’s the flip side of the golden rule: ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you.’ Whilst this sounds incredibly daunting, there’s a follow-up, which sets it in context: if we give ourselves in this way, God always repays – we’ll find that our kindness is paid back to us. If we refuse to judge or condemn, then neither will we be judged or condemned. If we give generously, then we will receive generously in return. And because our great God is gracious and generous, it won’t be a sparing return: ‘a good measure... will be poured into your lap’ (v38).

This is what distinguishes Jesus’ teaching from the ancient principle of karma. It sounds similar, but this is not ‘the universe’ paying you back, it’s a person: it’s God himself. And this God usually repays more generously than we expect. Yes, it might come via the giving of other people, but there is a divine hand behind it. The measure we use is returned to us.

This is challenging teaching for those who use bad or sparing measures; but it is wonderfully encouraging for all of us seeking to live out Jesus’ teaching. God sees our efforts, and we can trust that he will repay – he always does. May that thought lift your heart today, to keep living Jesus’ way – and may God grant all of us *all* that we need, returning the measure we use back to us.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 43 – Luke 6:39-42 ‘What’s in my eye?’**

It is an unfortunate fact of human nature that we’re very good at spotting other people’s sins. More than that, we’re most likely to spot the things in other people that we’re most prone to doing ourselves. I personally know loads of people who do that... and that’s the point isn’t it? *Of course* I can spot this failing in others – but what about closer to home? The truth is that I do this, too. We all do – it’s part of the selfishness of the human condition.

So, Jesus gives us one very simple, life-changing principle: test your own actions first, make sure your own behaviour matches up – and only then can you address it in others. He’s not saying that we should never challenge wrong behaviour – only that we should get our own house in order first. Once we’ve done that, then, as he says, we’ll see clearly what’s wrong in the world around us, and have the integrity to address it.

There’s an undercurrent of humility which runs throughout this section of Scripture. Humility is really about self-awareness, having a true estimate of yourself. The more we see ourselves as we really are, the more we’ll cultivate a life which looks more like the master’s – and also, the more grace we’ll share with others.

In a world where public discourse is increasingly dominated by who can tell the best lies most convincingly, and where the shortcomings of our own position are best drowned out by vocal finger pointing at the other side, how we need this teaching of Jesus! Life is ultimately about following the right models, the right examples, the best teachers. If we choose the wrong people to follow, they’ll lead us (and themselves) into a hole (v39).

On the other hand, if we follow the best teacher (v40 – and we know who this is) then we can become like them: a fully aware, gracious, humble, authentic human being.

So, today, let’s all pray for grace to live with this kind of humility – in other words, with self-awareness, and a willingness to look first at our own hearts, before reacting to others’. And may the Master Teacher be our guide, our way and our life this week, and this season.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 44 – Luke 6:43-45 ‘Bearing good fruit’**

Surprisingly, 2022 was a bumper year for apples – at least it was a bumper year for the apple trees in our garden. To be honest I know very little about these things – I’m generally better at destroying than growing things in our garden – but I had expected the very hot, dry summer to have reduced our yields; however, the reverse was true. After a lean year in 2021, even the tree at the back (my favourite, but very erratic in its output) was laden with fruit.

The point of fruit trees, of course, is that they bear fruit. That’s what they do. But it’s not just any old fruit that matters: it’s *good* fruit we’re looking for: fruit that we can eat and enjoy. I usually lose at least a third of my apples to insects and birds (which I don’t mind at all) and also a smaller proportion to apples that rot on the tree and then ‘infect’ the apples next to them. If you’ve left a rotten apple in a bag of other apples for a couple of weeks, you’ll know how quickly the rot spreads!

We’re lucky that most of our apple trees are good trees: healthy, productive, reliable. They bear good fruit. One, however, produces almost nothing, and what it does produce is usually small, shrivelled and sour. Interestingly, by outward appearance it doesn’t look much different to the others – but what it produces is very different.

Over the last few days, we’ve soaked up some of the most profound and powerful teaching ever spoken in our world, by Jesus the great teacher. The core of it is, however, very simple: and it’s Jesus’ point today. If you want to know what’s in a person’s heart, observe how they *live*. You can tell what someone really believes by how they behave. You recognise them by their fruit.

How can you tell if someone is ‘good’? By what they say and do. If their life is characterised by kind words and compassionate speech, then the good fruit tells you it’s a good tree. On the other hand, you can’t claim to be good and then treat others harshly, gossip, slander etc. Bad fruit betrays a bad tree.

And perhaps, outwardly, just like my failing tree, such people might not *look* all that different: but then you see how they speak (v45) or how they relate to other people, and you know what is in their heart. Out of the overflow of the heart, Jesus observes, the mouth speaks.

