

JESUS' MINISTRY IN GALILEE

Luke 4:14 - 8:56

Jesus the teacher: a summary introduction

Jesus was conceived when the Holy Spirit came upon his mother and God covered her with his glory-cloud (1:35). At his baptism the same Holy Spirit came upon Jesus (3:22). Filled with the Holy Spirit, he was led into the wilderness (4:1). Now, 'filled with the power of the Spirit', he returns to Galilee. Luke leaves us in no doubt that it is God who is carrying out his divine purpose in Jesus.

Galilee, the territory north of Samaria, came more and more under Greek influence throughout the third century BC. 1Mac-cabees 5 portrays Galilee in the second century BC as being predominantly Gentile. Jesus chose to carry out his ministry in an area where there were non-Jews as well as Jews. In this way he could be 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (2:32). Indeed 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God'(3:6).

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

compare Mark 1:14-15
Matthew 4:12

**¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,
¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.
²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, Is not this Joseph's son? ²³ He said to them, Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, Doctor, cure yourself! And you will say, Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.**

Jesus is rejected in his home town

Luke chooses to open Jesus' ministry in Nazareth. He wants to establish two central themes from the start. The first concerns the essence of Jesus' mission, which is to be God's word of grace to the poor; the second is that rejection cannot thwart God's design.

The quotation from Isaiah 61:1-2 enables Luke to link Jesus with God's eternal design as reflected in the sacred Scriptures. It reinforces an already familiar theme: that it is the 'Spirit of the Lord' (4:18) who is directing Jesus' ministry (see 1:11,26,41,67; 2:9,27; 3:2,22; 4:1,14).

We are told that the Spirit has anointed Jesus to 'bring the good news to the poor' (4:18). We have met the expression 'to bring the good news' already on three occasions (1:19; 2:10; 3:18). It refers to the fact that God is fulfilling in Jesus the promises made to Abraham and to David, and that this salvation is being offered to the whole world. The exultation and praise that filled the opening chapters of the gospel were all in response to this revelation.

The 'poor' are those who lack the resources to meet their own pressing needs. In the Scriptures it refers especially to those who recognise the fact that they are totally dependent upon God, and so they cry out to him in their distress. The good news is that their cry is being heard in Jesus who has come to establish the reign of God's justice on the earth. We will examine Luke's use of the term more fully when we meet it again in his account of the beatitudes (6:20).

The quotation from Isaiah goes on to illustrate who the poor are. It speaks of the captives who are going to be released, and of the oppressed who are to be set free. This second phrase is borrowed from Isaiah 58:6. The word translated 'release' is the Greek *aphesis*. Elsewhere Luke uses it only to refer to release ('forgiveness') from sin. It is primarily this release that Luke has in mind.

The 'blind' are to receive their sight (4:18). As in Isaiah (see Isaiah 42:6-7; 49:6; 58:8,10), the reference is to blindness of mind and heart. Jesus has come to reveal the truth about who God is and about how we are to respond to God in order to receive salvation. As Zechariah has already said: 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death' (1:78-79).

The enlightenment promised by Jesus is the enlightenment experienced by Simeon who came to see God's salvation: a light of revelation to the Gentiles (2:30,32; see also 3:6; Acts 13:47; 26:17-18,23).

Jesus is going to 'proclaim the year of the Lord's favour', for 'the Lord God of Israel has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them' (1:68). When he finishes his reading, Jesus rolls up the scroll and says: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'. The history of the chosen people has reached its goal.

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

– Psalm 118:24

O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts.

– Psalm 95:7-8

The people were confused by Jesus' words. On the one hand 'all spoke well of him', but on the other hand though his words are described as 'good news' and 'gracious words' (perhaps better translated 'words of grace'), they were disturbing. They could see that if he did what he claimed to be sent to do this would cut right across the social and religious equilibrium in which they passed their lives. This will become clearer as the gospel progresses.

Their fears won through and they attempted to neutralise his message. After all he was only the son of a local tradesman (4:22). Or so they thought (see 1:35; 3:23). Jesus sees into their hearts, and, as Simeon had foretold, their 'inner thoughts are revealed' (2:35; see also 5:21-22; 6:8; 9:46-47; 24:38). He sees that they want him only for his miracles, not because they want to take his message seriously. They fail to see that Jesus' miracles are what love makes possible where there is faith.

24 And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.'

25 But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; 26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.'

28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

30 But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

verse 24, compare Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:4

Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth

Jesus reminds them of God's concern for the outsiders by referring to incidents from the lives of Elijah (see 1Kings 17:7-16) and Elisha (see 2Kings 5:1-9). God's revelation is not only for the Jews, but is also for the non-Jewish world, the world to whom Luke's gospel is addressed.

The villagers try to kill Jesus – something to be expected by a prophet (see 13:33). This rejection of Jesus by his own people prepares us for his crucifixion where again he is cast out of the city (23:33; see also 20:15).

However, the villagers' plan fails and Jesus 'went on his way'. God's purpose is not thwarted by rejection:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; [and] he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

– Acts 10:38

Jesus' teaching vanquishes the powers of evil

Capernaum was a cosmopolitan fishing town on the main trade route from Egypt to Damascus (the Roman 'Via Maris'). Its population at the time of Jesus has been estimated at 15,000 inhabitants. It was the last town in Herod's territory on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and so had a customs office and a Roman garrison (7:5). Jesus chose to make his home here in a place where the 'salvation of God' could, indeed, be seen by 'all flesh' (3:6).

In this, Luke's first portrayal of Jesus' ministry, we see him who truly is 'the Holy One of God' (see also 1:35) confronting demonic powers and triumphing over them.

To understand the category 'unclean' we need to go back to the ancient regulations forbidding contact with certain foods (see Leviticus 11), certain objects, for example a corpse (Numbers 5:2) and certain people, for example, lepers (Leviticus 13:45), and women at the time of menstruation (Leviticus 15:19) and childbirth (Leviticus 12:2-5). The reasons for such regulations varied from the desire to avoid disease to a determination not to encroach upon the area of the sacred. This was especially important in the regulations concerning women, for blood was deemed sacred.

A person who broke these ancient taboos was declared 'unclean' and had to avoid social contact. It was especially important that they not contaminate places deemed holy because of God's presence. The separation of what is 'holy' from what is 'unclean' led to lands other than Israel being called 'unclean' (see Amos 7:17). The same held for their inhabitants, the Gentiles (Isaiah 35:8; 52:1).

A person who separated himself from God by sin was thought of as being 'like one who is unclean' (Isaiah 64:6). By the time of the New Testament, popular imagination thought of the 'unclean' as being outside the protective power of God's holiness and so a prey to the influence of 'unclean demons'.

³¹ He went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbath. ³²

They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority.

³³ In the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice,

³⁴ 'Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.'

³⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' When the demon had thrown him down before them, he came out of him without having done him any harm.

³⁶ They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, 'What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!'

³⁷ And a report about him began to reach every place in the region.

compare Mark 1:21-28

Evil vanquished

Luke the physician distinguishes between obviously physical diseases and what we would call psychic disorders (see Luke 6:18; 11:24-26; Acts 5:16; 8:7). He understands the latter to be the result of demonic possession, as in the present scene (compare 8:29; 9:42).

The unclean spirit and the possessed man cry out: 'Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?' Jesus has come to destroy the power of evil. He has not come to destroy the person who is under its influence, but rather to liberate and to heal him. Evil cannot resist the command of Jesus but does not leave the man before it has 'thrown him down before them'. Everything that sin has built up in a person's psyche must be shaken to its foundations for full purification to be effected. Though the man is thrown down, no harm is done to him (4:35).

It is important to observe Luke's focus on Jesus' 'teaching' (4:31,32) and the power of his 'word' (4:32,36). Jesus is no magician, exercising hidden powers. Though Luke does not here reproduce Jesus' words, he does want his readers to know Jesus conquers evil and heals a disturbed man by virtue of the words he speaks. The good news lived and spoken by Jesus echoes the word of God bringing order out of primeval chaos (Genesis 1:3). When the all-holy God is revealed and welcomed, nothing impure can remain, and so, with powerful love, Jesus draws this man into the protective embrace of God's holiness.

The people are 'astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority' (4:32,36). Jesus' power comes from his very being, and from the 'author' of all things, for he is 'filled with the power of the Spirit' (4:14). The response of the people reminds us of that of Isaiah to his vision of the all holy God:

Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!

– Isaiah 6:5

Jesus' injunction, 'Be silent!' (4:35), is the first of many occasions on which Jesus enjoins secrecy on those who acclaim him in Messianic terms. There are two main reasons suggested for this. One suggestion is that Jesus resisted Messianic claims because of the mistaken ideas about the Messiah that were current. He wanted to ensure that those who accepted him as the Messiah knew who and what it was they were accepting. For this to happen it was necessary that they come to know him personally, rather than simply hear of him through others. It is only after Jesus has presented the good news about God that Peter acknowledges him as the Messiah (9:20). Even that acknowledgment, however, has to be corrected and refined still more through an exploration of Jesus' special relationship of obedience to God and his mission of suffering.

Another suggestion is that Jesus, at this early stage of his ministry, was anxious to avoid the kind of publicity that would bring him into conflict with the authorities. In fact it was actions such as the one described in this scene — actions performed on the Sabbath and so running counter to the prevailing understanding of God's will concerning the Sabbath rest — that did eventually lead to his condemnation by the Jewish religious leadership. When opposition came, Jesus faced it; but it was not his intention to provoke it unnecessarily.

How often we are brought close to despair by the apparent meaninglessness of life. We long to hear a word that makes sense and that touches our deepest longings — longings that so often lie unexplored amid the distractions of daily living. Luke presents Jesus as one who spoke such words. In fact, everything about Jesus, not just what he said, carried 'authority', for it brought people in touch with the 'author' of life, and so was a 'word of God', revealing the mystery of God and able to engage the hearts and the minds of anyone who was open to listen to him.

³⁸ After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon's house.

Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her.

³⁹ Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them.

Healing leads to ministry

Here we have another significant move, from the synagogue, the public place of Jewish worship, to the home. This parallels the movement in Luke's opening chapter from the temple to Mary's home in Nazareth.

Luke presents his readers with a simple act of healing love, one of the many anecdotes concerning Jesus handed down by those who knew and loved him. However, Luke paints the scene in such a way as to bring out two important points.

In the first place, the fever is rebuked as one might rebuke an evil spirit (compare 4:35). Luke sees all of Jesus' ministry, including his healing, as a confrontation with and an overpowering of the forces of darkness.

Secondly, he observes that, once healed, Simon's mother-in-law begins to 'serve them'. The verb 'serve', used by Luke for the first time here, translates the Greek *diakonein*, from which we get our word 'deacon'. The primary reference of *diakonein* in the New Testament is to God, not to those in need. Jesus is the servant of the Lord because he is commissioned to carry out a special ministry for the Lord. To speak of this woman as serving is to recognise that she is carrying out a commission given her by the Lord.

Sometimes sickness is a hindrance to our being instruments of God's love. When this is so, to open ourselves to Jesus' love is to open ourselves to healing which brings us into more intimate communion with God and with others. In these circumstances, healing enables us to join Jesus in his ministry of service.

We all have love to offer. We all have something to give to others in service. How often we can be so overwhelmed by our own pain that we are tempted to give up and isolate ourselves from those who need our love. We need Jesus' healing touch that we might share his ministry of service. We might reflect on the following statement from Saint Paul:

There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God
who activates all of them in everyone.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit
for the common good.

– 1Corinthians 12:4-7

compare
Matthew 8:14-15
Mark 1:29-31

Paul is reflecting on the Christian life. From the Spirit of God we each receive all that we have as a gift of grace. From the risen Christ we are all commissioned to use the gifts we have to carry on his mission in the world: to 'serve' God in serving others, and to 'give our lives' for them. Nor should we be despondent if our gifts seem so poor, for it is God, who creates out of nothing, who 'by the power at work within us is able to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine'(Ephesians 3:20).

