

The Good News According To Luke - 4th July 2021

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[0 : 00] Hey everyone, Cosmic to be with you for this, our latest Sunday session. It's the 4th of July, happy Independence Day to our American cousins.

Happy day 468 of restricted life for us here in the UK. A couple of weeks to go, maybe till restrictions might lift. And whether we're currently feeling cautious or confident about that, the good news is we can at least be united in this online way for now.

It's been quite a week in terms of football, although I'm recording this before the Ukraine game on Saturday night. So I've no idea whether football's still coming home or whether we've blown it again. Ignorance is indeed bliss at this stage, I tell you. A shout out this week though to Tom at the Old Art House. He's produced some cracking new artwork for us of our church building.

Bit of a day-night combo. So many thanks to Tom and do give the Old Art House a like or follow on social media. Today, Tom's been making artwork for various businesses around Burntwood of late.

[1 : 09] So it's good to now be part of that personalised portfolio. Talking of artistry, well there's a verse in one of the New Testament letters which says this about us.

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

We are God's masterpiece. You are God's masterpiece. Yeah, we may not always feel or be picture perfect, but that doesn't negate our identity as God's work of art.

Each of us, carefully created by God and renewed through Jesus to pursue the good things of this God-given life. That sounds like a decent reason to be cheerful today.

Taking confidence from the care God's taken in our creation, meaning that all will be well. So God, help that truth to soak in to us today, to seep in to our innermost being.

[2 : 19] And yet whilst we know all will be well from your eternal perspective, I imagine a lot of us, God, are feeling pretty conflicted about what this month ahead might bring. With a prospect, it seems, of restrictions lifting and personal choice on distancing and so on taking their place.

As much as that individual freedom may be welcomed by many, it does put a lot on each of us to work out for ourselves. You know, concern for rising cases, weighing up our actions and behaviour in light of our mental, physical, social wellbeing.

Quite apart from navigating the wishes and preferences of others. The complexity, the confliction we feel, God. Well, it can be pretty wearying, to say the least.

And yet we're also aware of your voice, the one that says to us, Come to me, all who are weary, and I will give you rest. That's good to hear today, God.

So whatever level of weariness, uncertainty, isolation or anxiety we're carrying, whatever weight or worry we're shouldering, help us to come to you today for rest.

[3 : 34] For the restoration, the recharging you promise. That we and those we walk with might be fit for good things on the road ahead with you.

And so as part of that recharging, would you speak to us clearly today, please, of your love, your priorities, your peace.

Above all perhaps, of your good news, we pray. Thank you, God. Amen. Alrighty. Well, if you've kept up with these sessions over the last couple of weeks, you'll know we're taking an individual look at each of the four gospel accounts of Jesus' life that are in the Bible.

The books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. As each has a unique way of outlining just what the good news of Jesus is all about. We were talking about artwork earlier and I guess each of these gospels is similar to an artist's attempt at trying to accurately represent someone in a sculpture or statue.

I mean, we've seen a new statue of Princess Diana being unveiled this week. The latest in a long line of sculpted likenesses of her, including this one of Diana and Dodi Fayyad, which was displayed in Harrods.

[4 : 54] And this one in blocks which just down the road from us, which an unimpressed queen apparently vetoed from being displayed at Walsall bus station, believe it or not.

This latest statue for this week, well, it's an improvement on those two, I suppose, but it underlines the challenge there is when trying to capture the essence of someone in any form, whether a painting, a sculpture or, in a case of the gospels, a written biography.

So far, we've looked at the ways both Mark and Matthew have attempted to capture Jesus' character and message. And this week, we're going to explore the Jesus who Luke presents to us in his gospel.

Now, it's called the gospel, the good news of Luke. And although Luke isn't credited as the author in the gospel itself, from very early on, this was seen as Luke's work.

Who was he? Well, he's mentioned in a few of the Apostle Paul's New Testament letters as a travelling companion of his, someone who journeyed with Paul around the Mediterranean, spreading the word about Jesus.

[6 : 03] What's more, Luke is described by Paul as the beloved physician. He was a doctor, a respected profession, and therefore obviously a highly educated guy.

Indeed, his brains are in demand because Luke addresses his gospel to a guy called Theophilus. Probably the bloke who's given him the money and back in to write his account.

Theophilus being a patron, the publisher, if you like, of Luke's work. We don't know much about this Theophilus, but Luke calls him most excellent Theophilus, indicating he's some high-ranking official. Indeed, here's how Luke kicks off his commissioned account. So from chapter 1, verse 1, we're told by Luke. Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

[7 : 22] It's a strong start, you know, a one-sentence wonder, telling us that Luke wants to put together a careful, detailed, well-researched account of Jesus' life.

