



St Mark's **Review**

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No. 223, February 2013 (1)

Promise and Fulfilment

Preaching the Prophets and Luke's story of Jesus

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Editorial

‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’

According to Matthew’s Gospel, this is the essence of John the Baptist’s opening proclamation (Matthew 3:2). Mark’s and Luke’s Gospels bear this out: ‘And so John came, ... preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ (Mark 1:4). Matthew and Luke record another essential element of the Baptist’s message: ‘Produce fruit in keeping with repentance’ (Luke 3:8).

‘Repent, and then produce fruit in keeping with that repentance!’ Whether they had come out from metropolitan Jerusalem or were from rural Judea, those who went to see and hear John the Baptist should have understood fully his firm injunction to produce fruit. They knew about growing fruit on the vine, good crops and poor returns, vine-dressing, harvesting and the ever-present risks posed by the climate and by predatory animals and voracious birds.

John’s first listeners also knew about the depiction of Israel as God’s vineyard (Isaiah 5:1–7, Psalm 80). They knew about the failure of their own forebears to produce the fruit required by their God in response to his demonstrations of divine mercy and heavenly generosity.

Jesus, in his metaphors as well as in his parables, drew heavily on the imagery of the vine, of vineyards and of people working at different times of the year in the vineyards. He even made a direct link with John’s preaching in the so-called ‘Parable of the Two Sons,’ those who were directed by their father to go and work in the vineyard (Matthew 21:28–32). ‘For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness,’ he said, referring to John’s injunctions to repent, and then to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The force and effect of Jesus’ words are unmistakable: ‘Do as the Father has directed. It is not sufficient to give lip-service to the Father’s commands; the will of the Father must be obeyed.’

‘Repent, and then produce fruit in keeping with repentance!’ These two injunctions remain central to the messages every preacher should be conveying into the new church year. But for those of us charged with proclaiming these messages in the affluent and increasingly urbanised West, the use of

imagery that depicts the production of fruit is probably more picturesque and poetic now than relevant and polemical. A continuing challenge for the followers of Jesus is to re-present the truths of God's Word while using language our audiences are able to hear and figures of speech which to them become real.

The focus of this issue of *St Mark's Review* is predominantly on preaching the word of God in the current church year, namely, Year C in the *Revised Common Lectionary*. The emphasis in this issue is on Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, with two contributions from Jeanette Mathews addressing the mode and meaning of Old Testament prophecy.

In the recent past *St Mark's Review* has presented papers designed to guide and to contribute to preaching during Years A and B ('Fulfilling the Law: Preaching Matthew and Moses' for Year A in *St Mark's Review* No. 216 and "'The Way of the Lord': Preaching the Psalms, Mark and the Catholic Epistles' for Year B in *St Mark's Review* No. 219).

The current issue, like those which have preceded it, draws its contents mainly from the annual preaching seminar conducted by St Mark's National Theological Centre. In this issue of *St Mark's Review* we are fortunate to have an additional paper from A/Professor David Neville which complements his earlier study, "'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me': Preaching from Luke in Year C", which appeared in *St Mark's Review* No. 213.

May you be spiritually inspired and your preaching reinvigorated as you read this issue, and may there be much fruit borne as a consequence of your applying what you learn.

Preaching Luke's Jesus

Geoff Broughton

Single mums and Sunday best

At the turn of the last century a young woman was abandoned by her husband and left with four young children to feed and to raise by herself. Sensing that she could not do this alone or without some divine intervention, the following Sunday she went with the four children to the nearest church, which happened to be an Anglican church. The children were sent off to the largish Sunday school where immediately they sensed they were different. The other children were all dressed in their Sunday best including freshly-shined shoes. These four kids did not own any shoes, let alone have shoes kept especially polished for Sundays. These four children were in clothes of the home-made variety; the clothes were functional, they fitted well but they hardly compared to what the other children were wearing. Certainly they were not 'Sunday best'. On collecting the children from Sunday school, this young mother was seen in earnest conversation with the Sunday school superintendent. That single mother and her four children never returned to that church or any other Anglican church. The next weekend they were welcomed into the local Baptist church - but that's another story.