It is surprising how often we find that our healing comes precisely when we reach out beyond our own needs and serve others. Listen to Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

– Isaiah 58:6-11

⁴⁰ As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them.

⁴¹ Demons also came out of many, shouting, 'You are the Son of God!'

But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Messiah.

⁴² At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them.

⁴³ But he said to them, 'I must proclaim *the good news of the kingdom of God* to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.'

⁴⁴ So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea.

compare Matthew 8:16
Mark 1:32-39

Healing in obedience to God's will

As noted earlier (see the commentary on 4:31-37), some physical diseases, especially mental ones, were thought to be the result of sin and to indicate demonic possession. Jesus had an extraordinary gift to heal. Luke wants his readers to see in this healing God's love vanquishing all forces of evil.

With the special insight that belongs to spirits, the powers of evil recognise Jesus as the 'Son of God', interpreted here as a title for the Messiah (compare 1:32). Jesus repeats his injunction of silence, for reasons already suggested (see the commentary on 4:33-36).

To describe Jesus' mission simply as a mission of love is to neglect its central focus. It would appear loving to have stayed to meet the needs of those who were searching for him so keenly. Luke wants us to follow the heart of Jesus to its source where we find that he saw his mission as mediating *God's* love to people. It was Jesus' desire to love only in obedience to God's will, for only then is love really love. Hence the need for him to retire to a deserted place to be alone with God. He discerns in prayer that it is God's will for him to move on (4:43).

It is surely appropriate to speculate that obedience in this case would not have been easy for Jesus. Who finds it easy to leave people when they want us as much as those people wanted him? Jesus remained continually attentive to the Spirit of the One whose mission he was carrying out. We must do the same. Here we have another lesson in detachment.

As we watch Jesus seeking solitude even from the grace-filled activity which the Spirit of God was accomplishing in and through him, we are reminded not to neglect the silence of solitary prayer ourselves. John of the Cross has the following advice:

Let those who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer, even though they may not have reached a prayer as sublime as this. They would then certainly accomplish more by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm.

– The Spiritual Canticle 29.3

The message Jesus is to proclaim is called here ‘the good news of the kingdom of God’. It is the good news of what God’s love is doing in the world and what will happen if people listen to God’s word and obey God’s will. It is just such a kingdom that Jesus is commissioned by God to build (see 4:18). When Luke speaks here of the ‘synagogues of Judea’, he is referring not to the region of Judea as distinct from Galilee, but rather to the whole land inhabited by the Jews (see also 1:5; 6:17; 7:17; 23:5; Acts 10:37).

¹ Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,

² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.

³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.

⁵ Simon answered, Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.

⁶ When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.

⁷ So they signalled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.

Jesus calls disciples to share his mission

In this scene, Luke takes us to the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, called to share his mission.

He has already told us that Jesus has been anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to preach the good news to the poor (4:18). Here we catch a glimpse of the crowd, eager to hear his words, described here simply as 'the word of God'.

After borrowing a boat and teaching the crowd from it, Jesus invites its owner, Simon, to 'put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch'. Simon obeys, and the catch is amazing.

Looking back over the astonishing years of the ministry of these fishermen, Luke could truly wonder at how miraculous their lives had been. Here, as he introduces Simon and his companions for the first time, he wants to make the point that the success of their ministry was not the result of their natural talents.

Simon first admits that he and his companions 'have worked all night long but have caught nothing'. It seems that we have to exhaust ourselves, fruitlessly, to be ready and able to acknowledge that the good that comes about in our lives is not of our making but is sheer grace. At the same time, it will happen only if we, like Simon, obey Jesus' word (5:4).

To the name 'Simon', Luke adds 'Peter', thus introducing the name Jesus gave Simon as his disciple. It is as a representative of believing disciples that Simon calls Jesus 'Lord', expressing the Christian belief that in Jesus is experienced the presence and action of the Lord, the redeemer God himself (see the commentary on 2:11). With the sense of awe and wonder comes the realisation of Simon's own sinfulness. We recall the reaction of Isaiah when he is encountered by God in the temple:

Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips,
and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes
have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!

– Isaiah 6:5

Along with the sense of awe in the presence of God, the disciples are amazed at what they have been able to do when they heeded the word of Jesus. Luke draws special attention to James and John (see 8:51 and 9:28). Are we meant to remember David's three close companions (2Samuel 23:8-23; 1 Chronicles 11:10-25)?

Jesus tells Simon not to be afraid (5:10), words we have already heard addressed by the angel of the Lord to Zechariah (1:13), to Mary (1:30), and to the shepherds (2:10). Simon is right to realise his smallness when confronted with God's action, but his focus must remain on God, and not on himself. The appropriate response is one of gratitude and wonder. Finally, Jesus reveals to Simon God's call: he is to go out and catch people. The Greek word translated here 'catch' is more literally translated 'catch alive'. The disciples are to rescue people from the dark depths and haul them to life.

The rest of the gospel and Acts will show that Simon has much to learn: the deficiencies in his faith will become obvious. Here, however, Luke portrays the essential response expected of a disciple. Peter and his companions 'left everything and followed Jesus'. They continue to trust him and to obey his word. Whatever life meant to them before this, they now leave it all behind and throw in their lot with Jesus. Nothing less is asked of anyone who would be Jesus' disciple. Nothing less is required of anyone who would have the privilege of sharing his mission. In his own home town Jesus was rejected and had to walk away (4:30). Here by the lake he is accepted by strangers who choose to walk with him.

8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!

9 For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken;

10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

Then Jesus said to Simon, Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.

11 When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

compare
Matthew 4:18-22
Mark 1:16-20

¹² Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy.

When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.'

¹³ Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I do choose. Be made clean.'

Immediately the leprosy left him.

¹⁴ And he ordered him to tell no one. 'Go,' he said, 'and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them.'

compare
Matthew 8:1-4
Mark 1:40-45

Jesus heals a social outcast

The man could have had any one of a number of virulent skin complaints. Whatever the exact nature of his disease, he was considered 'unclean', that is to say, people judged that he was within the power of evil spirits and that he endangered anyone whom he might contact. This made him a social outcast. The fear of the spreading of the evil pollution meant that everyone would have been forbidden, in God's name, to have any contact with him.

The law is clear. As soon as anyone noticed signs of what might be leprosy, they were required to disclose this to the priest, who, in turn, had no choice but to banish the sick person from the community. Furthermore, everyone understood that to disobey the law in this matter was to disobey God:

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

– Leviticus 13:45-46

This is the first of a number of scenes in which we see Jesus acting in ways that are contrary to what was then the traditional understanding of God's will as revealed in the Law. Jesus knew that the Law, at its best, recognised God to be 'merciful and gracious ... abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Exodus 34:6. See also Hosea 2:19). Moved by the Spirit of God who hears the cry of the poor (Job 34:28), Jesus reaches out to the leper and, bypassing the injunctions of Leviticus, embraces him with his healing touch.

Jesus is not setting out to break the Law. This is clear from the instructions he gives the healed leper. He will not, however, let a superficial understanding of the Law stop him from obeying its profound message. In a document entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission draws attention to the human limitations of viewpoints expressed in the Scriptures:

There is mutual illumination between the Scripture and the events which bring it to fulfilment and a progress that is dialectic: what becomes clear is that Scripture reveals the meaning of events and that events reveal the meaning of Scripture. The events require that certain aspects of the received interpretation be set aside and a new interpretation adopted (pages 91-92).

The exegete need not put absolute value in something which simply reflects limited human understanding (page 94).

The Word of God finds expression in the work of human authors. The thought and the words belong at one and the same time both to God and to human beings, in such a way that the whole Bible comes at once from God and from the inspired human author. This does not mean, however, that God has given the historical conditioning of the message a value which is absolute (page 113).

Let us give the leper a name and a history, for behind that repulsive exterior is a person with memories and feelings. When he was a boy did he share the hopes and aspirations of his friends? Did he marry? Does he have children that he will never see again, and whose embrace he will never again experience?

Whenever people happened by chance to find themselves anywhere near him, all he ever saw was the fear and horror in their eyes as they quickly withdrew. Nor was religion any help. On the contrary, everyone 'knew' that he was being punished by God for some terrible crime. He did not know the crime, but he, too, was socialised into concluding that God must have rejected him to have allowed this terrible thing to happen to him.

It is such a leper who happened, one day, to see Jesus. Hiding somewhere out of sight so as not to be sent away, he had heard Jesus speak tenderly of God's love. At first he found it too unbelievable, that God might actually delight in him, and want to heal him and welcome him back into the community. Could this be possible? But as he listened, his heart wanted to believe the words spoken by this extraordinary man, and so he broke all the rules and approached Jesus.

This already tells us a lot about Jesus. What kind of man must he have been for a leper to have dared to approach him, breaking all conventions, (including the 'word of God' as understood by all his contemporaries), and risking the ire of the crowd? Something in him tells him that Jesus can cure him.

Did Jesus know that he could cure a leper prior to this encounter? We lack the evidence to give a confident answer to this question. Lepers would not have been new to Jesus. He would have come across them as a boy and as a young man. It is quite possible that prior to the encounter recorded here in the Gospel, his heart would have gone out to the lepers, but he may not have been ready for the grace which he receives here. After all, we come to know ourselves through the responses of others. Possibly it was something in this man's eyes and in his manner, especially the absolute trust, that stirred Jesus deeply and moved him to embrace and heal him.

The silence imposed by Jesus on the healed leper is related to the silence imposed on the spirits in an earlier scene (4:35). Jesus does not want a reputation that will lead people to misunderstand him and his mission. The only safeguard against this is for people to come into a relationship of immediate discipleship and experience Jesus for themselves.

The leper

Who of us does not need healing? Who of us does not know the feeling of being alone, isolated from others, a 'leper' and an outcast?

There are two questions we might ask ourselves. Firstly, do we really want to be healed? And secondly, can we, like this simple man, dare to approach Jesus and say to him: 'If you choose, you can make me clean', believing that he does want to, and will not fail to hear our cry? This is not to say that we will necessarily obtain the healing that we think we need. But we can be certain that God, who knows us, will grace us with whatever healing will release us to be more closely united to God's Son, Jesus, and more able to love. To know that is enough. So let us, like children, dare to ask for whatever we desire, trusting that God knows best what is good for us.

Furthermore, let us learn from Jesus how to welcome those who feel themselves to be outcasts. Who knows what miracles of healing are possible if we are willing to share each other's pain?

Ministry and Prayer

After Jesus' action in the preceding scene, we might have expected his ministry to suffer. There would surely have been those who condemned him for apparently disregarding God's word. However, it is apparent that no legalism can stop the spread of the gospel. Jesus refused to obey the Law when it required him to restrain the compassion of God that moved his heart.

The people learned from him and they too learned not to be contained by the words of the Law. They refused to stay away from him for they were learning a new way of looking upon God: a way that broke through all the humanly contrived limits of the Law, and that moved them, as it had moved the leper, to dare to seek healing from the one who revealed to them a God in whom their hearts could believe.

As in an earlier scene (4:42-44), Jesus makes space in his life for intimate prayer-communion with God. His healing ministry flows from this prayer, for it is God who anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power, and:

He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

– Acts 10:38

¹⁵ But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases.

¹⁶ But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

17 *One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal.*

18 **Just then some men came, carrying a paralysed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus;**

19 **but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus.**

20 **When he saw their faith, he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven you.’** ²¹ **Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, ‘Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’**

compare
Matthew 9:2-3
Mark 2:3-7

Jesus liberates from sin which paralyses

For the first time Luke introduces the ‘Pharisees’ and the ‘teachers of the law’, also called ‘scribes’. The Pharisees (the ‘separated ones’) were a sect of laymen who carried on the tradition of the Hasidim, who, in the period of the Maccabees (c.167BC), resisted any attempt to allow Greek culture to corrupt Jewish traditions. At their best, the members of the Pharisee sect were truly devoted to God and wanted only to do God’s will in the least detail of their daily lives. They found God’s will in the writings of their sacred Scriptures which they scrupulously followed.

