

Looking for certainty?

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[0 : 00] Our first Bible reading is Luke chapter 1, verses 1 to 4, and this is found on page 1030 in the Church Bibles.

Luke chapter 1. In as much as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Philophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Luke chapter 24, starting at verse 36, on page 1066. Luke 24, verse 36.

As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, Peace to you. But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit.

And he said to them, Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see.

[1 : 33] For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, Have you anything here to eat?

They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it before them. Then he said to them, These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and said to them, Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my father upon you, but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple, blessing God.

[2 : 57] Well, we live in uncertain times. The uncertainty of the U.S. election has been replaced by the uncertainty of what a Trump presidency will look like. There's the ongoing uncertainty around Brexit, volatility in the currency and stock markets, the ongoing threat of terrorism, instability in the Middle East and Africa, the refugee crisis, climate change, and so on.

I guess it's fair to say that many of the certainties, or many of the historical certainties of a previous generation, which many were brought up with, are now up for grabs. I want to begin by asking the question this morning, is Christianity yet another of those historical certainties, which is also now up for grabs and in doubt?

The statistics seem to suggest it is, the news just last week, that just 750,000 people attend the Church of England service every week.

Ten times that many sit down every Sunday evening to watch Countryfile. And that is why I'm thrilled that we're starting this new series of sermons in Luke's Gospel, and studying it as well in our growth groups midweek, because Luke writes, as I guess most of us know by now, to give our certainty about Jesus.

Verse 3 of Luke 1, Now we don't know who Theophilus was.

[4 : 33] His name is a Roman name. It means loved of God. Perhaps he was a Christian believer already, or perhaps he was someone Luke was hoping to persuade, to put his trust in Jesus Christ for himself.

Indeed, it may be that you're here this morning, and you are looking for certainty. You're looking in on the Christian faith, and you are looking for certainty. How can I be sure it's all true?

Is Jesus really who he said he was? Did he really do the things that the Gospel accounts claim he did? In other words, you're asking the question, is Jesus Christ really someone I can entrust my life to?

And he's someone I can entrust my death, and what lies beyond death to as well. Well, for those of us who have put our trust in Jesus Christ already, why can we be certain we've done the right thing?

When living for Jesus means, at best, living on the edge of the cultural mainstream, and at worst, when it invites hostility and opposition.

[5 : 43] I take it that if you and I are going to contend for the message of Jesus Christ, if we're going to do so tomorrow morning, wherever that is, at school, with friends, at home, at work, if as a church, as our mission statement says, we are seeking to make disciples of Jesus Christ, why, you and I need to be certain of Jesus for ourselves.

So, whoever we are, I hope we can see how important this whole issue of certainty is, and therefore that is why I'm so thrilled that we're looking at Luke's Gospel over the course of the next few months or so.

And today you'll see on the outline, on the back of the service sheet, that we're simply looking at two things. First of all, the basis of certainty, and then the value of certainty. First of all, the basis of certainty, and note Luke's sources, verses 1 and 2.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us.

Now, Luke wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else. He wrote more even than the Apostle Paul. His two volumes, Luke's Gospel and Acts, were designed to be read together.

[6 : 58] He's mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Church of the Colossians as the beloved physician. And his writing shows all the thoroughness and all the attention to detail that we would expect from a well-trained doctor.

And I take it the point in verses 1 and 2 is simple. It is simply that Luke's sources guarantee their quality. Verse 1 again, Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us.

These are public facts that Luke is writing about. You can't write bad history, can you? When the eyewitnesses are still around, who, if it's bad history, they're going to put their hand up in the air and say these things simply didn't happen, or it didn't happen like that.

But throughout Luke's Gospel, we encounter real people in their real historical setting. Chapter 1, verse 5, In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah.

Chapter 2, verse 1, In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

[8 : 14] Chapter 3, verse 1, In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and so on.

These are real events, real people, because, verse 2 of chapter 1, Luke had access to the eyewitnesses. It's the original apostles who were set apart by the Lord Jesus to be eyewitnesses.

