

GEOFFREY  
ROBINSON

THE  
GOSPEL  
SAMPLE  
OF  
LUKE

FOR  
MEDITATION  
AND  
HOMILIES

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## INTRODUCTION

*Lectio Divina* means ‘divine reading’ and describes a way of reading the Scriptures whereby we gradually let go of our own agenda and open ourselves to what God wants to say to us.

The first stage is *lectio* (reading) where we read a passage from the Scriptures, very slowly and reflectively, pausing over every significant word and phrase, so that the Word sinks into us.

The second stage is *meditatio* (meditation or reflection) where we think about the text we have chosen, and then meditate on it so that we may find what God wants to say to us.

The third stage is *oratio* (prayer or response) where we leave our thinking aside and simply let our hearts speak to God.

The final stage is *contemplatio* (contemplation or rest) where we simply rest in the Word of God; that is, we listen at the deepest level of our being to God who speaks within us. As we listen, we are gradually transformed from within, so that the Word has its effect on the way we live.

These stages of *Lectio Divina* are not fixed rules of procedure but simply guidelines as to how the prayer normally develops. Its natural movement is towards greater simplicity and silence, where talking gives way to listening.

One of the great advantages of this form of prayer is that it improves the chances of our letting God speak to us rather than always having us speak to God.

If I have a problem with this time-honoured form of prayer, it is that it does not seem to include, at least directly, a deeper understanding of the meaning of the text by reading what scholars have to say to us concerning it. Perhaps this reflects the idea that praying the scriptures is one thing, while studying them is something quite different. Against this I would maintain that study *is* prayer if our purpose in studying is to understand better what God is saying to us. Why should we base our meditation on our own false understanding of a passage when a better understanding is available to us from people who have spent their lives seeking the deepest meanings in the scriptures?

I suggest that the place for study can be either before we begin the whole process of *Lectio Divina* of a particular passage or, in a briefer form, at the stage of *Meditatio*. I have tried to cater for both of these possibilities.

This book is not a learned treatise on Luke’s gospel.

There are many other books that seek to provide this and I must refer the reader to them. The sole purpose of this book is to assist in meditation and homilies on this gospel, and the commentary limits itself to aspects of the gospel that are directly relevant to these two purposes. The chapter and verse references are given here so that we can read the passage from our own copies. For copyright reasons it was not feasible to reproduce each passage in full.

I also make no attempt to provide ‘model’ homilies on each passage. Homilists are so different from each other that no one can write anyone else’s homily for them. This is as it should be, for every homily should come from the heart. So all I do is offer a brief commentary on each passage, then give points that might assist in meditation and in preparing a homily. The rest – of necessity – is up to the individual.

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# THE INFANCY NARRATIVE

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## 1:1-4: PREFACE

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The first four verses of the gospel are a free composition of Luke, not based on any sources. They consist of a single sentence, written in a formal literary language that is quite different from the language of the rest of the gospel. They are a conscious imitation of the formal prefaces used by a number of other ancient writers of historical works. The first message is, therefore, that Luke is intending to write as a serious historian like those other writers before him.

It will, of course, be history written according to the understanding of his own time, quite different from anything we understand by historical writing today. We insist on hard historical fact, while in ancient times people largely told history through stories, and the details could be freely changed or invented in order to bring out the meaning of the story.

He claims that what he writes will be complete, accurate and thorough ('after investigating everything carefully from the very first'), and that it will be set out systematically ('an orderly account').

He does not pretend to be uninvolved and purely dispassionate, for he states that he writes 'so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed'. He will write history, but it will be history in the service of religious truth, and he will present his material in a manner that makes this clear.

Theophilus ('lover of God') may have been a real person, e.g. a patron who provided the money to enable Luke to carry out his work, or a personification of the audience Luke was addressing.

*Put yourself in the place of Luke as an educated third-generation Christian who has been asked by the community to provide a written account of the life of Jesus that could then be handed on to later generations. How would you go about telling this story? What are the most important things you would want to emphasise about Jesus? From your own personal thinking and prayer, how do you best sum up Jesus? Who is he for you?*

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## 1:5-23 – THE ANNUNCIATION TO ZECHARIAH

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Only Matthew and Luke have infancy narratives and they are totally different from each other, so we are dealing

with freer compositions. While the infancy narrative of Matthew has elements of foreboding, the dominant note of that of Luke is joy. There is a contrast between the high Greek style of the first four verses of Luke's gospel and the many Hebrew and Aramaic words inserted into the present passage.