It emerges from the Gospel record that a number of them were blind to the ways in which God revealed his love and his will in Jesus. Jesus’ rejection of their understanding made him a threat which they were determined to oppose. In the experience of the early Church it was the Pharisees who were mainly responsible for defending Judaism against what they saw as the inroads of Christianity. It is not surprising, therefore, that from the Christian perspective they came to symbolise those responsible for the rejection of Jesus and of the members of the Jewish community who chose to follow him.

Luke first speaks of sin in the prayer of Zechariah whose son was to prepare the way for the Lord by giving the people knowledge of salvation by the ‘forgiveness of their sins’ (1:77; see also 3:3). The Greek word which we translate ‘sin’ means ‘missing the mark’. It includes many aspects of our human condition that result from fear, insecurity, ignorance and lack of freedom, as well as from stubbornness, laziness, envy, lust and pride. We are not wholly responsible for the sin that is in our lives, any more than the man in the gospel is responsible for being paralysed. Our sinful condition is largely the result of factors that are hereditary and environmental (hence the term ‘original sin’ — sin that comes from our origins).

We know, however, that there are times when we choose to say Yes to sin, when we fail to resist its attraction, though we know we are able to do so. We bear some responsibility for who we are and for what we do. Whatever the measure of our personal responsibility, the fact is that we are sinners who so often ‘miss the mark’, and the result of sin is a paralysing of our spirit.

Jesus knew our fears and our insecurity. He knew, as we have already seen at Nazareth (4:28-29), the pain of rejection. He knew what it was like to be misunderstood and wrongly judged. He knew what it was like to feel abandoned, not only by friends but also by God. He showed us that sin is no answer to any of these experiences. He also showed us that it is possible to be human and not sin. More than that, he witnessed to the truth that to give in to sin is to fall short of what as human beings we are called and graced to be. Nothing can separate us from God's love, and no circumstance can force us to stop loving, no matter how limited our capacity to love may be.

In this passage, Jesus sees the faith of the man and his friends (compare Acts 3:16), and he declares the man forgiven. To sin is one thing. To remain bound in sin is another. Whatever our sin, there is a liberating power at work in us that is greater than our sin, and Jesus knew the importance of forgiveness. The English word 'for-give' captures well what is asked of us in relation to each other. To love is to *give oneself for* another. To 'for-give' is to continue giving ourselves, even to someone who is offending us. Of course, reconciliation and so communion in love is possible only when the one who is causing the offence admits the sin accepts the forgiveness that is being offered us, and alters the offending behaviour. The person who is offended may be willing to forgive, but he or she cannot effect reconciliation alone.

It is of the essence of love that we do not take it upon ourselves to judge the readiness of the other for reconciliation, but that, whatever the circumstances, we keep our hearts open and continue our willingness to offer love, whether or not the one offending us is willing to receive it. There is no more difficult lesson to learn than this, but we have Jesus to keep reminding us of the challenge before us. He also keeps on demonstrating that whatever our sin we cannot stop God loving us. The offer of forgiveness from God is never closed.

We can choose to remain paralysed. It is difficult to understand why we would do so, but there is no doubt about the fact. Are we too stubborn to admit the fact that we are paralysed? Are we afraid of what might be involved if we have to begin walking again? Is our self-esteem so low that we cannot believe that anyone would want to heal us? Even if we refuse healing and deny the love that is being shown us, we cannot cause God to stop loving us. This is the good news preached and demonstrated by Jesus.

In this scene the love of God penetrates to the deepest recesses of our hidden paralysis. The scribes are scandalised by Jesus' words. They claim that only God can forgive sin. And they are right. Only the creator God can dispel the darkness. There is no love and no forgiveness that does not have its source in God.

22 When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?

23 Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'?

24 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – he said to the one who was paralysed – 'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.' ²⁵**Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God.**

26 Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'

compare
Matthew 9:4-8
Mark 2:8-12

The mistake of the scribes and the Pharisees, and it is a serious one, is to forget that the transcendent God is at the heart of creation. God can forgive through us, as he forgives in this scene through Jesus, and through the love and faith of this man's friends.

Jesus identifies himself as the 'Son of Man'. This is the first time that we have met what is, to our ears, a rather strange expression. In the New Testament, apart from Acts 7:56 and Apocalypse 1:13 and 14:14, it is found only in the gospels and then always on the lips of Jesus himself. It possibly represents Jesus' own understanding of himself and of his mission. It is certainly used by the gospel writers to express their understanding of the true identity of Jesus.

We find 'Son of Man' in the Old Testament as an idiomatic alternative to 'man', in the sense of human being (Psalm 8:4 and frequently in Ezekiel). There is a quite specialised use, however, in the Book of Daniel, and it is to this text that we must turn to discover the meaning of the expression as found here in Luke.

The Book of Daniel was written at the time of the persecution of the Jews by the Syrian king Antiochus IV (c.165BC). The invading Syrian army seemed to be winning, but the author of the Book of Daniel gives expression to his faith in God's providence in an imaginative portrayal of the last judgment: 'The court sat in judgment and the books were opened' (Daniel 7:10). In his vision he sees:

One like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One [God] and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

– Daniel 7:13-14

There follows an explanation of the vision in which the 'Son of Man' is the heavenly counterpart or representative of the ordinary, downtrodden and persecuted people of God who will ultimately prevail and who will be exalted by God in the final judgment.

The text reads:

The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.

– Daniel 7:27

Jesus has been carefully avoiding Messianic claims (4:35,41; 5:14). In identifying himself as the ‘Son of Man’, he is declaring his solidarity with the poor and the oppressed and the victims of injustice in all its forms. In this there is already a hint that this solidarity is expressed by suffering with and for the oppressed.

He is also asserting his faith that God will vindicate him and those who identify with him and his mission. God’s Messiah will ultimately triumph, but not in the earthly and nationalistic way popularly associated with the Messiah. His triumph lies with God and God’s judgment of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness - a vindication which lies outside the realm of human history.

In this present passage Jesus is claiming that this ultimate judgment of God is already active among them in his own ministry of forgiving sins. This is the fulfilment of scripture that was happening now among them (4:21). This is the ‘good news’ which Jesus has been commissioned to reveal and to make effective in people’s lives.

Let us thank God for those who, when we have been paralysed, have held us and carried us to Jesus by their faith and their love. Let us also know that God does want to forgive through us, so that when we see someone who is too afraid to move, let us help lift that person up and take him or her to God.

We would do well to reflect on the implications of words which we so often pray: ‘Forgive us our sins (‘trespasses’) as we forgive those who sin against us’(11:4). If God took us at our word what kind of forgiveness would we receive?

27 After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.'

28 And he got up, left everything, and followed him.

29 Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them.

30 The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'

31 Jesus answered, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick;

32 I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.'

compare
Matthew 9:9-13
Mark 2:13-17

God's word reaches those not accepted in the synagogue

The tax alluded to was a symbol of Roman oppression, and of humiliation for the Jews who rejected any subjection except to God. In Galilee the proceeds went to the Roman puppet, Herod Antipas. The tax collectors were Jews and were despised as traitors. Many of them were especially despised because to earn a living they extorted as much as they could from the farmers, fishermen and merchants under their jurisdiction. They were excommunicated from attending the synagogue.

The scribes and Pharisees have already appeared in the previous scene. Here Luke is speaking of those teachers of the Law who belonged to the Pharisee sect. Luke could not have chosen a more powerful scene with which to demonstrate the profound difference between the religious attitude of Jesus and that typified by a number of the Pharisees of his day.

Levi and his friends are 'sick'. Jesus does not deny that. So were the leper and the paralysed man of the previous scenes. Jesus, however, is concerned to bring the sick to health by loving them into 'repentance' (see also 3:3) – something which will not happen if they are condemned and ostracised. He is happy to share with them the homely intimacy of a meal. It was traditional in the religion of Israel to celebrate the experience of communion with God in a ritual meal. When Moses ascended Mount Sinai with Aaron, Aaron's sons and the seventy elders, we are told: 'They beheld God; they ate and they drank' (Exodus 24:11). When the promised Messiah came, there would be a sumptuous banquet to which all would be invited:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all people a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

– Isaiah 25:6

Luke delights in portraying Jesus sharing a meal. Much of his teaching and a number of his parables are associated with a meal (7:36-50; 11:37-52; 14:1-24; 15:1-32). Of special significance is the meal he shared with the multitude in the deserted region near Bethsaida:

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled.

– Luke 9:16-17

The Law had strict rules about who was welcome at the ‘communion banquets. In the scene upon which we are reflecting, the experts in the Law are shocked that Jesus eats with people of the likes of Levi and his friends. We meet this criticism again later in the Gospel: ‘All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them”’ (15:1-2). ‘They began to grumble: “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner”’ (19:7). Jesus responds to their grumbling: ‘Today salvation has come to this house for the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost’ (19:7,10).

Jesus’ final meal brings to fulfilment the longings of Israel and itself looks forward to the complete divine communion with Jesus in the risen life: ‘When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God’ (22:14-16). ‘I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom’ (22:29-30). This echoes the cry of one of Jesus’ fellow guests at a meal at the home of a leading Pharisee: ‘Blessed is the one who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!’ (14:15)

After Jesus’ death, his disciples continued to meet in their homes to celebrate what they called the ‘Breaking of Bread’. They believed that the risen Jesus was present with them at this meal. They gathered around him, remembering all that he had said and done, and awaiting the promised communion with him in the Messianic Banquet of heaven (Luke 24:30,35; Acts 2:42; 10:41).

That Jesus would call this man to be part of his mission, and would enjoy the company of his friends, should surely give us confidence in the compassion of the heart of God. We need not fear that we have nothing to offer. We are all called to love, and Jesus welcomes us and invites us to take our part in bringing about that communion of love which is God’s kingdom on earth.

There are people who criticise the Church because of the sinners that are in it. We should not be complacent about sin, and we should expect the Christian community to challenge us to repent of our sin by accepting the grace of repentance and forgiveness offered us by the Spirit of Jesus. However, any community desiring to follow Jesus must have within it the whole range of humanity, from the most broken of sinners to the purest of saints. If there is no room for sinners in the Church, there is no room for anyone, and it is not the Church of Jesus.

It is because we are sinners that we need the intimacy of communion with Jesus. Let us humbly and with gratitude accept his invitation to dine with him:

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking;
if you hear my voice and open the door,
I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

– Revelation 3:20

³³ **Then they said to him, ‘John’s disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink. ³⁴ Jesus said to them, ‘You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? ³⁵ The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.’**

compare
 Matthew 9:14-15
 Mark 2:18-20

God’s word liberates from slavish conformity to ritual

The Law required people to fast on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29; 23:29). There is no indication in the text that it is failure to keep this fast that is the subject of the complaint by the Pharisees. They themselves used to fast ‘twice a week’ (18:12) and they expected that if Jesus were truly a religious man he, like the disciples of John, would be similarly conscientious. It is clear from the dialogue that Jesus is not against fasting on principle. What concerns him is the false perspective which many of the officially respected religious people were giving. Their priorities were wrong.

Jesus’ position is consistent with the prophetic tradition found, for example, in Isaiah 58:

The fast that I choose is to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke, to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin.
 – Isaiah 58:6-7

People seem to find it easier to follow the requirements of religious devotion and ritual rather than face up to the radical demands of a truly religious life. Jesus knew how easily we revert to insecurity and cling to religious practices, even when they fail to reveal God’s true concern for us. He knew that what the people needed most was not to be reminded of the Law but to experience God’s love. He was intent on communicating to his contemporaries the essence of the good news, even if the pious were scandalised by his ignoring of practices customarily expected of the observant.