He's drawing on stories from eyewitnesses, sources which, like Matthew, seems to include chunks of Mark's gospel, as well as other testimonies and perhaps early collections of Jesus' key sayings, which had also begun to be compiled.

He's got the doctor's eye for detail, yeah, but he's also got the investigative drive of a historian.

Think a cross between Dr Zand and Dan Snow, you know, we're on safe ground with Luke.

And yet, let's not forget Paul's description of him as the beloved physician, too. It's not just facts for Luke, no, he's obviously all about feelings.

Two, someone who's well-loved. He's a doctor, yeah, but one, it seems, with a caring, compassionate bedside manner. And this mix of facts and feelings of commentary and compassion, well, it makes for a cracking read, because not only is Luke's account news, it's good news.

[8 : 41] How does Luke help us to understand what this good news is, and more specifically, who it's for? Wow, from the word go, the Jesus Luke presents us with is for everyone, all people, everywhere.

For example, last week we looked at the family tree of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, this genealogy which goes all the way from Abraham, the granddad of the Jewish nation, right through to Jesus.

Jesus. Now, interestingly, Luke also includes a genealogy, but rather than going from Abraham to Jesus, Luke begins with Jesus, and takes Jesus' line all the way back, not just to Abraham, but to Adam, the father figure of not just a Jewish nation, but every nation of all people.

It's Luke's way of saying that Jesus is for and inclusive of everyone, Jews and Gentiles, all people, regardless of class or status, race or nationality, and so on.

Indeed, this principle of inclusion, particularly on grounds of race or nationality, well, it's a theme which threads all through Luke's gospel.

[10 : 01] So it's Luke alone of the four gospels who tells us about Simeon in the temple, prophesying about the newborn Jesus. He says this, It's not Jews or Gentiles with Jesus.

Now it's both and. And yet what's interesting is that within this all nations theme, Luke's Jesus makes a point of ensuring that this inclusion was recognised as being of particular importance for those who have regularly experienced exclusion within mainstream society.

So it's Luke alone, again, who relays Jesus' parable about the Good Samaritan, where the heroic role model of the story is a Samaritan, you know, the race of people who Jewish folks tended to despise due to their mixed heritage.

Similarly, it's only Luke who tells us about the time when only one of the ten leopards who Jesus had healed came back to thank him, with Luke making a point of saying that this one grateful guy was himself a Samaritan.

Again, it's Luke's way of reminding his readers, if the good news of Jesus is about inclusion of all people, then particular attention needs to be paid to those who have suffered the most through exclusion over the years.

[11:42] For me, well, I'd suggest this means that Luke's Jesus remains as relevant to our own day as ever. Since stating Samaritan lives matter as Jesus appears to do, well, it's not saying that all lives don't matter.

No, it's simply stating that Samaritan lives matter in a world where they're often marginalised and discriminated against. Jesus being a light for all nations is good news.

Jesus' message of inclusion is good news. But this good news is particularly significant for those who are faced or who still experience exclusion on a daily basis.

So, Jesus' good news in Luke is clearly for all people, but with particular focus on those who are often excluded, oppressed or marginalised.

Who else is the good news particularly for in Luke's Gospel? Well, Luke introduces Jesus' public profile by highlighting an event which takes place in the synagogue in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, a time when Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah to outline who he is and what he's come to do.

[13:02] The Spirit of the Lord is on me, he says, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

You see, just like a composer has a motif or theme which will run through their symphony, Luke presents these words as the theme for the Jesus he presents us with.

Where themes of freedom, release, recovery and favour, particularly for the poor, will characterise his ongoing mission. You know, it's interesting, for Mark and for Matthew, Jesus' opening message is along the lines of repent for the kingdom of God is near.

But here, Luke conveys a different emphasis from Jesus. As here, he's come not preaching repentance, but rather good news for the poor and release for the captives.

I don't know about you, but I like this emphasis from Luke. Because there's a subtle but significant difference between telling people to repent, you know, you've done wrong, turn around and follow God's way, and offering them release from the things which hold them back from being the people God always intended them to be.

[14:35] They're both important, repentance and release. But it's this release idea, which for me is one which perhaps resonates more strongly in these particular times and in our particular context, as good news.

You see, for the vast majority of people I speak with in any depth, What often comes through is any one of three things. Firstly, how burdened people generally feel.

Burdened by stress, worry, anxiety, workload, responsibility and so on. People are generally tired and overloaded. Secondly, what often comes through is how inadequate people feel.

Feelings of failure and insecurity, of worthlessness, of often crippling low self-esteem. And then thirdly, it's often clear how lonely a lot of people are.