Matthew's story is openly based on five quotations from the First Testament, while Luke weaves the First Testament allusions into his story. There are in fact allusions to many different persons and stories, making the point that the story Luke is about to tell does not begin here, but had its origins in the distant past and is the fulfilment of a multitude of promises.

If one goes through this story and the story of the appearance to Mary in the next scene statement by statement, there is a very close parallel between them, though with the latter story always superior to the former. This alone tells us that we are dealing with two literary constructions, not literal accounts of what happened.

The story begins with the historical note that it happened in the time of Herod the Great and, therefore, between 37 and 4 BCE. Despite all the allusions and literary constructions, the story has a factual basis.

The two protagonists, Zechariah and Elizabeth, are presented as representatives of the anawim, the faithful remnant of poor people through whom salvation would come. This couple had the affliction and social stigma of barrenness.

The story begins in the temple and will end there in its last verse (24:53). There were 24 priestly sections that handled the daily service in the temple on a rotating basis, and many priests within each section. So the choice of Zechariah was a rare (and perhaps once-in-a-lifetime) occasion for him. In typical fashion (appearance of angel, fear, explanation, objection, sign) an angel appeared and, in a rich and lengthy passage, spoke of who John would be. There are references to Samson, to the prophecy of Malachi and to Elijah. It is not said that he will be Elijah returned, but he will have the role of Elijah in turning the hearts of people to God.

Normally when the priest came out of the sanctuary to where the people were waiting, he was expected to bless

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them; but Zechariah could not do so because he was dumb.

The great story of salvation has begun, but, in typical biblical fashion, at this stage its unlikely carriers are an elderly pregnant woman hiding herself away and an elderly dumb man. To outsiders nothing was happening, and yet the great story prepared for over thousands of years was already taking place.

John's task will be 'to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord'. Great events were happening, but there would be no coercion. If these great events were to have good effects, hearts had to be prepared and open. The great events would be actions of God but, to produce effects, there would have to be a positive response from human beings, and that is where the problem would lie, both then and throughout later history.

A prime method of meditating on this passage is to seek out the many references, especially to the great barren women of the First Testament, such as Sara (Gen. chapters 16,17, 21), Rebecca (Gen.25:21), Rachel (Gen.30), the mother of Samson (Judges 13) and Hanna, the mother of Samuel (1Sam.1). The story Luke tells began in the distant past and is the fulfilment of that past.

Scientists tell us that the world began with a Big Bang. I believe that this Big Bang was an explosion of God's love, for it is the nature of love to reach out to others. At first there were only gases, heat and energy swirling around, but over immense periods of time more solid objects began to form as the gases coalesced. Stars, planets and galaxies were eventually formed. They had their great beauty, but they could not respond to God's love. More time passed, until within the oceans the first primitive life forms came into being. They developed until some began to crawl out of the sea onto the land and colonise the grasslands, the trees and even the air. The animals were beautiful, but they too could not respond to God's love. More time passed until a few animals began to stand upright on two feet. Human beings slowly evolved and began to think and to feel. At long last there were beings who could actually respond to God's love.

All of this process from the explosion of love in the Big Bang to the first response to God's love had taken, so scientists tell us, nearly fourteen billion years, and over all that time God had patiently waited and waited. Only then did God actively intervene in the history of this world by sending a special person, an only Son, to show the world

what the greatest and most profound love really looked like, in the hope that others would imitate this love and the process of development might accelerate. God waited all that time and, if necessary, will wait for as long again for the full working out of the divine plan for this world. I suggest that the final goal of the divine plan is that the human race should continue to grow and grow until it in some manner returns the world to the love from which it came. If that takes another fourteen billion years, then so be it, for God can wait.

If God has waited that long, then waiting has its importance for us too. If something is important enough, it is worth waiting for. Each year during Advent we wait for Christmas, the coming again of Jesus into our world, the yearly reminder of the love that created this world. In Advent we are called to join God in an active waiting. We are called to make ourselves an active part of the entire divine plan for this world and move that plan forward as best we can.