The Christian community for whom Luke is writing had learned from Jesus to celebrate his continued presence as the Bridegroom among them. They also fasted because they experienced his absence and longed for the time when they could celebrate with him the fullness of communion for which their hearts longed – a fullness that could come only when they joined him in the risen life. A number of texts from the Old Testament liken God’s love of his people to that of a bridegroom for his bride:

For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name;
 the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
 the God of the whole earth he is called.
 For the Lord has called you
 like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
 like the wife of a man’s youth when she is cast off, says your
 God.

For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the Lord, your Redeemer.

– Isaiah 54:5-8. See also 62:4-5

I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife
in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy.
I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.

– Hosea 2:19-20; see Ezekiel 16:8-14

In John's Gospel we find the Baptist speaking of himself as the friend of Jesus the bridegroom:

He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.

– John 3:29-30

This same image holds a particularly important place in the Book of Revelation:

Let us rejoice and exult and give glory to the Lord our God, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has been made ready.

– Apocalypse 19:7; see also 21:2

In the light of this we should not wonder that Jesus would call people to celebrate the good news that the time for the nuptials had come. After reading the Law, Nehemiah could say:

This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep . . . Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine . . . and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

– Nehemiah 8:9-10

Jesus had more cause than Nehemiah to call his disciples to celebrate. Jesus knew that acknowledging the reality of God's love and accepting it was essential to the 'repentance' required of us, if we are to experience the reign of God in our lives. Without this, we would remain locked in our sin.

³⁶ ***He also told them a parable: 'No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old.***

³⁷ ***And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed.***

³⁸ ***But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.***

³⁹ ***And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'***

The time had come to transcend the imperfect revelation of God and of God's will as expressed in the Law. Jesus makes the point that the good news cannot be patched onto the old cloak of the Law, nor can it be poured into its ancient skins. The new creation which he was initiating would need to be expressed in new ways. Those who saw themselves as preserving the Law should go to its essential core. If they did this, they would recognise Jesus as bringing it to perfection.

In his final remark, Jesus recognises how difficult it is for people to change. How unwilling we are to follow the example of Levi, and of the first disciples, and leave *everything* to follow him (5:28). We tend to prefer to stay with what we know.

However well-founded and inspiring the religious customs handed on to us may be, they cannot substitute for an openness to the surprise of God's self-revelation in the present moment. Every time a child is born into our world, a new cloth is created and we are gifted with new wine. Every generation brings with it a new energy and a new revelation — not contradicting the old, but certainly not able to be contained within it. The call of Jesus is for us to be faithful to what has gone before, by being as open to the surprise of God's action in our lives as were our ancestors in faith .

We are being called ever forward into a future full of hope. Our Christian faith is faith in that promised future, which God will create through us if we listen now to 'every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3). In our willingness to do God's will, we must be ready to be detached from everything, however sacred it might appear.

The metaphor of the new wine requiring new skins is important in the realm of theology and catechesis. There are some among us who think that truth can be mastered permanently and preserved in the skins of defined dogma. We do not seem to realise that truth is found in human judgment and that, if we are to make right judgments, we must be continually open to new insights.

No one period of history, no one philosophy, no single point of view can contain the fullness of truth. Learning from the past and faithful to the insights of those who have gone before us, let us dare to face up to the new questions being asked today. Let us keep our eyes on Jesus and find the direction that will continue to lead us towards the truth, especially towards the revelation of the truth of God to be found in him.

compare
Matthew 9:16-17
Mark 2:21-22

God's word liberates from the limitations of the law

In this deceptively simple scene, Luke illustrates one of the key insights of the early Christian communities into the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

The prohibition against agricultural labour on the Sabbath (the seventh day of the week) goes back to the earliest years of Israel's presence in Canaan:

On the seventh day you shall rest; even in ploughing time and in harvest time you shall rest.

– Exodus 34:21

In later writings it is evident that the prohibition has been extended to all kinds of nonessential activity (see, for example, Jeremiah 17:19-27 and Nehemiah 13:15-22). It was during and after the exile that Jewish self-identity assumed a special importance now that Judah was part – and a small part – of the huge Persian empire. The people were forced to ask themselves what it was that set them apart from the peoples around them. They sought to identify what it was that made them special to God and how they were to express this special identity.

Of particular significance was the covenant which God had made with them, and among the many ways in which they responded to this covenant three stood out as important identifying traits: the practice of circumcision, certain food laws and the institution of the Sabbath. It was particularly this last that took on more and more importance in the self-identity of the Jew. Special Sabbath temple sacrifices were instituted, and, more importantly, this was the day when the people assembled for prayer in the synagogues. The Sabbath was a day consecrated to God, and its observance was symbolic of the commitment of the people to keep their part of the covenant.

You shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. ... Whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. ... Therefore the Israelites shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant.

– Exodus 31:13,16; see also Ezekiel 20:12

¹ One Sabbath while Jesus was going through the grain-fields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them.

² But some of the Pharisees said, 'Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?'

³ Jesus answered, 'Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?'

⁴ He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?'

⁵ Then he said to them, 'The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.'

compare
Matthew 12:1-8
Mark 2:23-28

This consecration to the Lord was to be a source of delight:

If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord.

– Isaiah 58:13-14

By Jesus' time a host of specific prohibitions had been built up to ensure against causing offence to God on this specially dedicated day. Though the action of Jesus' disciples in the scene before us was allowed on ordinary days (Deuteronomy 23:25), the Pharisees obviously considered it unlawful on the Sabbath.

Equally obviously, Jesus disagrees. He reminds them of the time when David bypassed a regulation of the Law to satisfy the hunger of his troops (1Samuel 21:1-6). The 'bread of the Presence' mentioned in the text refers to the twelve fresh loaves placed on a table in the tabernacle each Sabbath, and afterwards consumed by the priests (Leviticus 24:5-9; Exodus 25:30; 40:23). Note that Luke's use of the verbs 'took', 'ate', and 'gave' (6:4) have a Eucharistic resonance (see 9:16-17 and 22:14-20). This hearkens back to Jesus' earlier statement about himself as the bridegroom at the Messianic banquet (5:34).

Jesus' final remark, 'The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath' is a Messianic claim with a difference. If David, the Lord's anointed, could dispense from certain injunctions of the law, Jesus claims the right to interpret and reveal the essential meaning of even its central and most sacred demands. This is not the last time that Luke will draw attention to this truth (see 13:10-17; 14:1-6).

In speaking of himself as the 'Son of Man', Jesus is claiming this right also for his disciples. The title, as we saw when commenting on 5:24, focuses on Jesus' identification with the oppressed, and of God's judgment in which they are vindicated. An essential dimension of Jesus' redeeming action is to liberate the oppressed from the oppressive interpretations of the Law with which they have been burdened by their religious leaders. The Sabbath is a sign of consecration to God and is to be lived joyfully in the light of the good news.

An examination of the importance of the Sabbath in first century Judaism indicates that when Jesus, speaking of himself as the Son of Man, says that he is 'lord of the Sabbath' he is claiming a unique relationship to the whole of divine revelation as expressed in the law of Israel. This is of the utmost importance to Luke the historian and theologian. It is important at this point to attempt to express this relationship carefully.

The 'Law'

It is important from the outset to state that the word 'law' does not satisfactorily convey the meaning intended by its use in the Bible, and so in this section of our commentary. The Concise Oxford Dictionary gives as its first definition of law: 'a body of enacted or customary rules recognised by a community as binding'. This is a fairly adequate definition of the Greek word *nomos* which the English 'law' translates. However behind the Greek *nomos* stands the Hebrew *Torah*, which is perhaps better translated as 'instruction', or 'way'. It includes what we intend by 'law', but has a broader as well as a more precise application.

We find *Torah* being used for the way God reveals his will via a specific oracle issued by a priest or a prophet. From this it came to stand for the totality of the way God has revealed himself and his will through the history of his dealings with the people of Israel. In this sense *Torah* ('law') is synonymous with the whole of Israelite tradition, written (the Scriptures), and oral. Following Old Testament usage, Luke frequently uses *nomos* ('law') with this meaning (Luke 2:27; 5:17; 10:26; 16:17; Acts 5:34; 21:20, 24; 22:3, 12; 23:3, 29). In this sense 'law' can be the equivalent of 'the religion of Israel' (Acts 2:23; 25:8).

When the Scriptures were given a more definite form in the period after the exile, the *Torah* came also to be used in a more restricted sense for the first five books of the Jewish canon: the Book of Genesis and the Books concerned with Moses (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). An example of this usage is found in the Prologue to the Book of Sirach:

Many great teaching have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the other writings that followed them.

Luke speaks of 'the law' in this more restricted sense (Luke 16:16; Acts 7:53; 13:15; 24:14). He also speaks of 'the law of Moses' (Luke 2:22; Acts 15:5), and 'the law of the Lord' (Luke 2:23-24, 2:39). For the rest of this discussion we use the word 'law' in its widest application as 'the revelation from God found in the writings and traditions of Israel'. This is the meaning it generally has for Luke, for Paul, and throughout the New Testament.

Living according to the Law as an experience of salvation

It is clear from the whole of the New Testament that the law (*Torah*) was treasured as a genuine revelation of God and that living according to the law was a genuine experience of salvation. This remained the understanding of the Christian community when the Church saw itself as distinct from the Jewish synagogue and was increasingly Gentile. This is clear from the theological writings of Irenaeus. In his famous work *Against Heresies: a refutation and subversion of knowledge falsely so called* (180 AD), he writes:

God formed mankind ... but chose the patriarchs for the sake of mankind's salvation, and prepared a people ... and raised up prophets upon earth, accustoming people to bear his Spirit and to hold communion with God.

– Against Heresies IV,14,2

Jesus and the Law

The Bible records the religious experience of a people, many of whom in living their religion came to close communion with God. One has only to pray the psalms to realise this truth. Using a remarkably evocative image, which applies not only to Judaism (the 'law') but to all that is genuine in every human religion, Irenaeus continues:

God put the human race together in many ways to effect a symphony of salvation.

– Against Heresies IV,14,2

For Irenaeus, and for Christians generally, Christianity is not just one among many religions, including Judaism. We find expressions of the Word of God in every human expression of truth. We find the life-giving activity of the Spirit of God in every genuine religious experience. In Christianity, however, we have the Word of God himself made flesh who with the Spirit is one God with the Father. The Word of God, however, who is incarnate in Jesus, is the same Word whom we find expressed in the sacred Scriptures of Judaism (the 'law'), and, indeed, in every religious culture, however incompletely:

The person who is truly spiritual, knowing always the same God, and always acknowledging the same Word of God (although he has but now been manifested to us), and acknowledging also at all times the same Spirit of God (although he has been poured out upon us after a new fashion in these last times) will know that he (the Son of God) descends even from the creation of the world to its end upon the human race, from whom those who believe God and follow his word receive that salvation which flows from him.

– Against Heresies IV,33.15

The Second Vatican Council in its dogmatic constitution on divine revelation ('*Dei Verbum*', 1965) reminds us:

Through Moses, with the race of Israel, God acquired a people for himself, and to them he revealed himself in words and deeds as the one, true, living God, so that Israel might experience the ways of God with people.

– *Dei Verbum*, n.14

Though the Word of God had not yet become flesh, he was still speaking to Israel (and, of course, to all peoples in different ways - though this is not part of our discussion here) revealing God and drawing the people into divine communion.

Jesus and the Law

As we would expect, Luke presents Jesus as being obedient to God's will (4:1-12) and as calling for this same obedience from others: 'Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it' (11:28). This includes faithfulness to the revelation of God found in their tradition.