It’s so simple, and yet so profound – as the greatest wisdom usually is. And if you’re anything like me, your immediate response may well be: ‘Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner!’ It shines such a light on my heart – and my speech, my actions – that all I can ask for is help! I long to be someone who produces good fruit; perhaps you do, too. If so, may we all pray for Jesus’ love to fill our hearts, that what flows out of our heart this day, this week, this season is grace, peace and kindness.

**Day 45 – Luke 6:46-49 ‘Good foundations’**

I’ve always loved a good sandcastle. As a family we often head for the beach if we’re on holiday, and my particular speciality over the years was always a sand speedboat. Give me half an hour and a half-decent spade, and I can rustle up a passable sand-boat, complete with two seats and aerodynamic bow design. And the great thing about this design is that it can be fairly easily adapted to any kind of vehicle: car, tractor, plane even a rocket. 5- or 6-year-old children aren’t too choosy!

It’s easy to build on sand, but we all know what happens when the tide comes in. I’ve seen many a family at the seaside desperately trying to salvage their castle, frantically digging a trench to divert the water: but all it buys is a few extra minutes, before the shore is smooth again, and all traces of civilisation have disappeared. Castles made of sand always fall in the sea... eventually.

Jesus continues his main point from yesterday – that real faith is shown through obedience, through how we live – by telling the famous story of two builders: the one who built on rock, and the other on sand. And the comparison he draws is that to obey his teaching is to build our life on the right foundations: solid, dependable, a foundation that will last. On other hand, if we don’t practice what Jesus preaches, then our foundations will be shaky, unreliable. Our house is in danger of collapse.

Foundations matter: they matter for buildings – and they matter for our lives. But the sting in the tail of this story is that it’s *easy* to build on sand, and *hard* to build on rock. This is the point we need to spend time reflecting on. To follow me and my teaching, Jesus says, is much the best way to live; but it’s also much harder to live that way. It’s easy to follow the crowd (which is really what building on sand is) – to join in with the gossip, to lie to cover your own tracks, to buy something we don’t need on credit because we can’t wait to have it. This is digging into sand... and sandcastles always collapse.

On the other hand, to dig into rock is hard graft – imagine how much harder in the pre-industrial society of Jesus’ day! It’s frustrating, we may feel we are making little progress, for lots of effort; and yet, for those who persevere, the reward is immense. When the storms of life hit, our house stands firm ‘because it was well built’ (v48).

Deep down, we all want that kind of life; but there are no short-cuts. It takes what John Stott used to call ‘daily dogged discipline’: not a very fashionable idea, but one which has stood the test of time. It’s Jesus’ way; and thankfully he longs to pour out his Spirit on all those who would follow this way. May God grant us all grace to build on good foundations today, that the house of our life stands firm, whatever storms we face at present.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 46 – Luke 7:1-10 ‘Deserved or undeserved?’**

Many years ago, I had a wonderful spiritual mentor who had been a very high-ranking officer in the army. He was also a great man of God, and in many ways he epitomised the kind of faith shown by the centurion in today’s story. Although Christians serving in the armed forces has long been a subject of debate, my mentor’s answer was simple: ‘if you ever happen to meet someone with a gun in their hand, would you rather they had Christ in their heart, or not?’ That may not resolve every discussion on this topic, but it’s a good answer.

And, just like my mentor, the centurion was able to recognise greater authority when he saw it. True, he was, himself, someone invested with real authority in his sphere of work; but the authority of Jesus was on a different level entirely. The centurion understood, not just that you need to look for authority in the right places, but he was also humble enough to recognise that, in the grand scheme of things, he was ‘middle management’; the King of kings, though, was here in his neighbourhood!

Humility, in fact, lies at the heart of this story. Faith and humility are closely linked, and indeed what I noticed as I was preparing this reflection is the contrast between what the religious leaders say about the centurion and what he says about himself: the religious leaders ask Jesus for miraculous intervention ‘because this man *deserves* to have you do this... he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.’ (vv4-5)

The centurion’s approach is quite different, however: ‘Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I *do not deserve* to have you come under my roof.’ (v6) In the way that Luke has told this story, the contrast is deliberate. Matthew’s version does not have the preamble with the religious leaders – Luke has clearly included this part of the story to make a point.

And the point is... grace. The world works on the principles of just desserts; but we can never approach God like that. God does not treat us as we deserve – thankfully! Rather God pours out his blessings on the undeserving. Despite his high rank and good works, the centurion grasped this; he recognised that his only plea was the goodness and compassion of God, not his status or works.