Where they're craving connection, friendship, support, fun, and yet instead live with feelings of disconnection and isolation, disappointment perhaps with the superficiality of their social life, but fearing that their lack of confidence, what a perceived lack of charisma, is making it hard for them to forge faithful friendships.

[15:59] Incidentally, I wonder if that's partly why family is such a big thing for so many of us. Not that there's anything wrong with family, but the easy option of having family as a social backstop, if you like, means we haven't always got to face the fact that friendships are often far more elusive and difficult to form.

Indeed, I appreciate it's particularly tricky in social settings if we haven't got the safety net of family or partners or even children with us.

Because walking into a room full of people on our own can be a pretty daunting experience. I know we've got work to do as a church on enabling people to foster friendships, particularly single folks. And if you want to be part of that ongoing conversation, it'd be great to have you involved. But these feelings of being burdened, inadequate, lonely, they're all things that I identify with.

Maybe you do too. Perhaps with one or more in particular. But I mention these today because my hunch is that Jesus' promise of release from these kinds of pressures will resonate far more with people than simply being told to repent.

[17 : 21] Now, please don't mishear me. I'm not saying we don't need to repent. Of course we do, as we all fall short of the standards God would want for our lives. It's just that the compassion and care which Luke presents to us in Jesus is of someone who's come to us with good news, where freedom, release and recovery are offered, where God's favour already rests on us as people more loved by God than we can ever fathom.

You know, you are loved so very much by God. And Jesus comes to bring you release and recovery from whatever burdens, whatever inadequacies, whatever loneliness you're carrying. That's the offer. That's the promise. That's the good news which comes with welcoming God's presence into our lives. Now, in line with this, what's equally interesting is that time and again, Luke emphasises that whilst this good news of freedom, of recovery and so on, whilst that good news is open to all, it's particularly good news for those who are poor.

Indeed, in the chapters following this synagogue statement by Jesus that he'd come to bring good news to the poor, we see example after example of Jesus demonstrating what this good news looks like in practice.

So, soon after, Jesus heals a man with leprosy, skin condition which would have meant the man was not only excluded from mainstream life, but also therefore unable to work and support himself.

[19 : 08] In healing him, Jesus brings good news, not just for his health, but his all-round well-being too, freeing him to take his proper place in community life.

This explains why Jesus tells the man to go and show the temple priests that he has been healed, not as a way of showboating, but of enabling the guy to be integrated into his wider worshipping and working community.

Following this, Jesus then heals a paralytic who's been let down through the roof. And again, by telling him to get up, take your mat and go home.

It's Jesus' way of saying, look, you don't need to sit begging in the street on your mat anymore.

Nah, go home, clean yourself up and get stuck in to everyday life.

Jesus restores not just his physical mobility, but his social mobility too, restoring to him the dignity of being able to run his own affairs, whether at home or in time at work.

[20 : 15] Similarly, Jesus raises a widow's only son from the dead in a town called Nain. Now, the son was grateful for his healing, I'm sure, but of equal significance is the benefit this would have had on his mum's social and economic status as well.

Widows in Jesus' time often had no means, no income, no property of their own. And so here, the son, this young man, as Jesus noticeably calls him, well, he would have been expected to provide for his mother.

If he's dead, the widow's tough life is going to be even tougher. That's why Luke, I think, makes a special point of telling us that the dead lad was the only son of his mother and she was a widow. It's like a double whammy here. And yet Jesus understands both her grief and her anxieties. His heart went out to her, says Luke.

And so, in miraculously raising her son, Jesus restores not just her son's life, but her social and economic possibilities too.

[21 : 31] You know, with these miracles in mind, it's interesting that in Matthew's mountainside version of Jesus' epic preach, you know, his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, he tells us that Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God, which is great stuff.

But in Luke's version of a similar message, Luke's Jesus says, blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. You know, and comparing the two, not only is Luke's more personal, yours is the kingdom, not theirs is the kingdom, but Luke's version simply says, blessed are you who are poor, not blessed are the poor in spirit.

Seems in Luke's gospel that Jesus means it literally. Blessed are you who are poor, you who are without means, you who are skint, yours is the kingdom of God.

I know for me it's tempting to sometimes over-spiritualise stuff, but in saying the kingdom of God belongs to the poor, in Jesus saying that he's come to proclaim good news for the poor, he means it, literally.

You know, we talked about this at length the other week in that session on fellowship, but we're called to follow Jesus' lead in how we care for the poor, because the way we feed, clothe and support those in need is at the heart of the good news of the kingdom of God.

