

A NEW START! LUKE 3:1-23

Life is full of new starts. Today is a new start for us in Church as we begin to look together at Luke's Gospel. We're going to spend the next 9 months, looking together at the story of Jesus that Luke tells (with a few breaks along the way!), living with the gospel so that life, Church, and faith are shaped by the gospel. Our Discovery Groups are another new start; on Wednesday 12th September, in Hall 2 there will be a chance to study and discuss together the stories that we look at on Sundays and the bits we miss out because it will not be possible to cover everything Luke has to say. These are new starts and who knows what impression and impact these new things will have on us. For some this might be a new start in Christian faith, understanding Jesus in a way we never did before, believing things we've never been challenged to believe before, or coming to a personal faith in a way that we never did before. Who knows where this will lead us? I certainly don't and that's part of what makes this exciting.

I've produced a handout that gives a little bit of background information about Luke. We don't know much about him, except that he travelled at times with Paul and that he is described as a doctor. He may well have been living in Rome; he arrived there with Paul and perhaps stayed. By AD60, the Church was into its 2nd generation of Christians; the 1st generation was the people who had been with Jesus, the eye-witnesses of His life and ministry; by Luke's time, a whole new generation of Christians had come along who had not seen Jesus, but who had heard the stories and had come to know a bit, but maybe not it all. So Luke decided to write it down for his friend Theophilus who probably also lived in Rome and was educated man, intelligent, but may or may not have been a Christian; in the introduction to the gospel he explains: "*It seemed...*" (1:3f) Was Theophilus a convert or an onlooker? We don't know, but either way Luke wants to give him a solid, certain foundation for faith.

He sets out to write an orderly account. Till then the stories were told and passed on by word of mouth; traditions are simply things that are passed on from one to another. Luke wants to write it down and his gospel is now 1 of 4 Bible books called gospels; they all set out to tell the stories of Jesus from different perspectives; they all present solid reliable evidence for faith in Jesus. The book is not simply a history of Jesus; it is called 'gospel' which means 'good news', a message to proclaim. "It does something to the people to whom it is proclaimed... it changed men's lives." (Wilcock) and Luke hoped that writing this down would have same effect on the people who would read his gospel. I believe that the gospel still does something to people as it is proclaimed; for each of us that might be a different thing, but it changes us; we should expect to be different people after we do this, maybe only in small ways, but maybe in significant ways; let's not be frightened by that, but excited!

Where does the story start? Luke's story starts with the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus, but we'll look at these stories at or around Christmas time.

In terms of ministry, where did it all start? How did it start? God is at work here, doing something new for His people; a new Messiah is about to hit the streets and God is about to do something new for the salvation, not only of Israel, but the whole world. How does it all start? With lights in the sky? With armies of angels? With a new comet in the sky? For this new start, God sends a man! An eccentric man at that. God sends a man who goes to live in the desert and who eats locusts and wild honey. He sends a man who would preach and teach and baptise and this is the start of the new thing God is about to do for world. It's not the kind of start we might expect for such a great story; it's not the opening scene we might envisage for a film of the greatest story ever told; it is not the kind of start people then expected, but God is at work here and unexpected things happen.

"In the..." (3:1f) There's the history – we can set the time by the people who were in power then; Pilate and Herod were the political rulers; Annas and Caiaphas were the spiritual rulers and all will reappear later. We can set the time – an actual date of c.AD 25/26 - by these references. Then God spoke to John; John is Jesus' 2nd cousin; their mothers were cousins; had they met before? Did they know one another? We have no way of knowing, but John's relationship to Jesus will forever be defined, not by blood, but by its spiritual significance. "When John appeared, not the oldest man in Palestine could remember to have spoken, even in earliest childhood with any man who had seen a prophet... in these circumstances it was an occurrence of the 1st magnitude, more important by far than war or revolution, when a new prophet actually appeared." (John Seeley; *Ecce Homo*; quo Wilcock p.54)