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### 1:26-38 – THE ANNUNCIATION TO MARY

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As already noted, this story balances, statement for statement, the story of the appearance of the angel to Zechariah. By this means Luke creates a strong contrast between John and Jesus, and between Zechariah and Mary.

John will be great before the Lord (1:15), but Jesus will be great and Son of the Most High (1:32). John will prepare a people (1:17), but Jesus will rule the people (1:33). John's role is temporary (1:17), Jesus' kingdom will never end (1:33). John is to be a prophet (1:15), but Jesus more than another prophet: he is Son of God (1:35). John will be 'filled with the Holy Spirit' as a prophet (1:15), but the overshadowing of the Spirit and Power will make Jesus 'the Holy One'.<sup>1</sup>

Zechariah was a senior male who held an official position and exercised his office in the temple, the very centre of national life. Mary was young, female, poor, with neither husband nor son to give her any standing, and living in an insignificant village far from Jerusalem. Zechariah was childless because his wife was barren; Mary was childless because she was a virgin. By his question Zechariah implied that 'This can't happen', while Mary by her question simply asked

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina series, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1991, p.38.

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how it was to happen. Zechariah was held in his doubt by being made dumb, while Mary spoke the eloquent acceptance, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'.

The greeting of the angel is quite beautiful and euphonious in Greek (chaire kechairitomene), but difficult to translate. The nearest one can come to a literal translation is 'Hail, Graced Lady'. 'Full of grace' comes from the Vulgate Latin and runs the serious danger of the reading-in of far too much later theology concerning grace (and this in fact happened). Johnson proposes 'Hail, Gifted Lady' and suggests that the plain meaning is given by the gospel itself, 'Hail, you who have found favour with God'.

Zechariah was disturbed by the angel's presence (tarasso), while Mary was even more disturbed by the angel's words (diatarasso).

The message of the angel was given to Mary in two stages. At first she was told that her child would be the Messiah, for the term 'son of God' was used of the Messiah and also of angels, kings, prophets and others. Then, after her question concerning how things were to happen, she was told that her child would be 'Son of God' in a far more literal sense, for the Holy Spirit would come upon her; this was entirely without precedent.

The virginal conception of Jesus is affirmed, but it is set forth in order to explain something about Jesus, not primarily about Mary: 'therefore he shall be called God's Son'.<sup>2</sup>

Fitzmyer also points out that the literary composition of Luke's infancy narrative belongs to the third stage of tradition, and so is a poor basis on which to attempt to answer questions concerning the Mary of history, the first stage of tradition.<sup>3</sup> This comment must be applied in a particular way to the words, 'I do not know a man'. In itself it is a simple statement of fact, indicating only that Mary did not at that time have sexual relations with a man, and it would be wrong to read into it statements about her psychological condition or future intentions.

In this scene the story of redemption passes from a senior male to an unknown and unimportant junior female. It passes from the temple in Jerusalem to an obscure village. And yet Mary is greater than Zechariah, as her son will be greater than his.

For Luke the story had to begin in the temple in Jerusalem (and it will end in the same place in 24:53), but it has quickly moved to an insignificant village, for this is a divine story that will overturn all human expectations.

Chaire kechairitomene: *'Hail, Graced Lady, the one who has found favour with God.'*

*In our own dealings with God we are capable of both replies: 'This can't happen' and 'How is this to happen?'*

*'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'*

*You are going about your daily duties in your home when an angel appears, uses beautiful words about you and tells you that you are to play an important part in a special divine plan. This could be the basis of a nice daydream, but imagine that it actually happens. Imagine that there is a real divine plan for this world and you are being thrust into a crucial and central role, with little in the way of explanation and without knowing what will be asked of you. In real life, not in a daydream, how will you respond? Would you at least want the answers to a whole series of questions before you responded? And yet there is a divine plan for this world and you do have your part in it, a part that no one else can supply for you.*

*Last Christmas I watched part of the Carols in the Park celebration on television. It was a real family affair and the Christmas spirit was present in abundance. There was nothing at all that I objected to. And yet I couldn't help noticing that only a few of the carols mentioned the birth of Jesus. It was announced that a radio survey had shown that the most popular carol is 'Jingle Bells', with 'Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer' second. There is a vast secular Christmas in Australia. I don't like its commercialism and there is far too much alcohol consumed, but otherwise it has many positive elements to recommend it and I am glad it exists. But I have to fight to ensure that my own personal Christmas is centred on the birth of Jesus.*

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### 1:39-56 – THE VISITATION

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So far in this gospel we have had the announcements to Zechariah and Mary, both concerning the birth of a baby. The first was met with scepticism, the second with faith. Now the two stories are brought together. The sceptical man was still dumb and is left out, and it was the strong women of faith who now met each other. In their sharing of their stories faith became knowledge, testimony and celebration. In that celebration there was already present the beginnings

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph A Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, The Anchor Bible, Vol.1, 340-341.