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Ninety years later, as grandpa reluctantly retold this story for his newly-ordained Anglican grandson, the scars of disappointment felt by that seven year-old boy were discernible still.

Although my great-grandmother was never prepared to talk about it, grandpa was convinced that the children were told they did not fit in. They were too poor, too working class. The not-very-subtle message of that church was, 'don't come back'. I guess being a single mum in the years before the Great War would have added to the family's sense of shame.

Unfortunately for my grandfather and his family, the Anglican church they visited had not learnt Luke's story of Jesus. Luke's Jesus told stories about loving one's neighbours and welcoming prodigals. Luke's Jesus is a prophet who cared deeply about justice. Luke's Jesus is more than a prophet for he is to be encountered through his saving death and resurrection. Luke's Jesus is not only to be recognised and worshipped but also to be followed as Lord. Fortunately for my grandfather's family, then for my father and now for me and my children, there have been other churches that have had a better sense of Luke's story of Jesus.

Jesus' unique teaching: parables of the Kingdom (Luke 10 and Luke 15)

Luke's distinct stories of Jesus centre on two parables: the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Sunday morning is the main context for preaching Jesus' parables. A wider range of opportunities exists, however, to demonstrate who Christians are and why the Church does what it does – essentially what Christian faith means – through preaching Luke's parables told by Jesus. The story below is from the decade I spent working in the inner-city of Sydney: how Luke 10 and Luke's story of the Good Samaritan became important to the Anglican Church in King's Cross and Darlinghurst where I was the associate minister.

The local small businesses in the King's Cross and Darlinghurst area were experiencing street violence; St John's Anglican Church was right in the centre of the action. The Church is located in a neighbourhood comprising the third richest and the fifth poorest areas of Sydney. Similar to many inner-city neighbourhoods around the world, this one has a diverse range of people – international tourists and backpackers, visiting sailors, the wealthy, the influential, the marginalised and people on the street, the elderly, those suffering from addictions and mental health issues – brought together in a small geographical area. Re-gentrification led to increased

conflict. Strife erupted over the proliferation of footpath cafes and *al fresco* dining as people dined on the footpath and not just behind the doors of cafés and restaurants. The outdoor dining displaced the street people who had long-established businesses – primarily sex work and drug dealing – on those very same footpaths. A number of approaches to solve the conflict over these contested spaces, including a stronger police presence and advocacy from the local chamber of commerce, had failed.

St John's Church had a long history of caring for people in need and of working with people who were violent and abusive. Established programs offering alternatives to violence and restorative justice conversations resolved similar issues. The Church hosted a training day for local business owners together with the staff of local government agencies. The training event was attended by nearly 90 participants and began with a Gospel presentation: Luke's story of the Good Samaritan told by Jesus in Luke 10. It was very important for the local Anglican Church to be able to tell this particular story. It was one of those rare moments when local business owners, health professionals and community leaders (including Sydney's Lord Mayor) were able to 'look under the hood' of this local Anglican Church. While our good works with marginalised people were well known in the community, Luke's Jesus, found in this story of the Good Samaritan, displayed the 'engine' of Christian faith. Christians loved their neighbour, not just because they are 'do-gooders'. The Christian Church loved its neighbour because of *who* it followed, who *he* was and what *he* taught. The amount of engagement we had on that day with different people from the local community through that story was truly remarkable.

The distinct teaching of Jesus in Luke introduces the particular shape Luke gives to the story of Jesus.

Luke's Jesus is a prophet (Luke 4:16 and following)

The first thing scholars have noticed is that Luke's Jesus is a prophet. In Jesus' inaugural sermon (Luke 4) he reads from the scroll in the synagogue from Isaiah 6, concluding, 'today this word has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Isaiah's prophecy and its fulfilment is a strong theme in Luke's Gospel.