[23 : 00] If someone's cupboards are empty, we're called to fill them. Someone can't pay their gas bill, we're called to cover it. If someone's child needs a school uniform, we're called to buy it for them.

Now, I appreciate in all this, we might hesitate to label ourselves or others as poor. Sadly, there's a stigma attached to it in our culture, but Jesus has no qualms at all about using the word, probably because he himself was poor.

We know his parents could only afford to dedicate him at the temple with a couple of pigeons. He had the cheapest, most budget of all options. He grew up in Nazareth, a town renowned as being a dump from where it was doubted anything good could come.

And then the adult Jesus says of himself, foxes have dens and birds have nests, but a son of man has no place to lay his head. Now, we've no idea whether Jesus had his own home, but these words of his, combined with the fact that he seems to sofa surf from one house to another when out on his travels, and he needed the financial support of some of his female followers, well, Jesus clearly knew what it meant to be poor.

Indeed, his lived experience helps to explain his affinity with and compassion for those in similar circumstances. Maybe that's why he says in Luke that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

[24 : 41] If we are rich, even comparatively rich, it is difficult for us to truly understand and identify with the daily crippling effect that poverty has on those in need.

But if we give our money away in order to help people, not only will we be less rich, a good thing it seems in Jesus' eyes, but we'll also receive the benefit of witnessing the kingdom of God in action as we see God meeting other people's needs through what we give away.

And so if you have needs, or you hear of folks locally who do, particularly as the economic hit of Brexit and COVID is becoming clearer, please get in touch. We'd love to help, or if we can't, we'll find people who can.

Really is what we're here for as a church. It's what we do. Similarly, if you're able to give or give more, please do. And I'll keep saying it, but thank you for your generosity and the funds which come into us as a church, as it's only through your giving and mine that we're able to respond in the ways we can.

You know, there's so much in Luke there hasn't been time to touch on today, but from what we've explored, I guess to just wind things up, four things stick out about a Jesus who Luke presents us with.

[26 : 11] Firstly, Jesus is good news for all people. There's no one who isn't invited to take their place in his kingdom. But secondly, Jesus has a particularly enthusiastic and inclusive welcome for those who have experienced exclusion in other ways.

He champions the cause of the oppressed and the marginalised. Thirdly, Jesus offers release and restoration to those who are captive, assuring them of God's favour.

I suggested this might be especially true for us in these times if we're feeling burdened, inadequate or lonely. And my encouragement for us all is to invite God to work through our struggles with us in order to receive that relief and release which is on offer from him.

And then fourthly, we've seen how central Jesus' message was and is for the poor. Finding practical, personal ways to meet their needs and heal their hurts.

Something which I would say Jesus calls us as his people today to partner him in doing. You know, the name Luke means light giver.

[27 : 31] My prayer is that the good news of Jesus in Luke's gospel would illuminate our lives and in turn, the lives of all those we live alongside.

both this week and beyond. Now, if we recall in his introduction, Luke says he writes his gospel so that we may know the certainty of the things we've been taught, the assurance, if you like. And so with that assurance in mind, here's our track for this week, which us and John's band have kindly put together for us. It's the classic hymn, Blessed Assurance.

Blessed Assurance Jesus is mine. Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine.
of glory divine. Heir of salvation, Heir of salvation, Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine Heir of salvation, purchased of God Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood This is my story, this is my song Praising my Savior all the day long

[29 : 24] This is my story, this is my song Praising my Savior all the day long Perfect submission, all is at rest I am a Savior, I'm happy and blessed Watching and waiting, looking above Filled with His goodness, lost in His love This is my story, this is my song

Praising my Savior all the day long This is my story, this is my song Praising my Savior all the day long My King is coming soon He will roll the clouds away Light of heaven bursting through Oh, what a glorious day Yes, my King is coming soon He will roll the clouds away Light of heaven bursting through Oh, until that glorious day

This is my story, this is my song This is my song This is my song, praising my Savior all the day long This is my story, this is my song This is my song, praising my Savior all the day long This is my story, this is my song This is my song, this is my song My King is coming soon This is my song, this is my song My King is coming soon He will roll the clouds away Light of heaven bursting through Until that glorious day Until that glorious day This is my story, this is my story This is my story, this is my song Smashing stuff and thanks as always to the band All right, let's wind it up there Thank you very much though for tuning in today Hopefully some takeaways in there for us all There's more to unpack in the extra time to accompany this session So feel free to flick to that if and as and when you fancy it Until next time though We've just been hearing about the blessed assurance which comes from God So let's go this week with the words of the prayer known as the grace ringing over us And maybe you might like to picture someone in your mind who you'd like to be especially assured of God's blessing this week

And so, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore Amen