<sup>3</sup> Fitzmyer, 341.



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of the future community that would celebrate through a sharing of faith.

The baby in the womb and his mother became prophets, for the baby leapt with joy and the mother was filled with the Spirit. Elizabeth did not bless Mary, but twice declared that she was already blessed by God – because she was the ‘mother of my Lord’ and because she had faith. Brendan Byrne suggests that the canticles in Luke’s gospel are like arias in an opera, when the action ceases for a time while a person in the opera comments on the action and expresses his or her feelings concerning it.

The Magnificat borrows much from the canticle of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, when Hannah’s barrenness was taken away by God and she became the mother of Samuel. Mary’s hymn begins with praise of God for looking on one of the anawim and, by gracious gift, raising her so high that she will be blessed for all generations to come. It then moves on to praise of God’s mercy, not just for her, but for ‘those who fear him’.

In obvious dependence on the canticle of Hannah, the Magnificat speaks of the reversal of human values that flows from this. The proud will be scattered in the thoughts of their heart, the powerful brought down from their thrones, the rich sent away empty. Instead, the lowly will be lifted up and the hungry filled with good things. The hymn finally moves to the blessings that God has given (and through her is now giving again) to all the people of Israel in accordance with the promises once made to their father Abraham.

A favourite device of Luke, particularly prominent in Acts,<sup>4</sup> is to bring together two individuals, both of whom have had a religious experience that they only partly understand. When they share their experience, individual experience becomes community experience and in the process finds full meaning.<sup>5</sup>

*Think of occasions when you were part of a group discussing some event you had all shared, and in the discussion you all came to a deeper understanding. Did individual experience become community experience? And was this community experience a richer individual experience?*

*If you want to become friends with someone, the most essential thing is that over a period of time you both tell your personal stories, and the depth of the friendship will depend to a large*

*extent on the depth of the stories told. Here Mary and Elizabeth told the most important stories they knew, and the sharing of stories became knowledge, testimony and celebration.*

*The Magnificat is a hymn of spontaneous praise. It anticipates many later themes of this gospel, especially the reversal of human values that Jesus will bring and the social revolution implicit in this that Luke will accent. It invites us to the same spontaneous praise for our own lives.*

*Like most human beings, I can easily dwell on the problems in my life and the difficulties I face. And yet, if I stop to think, there is also a long list of good things that have happened, advantages that I have been given, blessings that have been poured out on me. What would I say if I composed my own Magnificat for my life?*

*We are reminded again of the ‘promises made to Abraham’, all the promises made more than a thousand years earlier that were now being fulfilled.*

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#### **1:57-80 – THE BIRTH OF JOHN**

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The prophecy of the angel in 1:13 was fulfilled and Elizabeth gave birth to a son. The note of joy in this infancy narrative is again stressed as the neighbours rejoiced with her.

Village life and its pressures enter into the story, for the literal translation of the Greek would say that, even before the boy was officially named, the villagers ‘were (continually) naming him Zechariah’ according to custom. But Elizabeth stood against custom and declared that he would be called John. Then dumb Zechariah settled the question by writing ‘His name is John’, meaning ‘The Lord’s gracious gift’. Convention had to give way to the new reality created by God, so rejoicing turned to amazement.

As soon as Zechariah had in this manner shown that he was now obedient to the angel’s commands, his punishment was taken away and he could speak. At this marvel the amazement of the villagers turned to fear or awe. The villagers asked, ‘What then will this child become?’ and the Benedictus that follows will be the answer to this question. We are told that Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and that what he spoke was a prophecy.

There is a practical problem with the Benedictus, for in the Greek it consists of only two very long and involved sentences (68-75 and 76-79). It is very difficult to be faithful to the Greek and at the same time give a clear, simple and coherent English translation.