Luke would agree with his teacher Paul that the law is a 'gift' from God (Romans 9:4); that it is 'holy' (Romans 7:12) and 'good' (Romans 7:12) and 'beautiful' (Romans 7:16), and that it reveals God's fidelity to his covenant of love (what Paul calls his 'justice', Romans 1:32; 2:26; 7:12). It is God's Spirit who breathes through the law (Romans 7:14). Besides revealing God, it directs us how respond to God, and therefore helps us to recognise our sinfulness (Romans 3:20; 7:7; Galatians 3:19).

Luke presents Jesus as the goal of God's revelation found in the law. It is he who brings it to perfection: 'No one knows who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him ... Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it'(10:22-24).

This was expressed dramatically, shortly beforehand, in what is commonly called the Transfiguration: 'The disciples saw two men, Moses and Elijah [together symbolic of the law] talking with Jesus ... Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone'(Luke 9:30,35-36). 'Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled'(24:44; see 24:27; Acts 28:23).

To obey God's will expressed in the law we must listen to Jesus and share in Jesus' faith, hope and love (Galatians 2:15-21; Romans 3:31; 10:4). It is because Christ lives in his followers that they are able to carry out the just requirements of the law (Galatians 3:2,5; Romans 8:4). It is the love of Christ experienced in the Christian community which is the fulfilment of the law (Galatians 5:14; 6:2; Romans 13:10).

Jesus' relationship to the law is summed up in the opening words of the Letter to the Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

– Hebrews 1:1-2

This same point is made by Irenaeus:

The patriarchs and prophets sowed the word concerning Christ, but the Church reaped, that is, received the fruit ... both the sower and the reaper may rejoice together in the kingdom of Christ, who is present with all those who were from the beginning approved by God who granted them his Word to be present with them.

– *Against Heretics*, IV,25,3

Likewise by the Second Vatican Council

The most intimate truth which revelation gives us about God and human salvation shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of revelation.

– *Dei Verbum* , n.2

God taught them to look for the promised saviour. And so, throughout the ages, he prepared the way for the Gospel.

– *Dei Verbum*, n.3

'Jesus Christ completed and perfected revelation'(DV, n.4).

Removing the limitations of the law

In the scene on which we are commenting it is clear that Jesus' interpretation of the law is in conflict with that of at least a significant number of the religious leaders of his day. Jesus had his own way of getting to what we might call the heart of the law. This gave him a perspective that his followers found liberating and life-giving.

However, there is more to it than this. What we have in the Jewish Scriptures (the 'law') is not the divine Word himself, not the divine Word-who-speaks, but the divine Word-as-heard. God inspires real human beings to express their experiences of his presence and his will, and so we must expect them to respond to God within their human limitations, historical and cultural, as well as personal. The fact that the words of these real human beings continue to be taken up by the community and treasured as inspired assures us that in heeding the inspired words we are, indeed, listening to God - but not in some ethereal or abstract way. We are listening to God as God was heard by limited human beings who, in turn, could give expression to their communion with God in ways that are necessarily limited and that must be subject, therefore, to careful interpretation.

This point is stressed in a document issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993). A few passages should suffice:

Scripture reveals the meaning of the events which bring it to fulfilment and that events reveal the meaning of Scripture, that is, they require that *certain aspects of the received interpretation be set aside and a new interpretation adopted.*

– The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, page 91-92).

In other words all understandings found in the law concerning God, God's ways with the human race, and our response to God must be looked at anew in the light of the events that fulfil the law – that is to say, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The exegete need not put absolute value in something which simply reflects limited human understanding.

– The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, page 94

The Word of God finds expression in the work of human authors. The thought and the words belong at one and the same time both to God and to human beings, in such a way that the whole Bible comes at once from God and from the inspired human author. This does not mean, however, that God has given the historical conditioning of the message a value which is absolute.

– The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, page 113

Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that his word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language.

– The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, pages 132-133

If the reader wishes to find a few easy and obvious examples of the limited understandings found in the Old Testament but corrected in the New, he or she could consult Psalm 54, noting that verse five ('He will repay my enemies for their evil. In your faithfulness, put an end to them') is omitted when the psalm occurs in the Christian liturgy (see 25th Sunday, Year B). The reasons should be obvious.

Likewise compare the advice given in Sirach 12:1-7 ('Don't help sinners ... for the Most High hates sinners') with the parable of the Good Samaritan, or read the injunction of Deuteronomy 23:1 excluding eunuchs from the assembly (already 'corrected' in Isaiah 56:4-5) in the light of Matthew 19:2. Examples could be multiplied.

Statements about the inherent limitation of human language and insight need to be made about any inspired literature, including, of course, the New Testament. Jesus himself, as human, also lived within the limitations of the human. The big difference – a difference that is at the heart of the faith of Christians – is that, within the limitations of the human, Jesus is the perfect human revelation of God. He is not simply a limited human being responding as best he can to the overwhelming experience of the Word of God and giving expression to his religious experience in words. He is the very Word of God himself living within the limitations of the human, but, within those limitations, giving expression in word, deed, attitude, feeling, decisions and relationships, to the perfect human communion with God which he experienced, having God's Spirit without reserve.

The law, however good, was imperfect, incomplete. It had to give way before the revelation of the Word-made-flesh. Luke, following Paul, held that the limitations and imperfections of the law had to be let go when they failed to express the revelation of God and of God's will given by him who is 'the lord of the Sabbath'(6:5).

You have died to the law through the Body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God ...

We are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

– Romans 7:4,6

This does not mean that the law has lost its value. It does mean that it now has to be treasured as seen through the eyes of Jesus and as understood with his mind. The law indicates the way to communion with God, but now it has come to its goal, now we have experienced its flower, now we can read it in its proper perspective and discern more accurately what is of God and where limited human perception was unable to receive God's Word without distortion.

As disciples of Jesus all are free from the necessity to observe all the detailed prescriptions of the law. Many of the laws will express lasting human values, values embraced by Jesus himself. A Jew, becoming a Christian, will find much in his religious tradition that is of lasting value. A Gentile, becoming a Christian, will be enriched by coming to know and follow the divine guidance found in the law. However, the early Christian community recognised that it was not necessary to become a Jew in order to become a Christian, for the basis of a person's communion with God was not conformity to the law but communion with Jesus.

Jesus and the Law

For Paul, as no doubt for many Jews who became disciples of Jesus, this was experienced as a deliberate and painful shift, likened to a death:

By works of the law shall no one be justified ... For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live *in the faith of* the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.

– Galatians 2:16,19-21; see also 4:4-7

If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the Law.

– Galatians 5:18; see also Philippians 3:7-11

Their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains, unlifted, because only through Christ is it *being annulled*. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their *hearts*; but when a *person* turns to the Lord the veil is removed.

– 2Corinthians 3:14-16

Already in this early part of Luke's Gospel we have seen Jesus setting aside injunctions accepted as law by his contemporaries. Jesus touches lepers (Luke 5:13), eats with sinners (5:29; 7:34; 19:7), and does not follow the Sabbath regulations expected by the religious authorities of his day (6:1,10; 13:12; 14:3-4). Jesus' followers did not follow the cultic food laws (Acts 10-11), nor did they accept the necessity of circumcision as a requirement of belonging to God's people (Acts 15). Following Jesus' teaching they did not accept the barrier between Jews (judged to be 'holy') and Gentiles (judged to be 'unclean').

It is still obvious today that people find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to let go practices which have been part of their religious identity. Many of Jesus' contemporaries, especially those responsible for preserving the tradition, were no exception. Jesus was crucified because he was seen to be attracting people away from the law (Luke 23:5; see Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Jesus' followers were to meet a similar fate (Acts 6:13; see Acts 7; re Paul, see Acts 21:28).

The other side to this is that many recognised in Jesus the fulfilment of their religious aspirations, and the flowering of the law. They found in his love the power to be liberated from sin – something they were unable to do within the confines of the law.

The leaders reject Jesus and conspire to destroy him

This tragic scene suddenly brings to an end Luke's presentation of the liberating power of Jesus' word. Jesus has demonstrated the reality of God's powerful, redeeming presence. In doing so, he has come up against those who wield power in the land. They are unwilling to see their position of authority undermined and, rather than yield to the attractiveness of Jesus' person and message, they 'discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus'.

In this early part of his presentation of Jesus' Galilean ministry, Luke has focused on the new spirit that Jesus introduced into the interpretation of the Law. The confrontation reaches its climax in this scene.

Jesus knows what he must do, and he is determined that the people realise that they must choose between the understanding of God promoted by the Pharisees and his own view. He therefore summons the man into the middle of the synagogue where all can see him.

His disciples must have vividly recalled the passion of that moment, when Jesus' heart and eyes burned with anger and grief. Jesus goes beyond the particular injunctions of the Law and the limited interpretations placed on them by the scribes, and asks the central question: Is the Sabbath law about doing good or doing evil? Is it about giving life, or destroying it?

The Pharisees were not used to arguing on this level. In their desire to obey God, they were concerned to focus attention on the least detail of the Law as written, and to carry it out meticulously, as well as to see that everyone else carried it out with the same scrupulous attention to detail. To admit Jesus' question was to forgo the basis of their power, for they were the ones who were learned in the Law and who controlled debate upon it. They chose to remain silent.

Jesus will not be dissuaded from his mission and he heals the man's right hand – the hand symbolic of action. He is being healed to carry on God's mission.

The confrontation is now in the open. Jesus' healing action sets in motion an opposition which will eventually bring about his death.

6 On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered.

7 The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him.

8 Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come and stand here.' He got up and stood there.

9 Then Jesus said to them, 'I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?'

10 After looking around at all of them, he said to him, 'Stretch out your hand.' He did so, and his hand was restored.

11 But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

compare Matthew 12:9-14
Mark 3:1-6

¹² **Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.**

¹³ **And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles:**

¹⁴ **Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John,**

and Philip, and Bartholomew,

¹⁵ **and Matthew, and Thomas,**

and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot,

¹⁶ **and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.**

The call of the Twelve

Jesus goes to the ‘mountain’, the place of prayer and revelation. He responds in a powerfully symbolic way to his rejection by the religious leaders by publicly selecting and commissioning a group of twelve to carry on his universal mission of renewing the twelve tribes of the covenant community of Israel (see 22:30; compare the symbolic action of Moses in Exodus 24:4). He has already said that new wine needs new skins (5:38). Since the old Israel will not accept the gospel, he must establish a repentant and renewed Israel that will.

The number twelve (see also Acts 1:13) derives, ultimately, from the twelve constellations in the zodiac. Since the heavens were understood to be the realm of God in a special way, the number twelve represented universality in its heavenly aspect – that is, universality as willed by God.

Luke has already introduced us to ‘Simon’, named ‘Peter’, meaning ‘the rock’ (5:3-11). Likewise ‘James and John’ (5:10). The remaining nine are introduced here for the first time. During the period of the Jewish revolt (66-73AD) there existed a fanatical group, called Zealots, who bound themselves by oath to oppose with violence all who did not conform to their understanding of religious orthodoxy. There is no evidence of such a group existing during the period of Jesus’ ministry. When Luke introduces the second Simon as ‘the Zealot’ he is using the term in the more general sense of one zealous for the Law (compare Acts 21:20; 22:3). Judas, the last named, is called ‘Iscariot’, possibly a transliteration of the Aramaic words *yaskar yothê*, ‘he who hands him over’ (that is, the ‘betrayed’).

Israel is now to gather in all the peoples of the world (see 2:32; 3:6). This is the new covenant promised by Jeremiah (31:31 – see Hebrews 8:8). Recall the words of Zechariah:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’

– Zechariah 8:23

The twelve are called, not only to be disciples (those who learn from a master), but to be ‘apostles’ (those sent on a mission). They are to share in Jesus’ universal mission (see 24:47-48; Acts 1:8; 13:47).

compare
Matthew 10:1-4
Mark 3:13-19

The 'Sermon on the Plain'

Jesus, like Moses (see Exodus 33:12 - 34:28) has been on the mountain in prayer with God (6:12). Moses was commanded not to take anyone with him (Exodus 34:3). Jesus, on the contrary, summoned the twelve to be there with him. They are to be his 'apostles', so they must first share with him his communion with God.