Jesus the prophet hosts meals between debtors and debt collectors (Luke 5:27–32)

What does it mean for Luke to tell the story of Jesus as a prophet? Luke 5 recounts the calling of the first disciples – including Levi – and the large

and diverse gathering at Levi's house for a banquet. Jesus the prophet is seen sharing meals between debtors and debt collectors. The social and economic scandal is that debtors and debt collectors are brought together around the meal table. It is easy to miss this kind of detail in Luke's stories, this evidence of Jesus' prophetic action. Jesus wasn't just a prophet in word but he was also a prophet in deed. What words might have been spoken around that banquet table – accusations, threats? It is certain that harsh words were spoken but is it possible that mutual understanding also emerged? Was reconciliation achieved as a consequence of debtors and debt collectors actually meeting each other face to face?

Jesus the prophet agreed with the prophet Isaiah that exclusion was deeply unjust. By his words and through his practice of table fellowship he invited people previously excluded. Jesus concluded that it was not the healthy who needed a doctor but the sick. Jesus came to call sinners to repentance, not the already-righteous.

Jesus the prophet cares deeply about exclusion.

Jesus the prophet heals a man's withered hand on the Sabbath (Luke 6:6–11)

A little later Luke shows that Jesus went into the synagogue and found a man with a withered hand. Luke's portrayal of Jesus as a prophet in this Gospel demonstrated that Jesus cared about the injustice of abusive power. The synagogue rulers acted as guardians of people's access to God. In Luke 6 these rules were more concerned about regulating God than this man's hand being restored! In a number of places in Luke's Gospel, Jesus confronts this kind of abuse of religious power and political power.

Jesus the prophet also cares about the injustice of abusive power.

Jesus the prophet consistently practises nonviolence (Luke 13:34 and 19:41)

Jesus is questioned by the disciples of John the Baptist: 'are you the one to come or should we wait for another?' Jesus' answer is a direct quote from Isaiah 61:

go and tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news preached to them.

Jesus sees himself as a prophet fulfilling the ancient prophecies of all God's prophets and in particular of Isaiah. In fulfilling these prophecies Jesus is

consistently a man of peace, even the 'Prince of Peace'. Jesus the prophet consistently practises nonviolence in his words and actions.

Jesus cared deeply about the injustice of violence in this world.

Jesus the prophet confronts the exploitation of those with few resources by those with an abundance (Luke 21:1–4)

The fourth depiction of Jesus as a prophet in Luke's Gospel is his concern for the poor and the roots of poverty in the greed of others. Jesus saw a poor widow giving everything she had. This story is often cited on stewardship Sundays to encourage people to give generously but this is only one half of Luke's story. The less comforting part – the less encouraging part for those with more ability to give – is Jesus' confrontation with those who 'devour widows' houses' (Luke 20:47). The earlier part of the story critiques the greed of some that causes the widow's poverty!

Jesus cares deeply about poverty and its causes – greed and acquisitiveness by others.

Luke's Jesus is cast as a prophet: someone who cares about exclusion, cares about abusive power, cares about the injustice of violence and cares about poverty and greed. Luke presents to us the prophet Jesus who continues to speak to these same issues in our world, in our communities, in our own lives. Jesus, through Luke, prophetically critiques *my* exclusive practices, *my* abuse of the power I have, *my* violent words, *my* greed and acquisitiveness! Preaching Luke's Jesus as a prophet speaks precisely to these and other issues in our world.

Further questions that emerge from a detailed examination of Luke's Jesus could easily form the structure of a preaching series:

- What kind of kingdom did Jesus establish? (Jesus' intentions)
- What kind of faith did Jesus evoke? (Jesus' relationships)
- What kind of hope did Jesus exhibit? (Jesus' words)
- What kind of love did Jesus embody? (Jesus' deeds)
- What kind of justice did Jesus care about? (Jesus' prophetic action)

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is a prophet but he is also more than a prophet. Jesus' death and resurrection are predicted a couple of times in Luke's account, with Jesus setting his face to Jerusalem, knowing that he would die. It is in

Jesus' saving death and resurrection that Luke presents the most intimate and revealing encounter with Jesus.

Luke's Jesus is encountered through his saving death and resurrection (Luke 23)

Reading Luke's story of Jesus' death and resurrection, we might find it striking that critical moments in the story are prayers on the lips of Jesus. I am greatly indebted to scholars like John Howard Yoder; his retelling of the story of Jesus and perhaps most famously his book *The Politics of Jesus* describe a more political, earthly, social Jesus. Jesus is not over-spiritualised. Yoder does not fully comprehend Jesus' death. Yoder emphasises the human and *political* dimensions of why Jesus died, yet neglects Luke's *theological* emphasis. Yoder's account of Jesus' death is virtually silent on the prayers of Jesus in Luke's Gospel.