This is good news for us, too. And yet, it’s also so easy to get sucked into ‘slot machine religion’ – put this in, get this out. Let today’s story be a healthy reminder that it is God’s grace that saves us, which pours blessings out to us, and ultimately, draws the Lord close to us. May that grace be our light, hope, peace and joy today.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 47 – Luke 7:11-17 ‘His heart went out’**

It's easy to get into the habit of reading something into all of Jesus' actions: he says this because.... he does this because.... And that's all well and good, Jesus usually does have a bigger picture in mind – he is, after all, the Son of God! But there is a risk to over-analysing: we can get so caught up with the 'big picture' that Jesus starts to appear more like a military strategist or a marketing guru – carefully lining up all his ducks to fulfil the mission of the kingdom.

Sometimes we read a story and the best response is just to marvel at his glorious compassion for people like you and me. Today's story is a case in point – on the face of it, there's nothing unique here. It's not a unique place: Nain is a village in Galilee eight miles south of Nazareth, so familiar territory. It's not a unique encounter: Jesus raises others from the dead (the little girl, Lazarus).

There are striking details, but again not unique: he touches the coffin, which would make him unclean according to the regulations – just as touching the leper did in chapter 5. Likewise, the people's response in v16 – 'God has come to help his people' – seems deliberately to echo Zechariah's prophetic song (1:68), thereby fulfilling the expectations which accompanied Jesus' birth; but it's not an exact match, so we can't be totally sure.

Ultimately, none of that is the point. What matters here is exactly what is written on the page: it's the story of Jesus' encounter with a person in need, and how he met her at her point of need. What matters is what it tells us about Jesus' heart of compassion for a hurting world. When Jesus saw the funeral procession, 'his heart went out to her' (v13).

For all the demands on his time and energy, Jesus still kept seeing the world with God's eyes of compassion. His heart broke for *one* person – and he met with that person and changed her life.

This is how Jesus feels about you, too. His heart is big enough to encompass every person – he doesn't just look at the mass of humanity with compassion: he looks at *you* with compassion. So, today, offer your troubles to him, and receive his love. Let him wipe your tears and soothe your mind – because you matter to him.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 48 – Luke 7:18-23 ‘Are you the one?’**

Back in my old job, I did a fair amount of recruitment. It was a rewarding experience: whatever role we were recruiting for, we’d sit and interview the prospective candidates, all of whom were eager to please and make a good impression. Most of the skill was in teasing out what *wasn’t* in the CV – the bits people were exaggerating or trying to hide! At its root, though, we were asking the same question John the Baptist’s disciples were asking in today’s passage: ‘Are you the one?’

This is a strange interlude in the story, because it suggests that even John the Baptist had a moment of doubt about who Jesus really was. Perhaps it was because, to his eyes, Jesus’ CV was starting to look a bit less like the one he thought he was preparing the way for. Not enough brimstone! Not enough wrath, perhaps? (See Luke 3:7 and 3:17 for context.)

We need to remember that John was an ultra-orthodox Jew, quite possibly one of the radical Essene community. And, for all his greatness, it seems that even John was expecting a Messiah more in the mould of popular thinking. So, when he hears of Jesus blessing (and healing the servant of) a Roman centurion (7:1-10), and then touching a dead body (v14) – which no devout Jew would ever do – he suddenly starts to think: is this really the One?

And so, with characteristic bluntness, he sends a couple of friends to ask Jesus directly: ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’ Jesus (John’s cousin, remember) has known John all his life, so no doubt is well used to his prickly edges! He responds with equally characteristic grace and wisdom: in effect, ‘take a look, John, at everything God is doing – the miraculous is commonplace, the prophecies are being fulfilled – *who else* would be doing this?’

Just to reinforce the point, Jesus deliberately finishes by quoting the passage from Isaiah 61 which announced his ministry: ‘Good news is proclaimed to the poor’ (v22, see 4:18). What Jesus is doing is exactly what the Messiah is meant to be doing!

So often we try to make Jesus fit what we want or expect him to be. It’s always best to let Jesus speak for himself, to be who he really is. May God grant us all grace to see Jesus with pure unfiltered eyes, that we might again – and every day – behold his glory. Blessed is the one who does not stumble on account of him.



## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 49 – Luke 7:24-30 ‘Greater than John’**

I wonder who you consider to be the greatest human being who ever lived? Apart from Jesus, obviously! Some of you may think of those known for great courage or conviction – someone like Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela. Others may think of great geniuses – someone like Leonardo da Vinci, who managed to revolutionise art, science and engineering in one lifetime. A series entitled ‘Great Britons’ at the turn of the millennium boiled the popular vote down a straight contest between Winston Churchill and Isambard Kingdom Brunel – with Churchill coming out as victor.