In Luke 24, 48, Jesus tells the apostles, you are witnesses of these things. In Acts chapter 1, verse 8, he says to them, you shall be my witnesses. And then in Acts chapter 2, when a twelfth apostle is chosen who is going to replace Judas, the emphasis is on that he too must be an eyewitness.

I put Acts chapter 2 there on the outline, verse 21 and 22. The apostle Peter said, so one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us, one of these men must become with us a witness to the resurrection.

What's more, it's clear from Acts, and if you read through the last third in particular of Acts, you'll notice that the writing becomes we, there's a lot of we, as in you and I, we, being used.

[9 : 46] I take it that is because Luke himself was with Paul through a lot of his traveling towards the end of Acts. It's certainly clear that he was with him in Jerusalem for extended periods of time.

So Luke would have had extended access to these eyewitnesses of Jesus' life and teaching. Now sadly, many people assume that what we call Christianity was simply invented by the early church and done so well after the events themselves, that stories of Jesus' life kind of evolved over the decades, moving further and further away from the original events of history.

That's certainly the premise of Dan Brown in the Da Vinci Code, that the message kind of evolved like a process of Chinese whispers over time. But no, verse 2, the eyewitnesses have delivered the facts to us.

That word delivered has something of the sense of something being entrusted for delivery. So imagine the front door bell goes, there's the DPD or interlink, the driver is there, he hands over your parcel, he also gives you his terminal, you squiggle something on the terminal which is nothing like your signature and the point being that confirms that he has done what was entrusted to him.

He has handed the thing over as he was meant to. Well in the same way you see Luke has spoken to these eyewitnesses, they have faithfully passed on, they have faithfully handed over that that was entrusted to them, Luke's sources.

[11 : 28] Secondly, Luke's method, verses 3 and 4, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you've been taught.

Now there are many people who claim that the New Testament with its account of the miracles of Jesus and ultimately of course the resurrection of Jesus is simply an exercise in make-believe.

So will you notice what Luke says? He says he has followed all things closely for some time past. He has, if you like, acted as an investigative historian interviewing, checking accounts with authorised sources.

In other words, Luke is in the business of doing something where careful research and accuracy matter. And we're told that is typical of the first century historical method.

Professor Richard Baucom, who's an expert on these things, writes this. The ancient historians such as Thucydides, Polybius, Josephus, and Tacitus were convinced that true history could be written only while events were still within living memory.

[12 : 43] And they valued as their sources oral reports and direct experience of the events by involved participants in them. Eyewitness testimony was the essential means to reach back to the past.

In other words, the assumption by many, I think, today that the Gospels are simply the product of a pre-scientific era of ignorant peasants is actually supremely arrogant.

I mean, how can you visit the remains of ancient Greece or go and see the remains of ancient Rome and conclude that this was a backward primitive culture that knew nothing of literature, history, or simply writing ordered eyewitness accounts.

what's more, verse 3, Luke is writing an orderly account. He orders his material. We'll see this as we go through in our growth groups over the next few weeks.

He's ordered his material chronologically as we move from the birth of Jesus to his young adulthood to his death and resurrection. He orders his material geographically as well, and especially in the second part of the Gospel where relentlessly Jesus is heading to Jerusalem.

[14 : 01] In other words, you and I need to ditch any notion that we might have that Luke's Gospel or any of the other Gospels is rather like a sort of holiday scrapbook. Perhaps those of us who are children, they keep a holiday scrapbook sometimes on holiday.

I certainly used to keep one occasionally when I was younger. There was little overall method. There was little logic. Just a kind of, you know, a random postcard here and a memory there and lots of sugar wrappers because I used to keep sugar wrappers of all the places which we used to get on holiday and empty them and then stick them in my holiday scrapbook.

By contrast, you see, Luke did not sit down to write his accounts and just write the first things that popped into his head. No, he wrote an orderly account.

He's not writing myth. He's not writing fiction. In fact, modern fiction as we have it today was completely unknown in the first century. So in the first century, broadly speaking, there were only two kinds of writing.

There was historical, factual reporting and there was myth. Ancient Greek and Roman mythology, if you've read any of it, simply doesn't pretend to be true. It reads more like Harry Potter.

