

Beginning with Luke (PF) - Luke 1:1-4
Wednesday 5th September 2007

Wherever you go – and whatever you do, it's hard to miss one thing about modern British society – it's multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-ethnic – multi-faceted.

And as a nation – we've embraced this. Quite rightly we're recognised that you can't just have white people on TV with those rather plummy accents reading the news and - implicitly or otherwise – telling us what it is to be English – you've also got to have people who use proper, short vowel sounds – and who represent the mix of races that makes up the UK.

And we've recognised the value of the ethnic communities around us – whether it's our historic – or our modern – Polish Community around the Northwich area, or the many, many different ethnicities around North London where I used to live – we can see the value of this melting pot of cultures – and the way in which it enriches our own culture.

There is much to celebrate about being multi-cultural. And yet at the same time – perhaps we're not so sure about all that comes with it. You see – we're told – we're not only a multi-cultural society – we're also multi-religious. And more than that – we're not just multi-religious – we're also pluralist – we're not to just tolerate other religions – we're not even to recognise that other religions might contain some truth – we're also to accept that every religion can be true in it's own terms – in the claims that it makes.

And that, understandably makes us uncomfortable. Particularly when – as is now beginning to happen – anyone who disagrees with this pluralist - and increasingly relativist agenda – is accused of being bigoted – extremist – arrogant – and might even be doing something illegal.

We've moved from toleration of those we disagree with – to having to agree with those we tolerate – otherwise we're not being tolerant.

So what are we to do as Christians? What are we to do when our truth claims are exclusive? For example:

John 14:⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.

Turn with me to Luke 1, verse 1 – on page 1025 of the bibles in the chairs – as we seek out an answer – and as we begin to familiarize ourselves with Luke's gospel.

We ask ourselves – **What is Luke's Gospel?**

Look at verse 1 and 2 with me. Luke is

1. An eye-witness account of Jesus' life and ministry (v1-2)

Luke 1:1 Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word.

As he begins his account, Luke acknowledges that his is not the first gospel. It probably postdates Mark's gospel, as it looks like Luke has used some of Mark's material, often summarizing what Mark says in more detail.

It may have been written after Matthew – or before – or more likely around the same time, but in a different place – with the same kind of sources being used by both authors – Mark, and some other traditions – and then Matthew and Luke both having access to other material.

For example – look at the accounts of Jesus' birth in Luke and Matthew – Luke has the shepherds – Matthew the Magi.

So Luke has written his account of Jesus' life and ministry – the things that have been fulfilled among us. He probably wrote it in the mid 60's AD – we think this because of when Acts finishes – before Paul was martyred – and we believe Paul to have been martyred under Nero in the late 60's AD.

But although he's writing after the events, Luke is speaking to eyewitnesses, and using what they have written.

By the way – we know a little about Luke himself. Look at the greetings Paul sends in the letter to the Colossians:

*Colossians 4:*¹⁰ *My fellow-prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)* ¹¹ *Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. **These are the only Jews among my fellow-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me.*** ¹² *Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.* ¹³ *I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.* ¹⁴ ***Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.***

Luke is the doctor, Paul's dear friend. He is also a Gentile – a non-Jew – Paul lists the Jews that were with him first. He is a companion of Paul, and some of the passage we read in the book of Acts are in the first person – showing that Luke was with Paul during some of his journeys. For example:

*Acts 20:*⁷ *On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.*

So Luke writes an eyewitness account of Jesus' life – and then goes on in Acts to talk about the early church. He's a companion of Paul, and he writes his gospel in the mid 60's AD

2. Carefully investigated and Orderly (v3)

The second thing we notice here is that Luke had written a careful and orderly account. Look at verse 3:

*Luke 1:*³ *Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,*

So Luke has a look at the sources – and he writes his gospel. He investigates it carefully. Remember he is a doctor – and his method would be to try to carefully access what was wrong with his patients.

Here, he looks at the sources. He writes as a historian – he talks about sources like a historian, and he is conscious of writing an orderly account – which starts at the beginning and goes through to the end.

When we look at Luke, we can see this careful organization:

Luke breaks down into 5 sections:

The Early Life of Jesus and John (1:1-2:52)

Jesus prepares for his Ministry (3:1-4:13)

We'll come back to these two sections in a minute

Who Jesus is – in Galilee (4:14-9:50)

Luke focused on the revelation of who Jesus is – by what he says and does – in Galilee. This section includes things like the calming of the storm, the teaching on the plain – and climaxes with Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ.

Following Jesus – to Jerusalem (9:51-19:44)

This new section is marked by Luke in this way:

Luke 9:⁵¹ As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

And on the way to Jerusalem – the disciples learn what is going to happen there, and what it means to follow Jesus. It is in this section of Luke that we learn about the Prodigal Son, and the Good Samaritan.

Death and Life in Jerusalem (19:45-24:53)

When Jesus gets to Jerusalem, he teaches – and we read about the Last Supper, his arrest, trial, death and resurrection. Luke ends with the ascension – which is where Acts begins.