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<sup>4</sup> See Acts 8:26-40; 9:1-19; 10:1-11; 15:1-35.

<sup>5</sup> Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God. A Reading of Luke’s Gospel*, St Paul’s Publications, Sydney, 2000, p.24.

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It begins as a traditional blessing prayer, praising God and then giving the reasons for the praise. Two reasons are given. The first is that God has visited the people, that is, there has been a special divine intervention into human affairs. The second is that God has then raised up 'a horn of salvation'. In Europe and the Middle East the bull was the largest and most powerful animal, and when it tossed its horns, this was a symbol of great strength, so the 'horn' is here a symbol of power. The 'horn' appears to be a symbol of Jesus the strong Messiah; his proximate coming is the second reason for giving praise to God.

Then, in an involved series of subsidiary clauses, the canticle relates these two grounds of praise to the covenant and oath given to Abraham. In this it repeats the message of the Magnificat that what is now happening is the fulfilment of promises made long ago. The purpose of the promises was that the people 'might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days'. This specific purpose would now be fulfilled through the birth of John and the proximate coming of Jesus.

Zechariah then turns to his newborn son and, in the second sentence of the canticle, makes a prophecy concerning him. Largely he repeats the prophecy given by the angel in 1:15-17. The important addition is that the preparation carried out by John will consist primarily in a knowledge that comes through a release from sins. The coming Messiah is described as a rising light that has already begun to shine and, like Mary, Zechariah speaks of liberation as already present.

*We complain that God is too far away. If God appears to come a little closer, there is joy. If God comes closer still, this turns to amazement. But if God comes even closer, our response turns to fear. We want God closer, but not too close. What do these universal attitudes to God's presence say about our ideas of God?*

*It is easy to fall into the habit of prayer as asking for things. Zechariah gives an example of a different kind of prayer – a prayer of spontaneous praise and then a meditation on the reasons for this praise.*

*Good prayer will always in some manner contain the five elements suggested by the word ALTAR – Adoration, Love, Thanksgiving, Asking and Reconciliation. At times one of these elements may be more to the fore than others, but it is good if all five are always present and in balance. Here we have two canticles in which adoration, love and thanksgiving are emphasised.*

*We are invited to serve God 'without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days'.*

*We prepare for the coming of Jesus into our lives through a knowledge that comes through a release from sins (vv. 76-77). When I fully acknowledge that something I have done has caused real harm both to my neighbour and myself, I understand myself better. When I understand that through reconciliation God has released me from this sin, I then understand God, myself and my neighbour better. This is the 'knowledge that comes through a release from sins' and it is essential if I am to be open to the coming of Jesus into my life.*

*'What then will this child become?' What are we invited to become in our own world?*

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## 2:1-20 – THE BIRTH OF JESUS

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The scene is introduced by the mention of Augustus, hailed as the saviour of the world because he brought peace (*Pax Augustana*) after many years of civil war. Paradoxically, it was Augustus who, through his census, would ensure that the true saviour of the world, the one who brought a deeper peace, would be born in the city where David had been born.

The scene that follows shows the starkest contrast between, on the one hand, the glory and opulence of the world of Caesar, the expectations of the Jewish people concerning the glorious birth of the Messiah and the glory of the heavenly host and, on the other hand, the harsh reality of two poor travellers who arrived too late to find a place in the caravansary and had to lodge with the animals when their baby arrived at the worst possible time. And yet this baby would save the world in a way that would be totally beyond Augustus.

The first persons to be told of the event were the shepherds who worked in the fields surrounding the city from whence David the shepherd became king. Because shepherds lived in the fields, they were seen in the same light as many gypsies are often seen today – as untrustworthy and thieving. Because the very nature of their life made it impossible for them to fulfil all the requirements of the law, a number of scribes saw them as sinners. And yet in this story they were the first to be told of the new and greater shepherd-king.

They were told to find a baby in a manger – unusual enough to be distinctive, enabling them to find him. The fulfilment of the smaller prophecy that they would find a baby in a manger became the sign of the greater promise



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that this baby was Lord, Messiah and Saviour. The first two terms have already been used of Jesus in this gospel and the new term is that of Saviour, the very title that Augustus reserved for himself.