Jesus’ view, however, is different: ‘among those born of women,’ he concludes in our passage today, ‘there is no-one greater than John’ (v28). John the Baptist gets Jesus’ vote for the greatest human being of them all – at least to that point in history.

There is an extraordinary sting in the tail, however. Jesus follows up with this bombshell: ‘Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’ How is this possible? What does he mean?

At the heart of this section is a clash of ideologies around this fundamental question: how will the rule and reign of God come into this world? How will the Messiah usher it in? To orthodox Jews – embodied by the religious leaders – it will be the triumph of obedience to God’s Law, through which God’s people will also prosper and triumph over their enemies. Jesus, however, points to a different way: the way of grace. As we humbly receive this divine gift – most appealing, Jesus admits, to ‘the lost, the last and the least’ – so we enter into this glorious new kingdom.

It can *only* be received as the gift of God – which is why even the greatest human cannot enter without it. John himself, of course, knew this: he welcomed the Messiah who would baptise with ‘the Holy Spirit and fire’ (3:16). Ironically, those who had received John’s baptism of repentance (i.e. return to obedience to the Law) were also most able to receive Jesus’ invitation of grace; whilst those too proud to repent under John’s ministry would also resist Jesus (vv29-30).

For us too, the way of beautiful grace is open. John’s ministry, like Jesus’, points us towards the Lord in all his glory. We, too, may feel like ‘the least in the kingdom of heaven’, but – thanks to his loving initiative, his wonderful grace – being the least is enough. Hallelujah!

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 50 – Luke 7:31-35 ‘Spoilt children’**

When I was seven years old, my nan sent me 10p in the post as a gift – oh for the days when you could still post coins! I opened the envelope, saw the coin and note from my nan, and said, to my enduring shame: ‘Is that all?’ My mum, usually the gentlest and most gracious of people, gave me such a telling off for ingratitude that I never forgot the lesson.

Jesus recognised a similar trait in his generation, too. More than a thousand years of being God’s chosen people had created among many a sense of entitlement, and a cynicism about true spiritual renewal. For all that Jesus was welcomed by thousands, many others looked down their noses at him and found fault. As Jesus observes wryly, they are behaving like spoilt children, for whom nothing is good enough (v32).

Such people criticised John for being too ascetic and Jesus for being too lax (vv33-34)! The issue, of course, is not with Jesus or John, but their determination to reject the way of God, which Jesus and John *both* came to bring them. For all that they resented the Romans, their lives were OK as they were – just religious enough to feel entitled, but not so much to feel harassed by it.

As an aside, in the gospels Jesus only uses the phrase ‘the Son of Man came...’ three times. ‘The Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost...’ ‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...’ – these two are rightly celebrated. The third is much less noted, and we find it here: ‘The Son of Man came eating and drinking...’ Hospitality and welcome were central to Jesus’ ministry. There’s nothing wrong with John’s rigorous self-discipline; but, Jesus’ willingness to socialise with those on the margins is perhaps just as central to his theology of the kingdom as the other two. It calls us to reflect on how we practise this today.

Either way, Jesus concludes with another reference to judging things only by their fruit. ‘Wisdom is proved right by her children’ (v35): in other words, look at the outcomes. Jesus calls us, not to be spoilt children, but those who receive the kingdom *like a child*: open-hearted, trusting, ‘all-in’. And as we do that, our hearts overflow with gratitude, and energise us to share this welcoming love wholeheartedly with those around us. Who could you offer that to this week, or even today?

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 51 – Luke 7:36-50 ‘Forgiven much’**

I don't know if any of you have ever had the experience of having your debts cancelled. I must confess that I haven't, but I know friends who have, and they have shared the exhilarating feeling of a heavy load being taken off their shoulders, a sense of being free, of being able to look forward with hope to the future and not always back with dread to the past.

To have any debt cancelled is wonderful – to have a huge debt forgiven must be almost indescribable. Such a feeling lies at the heart of today's famous story. Jesus is welcomed to a posh dinner party by one of the religious elite. I say 'welcomed' – it's clear from the complex social rituals of Jesus' day that he was not one of the honoured guests. The things that Simon *didn't* do for Jesus were designed to put him in his place, near the bottom of the pecking order – no water, no kiss, no oil (vv44-47). Jesus would have been on one of the tables at the back, not at the 'top table' with Simon.

This makes Jesus' encounter all the more divinely-inspired. At the other end of the room, Jesus could not have heard (humanly speaking) the Pharisee muttering away to himself about the actions, either of the woman, who anointed Jesus' feet, or of Jesus, who received this act with grace and humility. But Jesus knew what was going on, all right – and so he challenges Simon with the simple example of a debt forgiven. The one whose debt is large inevitably feels more gratitude than the one whose debt is small.