Luke has planned his account – he's structured the material to teach us about Who Jesus is, and what it means to follow him, to show how God has worked his plan of salvation.

We can have confidence in Luke. This isn't just good theology – it's also good history. We can believe what it says here – it comes from people who saw what happened, and it's written down by a reliable man, superintended of course by God.

Then, thirdly

3. From the Beginning (v3)

Look at verse 3 again:

*Luke 1:³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything **from the beginning**, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,*

Luke the historian wants to get everything in order for us – and that is why he writes so much about John the Baptist and Jesus – even before they were born. In Luke we have to wait 87 verses for Jesus to be born – because Luke recognizes that the beginning comes before Jesus was born.

It comes even before Jesus was conceived – of course God’s plan stretches back to eternity – but the first showings of it breaking through come relate to John the Baptist.

In fact - as we’ll see in Home groups next week – the first person to find out about what is coming is Zechariah, John’s father.

So Luke reaches back to the beginning – and that’s why we’re beginning with Luke with Luke. He didn’t just include this material for colour – he included it because he knew it was important, because it tells us about how God is working his purpose out – how he is fulfilling all things in Jesus Christ.

Now I don’t want to anticipate too much what we’re looking at over the next few weeks, but a few things to notice as you go through the material.

Notice how sections about John and Jesus parallel each other in chapter 1 and into chapter 2 – announcements of birth – and how these parallels show up how much superior Jesus is to John. John’s birth is miraculous in that Zechariah and Elizabeth were old and Elizabeth barren – but Jesus is God’s son – and so on.

Notice how chapter 2 focuses in on Jesus – and finishes with his own self-understanding at age 12.

And then notice how in chapter 3, the adult Jesus is prepared for ministry – a ministry which begins in chapter 4.

So we have:

- A. The Birth of Jesus and John (1:5-2:20)**
- B. Jesus in the Temple – as baby and boy (2:21-52)**
- C. John prepares the way for Jesus – the Son of God (3:1-38)**

And all the time we’re going through Luke 1-3 – think about why Luke put this material in – and what it teaches us about God’s plan for salvation.

So what do we have here? Luke’s gospel is:

- 1. An eye-witness account of Jesus’ life and ministry (v1-2)**
- 2. Carefully investigated and Orderly (v3)**
- 3. From the Beginning (v3)**

And finally it is

- 4. For Theophilus, For Us, for Assurance (v4)**

Luke writes to Theophilus:

Luke 1:⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Now we don’t know exactly who Theophilus was, but he is the most excellent Theophilus – which suggests someone important – and he was someone who had been taught the faith. He was perhaps from a Gentile background like Luke, someone who was probably a fairly new Christian.

And in his situation, he’d have been facing all sorts of questions. How did Christianity fit in with Judaism – and why were many Jews opposed to Christianity? What about the Roman authorities –

was this something they were going to tolerate - or would problems come - and if they did - what then?

Remember that in the mid 60's AD, Christianity had only been around for 30 years - and had only really traveled outside Palestine and that area quite recently. Where did followers of Jesus fit in? Where did Christ fit in - to a society which honoured many gods, including Caesar.

Now Luke didn't just write for Theophilus. He wrote an account to go alongside others.

And he didn't just write for his own day. See the connections between what Theophilus and his contemporaries were facing - and what we face.

The challenges of a pluralist society - which doesn't just say there are many ways to God - or many gods - but which also challenges absolute claims - and then makes other counterclaims.

Remember the words of Herod to Jesus:

John 18:³⁷ "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." ³⁸ "What is truth?" Pilate asked.

What is truth says Herod - a very modern statement. And then Christians are persecuted for refusing to say that Caesar is Lord.

In our day we might put the question 'What is truth' alongside a refusal to say '*Secularism is Lord, and religion a matter of personal preference, just a matter of faith*'

So Luke writes for Theophilus and for us into this kind of situation. What is his answer?

To give the facts - to write it down from the beginning - to show how things happened - to show how God has been and is at work - to give assurance that what we believe to be true is true.

Illustration - being shown that something is true

And so as we read Luke's gospel - we are being prepared for what is ahead - we are being equipped to face the realities of modern living - because we're being told the truth, and that truth leads us to Jesus - to what he did and said, to who he is, to why he died on the cross.

As we read these early chapters of Luke - we recognize God's hand at work - often in small things, and we trust that he is at work in us

We recognize God's faithfulness to his promises and his compassion for his people - and we are reassured, knowing that whatever we face - God is with us - as he was with Zechariah and Elizabeth and Joseph and Mary - and Simeon and Anna - and many other faithful Israelites.

We recognize that God is sovereign - he has planned all things from the beginning - and so we can trust in him, and follow him - and be obedient to him - even if that means falling foul of the authorities - because Jesus is Lord, not Caesar.