Jesus' first prayer: forgiveness for his wrongdoers (Luke 23:34–43)

(Jesus first prayer actually occurs the night before in the garden – that famous Gethsemane prayer – 'not my will but yours be done')

In the story of the death and resurrection we have a prayer from the cross – 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do'. At the centre of this drama is the offer of forgiveness.

New Testament scholars highlight some textual issues around this particular verse. Most scholars also agree that even if it wasn't in some of the earliest manuscripts, it sounds very much like something Luke's Jesus would say. These words of forgiveness from the cross are considered an authentic saying of Luke's Jesus.

As one scholar notes from the conversation with the two wrongdoers ('*kakourgoi*' – these might have been political rebels or just common thieves), one on either side of him, that only one of them with the plea to 'remember me' recognises Jesus has a Kingdom. Whatever sort of kingdom this was, it was a kingdom where forgiveness reigned. And one of the two wrongdoers actually responds to this kind of kingdom.

This wrongdoer's perspective, according to Luke, is that they are receiving justice for wrongdoing whereas Jesus has done nothing wrong. Above the clamour of the mocking from the soldiers and the crowd – in the middle of these volatile and violent events – this wrongdoer heard this

prayer come from this crucified King's lips: 'Father forgive them, they know not what they do'.

That's how Luke narrates this story of Jesus' death: the prayer of forgiveness on the lips of Jesus is at the very centre of his story.

Jesus' second prayer: for deliverance from wrongdoers (Luke 23:46)

Jesus' final breath is also a prayer, a prayer for deliverance. Jesus' second prayer is a variation on a key theme in Luke's Gospel of salvation. Jesus entrusts himself to God in the same way we are to entrust ourselves to God for our deliverance. This major theme in Luke's Gospel gives the exclamation mark to the whole story of salvation that began with the song of Zechariah. This salvation, this deliverance from our enemies, is at the end of Jesus' earthly life in his crucifixion. In praying, 'Father into your hands I commend my spirit', Jesus trusts God to deliver him from his enemies.

Luke's Jesus known, worshipped and followed as Lord (Luke 28 and Acts 9)

Finally Jesus is recognised, worshipped and followed as Lord. Luke narrates this in two stories of the risen Lord: the encounter on the Emmaus Road (Luke 28) and Paul's encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Thorwald Lorenzen makes a significant contribution to the story of Jesus' resurrection by reminding us that it is a relational event. One of Lorenzen's favourite phrases is that the resurrection is real and relational. Luke's description of the two encounters with the risen Jesus explains what 'real and relational' actually means.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus engage in prophetic dialogue with Jesus; Jesus explains the Scriptures to them then Jesus is recognised when he breaks bread. The story of Saul presents him setting out towards Damascus as a wrongdoer, breathing murderous threats and throwing people in jail for following the Way but arriving in Damascus a thoroughly changed, transformed person. Saul has been restored, not just in his relationship with Christ but also with Ananias and the Christian community he was persecuting. These are two accounts which Luke unpacks for us in order to show what Luke's risen Jesus means to people: he is real and he is relational.

Conclusion: let Luke's story of Jesus shape your preaching and your church

Towards the end of his life, just before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Junior warned his listeners in his home church that for the church to

be true to its nature it had to be true to its Lord, 'it says whoever will, let him come. It's one place where everyone should be the same, standing before a common master and saviour'.

Unfortunately King's words were 50 years too late for my great-grand-mother and her children. If the Anglican church they visited almost a century ago had a deeper sense that Jesus was the kind of prophet Luke portrays him to be - a prophet in the tradition of Isaiah, that Jesus is encountered through his saving death and resurrection and that the risen Lord is to be encountered, risen and alive, as Lord, then maybe that church might have provided the welcome, the prodigal embrace, that my family needed.

I hope you can preach Luke's Jesus in a way that helps your church to be that kind of church, because that's the kind of church I want for my children and for my children's children.