Therefore, the woman – no doubt an outcast in society, despised by respectable people – expressed her love for Jesus in a much greater way than the mealy-mouthed, polite-but-cold 'welcome' given to Jesus by Simon. As always with Jesus, he doesn't just make the point in a beautifully concise yet powerful way, he does two more things: first, he gives the woman his blessing, perhaps enough to restore her to some sort of place in the community as well.

Second, he leaves an implied sting in the tail: we know from plenty of passages elsewhere that the Pharisees' spiritual debt was, in fact, no smaller than most of the 'undesirables' they avoided. Their hearts were just as corrupt, even if their outward appearances were impeccable. Simon's 'debt' before God was likely as large as the woman's: he just didn't realise or acknowledge it.

As we conclude our Lent reflections in the marvellous Gospel of Luke, give thanks that Jesus receives *all* who come to him with gratitude and faith – people like you and me. And let's resolve to guard our hearts from pointing the finger at others, when we know our own debts which God has wonderfully cancelled. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see. Amen!

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 52 – Luke 8:1-10 ‘Puzzling it out’**

Most of us love a good puzzle. I certainly do – and I’m not just talking about jigsaws, but all types of head-scratchers. Perhaps it’s Sudoku for you, or crosswords, or logic problems... or a good old-fashioned crime drama. Agatha Christie remains the best-selling author ever – apart from the Bible – because we love a good puzzle. And the dramatic success in 2022 of the mobile app Wordle shows that this fascination is as strong as ever.

Today begins a section of Luke’s gospel which focuses on Jesus’ parables. It is commonly thought that one reason Jesus’ parables were so effective is because they earthed theological ideas in everyday matters: Jesus talked about God and life in the language of farmers and fishermen – the world of the people he lived among. Of course, this is true.

What is less well known is that Jesus didn’t necessarily do this to make his teaching easy to understand. It might be earthed in everyday life, but it was still meant to be something of a puzzle. Something to make us scratch our heads and wonder what it means. Something, even, that might remain veiled to those not prepared to look closely – he said as much at the end of today’s passage: ‘to others I speak in parables, so that, “though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.”’

It might come as a shock to hear Jesus apparently wanting people to be puzzled. Surely a great teacher would want things to be clear? Aren’t simple soundbites better than slippery stories? Why make things difficult?

The answer is that Jesus wants us to *seek* him – to have hearts and minds that go beyond surface thinking and feeling, to yearn for deeper things, real connections. Life is complex, and full of mystery. Simple answers offer short term benefits but are rarely satisfying for a whole life. Jesus wants us to puzzle it out: to wrestle with the big questions of life and faith.

So he tells parables: teasers, puzzles, always asking the bigger questions – what is life *really* about? How do we live fruitfully for the *whole* of our lives? Where do we get distracted, or misled? And what is a truly good heart?

When I think about it, these are the questions I really want answers to. Perhaps you do, too. That kind of deep truth doesn’t come quickly, or easily. But when it is revealed, it is like pure gold. Take a few moments today to ask God to reveal more of that deep truth to you – that the Word might fall on rich soil in our hearts. And may Jesus continue to amaze us, that we might worship him afresh today, and this week.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 53 – Luke 8:11-15 ‘Good soil’**

2022 has been a strange year for our gardens. The hot spring and summer caused all kinds of havoc with what most of us might have planned to grow. And if you went away on summer holiday without anyone to water in your absence, invariably you came back to a lot of withered glory... Bizarrely, despite the ‘boom and bust’ weather, we had an enormous crop of apples that autumn – to be honest I’ve no idea why, but I’m grateful all the same!

Nowadays, gardening is for most people a leisure activity: even those with allotments rarely grow food because they have to. But in the culture of Jesus’ day, as it still is for many places around the world today, the growing season was vital for their life and future. Most families would only eat what they – or their fellow villagers – could grow. Preparing the soil and sowing the seed were part of the fabric of life.

But what about the soil of our *lives*? What makes for abundant growth and fruitful harvest? Conversely, what stifles growth and leaves us choked with weeds?

This passage is one of Jesus’ most famous parables, and we’re also fortunate that it’s one which he explains to us. At one level he does the hard work for us! And yet, the real value of this timeless story lies in what we do with the meaning. In just a few verses, Jesus presents us with a vision of how to live – and also how not to live – a fruitful life. He gets to the heart of what real ‘success’ is, and how we sustain this kind of fruitfulness long-term.