[15 : 15] It's only in the last 300 years that the kind of realistic fiction as we are used to it has been invented and emerged. C.S. Lewis was a world-class literary critic as well as being a well-known Christian writer and broadcaster.

And let me just read this little quote there on the outline which came in the context of his reading of the Gospels. And he wrote this, I've been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends and myths all my life.

I know what they are like. I know that none of them are like this, in other words, the Gospels. Of this text, there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage, in other words, it's reported history, or else some unknown ancient writer without known predecessors or successors suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic literature.

Isn't that striking? In other words, if the Gospels were made up, they were written in a complete vacuum. No one would know for another 1700 years this kind of realistic, fictional writing that we have today.

Luke is not writing myth. He's not writing legend. Unlike Hinduism, which rests on self-conscious myth, unlike Islam, which rests on the unverifiable experiences of one man in the desert with no eyewitnesses.

[16 : 49] By contrast, it matters to Luke that what he writes is accurate, that it's reliable, that it's history, and he is completely up front in telling us that.

Luke's sources, Luke's methods, thirdly, Luke's content. Look again at verse 1, that word, accomplished. It's the same word Luke uses elsewhere to speak of fulfillment.

Indeed, I wonder if you noticed in that second reading we had from the end of Luke's Gospel, that is precisely the note on which Luke finishes. Why don't we just turn on and look at that, Luke chapter 24, page 1067.

These are the final words of the risen Jesus before his ascension. Luke chapter 24, verse 44. Then he said to them, These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and he said to them, Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead. That is a summary of Luke's Gospel in one verse, verse 46.

[18 : 17] And then verse 47, we have a summary of acts and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. In other words, Luke's point is he is not writing some kind of newfangled gospel.

Rather, what he is writing is what Jesus accomplished and fulfilled of God's Old Testament promises. It's very striking as you read through Luke if you've done this, it's very striking how many direct Old Testament quotes there are in Luke's Gospel and it's very striking in addition to those how many allusions there are to the Old Testament in Luke's Gospel as well as in Acts.

Because Jesus' arrival was not unexpected. It had been spoken of and prepared for over a thousand years beforehand. In other words, Luke is doing much more than simply giving us facts.

Yes, he orders his material chronologically, he orders his material geographically, but he also orders his material theologically. Luke is, if you like, a theologian. David Cameron's been busy over the last few months beginning work on his official autobiography.

Presumably, he'll be joined by Hillary Clinton shortly. And if politics isn't your thing, then Alex Ferguson's My Autobiography or Bruce Springsteen's Born to Run will do instead.

[19 : 47] I guess part of the appeal of an autobiography is that they don't simply run over the facts again. You know, the facts are often well-known or fairly well-known, but actually what the autobiography is doing is giving the interpretation and insider's view of the facts, not simply how things appeared, but actually what was really going on.

Well, in the same way, Luke is not simply recording the facts of Jesus' life, but he has ordered his material to provide the meaning and significance to show us what was really going on in Jesus' life and teaching.

And he gives us not just any old significance, not just any old interpretation, interpretation, but the official interpretation of Jesus' life and teaching, the apostolic, God-given interpretation.

Which means, of course, that as we read Luke's gospel together, we mustn't just ask the question, what happens? We must also be looking out for the meaning and significance of the events as they unfold.

So Luke starts his gospel, we can be certain Luke's sources, Luke's method, Luke's contents. Let me finish on the value of certainty.

[21 : 12] And I want us to think about why we need certainty and I think the way in which this unfolds as we go through Luke's gospel. First of all, certainty in terms of what we believe and believing the gospel.

Do you remember what the Red Queen said to Alice in Wonderland? I used to believe five impossible things before breakfast every day. And there are many people who think that is what Christianity is about.

Our postmodern world is reluctant to take history seriously. It wants to look at the historical accounts of the gospels and say, well, that's just your opinion. I'm glad that's true for you.

It's not true for me. But Luke is determined to establish the historical foundations. Think of all the anniversaries we've remembered this year.

950 years since the Battle of Hastings, 1066, 400 years since the death of William Shakespeare, 350 years since the Great Fire of London, 100 years since the Battle of the Somme, 75 years since the attack on Pearl Harbor, and 60 years since the Suez Crisis.