Just as Moses brought down from the mountain the revelation which he had received from God, now Jesus with his apostles brings down the new law, the new covenant, the new word from God to 'a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people' who are eagerly waiting to touch him and to hear his healing word.

¹⁷ He came down with them and stood on a level place,

with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases;

and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.

¹⁹ And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

compare Matthew 4:24 - 5:2; Mark 3:7,8,10

Preliminary comments on the following ‘Sermon’

By placing Jesus’ words on the essence of discipleship just after the appointment of the Twelve, Luke wishes to highlight the universal relevance of the teaching contained in this section.

A comparison with Matthew 5:3 - 7:27 indicates that the following ‘sermon’ is Luke’s composition, in which he draws together sayings of Jesus that focus on the essential meaning of the gospel and of discipleship.

While the building is Luke’s, he is not creating his own building blocks. We can be sure that wherever possible, he will give us Jesus’ exact words, treasured by the community, and translated as literally as possible from Jesus’ own Aramaic into Greek.

However, we must remember that the disciples of Jesus did more than remember Jesus’ words. They pondered their meaning in the light of the life and death of Jesus, and in the light of their post-crucifixion experiences of Jesus’ continued presence in the community.

Luke is sharing his inspired insights into the mind and heart of Jesus in an attempt to connect with the experience of his community and to draw out the implications of Jesus’ teaching for their lives. Sometimes he gives a summary statement of Jesus’ teaching; sometimes, however, he goes not to Jesus’ remembered words but to the heart of Jesus’ teaching, and finds his own inspired words to apply it to the new situation of his community.

We are privileged to have here a record of a number of Jesus’ sayings. We are privileged also to have the insights of an inspired disciple who has contemplated Jesus’ words and, with profound pastoral love, is sharing his insights with his fellow Christians. Each generation is called to do the same, as the context within which we live our lives changes.

We will not find here an ethical code as such or a complete statement of discipleship. The moral teaching of Jesus always includes a call and it is this call that continues to echo through these words, inviting whoever is willing to welcome Jesus into their hearts and to live as he lived.

The Beatitudes and Woes

The key distinction here is between the ‘poor’ and the ‘rich’. The other expressions function as illustrations. The ‘poor’ are hungry, they weep, and they are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed.

The good news that Jesus is preaching, is ‘the good news of the kingdom of God’(4:43). The poor are blessed now because God is taking them to heart and, in Jesus, answering their cry. They can experience God’s reign here and now (‘yours is the kingdom of heaven’). The fullness of life and of laughter for which they long, however, belongs to the future which they are being promised. By contrast, the ‘rich’ have their fill now, laugh now, and are spoken well of now. Their consolation is limited to the present. In the future they will be hungry, mourn and weep.

The key to Luke’s understanding of the term ‘poor’ is found in his first use of it, which was in the text from Isaiah selected by Jesus at Nazareth. Jesus presents himself as anointed by the Spirit ‘to bring good news to the poor’(4:18). Let us look again at those who have received the good news so far in this gospel.

Firstly, there is Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are among the poor. She suffers the humiliation (1:25) of being unable to have a child (1:7). However, she and her husband place their trust in God and pray to him (1:13). God answers their prayer, announcing the good news to them through his angel, and they experience the joy (1:14,59) of which Jesus speaks in this discourse.

Then there is Mary. She, too, is among the poor, for she is the obedient ‘servant of the Lord’(1:38). She placed her trust in God and ‘believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord’(1:45). She, too, is told to rejoice (the meaning of ‘greetings’ in 1:28), and expresses her exultation in a song of joy (1:46-55) which picks up the essential contrasts of this passage.

The shepherds are among the poor. They are the recipients of the ‘good news of great joy for all the people’(2:10), and they see the glory of God in the ‘child lying in the manger’(2:12,16).

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

22 Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of [because of] the Son of Man.

23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

24 *But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*

25 *Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.*

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

26 *Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

compare Matthew 5:3-6,11-12

The poor and the rich

Simeon is 'poor'. He has spent his life longing to see 'the Lord's Messiah'(2:26). He knows the truth of what Jesus is saying here, when he takes the child into his arms and praises God (2:28-32). Likewise Anna who 'never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day'(2:38). She, too, is moved to praise God when she sees the child.

John the Baptist is among the poor, for he longed for everyone to 'see the salvation of God'(3:6).

Most significantly of all, there is Jesus himself, the poor man, the man of prayer (3:21), humbly seeking the baptism of repentance. He knew the beatitude of which he now speaks, when heaven opened, and the Spirit of God descended upon him and he experienced God's words of love (3:22). Jesus knew hunger, but it was for God and God's will that he hungered and he looked to God to be satisfied (4:3-4; 6:20). He knew powerlessness, and it was to his Father whom he looked for protection (4:5-8). He placed all his hope in God (4:9-12).

We have seen the good news coming to a poor broken man troubled by the spirit of an unclean demon (4:33). We have witnessed it coming to Simon, who recognises his sinfulness in the presence of Jesus (5:8) and to a man covered with leprosy (5:12), a paralysed man (5:18), a tax collector (5:27) and a man with a withered hand (6:6).

The 'poor', who receive the good news (4:18) and who experience the special blessedness spoken of here by Jesus, are those who recognise their total dependence on God, who cry to him in their distress, and who are committed to obey God's will. The theme is a common one in the sacred Scriptures:

Blessed are those who trust in God.

– Psalm 2:11

The Lord takes delight in his people. He crowns the poor with salvation.

– Psalm 149:4

The psalmist (Psalm 107) speaks of those who are hungry (107:4-9), prisoners (107:10-17), sinners (107:17-22) and the lost (107:23-32):

They cried to the Lord in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress.

– Psalm 107:6,13,19,28

To understand what Jesus means by being 'poor' we will have to observe him. Being 'poor' is presented by Luke as the fundamental attitude of a person who is to receive the good news only because it is a fundamental attitude of Jesus also. The blessedness, the bliss, the profound delight of intimate communion with God which the disciple experiences is a sharing in the religious experience of Jesus. Our understanding, therefore, of what Luke means by 'poor' will deepen as we continue our contemplation of Jesus. Here, however, we should make an initial attempt to point our reflections in the right direction.

The word ‘poor’ applies literally to those who do not have the resources to meet their own needs. We are ‘poor’, therefore, to the extent that we recognise that everything we are and everything we have is a gift from God on whom we are totally dependent. Jesus is telling his disciples that they will be ‘blessed’. That is to say, they will have that special happiness that flows from God’s blessing. They will share his communion with God to the extent that they recognise their own powerlessness and complete dependence on God. This will mean giving up attempts to rely on themselves without reference to God. It will mean looking to God as the only source of their hope and salvation, trusting that God wants only to love them.

We should make an important clarification. It should be obvious from Jesus’ own commitment to the poor and oppressed that he is in no way justifying material, economic poverty, nor is he saying that there is anything good about any of the deprivations experienced by the oppressed poor.

When our lack of resources to meet our pressing needs is obvious, we are less likely to think of ourselves as self-sufficient than when our material welfare is secured. The deceptive and superficial self-reliance that goes with wealth is a trap that caused Jesus to say: ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God’(18:24). However, it can be hard for the materially poor too because of the temptation to envy and despair.

The ‘poor’ are those who recognise their need and cry out to God in their distress. The whole biblical tradition ever since the Exodus is that the God of Israel will heed such a cry:

Then the Lord said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians . . . I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt’

– Exodus 3:7-8,12

As we watch Jesus, we see that he too cannot resist the cry of the poor, and later he will call his disciples to share in his mission of liberation (9:1-2). When he meets a person who wants to be his disciple and who has resources to help the poor, he asks him to rid himself of his possessions — of the riches that burden and ‘possess’ him — and to give them to those who need them. Only then will he be free to follow Jesus (18:22). Whatever resources we have, we will be judged on how we shared them with those in need (3:10-11).

Jesus, therefore, is not praising poverty. He is calling his disciples to recognise that they are not independent, that they do not have the resources in themselves to be or to do anything, but that they are totally dependent upon God. He is assuring them that, if they place their trust in God and act accordingly, they will experience now the communion with God that will satisfy their deepest need and longing (compare 1:52-53; 6:20-21; 7:22; 14:13,21).

The poor and the rich

A perfect image for the 'poor' is found in Psalm 131. Here, the psalmist places before us a little child, utterly dependent, simply and totally looking to the mother, and doing so joyfully because of the security provided by the mother's love:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forever more.

– Psalm 131:1-3

For this reason, Jesus says to his disciples: 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me' (9:48).

The 'poor' are those who recognise their dependence. The 'poor' are open to hear the good news. They believe that God who delights in Jesus delights also in them. They believe that it is God's purpose to save them from all that hinders their full communion with him and thus limits their freedom to live full human lives.

Luke is a realist. The poor will experience hunger; they will weep; and they will be rejected, as Jesus and the prophets were rejected (6:21-23). It is one thing for a child to trust. It is another for an adult, in a world of sin and oppression and suffering, to maintain this same loving trust in God while being committed to do God's will. The challenge presented by Jesus to his disciples is to remain 'poor' under persecution. We will see Jesus living with this childlike trust in his own public ministry and especially in his suffering and death. In the face of a cruel death Jesus can still say to God:

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

– Psalm 31:5; Luke 23:46

Luke will develop this theme of persecution later (12:11-12; 21:12-19). His community suffered through the tensions they experienced because of the misunderstanding and rejection suffered at the hands of their Jewish brothers and sisters. They suffered also through the opposition they found when they attempted to put into practice the liberating love of Jesus in a society in which the powerful were determined to maintain the class divisions and unjust structures that supported their position.

The persecuted poor are assured by Jesus that, however painful the circumstances, they will experience now in this world the bliss of divine communion, the profound peace of belonging in this world because they are at home with God.

The 'rich', by contrast, are those who are 'proud in the thoughts of their hearts' (1:51). Their pride causes them to be self-reliant and therefore closed to what can be received only in dependence upon God. They go away empty (1:51). They are unrepentant (3:7-9) and when Jesus comes among them, they seek to get rid of him (4:9). They exercise religious power in Israel (1:52) and they accuse Jesus of blasphemy (5:21). How could they find life?

The 'rich' are 'choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life' (8:14). Like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan, the rich can see someone in need and not be moved by compassion. They are not open to the blessedness of the poor or to eternal life (10:25). Jesus' indictment of the lawyers and Pharisees (11:37-54) makes a good commentary on the woes of this present passage.

Luke's interest in the folly of the 'rich' is indicated by the fact that he alone includes the parable of the man who hoarded his possessions (12:13-21), the long section on the right use of money (16:1-15), the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31) and the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (18:9-14). In each case the man who seeks to rely on himself without reference to God misses out on life. In exalting himself, he fails to receive God's gracious gift, which can be welcomed only by one who is 'poor'; that is to say, by one who knows his or her complete dependence on God.

Disciples must be meek, loving as God loves

27 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies,

do good to those who hate you,

28 bless those who curse you,

pray for those who abuse you.

The command to love one's neighbour, that is to say one's fellow Israelite and to some extent the foreigners living in the land, is a fundamental demand of the law (Leviticus 19:18; see James 2:8). Jesus goes beyond this traditional injunction, and commands his disciples to love their enemies (6:27-28) – an idea rarely found in the Old Testament:

If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink.

– Proverbs 25:21

Apart from the baptism scene in which God speaks of Jesus as the 'Beloved' (3:22), this is the first time Luke has spoken of love. The love meant here (Greek: *agapê*) is not the spontaneous feeling that we associate with a spouse or family (*stergein*); it is not passionate desire (*eros*); nor is it the affection experienced between friends (*philia*). It is rather a love of choice.