And it is all a matter of what we do with God’s Word in our lives. Let’s note that this word (seed) is inherently fruitful. As long as the soil is good, it will multiply the benefit – Luke doesn’t include this detail, but in Matthew’s and Mark’s versions, the reward is ‘30, 60 or a 100 times’. It is powerful and amazingly abundant. But it can be rendered ineffective by other factors, and it is these that form the real challenge of the parable.

For the Word to bear fruit it needs to go deep into our hearts – if it stays shallow, it won’t withstand troubles in life. It can also be choked: either by worries, or by the distractions of wealth and the pursuit of other dreams or pleasures.

Life is a long journey, and the great treasure of this parable is that it brings us back to first principles; it makes us take a fresh look at where we are now. Is anything ‘choking’ us? Are we going deep or staying shallow? God is good, and merciful, and he is well able to ‘restore our soil’ – and our soul! Give thanks for the work of the Word in your life; and pray for it to become ever more fruitful – just as it’s meant to be.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 54 – Luke 8:16-18 ‘Close attention’**

Back in the day when I worked for a market research company, detail was a key part of my job. Often the client paid thousands of pounds for one set of results contained in one book of tables, so it was vital that every figure was checked and double-checked to make sure it was correct. Similarly, whenever we submitted proposals for new projects, we all proof-read each others' documents, to make sure it was both clear and easy to read – as well as containing no spelling mistakes!

I can't say that I ever enjoyed this type of work, though I learned to do it thoroughly, and get a sort of weird pleasure in spotting a missing apostrophe or a figure that was one digit out. I do remember once, though, getting the all-clear from a colleague on a proposal of mine only to discover when we'd won the project that the price I'd included was wrong (which the colleague couldn't have known) – and we were obliged to run the project at a loss! It pays to pay close attention.

And if that's true in our workplaces, it's also true when it comes to the most important piece of writing of them all – the text of scripture, and in particular the teaching of Jesus. Here we find the key to life, both now and in eternity: no wonder Jesus tells us to 'consider carefully how you listen' (v18). He's just shared one of the greatest stories ever told – the parable of the sower – which has implications for every single one of us. But, he counsels, are we listening carefully enough?

Jesus' encouragement to us today is that close attention to him is always rewarded, both in terms of wisdom – 'there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed' (v17) – and in terms of spiritual fruit: 'those who have will be given more' (v18). Just as the parable reminded us, how we sow determines what we reap: and seeking Jesus brings rich reward in a life full of faith, hope, purpose and gratitude.

Conversely, Jesus warns against a sense of complacency or entitlement – which is perhaps especially important to heed if we come from a strong Christian background, or have been fortunate to be part of great churches for most of our lives. The end of verse 18 could effectively be paraphrased: 'Don't take your spiritual heritage (i.e. "what you think you have") for granted. I will bless those who humbly continue to seek me.'

Today, let's give thanks for the freedom we enjoy to be able to study the Word, and for all the many tools available to help us go deeper in Scripture. And let's pay close attention to whatever Jesus is saying to us at the moment: for that attention is always repaid by our generous Lord – helping us to grow, and to bear fruit for his glory.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 55 – Luke 8:1-3 ‘The value of practical support’**

Before we move on to the next chunk of Jesus’ teaching, I’m going to do a brief detour back to the beginning of this chapter. I want to highlight a group of people who rarely get any attention, but whose ministry and support for Jesus is every bit as important as those who get more of the limelight.

We all know about the twelve apostles: these are the twelve close friends of Jesus, specially chosen by him, who journeyed with him and were trained to do what he did. These became the key leaders who went on to establish the church, and such is their reputation, Luke is simply able to refer to them as ‘The Twelve’ (v1).

However, we rarely stop to ask *how* this group (including Jesus) were able to live this itinerant lifestyle. Who bought the food (and other necessities), who washed their clothes, who provided the ‘support team’ to make this viable? Of course, Jesus received numerous invites, and no doubt he was led by the Spirit to various places and particular hosts. But divine provision is rarely just manufactured out of thin air – of course, God *can* do that; more often, though, God provides through other people.

In vv2-3 Luke tells us about Jesus’ and the Twelve’s support team. These are the people who, Luke says, ‘were helping to support them out of their own means’ (v3). In other words, it was this group who were paying for the remarkable ministry that Jesus and the Twelve were exercising. What an amazing gift!

As we look at this group, two things are notable: first, they are all women. This is not a comment on roles per se: in the patriarchal culture of Jesus’ day, being part of the Twelve would not have been possible in the way that it might be now – rather, what is remarkable is how Jesus welcomed women into his inner team, and relied on their support. Even if the culture of the time required those roles to be different, the giftings of women flourished under Jesus.