[22 : 19] And Christianity claims to be part of that world of historical facts. And just as you could go to the Cenotaph in London today, and you could interview men and women about the facts of history, so that is precisely what Luke has done, and he's recorded those facts for us.

Which means we can have certainty in believing the message of Jesus Christ. All of us need that, don't we? I guess some of us perhaps may be more obvious than others, those of us who are looking on the Christian faith, or those of us who regard ourselves as wobbly Christians, or those of us who are newer Christians.

But actually all of us need certainty and confidence about Jesus. Positively, so we can be certain what the message about Jesus is. Negatively, so we can be certain what the message of Jesus isn't.

Secondly, the value of certainty in defending the gospel. I just want us to spend a little bit of time thinking, why did Theophilus, do we think, need certainty? Well, there are clues all the way through Luke and Acts.

In particular, the enormous shock that it was, the enormous surprise it was, so there's early first century believers that the message of Jesus Christ was more often than not rejected by the establishments.

[23 : 42] Acts tells us that Luke travelled with Paul repeatedly as they proclaimed the gospel in the synagogues, the door was shut in their face and they were kicked out, that they were hauled in front of magistrates and political leaders.

Why was the gospel not welcome? Why did the Jews in particular reject their Messiah? Perhaps the message of Jesus isn't true at all. But actually, Luke shows us the gospel has always been rejected and always been resisted, just as it is by many today.

The kind of Christianity that our culture feels at ease with is not authentic, genuine Christianity. It's a culture which finds the language of certainty difficult, dangerous even, and especially in the realm of ideas and beliefs.

It is seen as being dogmatic, inflexible, even extremist, to be certain. To many people, being agnostic sounds more reasonable, humble, and open-minded.

And yes, if we seek to defend the message of Jesus before others, yes, no doubt there will be those who will hear gladly, but there will also be those who will throw a rejection and hostility in our way.

[25 : 05] And the temptation, of course, at that point is simply for us to be quiet, or to change and distort the gospel to fit the culture. In other words, if you and I are going to defend the gospel, we need confidence and certainty, don't we, as to what it is about, what the message of Jesus is.

We're not going to do that for something which actually, in the back of our minds, we rather suspect is a myth or a lie or just a bit of spin. A few days ago, I read a report about how President Putin is promoting a new film that's been made in Russia as part of his drive to restore Russian pride.

The film is called Panflov's 28 Men and it depicts a heroic act of self-sacrifice outside Moscow in November 1941 when 28 soldiers from the Red Army's 316th Rifle Division stood against the advancing German forces.

They were all killed, but they destroyed 18 German tanks in the process. And all 28 were posthumously immortalized and they were decorated as heroes of the Soviet Union.

Now, it's a very inspiring story, but it's come out that actually it is not true. It's simply based on a myth. Nevertheless, the Russian culture minister has defended the film, saying, even if this story was invented from start to finish, this is a sacred legend that shouldn't be interfered with.

[26 : 42] Now, many of the original disciples, they died for their faith in Jesus Christ. They refused to bow to the pressure to be silent.

They would not have suffered rejection and hostility for a myth, and nor will we. Luke's gospel gives the certainty that we need to defend the gospel.

But it also gives us the certainty we need to proclaim the gospel, because this is the gospel that must be proclaimed across the known world. It's how Luke finishes, as he says in Luke 24, 47, as the risen Jesus, rather, says, repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

It's how Acts begins. Acts 1, verse 8, Jesus says, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

It's how Acts ends. Acts 28, verse 28, therefore let it be known that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen. In the book of Acts, the church grew like wildfire.

[27 : 58] Our centers of gospel proclamation were established in major cities across the Roman Empire. And Luke will give us the confidence that we need to proclaim the message of Jesus in the same way.

Confidence that Jesus is not simply some random spirituality in a whole marketplace of religious ideas, but actually he is the one who is the fulfillment and at the very heart of history, the fulfillment of all of God's promises, the fulfillment of all that he's doing through history and indeed across the world.

Thank you. Thank you. And please thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.