The shepherds went away rejoicing, and it was Mary who was left pondering everything in her heart. That she did not understand everything that had happened will be shown in 2:33 when she will meet Simeon in the temple and 2:50 when she will find Jesus in the temple, so the emphasis is still on the woman who had to live by faith rather than knowledge.

The drama of divine paradox continues: barren Elizabeth has given birth to the prophet of the new age; dumb Zachary has spoken poetry; now it is time for the virgin to bring forth the promised one of God.<sup>6</sup>

*Take all the fairy lights out of the Christmas story and we are left with two poor travellers whose baby was born among the animals because there was no room for them elsewhere. In modern Australia the media would feature this story and it would lead to a parliamentary enquiry! Serious questions would be asked concerning how this could happen and whose fault it was. And yet all the glory of God was present.*

*When the Son of God was born into this world and the heavenly host watched in awe, the world slept.*

*There are four occasions in the first two chapters of Luke when we are told that Mary did not understand what was happening: 1:29, 2:19, 2:33, 2:48-50, and together they form a consistent pattern. So Luke's message is less about her special privileges and more about her as a woman of faith, caught up into a divine plan, given very little in the way of explanation and having to live by faith.*

*Here Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart, and we can do the same with this story.*

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## **2:21-40 – THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE**

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The overall spirit of this scene is of traditional Jewish piety as the parents observed all the requirements of the law. Luke uses the words 'the law of Moses' or 'the law of the Lord' nine times in his gospel, and five of those nine occur in this one scene. All the persons in this scene belonged to the anawim, the poor and faithful remnant that had remained steadfast. It is they who were the carriers of the story of

salvation at this moment when the Messiah first entered the temple.

The circumcision of Jesus on the eighth day is treated briefly, with the accent placed on the naming rather than on the circumcision.

The rest of the passage then combines two events that ought to have been separate: the purification of the mother after the birth (Lev.12:1-8) and the presentation of the newborn child to the Lord (Ex.13:1, 11-16). The parents made the poor persons' offering of a pair of doves.

On several occasions Luke adds a story about a woman when he has one about a man, and he does so here, so that two prophetic figures welcomed the child. Both were devout members of the anawim.

Simeon presents himself as a watchman posted to await an arrival, and at long last the expected person had arrived in the form of this baby. Simeon saw this as giving meaning to his whole life, and there was nothing else for him to await or do. He pronounced a canticle (29-32) and an oracle (34-35).

The canticle contains the first of two important new themes in this passage. The Benedictus of Zechariah had spoken of God looking favourably on his people (i.e. the people of Israel) and redeeming them, but Simeon placed 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' before any consolation of the people of Israel. This idea is startling in a scene that comes out of traditional Jewish piety: it will be a powerful theme throughout the gospel.

The oracle announced the second new theme, arising from the first. Precisely because Jesus would reach out to the whole world, he would become a sign of contradiction to his own people. Indeed, Simeon put 'falling' before 'rising', and spoke of a sword piercing the heart of the mother. The dominant theme of Luke's infancy narrative is one of joy, but it has its foreboding elements, and this is one of them. The sword probably refers to the way in which Mary would have to surrender her child to his higher destiny, as we shall see in the very next scene.

The female prophet then arrived to complement the male one. Her task was to spread the news of the birth of the Saviour, as the news of the birth of John had been spread widely. 'The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.'<sup>7</sup> Some twelve years are summarised in these words and they prepare the way for the next scene.

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<sup>6</sup> Denis McBride, *op. cit.*, p.36.

<sup>7</sup> Lk 2: 40.

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*The anawim are important in the infancy narrative and are seen as the true Israelites, the true carriers of the story of salvation. Who are the anawim in the Church today? How do we recognise them? What message do they have for us today? Where are they to be found in the fury of conflict between 'progressives' and 'conservatives'?*

*Mary and Joseph obeyed the law exactly and in all things, but it was never an end in itself, always a means to the end of total commitment to God.*

*Despite all the problems today, I am still moved when I meet a young couple glowing with pride and joy over their baby, but deeply wanting God to be part of their story.*

*There are fortunate people who, like Simeon, know that their time has come to leave this world and can do so without anger or regrets. This is a grace to pray for. In line with this, I also pray that I will know when the time has come to leave a position of authority and hand it on to someone else, or to leave the place where I live and move to a nursing home or whatever else may be required. Am I ready to do this?*