Second, this group came from widely different social backgrounds. Mary had led a troubled life, Joanna was from the ‘upper class’ – she was married to one of the most powerful men in the country, and presumably her personal wealth was instrumental in financing Jesus’ team. Much as we rightly prioritise Jesus’ mission to those on the margins, he was just as willing to embrace wealthy followers, too. With Jesus it is always about the heart.

Today, let’s honour and give thanks for those whose practical support makes ministry and mission possible. How we need people willing to offer time, talents and money to resource the work of the gospel. May the Lord raise up such people in our day, too. If you are one of these people, called to practical support – thank you! And may we always cherish their (your) work among us.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 56 – Luke 8:19-21 ‘Jesus’ family’**

As most of you know, the early Christians were heavily persecuted. Once they were considered to represent a threat to the authority of the Roman emperor, they were often slandered in particular with two outrageous slurs. The first is that they were cannibals – this was because ‘ate the body and drank the blood of Christ’. The second was that they promoted incest, because they referred to fellow believers as brother and sister, including within a Christian marriage.

Although both of these accusations put many early Christians in fear of their lives, since both were punishable by death, they are both distortions of important truths. Christians do remember the body and blood of Jesus, as they drink quite ordinary bread and wine. They also, from the very beginning, saw fellow believers as more than participants in a common cause: they were *family*.

In part, this incredibly strong and intimate image is theological: when we become followers of Jesus, through the grace of Christ we inherit the blessings of the divine Son – in effect we become co-heirs, and children of God. Therefore, as children of the same divine Parent, we can call each other ‘sister’ and ‘brother’.

But it’s also more straightforward than that, and goes back to this text and Jesus’ own teaching. My family, Jesus says, ‘are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice’ (v21).

Mark’s version of this story casts Jesus’ human family in a more threatening light: ‘When his family heard about this [the growth of Jesus’ ministry] they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind”.’ (Mark 3:21) This not a social call! Rather, they are concerned by what is happening, embarrassed even. And Jesus issues what we can interpret as a pointed riposte to his family: for all that he loves them and no doubt continues to honour them, he has another family, too: the family of God.

We, too, are part of that family. We don’t earn our ‘entry’ to this family, but we can attest to it every day, by living in obedience to Jesus’ teaching. If we do that, then with joy we can claim that we, too, are children of God! May God grant us grace to live as Jesus’ family today.



## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 57 – Luke 8:22-25 ‘Who is this?’**

‘I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene...’ So goes the grand old hymn – but it touches on a deep truth: how important it is to continue to be *amazed* by Jesus.

‘Who is this?’ the disciples utter in total amazement, ‘he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him!’ (v25) This passage begins what appears to be ‘a day in the life of Jesus’. Over what appears to be one 24-hour period – Luke 8:22-56 – Jesus demonstrates his authority over the four things human beings have no ultimate control over: nature, the supernatural, sickness and death. After just one of these outstanding miracles, the disciples are moved to cry out: ‘Who is this?’ Imagine what they were saying by the end of the following day!

Familiarity breeds contempt, as the old saying goes. And it’s possible for this to happen in our spiritual lives, too. Deep truths which made our spines tingle when we first came to faith seem almost normal now. Great answers to prayer get forgotten; the marvellous privileges of being part of a dynamic community for faith taken for granted.

It can happen to all of us: so this is why today’s passage is so valuable. Yes, we can admire it as a great miracle, an event in history which changed some people’s lives. But let’s also *personalise* it: let’s see it as an encouragement to keep being amazed by Jesus. May the disciples’ awe be ours.

Today, take a few minutes to remind yourself of some things about Jesus which amaze you. And if it takes longer than you hoped, ask Jesus to show you. At the heart of every person of dynamic faith is that childlike sense of wonder: the great saints of old were mostly just normal people who kept being amazed by Jesus. May their faith be ours: and may we, too, keep being amazed by Jesus the Nazarene.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 58 – Luke 8:26-31 ‘Unexpected wisdom’**

One of the most popular films of all time is Forrest Gump. One of the reasons for this is the homespun wisdom of Forrest, and in particular his mama. The film is punctuated with such pearls, though of course the most famous is: ‘Life is like a box of chocolates: you never know what you’re gonna get.’ Although actually, with a box Chocolate Brazil Nuts, you *always* know!

Wisdom is often found in the most unlikely places. Much as we like to think that it’s only clever adults who have a monopoly on wisdom, the reality is very different. A great friend of ours who was considering mission work was pointed towards the country where she eventually served by the spiritual intuition of a child she was teaching. She was so overcome she sought further direction from one of our ministers, who confirmed exactly what the child had said. God can speak through anyone!