As used in the New Testament, it means to recognise the value of others because of what we have come to know about them through God's self-revelation in Jesus. It includes a decision, based on this recognition, to do good to another, however badly the other person might treat us. Following the example of Jesus and strengthened by his Spirit, we are to call down God's blessing upon them, and to pray for them. Disciples are asked to give themselves for others (Galatians 5:13), just as Christ gave himself for them. In other words, the kind of love of which Jesus is speaking here concerns not feeling but faithful commitment to the good of another. This love is from Christ; it is a participation in his loving:

Christ lives in me ... and I live by faith in the Son of God who loves me and who gave himself for me.

– Galatians 2:20

Knowing what God has done for us in Jesus (Philippians 1:9-11), we commit ourselves to carry on his mission of love. Love, therefore, like *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible, is primarily a quality of God: it is God's commitment to our liberation. Jesus incarnates this love in his obedience to the mission of liberation (redemption) which he has from his Father. He wants this same love to be in his disciples. To speak of our love for God is to speak of our commitment to God's cause and of our faithful carrying out of God's will. For a Christian this is to love Christ, for it is Christ's mission which we share and it is his Spirit that enables us to do it. If we love him, we will do what he commands us (John 15:15): we will love one another as he loves us (John 15:12 and 13:34-35).

Jesus' examples of loving people who treat us badly are simple and direct, not so that we will treat his words as instructions to be followed literally and without discernment, but so that we will penetrate to the spirit that underlies Jesus' own attitude. Paul tells us that our faithlessness cannot nullify the faithfulness of God (Romans 3:3), a faithfulness which we see in Jesus:

If we are faithless, he remains faithful.

– 2Timothy 2:13

Jesus' disciples are to learn this same fidelity. Evil has its own seduction, and we are tempted to respond badly when we are treated badly. Jesus teaches us to remain loving even when others treat us in an unloving way. Paul expresses this principle well:

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

– 1Thessalonians 5:15

In Jesus' first illustration we are to imagine a disciple offering his or her right cheek to someone as a greeting of welcome and peace. However, the greeting is rejected in a violent way. What is the disciple to do? Not only must our response not be violent; but we are to continue to reach out to the other person, offering the left cheek as well. Jesus has taught his disciples that this is the way God acts in our regard. We are to do the same. There is, perhaps an allusion to one of the songs of the Servant:

I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

– Isaiah 50:6

Of course, not everything can be said in one sentence. Jesus is not encouraging us to pretend that things are other than they really are or to allow ourselves to be manipulated by emotional blackmail. There will also be times when we need to protect ourselves against an evil that threatens to overwhelm us. The thrust of his teaching is that we are to keep loving when faced with rejection. When as disciples we are insulted or treated badly, we are to remember how Jesus was treated and respond in like manner. As Peter tells us:

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

– 1Peter 2:23

29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also;

and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.

30 Give to everyone who begs from you;

and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.

compare
Matthew 5:39,40,42

The commandment of love

³¹ **Do to others as you would have them do to you.**

³² **'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even *sinner*s love those who love them.**

³³ **If you *do good* to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even *sinner*s do the same.**

³⁴ ***If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even *sinner*s lend to *sinner*s, to receive as much again.***

³⁵ ***But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.***

Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High;

for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

³⁶ **Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.**

compare Matthew 7:12
Matthew 5:46-48

Among the many wise sayings of Sirach (c.200BC), we find the following:

Judge your neighbour's feelings by your own, and in every matter be thoughtful.

– Sirach 31:15

Rabbi Hillel, the leading Rabbi in Jerusalem when Jesus was a boy, was asked to sum up the Law, and replied:

What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: that is the whole Law, while the rest is commentary; go and learn it.

– The Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat II,5,31a

We read in Paul:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments ... are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.

– Romans 13:8-9; see Galatians 5:14

Jesus requires of his disciples that they do good to everyone. The reason for this universal command takes us to the heart of the good news. The Most High is not the God of one people only. God is the 'Father' of all and as the psalmist says:

The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

– Psalm 145:9; compare Wisdom 15:1

According to Jesus, God does not cease being 'kind to the ungrateful and the wicked'. Jesus' disciples are those who accept the challenge and the grace to live as Jesus lives, especially by loving, even their enemies, and to love without putting expectations on the other person to return our love. We must learn to love unconditionally, respecting the freedom of the other person to respond as they choose. If we do this we will share in Jesus' own relationship with God. We will be 'children of the Most High'. Strictly speaking Luke uses the expression 'sons', not 'children', for he wishes to stress our sharing, whether we be woman or man, in the life of Jesus the Son.

Jesus calls his disciples to 'be merciful as your Father is merciful'. *oiktirmôn* translated here as 'merciful' occurs in the New Testament only here and in James:

The Lord is compassionate and *merciful*.

– James 5:11

In the Old Testament *oiktirmôn* is used to translate a Hebrew word which refers to the ‘womb’, thus capturing something of the feeling which a mother has for the child in her womb. It is found in a text which recurs throughout the Old Testament as a formulation of the essential nature of the Lord, the God who revealed himself to Moses and redeemed his people from Egypt:

The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful [*oiktirmôn*] and gracious [*eleêmôn*], slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

– Exodus 34:6; see also 2Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17,31; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4)).

In the Jewish scriptures we read:

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy ...
You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin ...
You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people,
but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.

– Leviticus 19:2,17-18

When you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back.
When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back
from setting it free, you must help to set it free.

– Exodus 23:4-5

In this way the faithful members of the people of Israel attempted to respond to the injunction of the law:

You shall be holy, for I am holy.

– Leviticus 11:45

Jesus calls for this and more. His disciples are to follow his example, by imitating God in loving everyone, for the God he calls ‘Father’ is not only God of Israel, but God of the whole world, and God’s holiness radiates out to every land and every people. So must our love if we are to be faithful disciples of Jesus.

To see what it means for God to be ‘merciful’ we need to continue to watch Jesus as he responds perfectly to God’s love and radiates that love to others. Jesus’ disciples are called to share in the creative work of God in this world until all is as God wills it to be.

³⁷ **'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.**

Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ *give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'*

³⁹ *He also told them a parable: 'Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?*

⁴⁰ **A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher.**

⁴¹ **Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?** ⁴² **Or how can you say to your neighbour, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?**

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.

compare Matthew 7:1-5
verse 39, Matthew 15:14
verse 40, Matthew 10:24

Disciples are not to judge others

Jesus is not speaking against discernment. Of course we are required to make judgments in regard to our own actions and also in regard to the actions of others. There will also be times when it is our duty to point out to others their faults and to oppose them.

However, this must be done humbly and in love. The command not to judge is a command to refrain from passing judgment on *people*. Firstly, we are in no position to know their real motivation; and, secondly, we are not sufficiently free from our own subjective perceptions and our own blindness to see clearly or to judge correctly. Judgment of persons is to be left to God. Discernment must take place without condemnation, for we are not to impute guilt or determine responsibility.

We are not to pass judgment on others; we are not to condemn them. Balancing these two negative injunctions are two positive ones: we are to forgive, and we are to give. The measure we receive (from God) depends on our openness to grace, and this, in turn, depends on how open our heart and our hands are to others. The word 'parable' covers a number of literary forms, ranging from simple illustrative analogies to quite intriguing riddles. In 4:23 the Greek word *parabolê* was translated 'proverb'.

Jesus' disciples are called to love. If we are willing to suffer the purification necessary to become instruments of God's judgment — a judgment that is concerned to save, not to condemn — then, and only then, may we attempt to guide, or teach, or take the splinter out of another's eye. Without this love we are acting blindly, out of touch with reality and acting on appearances. Furthermore we ourselves will stand condemned for our blindness, pride and hardness of heart. James and Paul have the same teaching:

Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy.

— James 2:13; see also 4:12

You have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself.

— Romans 2:1; also 14:10; 1Corinthians 4:5

The heart of a disciple

Jesus' words focus on the heart. As we noted when reflecting on Luke's presentation of Mary as the model disciple (2:19,51), the 'heart' for Luke, as generally in the New Testament, is the deep, inner centre from which all thoughts, desires, affections, hopes and decisions arise. Jesus is saying that we can know the heart by looking at the kinds of actions that flow from it (compare Sirach 27:6; James 3:12). A good heart, as Jesus has already pointed out in this discourse, is 'poor' and compassionate, generous and forgiving.

Paul lists some of the key qualities of the Christ-like heart:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

– Galatians 5:22-23

⁴³ 'No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; ⁴⁴ for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.

⁴⁵ The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

compare Matthew 7:16-18,20;
and Matthew 12:33-35

⁴⁶ **'Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?**

⁴⁷ **I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them.**

⁴⁸ **That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built.**

⁴⁹ **But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.'**

compare Matthew 7:21, 24-27

Disciples are to hear Jesus' words and act on them

It is not enough to claim to be Jesus' disciple. It is not enough to recognise him as 'Lord' (compare 1 Corinthians 12:3). We must demonstrate by our actions that we are committed to doing the will of his Father. Recall Paul's words:

If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

– 1 Corinthians 13:2

When John the Baptist heralded the coming of Jesus, he too insisted that change of heart must be genuine: people must 'bear fruits worthy of repentance' (3:8). We saw what happened when Simon Peter, the first disciple, obeyed Jesus' word (5:5). He was able to call Jesus 'Lord' (5:8) from a genuine, humble, and obedient heart. He is an example for us all.

The whole of the 'sermon' has been about what it means to belong to Jesus. If we build on the foundation of his revelation and on our communion with him as his disciples, we will stand against all that threatens to destroy us. If our lives are not based on the life and teaching of Jesus, whatever we build will collapse when put to the test.

A Gentile centurion pleads for help and is heard

It is striking that in his first scene after the collection of Jesus' sayings about discipleship Luke should present Jesus reaching beyond the boundaries of Judaism to answer the prayer of a non-Jew. This is Jesus whom Simeon promised would be 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (2:32).

The man is a centurion, and it is interesting to compare this account with that of another centurion, Cornelius, who was received into the Christian community of Caesarea (Acts 10-11).

He is a man of faith, and he is seeking life for someone dear to him. He respects Judaism, even to the extent of building the synagogue. He does not want to embarrass Jesus, or ask him to do what many observant Jews would have considered improper; namely, enter the house of a non-Jew. Jesus, however, shows no reluctance to go to him.

Also of significance is the fact that it is the Jewish elders who are happy to act as mediators. Is Luke making a point to his contemporaries that there is no reason for the Jewish leaders to be reluctant to approach the community of Jesus' followers? The fact that Jesus heals without direct physical contact demonstrates to those living after the death of Jesus that God's healing continues and is not dependent on the direct physical touch of Jesus.

Luke is also stressing the fact that healing does not take place by some magical power unrelated to the condition of the one making the request. It is effective only where there is faith. Faith is something that Zechariah lacked: 'You did not believe my words' (1:20). It is something of which Mary has already been presented as the model: 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord' (1:45).

¹ *After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.*

² *A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death.*

³ *When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave.*

⁴ *When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us. ⁶ And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you.*

But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it.

⁹ *When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.*

¹⁰ *When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.*

compare Matthew 8:5-13

Faith

Faith is something which we have already witnessed in the friends of the paralysed man: 'When Jesus saw their faith, he said: Friend, your sins are forgiven'(5:20). It is such a central theme in Luke that it is important here to examine more closely the nature of biblical faith.

While 'faith' is impossible without 'trust', biblical usage is against identifying them. Hebrew words which express trust are never translated by the Greek word *pistis* which is the word invariably translated by the English 'faith'. *pistis* only ever translates words from the Hebrew root 'mn. To understand the meaning of faith as used in the Bible, therefore, we need to examine the meaning of Hebrew 'mn.

