

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2010 (May 16 – May 23)

'You are witnesses of these things' (Luke 24:48)

Sermon notes on Luke 24

A The gospel of Luke (Luke)



Luke 24 ends the first of two volumes by the same author: the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. The prologue (Luke 1:1-4) could refer to both. It follows good literary practice of the time and states as its aim: to convince the reader that the depiction of events contained in these writings is an authentic and comprehensive reflection of those events. The readers were presumably people who were at home in the Greek language. The writer was aiming predominantly at non-Jews, and it is assumed

that Luke and Acts were written outside of Palestine. The writer emphasizes that these writings are based on the accounts of eye-witnesses. It can be presumed that Luke was written some time after 70 CE (the destruction of Jerusalem), though views on the exact date differ widely.

The attempt to portray events as an historical record serves to undergird the soteriological "truth" that is at the core of Luke and Acts: that the "things about Jesus of Nazareth" (Luke 24:19), the story spanning the time from his birth to his ascension, is the fulfilment of prophecy as documented in the Hebrew scriptures and the foundation on which the Church is built. The Jesus story is the pivot of history. In Jesus, salvation becomes accessible to all nations, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles/and for glory to your people Israel" (from the words of Simeon in Luke 2:32; cf. Luke 24:47).

Striking features of Luke's gospel include the detailed account of events surrounding Jesus' birth (depicting it as the fulfilment of prophecy), the number of chapters devoted to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27), the attention paid to the stories of women, and the number of accounts depicting Jesus' concern for the marginalised.

B Luke 24: overview

The chapter covers three scenes or stories: the women at the tomb, the encounter on the road to Emmaus, and the appearance of Jesus to those gathered in Jerusalem.

In each of these stories there is a pattern:

1. dismay, despondency, fear;
2. then the reminder (by the angels in the case of the women, then twice by Jesus himself) that the events of these days had been foretold;
3. then the opening of their eyes to the fact that the events surrounding Jesus were part of the bigger plan of salvation, and/or the recognition of Jesus himself;
4. finally, the respective protagonists become witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection, and to the gospel message of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (24:47).

C Luke 24: notes

1. vv. 1-12

First of all it was the women who were the "witnesses to these things."

The account really begins in 23:50. It was "the women who had come with him from Galilee" who stayed on, along with Jesus' acquaintances, when the spectacle of the crucifixion was over. It was "the women who had come with him from Galilee" who followed Joseph of Arimathea to see where Jesus would be buried, and who prepared spices and ointments to take to the burial site when the Sabbath had passed. This is where Luke 24 begins.

The women had undergone the hard journey with Jesus, and they stayed with him when others left. They were concerned not to let the shocking events rob Jesus of the dignity of a proper burial.

The reference to spices and ointments (23:56) reminds us of the account of the woman anointing Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50).

A possible reflection: on women's ministries / contributions to the ecumenical movement / current contributions in our parishes / women and prayer (drawing on the women Christian mystics, as well as contemporary traditions)

Vv. 7-8 reveal that the women had been recipients of the teachings of Jesus about his coming death and resurrection – they are told to “remember” – and they do. This is worth noting, considering that other passages in Luke create the impression that only the twelve were told about these things (e.g. 18:31-34).

It “seemed to them [the apostles] an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (v.11).

Reflection: Any reflection on women’s contributions to ministry should encompass their lack of visibility, along with the frequent failure to take women’s contributions seriously and acknowledge them. Thus a celebration of these contributions could be apt, along with an act of repentance for their being ignored or rejected, as well as thankfulness for how far we have come. If the women in the story had kept quiet, thinking “they’ll never believe us anyway,” what would have been the outcome? This is an encouragement to women in the church – along with youth and others who do not belong to the dominant group – to be bold, not fearful.

The experience of rejection / humiliation is known to other groups that are not in majority leadership in the church, e.g. Indigenous people in Australia. What are our churches missing out on because the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians – like those of many women – are barely visible to the rest of us?

At the level of the narrative, the disciples’ disbelief of the women’s account provides a motive for Peter to run to the tomb and verify it, adding credibility to the story.

2. vv. 13-27

Their eyes were kept from recognizing him.



Jesus’ seemingly innocent questions give the writer a great opportunity to recall the substance of all the previous chapters, this time using the voice of the eye-witnesses themselves.

Jesus “came near and went with them” – even though the Emmaus disciples did not know it was he. Jesus must have longed to comfort them, but he waited till they invited him into their home. It was there that the eyes of the Emmaus disciples were opened. For those

disciples, the stranger's genuine listening and his natural authority provided the impetus to become vulnerable, opening themselves up to his presence.

The disciples' inability to perceive the meaning of Jesus' words, and the indication that they are kept from understanding, is a common theme in Luke – see 9:45 and 18:31-34. Similarly, their failure to "recognize" Jesus (v.16) is due to the fact that their eyes are kept from seeing, and it is when their eyes are opened that they recognize him (v.31). The Greek word used for "recognize" is the same as is used in Luke 1:4 – to "know" the truth. It implies knowing something through and through, a deep connection with something we have encountered already but have not yet made sense of.

Reflection: What things keep us from recognizing Jesus in each other and in those people who are barely visible in our society?
What kept the Emmaus disciples from recognizing him – was it the dominance of their own story, their fear, their acceptance of defeat?
Are we preoccupied with our own story?
What can help us to cultivate that sense of expectant wonder and surprise, giving us detachment from our everyday lives? Prayer? Other forms of meditation? Worship? The Eucharist/Communion? Reflecting on the stories and other texts of the Bible? Taking time to listen to those whose stories we would not normally hear?
How can we invite Jesus to open our eyes and ears so that the dominant narrative around us is not the one that dominates our lives?