On Saturday we saw the disciples’ awestruck confusion at what they had just seen and experienced. Jesus had just done something that only God could do, prompting them to cry out: ‘Who is this?’ At this stage they weren’t sure. Someone special, certainly – but was Jesus more than that?

We get an answer in the very next passage (today’s reading), albeit from a most unlikely source. Having crossed to the Eastern side of the shore of Galilee they are immediately accosted (v27). The man who approached them – who had never met Jesus before – knew *exactly* who Jesus was, albeit for somewhat unsettling reasons. He was a tormented soul, and whatever it was that possessed him – which the text clearly indicates was a demonic spirit of some sort – confirmed Jesus’ identity for everyone to hear: ‘Jesus, Son of the Most High God.’ (v28)

Tragically for this man, the demonic oppression he was afflicted with had tortured him for many years, leaving him wild and friendless – and we’ll see how Jesus heals him tomorrow. But today, let’s note the heavy irony that the very first person to truly grasp the identity of Jesus was this spiritually tormented loner. It took the disciples many months more to manage that, and many of the most educated religious people in his culture never got it: but this chap did.

I trust the Lord preserves us all from torment of this kind – but let’s keep our eyes open for wisdom in unexpected places. God is able to speak in surprising ways, and through surprising people: how might he do that for you this week?

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 59 – Luke 8:26-35 ‘Hot to handle?’**

Today’s passage is an unsettling one, especially to our modern sensibilities. First, we rarely talk in the West about spiritual beings like demons – although in much of the world such things are still treated as a part of life. Second, we find the idea of the drowning pigs abhorrent. What are we to make of it?

Two bits of context are important – they might not explain everything, but they help to set a backdrop for what’s going on here. First, the ancient world did not have the same emotional attachment to animals as we do. Farm animals were treated well (because they were incredibly valuable commodities), but were there for human usage and sustenance. The loss of these pigs was a financial disaster and a spiritual judgement, but not an emotional trauma at that time.

Second, the keeping of pigs was forbidden to Jews. Pigs were an ‘unclean’ animal, so the fact that these farmers were keeping a large herd of them was a sign of the poor state of their spiritual health. This part of Israel had been colonised around 700-500BC by other peoples, who had mixed their religious practices with the Jewish inhabitants, leading to a hybrid form of religious observance which broke many of the orthodox Jewish laws.

So when Jesus gave permission for the demons to enter the pigs, he was cleansing the people of two unhealthy influences: spiritual beings *and* idolatrous practices. This is why the people were afraid rather than angry. They knew they were doing wrong, and Jesus had called them on it.

A wise commentator once said that Jesus came to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable – and this is exactly what we see here. A tormented man is healed and restored. An apathetic population is challenged.

Jesus is many wonderful things: but he is never safe! Let’s continue to be astounded by Jesus. If we need to be challenged by him, let’s be brave to hear it. And if we are disturbed today, may his wonderful grace grant us deep comfort and rest.

## ***Daily Inspiration in the Gospel of Luke – chapters 1-8***

### **Day 60 – Luke 8:34-39 ‘Go and tell’**

Not many of us are good evangelists. Most of us are frightened at the prospect of having to ‘defend the faith’, and frankly terrified at the thought of ‘leading someone to Jesus’. Some of us have had bad experiences – others are keen to avoid that being the case!

The good news of today’s passage is that we don’t have to be Billy Grahams or J Johns. *We just need to tell our story.* The man in today’s passage has known Jesus probably for about an hour. That’s it. He has been excluded from all polite society for many years, so probably knows very little about religious belief or practice. And he’s just found a real spiritual friend for the first time in his adult life – and this friend is immediately being forced to leave by rest of the population.

In other words, he apparently has very little to offer to the kingdom of God. Not surprisingly, he’s desperate to travel away from this place with Jesus. But Jesus says no – not because he’s unfriendly, but because he knows that this man has something very precious: his story. His story is enough. God has done something wonderful for him, and the best way for him to practise his new-found faith is simply to share his story with the people that know him. After all, the change will be obvious!

This is great news for us, too. We all have a story of faith. Perhaps not as dramatic – but every bit as real, because it’s *ours*, and we’ve lived it. Take a few moments today just turning over some key moments in your story: times when God has been there, answered a prayer, changed something in your life, brought you a friend when you needed it, given you a task which you undertook for his glory – and more besides.

That is your story. No-one can argue with it, because it’s yours. Why not pray for opportunities to tell your story? It’s all Jesus asked of the man in the passage. It’s all Jesus asks of you.