*Jesus came for the whole world rather than for any one people. This is just as true for the church today as it was for the people of Israel. It follows that the church is not the goal of its own strivings; this goal is the kingly rule of God in the whole world. It was this kingly rule of God within the hearts of all people that Jesus wanted above all else and his whole message was directed towards this end. The kingly rule of God was the end and the church, or community of the followers of Jesus, was no more than a means to this end. It could never be the end in itself. If it ever in any way became an end in itself, the message of Jesus was being distorted. This would certainly happen if the two ideas of the kingly rule of God and the church were treated as being one and the same thing.*

*Even today many Christians seem to reflect a dualism between church and world, and seek to defend the church against the world instead of reaching out to the world. The great Lutheran martyr of the Second World War, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, spoke strongly of the consequences of this dualism:*

*The attack by Christian apologetic upon the adulthood of the world I consider to be in the first place pointless, in the second ignoble and in the third un-Christian<sup>8</sup>.... The place of religion is taken by the Church ... but the world is made to depend upon itself and left to its own devices, and that is all wrong.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Fontana, London, 1953, p.108.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p.95.

*Other writers speak of a 'churchianity'<sup>10</sup> that turns in upon itself and does not sufficiently look outwards. And yet the church exists for the sake of the world and is at the service of the world. As one writer has put it, God is concerned with the world, not really with the church as different from the world<sup>11</sup>. The church is not primarily an institution or an experience of ritual and worship or a belief system. It is primarily an offer of life to the whole world and the whole cosmos. If it is not this, it is failing in its task.*

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## **2:41-52 – THE BOY JESUS IN THE TEMPLE**

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No longer part of the infancy narrative but not yet part of the adult ministry of Jesus, this scene forms the bridge between the two, as all the extraordinary things that have been said about the child began to stir within him and he began to be conscious of his calling. The scene occurs at the time when in Jewish law he was on the verge of accepting adult religious responsibilities.

The story is told well, and strong Greek words highlight the pain and anxiety of the parents. It all leads up to a very mysterious phrase in which the crucial word is quite simply missing:

*'Did you not know that it is necessary for me to be in the of my father?'*

Various interpreters supply the words 'house' or 'affairs' or more vaguely 'things', but the phrase retains its mystery and one is left wondering why Luke did not supply a word himself. Or did he deliberately leave us with the vagueness and mystery? The rest of the gospel shows that Luke is a very careful writer, so the presumption must be that this phrase is exactly what he intended.

What is certain is that the child felt a sense of obligation: 'It is necessary' (dei). This word will occur again at crucial moments: 'It is necessary that I proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also' (4:43); 'It is necessary that the Son of Man undergo great suffering' (9:22); 'But first it is necessary that he endure much suffering' (17:25).

On the part of Mary and Joseph this necessity created shock, anguish and confusion as they struggled to understand. There is an almost brutal contrast between the words

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<sup>10</sup> cf. Edmund Flood, *Work and the Gospel*. The Tablet, 4 May 1991, pp.538540.

<sup>11</sup> Johannes Metz, *Theology of the World*. Herder and Herder, New York. 1969, p.50, note 51.

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of Mary, 'your father and I', and the words of Jesus, 'my Father's affairs'. On the part of the adolescent boy there was a tension between his duty to his parents and the pull of his higher vocation. For Mary 'Be it done to me according to your word' now meant that she would have to surrender her child to his mission. It is inevitable that the 'it is necessary' he already felt at age twelve would become stronger and stronger.

Jesus then returned to Nazareth and was subject to his parents, growing in wisdom, age and favour with God. The calling was there but a further period of growing and preparation was necessary.

*Try to put yourself within the mind of a twelve year old who is already powerfully drawn by a necessity to exist in the world of a different Father, and yet knows that he still needs to grow 'in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour'.*

*'I must be in the of my father.' Why would Luke deliberately write a sentence like this with the crucial word missing? What message might he be attempting to convey to us?*

*Rather than say that Jesus was deliberately cruel to his parents, should we see this as the story of a boy-man struggling to find his own identity and caught between powerful forces that he did not understand? Are we not sometimes in that same situation?*

*Are there times when we feel a tension between our ordinary selves and a call within us to rise to something greater, to live 'in the of' God?*

*Are there times when, like Mary, we may think we have given everything to God, only to find that God is asking more of us?*