3. vv. 28-35

Hospitality

The detailed account of what may have been culturally quite accepted practice (i.e. inviting a stranger to stay) is interesting. Jesus would not have been revealed to them if they had not invited him, a stranger, into their home. In the light of developments that had taken place in Jerusalem, this invitation was not to be taken for granted.

The meal together is central. Hospitality is the key that opens the door so that our eyes can be opened by the stranger we let in (v.31).

When our eyes are opened, we recognise the plan of God in hindsight, though it may not be visible to us along the way.

Reflection: The Eucharist is the meal in which Jesus shares himself with us. Yet it is also the Eucharist which still leads to some of the deepest divisions between our churches. How can we show deep hospitality to each other even when we cannot (yet) share in the Eucharist?

4. vv. 36-42

The risen Jesus in flesh and blood among us

We so often expect Jesus to be other-worldly but he appears as flesh and blood among us. The theme of hospitality in terms of food recurs in vv. 41-42, with a different accent: part of the proof of the resurrection. When we minister to those in need, is it in some way a confirmation and celebration of the resurrection?

The apostles' reaction is a mixture of terror, joy and disbelief. The word for "disbelieving" is the same one that is used in v.11, when it is said that the apostles "did not believe" the women. Their faith had been severely shaken by the persecution and killing of their leader. The writer is making sure that any "disbelief" on the part of the reader is dispelled.

Reflection: The apostles believe Jesus when he opens their "minds" to understand the scriptures (v.46). Belief is not some transcendent quality beyond our intellect. Our whole selves, thinking included, are part of it. We do not turn off our minds when we open the Bible or walk into church.

5. vv.46-49

To what do we witness?



"Repentance and the forgiveness of sins" is the core of the gospel message. It is not a new message but is at the heart of Jewish faith. God's message of love extends beyond the Jewish faith to all people but confirms that faith rather than negating it. Jesus was not trying to start a new religion but confirming prophecy that took the message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins to a dimension beyond the people of Israel ("all nations" v. 47, cf. Eph. 3:1 and Rom. 16:4 – the same phrase is translated

as "Gentiles"), in the name of the Christ, the one who was sent. This is at the heart of Luke.

Repentance – *metanoia* – implies a turning around, a change of heart and life – a turning toward something/someone, e.g. Acts 20:21 "repentance towards God" – and in Luke 24:47 could also be translated as "repentance *towards* the forgiveness of sins". The concept of journey and transition thus becomes visible. Something happens in a person's life upon repentance. In Luke 7:36-50 the woman who anoints Jesus' feet shows "great love" for having been forgiven. Repentance, forgiveness and a change of lifestyle are inseparable. The first step in any repentance is seeing and accepting the way we have been living, i.e. taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions.

Reflection: In our day we have become conscious of the need to repent of our sins not only against God and each other but also against God's creation, the environment in which we live and for which we are accountable to God.

"Witnesses" have the task of lending credibility to claims based on particular events. The claims surround the prophetic role of Jesus as the God-sent bearer of the message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins for all. In Acts 22:15 Saul (later to be called Paul) is told by Ananias that he will be a "witness to all the world" to what he has "seen and heard." Witnesses tell the story of their own experience of something outside themselves.

Reflection: what is the role of storytelling in our churches? What are the riches and pitfalls of publicly testifying to our faith journey? What forms of storytelling might be appropriate and possible today? How can we help those people to tell their story who have felt rejected by the Church, ignored and excluded? How can we help a new story to begin, a story of healing? The stories of the women and of the apostles would have contained brokenness, pain, confusion and lack of faith – just like those of the Emmaus disciples.

According to Luke/Acts the Holy Spirit must be given in order for the mission begun by Jesus to be fulfilled (Acts 2). The term "clothed" is used again in 1 Cor. 15:53, where Paul talks about the perishable body putting on imperishability. What is meant is a change of state, a change of being, not just the addition of a separable layer. So in Luke 24:49, the power with which the apostles are to be "clothed" will become part of them.

6. vv. 50-53

End of story?



Bethany (v.50), the place from which Jesus departs, is the place in which his entry into Jerusalem begins (Luke 19:29). It is situated on the Mount of Olives. The location creates a frame around the account of Jesus' time in Jerusalem, which is essentially the time of his death and resurrection. This is a good example of how the writer fuses details of human history (as he depicts it) with salvation history.

For the disciples and “companions” of Jesus, and for Jesus himself, the Temple was their spiritual home on earth (v.50).

Reflection: It is good to be reminded that for Jesus and the disciples the Jewish Temple was the natural place of worship and theological debate, though Christian communities quickly formed outside of the Temple and in locations other than Jerusalem – a necessity after 70 CE in any case. The early churches lived with this tension of continuity and new beginnings. We see too that from the beginning, the Church has been characterised by diversity, with Christians of Jewish identity and Christians from non-Jewish backgrounds. The Bible testifies to the fact that the apostles recognized the need to face these differences and talk about them (see Acts 11) so that the gospel would not be compromised. The story goes on, and we see that it has never been straightforward!

These sermon notes prepared by Queensland Churches Together in consultation with other members of the Week of Prayer team in Australia.



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