John came as a voice: *"He went..." (3:3)* using the picture painted by Isaiah, a voice in the desert. There was the physical desert – that's where he went; there was also a spiritual desert; the people had had no word from God for generations, so they were spiritually dry. John came to be a new start. What was his message for this new start? *"Repent... produce..." (3:8)* 'There are things wrong that need sorting out; people need to change; they need to think in new way, to behave in new way; don't hide behind your ancestry'. He gave some examples of this message: *"What then..." (3:10)* *"Tax-collectors..." (3:12f)* 'Don't cheat, don't be greedy; be honest and fair and treat everybody well.' John came to prepare the way for Jesus by knocking down wrong attitudes, wrong behaviour, wrong ways of thinking, thus getting people ready for new the Messiah who would come to show them the way. John was a herald going along the road in front of the King, preparing people to meet their King, making sure they were ready for the King's coming. I was driving a white van on Friday, moving furniture and trying to park in a cluttered narrow street; after waiting for about 15 minutes a space became available; I sent Alistair down the street in front of me so that nobody would get that space before me. That's the picture in a much bigger, much more significant way. John is making sure that the people are ready to meet their new King who is about to come; Jesus. "All spiritual advance begins with turning away from what is hindering our obedience." (Wright) What wrong attitudes would John address today, that get in way of our meeting Jesus?

The symbol of that repentance, of the inner cleansing of spirit and mind, was baptism. People were coming to John to be baptised in the Jordan to show outwardly, their inner spirit of repentance, the symbol of water making people clean. One day, in amongst that crowd, is Jesus. Why? Jesus had done nothing wrong; Jesus didn't need to repent of anything; He was the perfect human being. Yet, there He is, standing in line, waiting to be baptised by John. The first thing we see Jesus do in His ministry is stand alongside sinners He came to save. He identifies with them in their need; He stands alongside them as they wait to be baptised; He joins them in river; in some way He takes His place beside them. Much later this will be completed on the cross when Jesus takes the sin of all of us on Himself and dies as the great sin-bearer for all time and for all the world, so that we can be forgiven by God. The first inkling of all of this here in His baptism.

This new start is confirmed by God. *"As He..." (3:21f)* God equips Jesus for His ministry when the Spirit comes on Him. The Spirit gives Jesus strength and power to begin the work for which God has sent Him and to which God has called Him. God affirms Jesus as His Son. This is who Jesus is; before He has done anything God affirms Him as His Son, as His beloved Son. Jesus must have had some notion of this before His baptism, but here is the confirmation!

So we have 2 men: 1 whose ministry took place before Jesus came; the second whose ministry was telling the stories after the event; but both with one purpose in mind. Both John and Luke want to do the same thing: they want to point people to Jesus. John knew his ministry was not an end in itself, but was preparing way for Jesus; his real concern was that people followed Jesus, not John; he really wanted people to believe in Jesus and so pointed people in Jesus' direction. Luke didn't write his gospel to make himself famous, so that he would be remembered by posterity; he wrote his gospel so that men like Theophilus would know Jesus and find faith in Him.

The Bible is never an end in itself, but is the way for us to come to Christ. We can read the Bible as an academic exercise and learn to appreciate its style and literature and there is value in that. But the real value in the Bible is that it leads us to Jesus so that we can believe in Him. We all know people who can quote chapter and verse of Bible text and who know lots of bits off by heart. That's up to you, but that's not the point of this exercise. If you listen to this series, you will know Luke's gospel better by the end than you do now, and that will be good, but that's not really the point of the exercise. The point is that by doing this we get to know Jesus better, our faith grows, we follow Him more closely; that's the real point. That happens as we listen, think through, take to heart what we hear and put it into practice.

These 2 men are also a challenge to the Church. John and Luke pointed people to Jesus; the Bible points people to Jesus. The Church should point people to Jesus. How do we do that?

□ We do that when we tell people the story of Jesus. When someone asks "What does your church believe?" we should tell them. When someone says to you "What do you believe about Jesus?" we should tell them? My job is

not to tell you what I think and share my opinions about religion or the world or life; my job is to point you to Jesus by allowing the gospel of Jesus, the gospel about Jesus, to be heard. Our job as Church is to let the world, the community, hear the gospel of Jesus. We should tell people these stories.

□ We do that when we live the life of faith; the kind of people that we are will speak volumes to the people we meet, to people who know us. We should be people who care for others when they are in need, people who love peace, who care about justice; people who are honest and straightforward, who speak the truth, who are kind and considerate and all sorts of other good qualities. This is the fruit of faith and this quality of life will shine out in the world today and we will show faith by the way we live.

Luke points people to Jesus by writing his gospel so that people know and find a solid foundation for faith. John points people to Jesus by preparing the way for His coming; this was a new start in God's dealings with His people. Do we point people to Jesus by telling them story and Jesus by way that we live? What would John deal with in us, that hinders our obedience, that hinders our faith? Is this time for a new start? Is this the time to deal with issues of faith that we have never dealt with, or the commitment we have never made? Is this time for us to make a new start?