The Hebrew noun 'mnh denotes the quality of behaving reliably according to one's nature or commitments. It is often translated 'faithfulness', and it picks up the notion of reliable, secure, sure, certain, trustworthy. God has this quality because God always acts according to who God is:

The word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in *faithfulness*.

– Psalm 33:4

I will take you [Israel] for my wife in *faithfulness*; and you shall know the Lord.

– Hosea 2:20

To speak of Yahweh in this way is to say that he is the real God, not a false God, that he always acts according to the truth, and so we can be secure in him and place our trust in him.

When applied to us it does not state that we are *trusting*, but that we are *trustworthy* because what we do and say is in accordance with the truth. If we seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1,3), and deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2Chronicles 31:12,15,18; 34:12; Proverbs 3:3), then we share in this quality of the Lord. A prophet thus described is one who is truly sent by the Lord (Jeremiah 28:9), and therefore one who can be trusted to speak the truth. People who are faithful can be relied on (Jeremiah 15:18).

The adjective derived from 'mnh is generally translated 'faithful'. When used of God, it states that he is real, sure, faithful, and so trustworthy:

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the *faithful* God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.

– Deuteronomy 7:9

'The Lord is *faithful* in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds'(Psalm 145:13).

Abraham is said to have a faithful heart (Nehemiah 9:8), and Moses is spoken of as being trustworthy because of the intimacy of God's communication with him (Numbers 12:7). We hear of a faithful priest (1Samuel 2:35) and a trustworthy prophet (1Samuel 3:20). The city is spoken of as being faithful (Isaiah 1:21,26), witnesses as being reliable (Isaiah 8:2), and a supply of water as being sure (Isaiah 33:16).

The Hebrew verb *'mn* means to trust in the faithfulness of another and to behave in a trustworthy way. Both these ideas are contained in the word 'believe'.

Abraham *believed* the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.
– Genesis 15:6

I *kept my faith*, even when I said, I am greatly afflicted.
– Psalm 116:10

If you do not *stand firm in faith*, you shall not stand at all.
– Isaiah 7:9

We might sum up this study by stating that God has faith in its fullness – God is faith-ful. God always acts according to who God is. He is love and so can be depended on to act lovingly. He has made promises and can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith.

Jesus has faith in its human perfection. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2). We have faith when we act in accordance with who we are: creatures who are totally dependent on God and who are adopted as Jesus' brothers and sisters, children with him of God. Faith is a fruit of trust. It goes beyond trust in that it consists in the following five elements:

- To believe is to listen to God's word, trusting that God is revealing himself to us.
- To believe is to heed what God says (reveals), trusting that God is faithful and so accepting his word as true with all our hearts and minds and soul and strength.
- To believe is to act in accordance with God's will, trusting that God is our wise and loving Father.
- To believe is to respond in love to God, trusting that God is love. The English word 'be-lieve' nicely expresses this aspect.
- To believe is to live in communion with Jesus, sharing his faith.

It is this quality that Jesus admires in the Gentile centurion, a man who did not belong to the Jewish faith tradition expressed in the law. Luke presents him here as an illustration of the truth argued by Paul:

We hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.
– Romans 3:28

He listened to God's word spoken by Jesus, he heeded it and was willing to act accordingly. Where this disposition is present, a person's heart is open to receive all that grace is offering, free of the obstacles that can prevent the action of God's creating, healing and liberating love (see also 7:50; 8:12,25,48,50; 17:19; 18:42).

¹¹ Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him.

¹² As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town.

¹³ When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'

¹⁴ Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!'

¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

The power of God's word over death

Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, concluded his hymn of praise with the following words: 'By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace'(1:78-19).

We have been watching Jesus healing and liberating. In this scene he is moved by 'compassion'(see also 10:33; 15:20), that is to say, by the tenderness of God's mercy. He confronts the ultimate darkness of death. His word, the powerful word of God (see 5:1), penetrates beyond the gates of death and he, the 'Lord', the giver of life, draws this young man back to life.

The point of this story is surely not to raise hopes in the readers that when their time to die comes they will be restored to *this* life by God. Luke wishes to point to Jesus as having the power to raise a dead person to the life that is beyond death, the life of eternal communion with God. He wants to demonstrate that physical death cannot of itself separate a person from God, and so cannot separate a person from true life.

Real death is not the physical death that marks the end of our existence in this world. It is the death of separation from God, whether here in this existence (see 15:24,32), or in the existence that lies beyond the grave. The ultimate redeeming and saving power of God is shown by his raising to life in himself those who have experienced physical death while in communion with him. This the risen Jesus does by uniting people to himself. Just as Jesus, the 'only son' (3:22; 9:35; 20:13) is raised to life by his Father (24:6), so God's powerful word can raise this 'only son' from death to life.

The mother is a moving example of Jesus' earlier declaration: 'Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh'(6:21). In Jesus, God is moved with compassion and restores her son to her. The same grace is promised to every mother who weeps for her child. In that fullness of life that lies beyond death, God will:

wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

– Revelation 21:4; see also 7:17

Here, and in the story of the daughter of Jairus (8:40-56), as well as that of Tabitha (Acts 9:36-43), and of Eutyches (Acts 20:7-12), Luke demonstrates the truth of Paul's words:

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

– Romans 8:38-39

The reaction of the people, 'A great prophet has arisen among us!' is, in a special way, an allusion to the great miracle-worker Elisha, who restored to life the son of a widow from Shunam, a town just over the hill from Nain (2Kings 4:8-37. See also 1Kings 17:17-24, re Elijah).

At the birth of his son, Zechariah praised God for 'looking favourably on his people' (1:68). The same Greek verb (*episkopein*) is used in the text quoted on the previous page where we are promised that the dawn will 'break upon us' (1:78). The wonderful act of Jesus causes the crowd to praise God who has 'looked favourably' (*episkopein*) upon his people. Luke wants to reinforce the faith of his community in the final dawn of God's tender mercy that will break upon us beyond death.

The crowd recognise in Jesus' miracle God's redeeming activity. Luke expresses the same idea in Acts where Peter speaks of Jesus as:

a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you.

– Acts 2:22

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

– Acts 10:38

In his conclusion, Luke speaks of the word spreading 'throughout Judea'. Nain is in Galilee. We should remind ourselves that here, as earlier (1:5; 4:44), 'Judea' is sometimes used by Luke to refer to the whole area inhabited by the Jews, and so includes Galilee as well as Judea proper.

¹⁶ Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favourably on his people!'

¹⁷ This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

¹⁸ *The disciples of John reported all these things to him.*

So John summoned two of his disciples ¹⁹and sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

²⁰ *When the men had come to him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"'*

²¹ *Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind.*

²² **And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.**

²³ **And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'**

Jesus, the Messiah

Once again Luke refers to Jesus as 'the Lord' (see 5:8,12; 6:46; 7:6,13). Throughout the gospel his focus is on the risen Christ present and active in the community for which he is writing.

John had promised them that one more powerful than himself was coming, who would baptise them with the Holy Spirit and fire (3:16). Now he sends two of his disciples to ascertain whether or not Jesus is 'the one who is to come'.

This title ('the one who is to come') occurs in the prophetic literature (see Daniel 7:13; Zechariah 9:9; 14:5; Malachi 3:1, and Psalm 118:26). John, representing a long line of prophets, is seeking to discover whether or not Jesus is the one for whom Israel has been waiting, the one who is to fulfil the promises of God.

Some of John's disciples were still hesitating at the time Luke was writing (see Acts 19:1-7). Luke's answer is to invite them to observe 'what you have seen and heard'. He has already carefully laid the ground for Jesus' reply.

We have listened to Jesus quoting from Isaiah and declaring that his mission was to 'proclaim recovery of sight to the blind' (4:18) and in this present passage we are told that he 'had given sight to many who were blind' (see also 18:35-43).

He has already healed a paralysed man (5:18-26), and cleansed a leper (5:12-15; see also 17:12-19). We have witnessed Zechariah miraculously regaining the ability to speak (1:64), and we have just witnessed the dead son of the widow of Nain being raised (7:14-15).

Luke's build up of signs reaches its climax in the most wonderful sign of all, and the sign of which all the previous signs are but examples: 'the poor have good news brought to them'. This was promised by Jesus himself at Nazareth (4:18).

In claiming these as Messianic signs, Luke is alluding to prophetic oracles such Isaiah 61:1-2, already quoted at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (4:18). We could recall also the following:

compare Matthew 11:2-6

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come ... and save you'. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

– Isaiah 35:4-6

For Jesus, as for Isaiah, the blindness, the inability to move, the lack of purity, the inability to hear and the failure to live, go far deeper than a person's physical state. As we have seen, Jesus' physical healings are symbolic of a healing that penetrates to the depth of the human psyche and, when welcomed in faith, they bring about that communion with God which is the object of Jesus' Messianic mission. Hence the accent on the good news being brought to the poor. This is the good news that God is our Father, and that each of us is God's son or daughter. God loves us and delights in us.

Jesus is, as John had promised, baptising with the Holy Spirit (the 'fire' will be accented in the following passages). Those who are open to accept this good news are those poor who know their complete dependence on God, who cry out to God in their distress, and who welcome God's reply in Jesus. As Jesus has already said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God'(6:20).

Luke adds another beatitude here: 'Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me'(7:23); that is to say, anyone who is not scandalised because of the kind of Messiah he or she finds me to be. The following passages show that Jesus' contemporaries, on the whole, refused to accept him as God's Messiah, and so took offence at what they heard and saw. Simeon has already warned us to expect this (2:34).

Luke is directing his gospel to his own community, and we must allow it to penetrate our psyche as well. What kind of liberation do we expect from God? If we want something other than what we see in Jesus, we will miss the kingdom he is offering and be left unredeemed.

²⁴ **When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John:**

'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?

²⁵ **What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces.**

²⁶ **What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.**

²⁷ **This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'**

²⁸ **I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.'**

²⁹ *(And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism.*

³⁰ *But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.)*

compare Matthew 11:7-11 and Matthew 21:31-32

Jesus is offering a place in the Messianic kingdom

In this passage, Luke wants his readers to be aware of what it is that they are being offered in Jesus. It is nothing less than the promised Messianic kingdom. They flocked after John, not Herod, who had a reed stamped on his coins. Well, John is the one in whom the prophecy of Malachi was fulfilled (Luke 7:27 is from Malachi 3:1). He is a prophet, yes, but 'more than a prophet' in that he is the prophet sent by God to herald the Messiah.

The angel of the Lord had promised Zechariah that his son would be 'great in the sight of the Lord'(1:15). Here we find the Lord declaring John's greatness, though he does qualify it by reminding them that, however great as a human being John might be, this cannot be compared with the gift of belonging to God's kingdom.

John's greatness was not in focusing on himself, but in turning 'many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God'(1:16), in 'making ready a people prepared for the Lord'(1:17). Luke distinguishes here between the ordinary folk who accepted John's baptism and were able to listen to Jesus and come to 'acknowledge the justice of God', and the 'Pharisees and the lawyers' who characterise for Luke those who 'rejected God's purpose for themselves'.

The 'justice of God' is revealed in Jesus because he shows God to be who God claims to be: the saviour and redeemer of those who put their trust in him (see 6:20), the Father of mercy (see 6:36). Luke is writing his gospel to demonstrate that 'God's purpose' is a universal one. God's purpose is to save through the forgiveness of sins (1:77), and to invite all to communion with him. We recall the words of Jeremiah:

I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord.

– Jeremiah 29:11-14

Luke is convinced that this purpose is not thwarted by human opposition – an idea found also in the Book of Job:

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

– Job 42:2

Luke has already stated that ‘nothing is impossible with God’ (1:37). However, God respects our freedom and so, while God can use even human rejection to achieve his will, we can choose to stay outside his loving and saving design. If we persist stubbornly in such a rejection, we will not enjoy that communion with God which is God’s will for us. The Pharisees and lawyers are in danger of locking themselves into such a position (7:30).

Jesus is rejected

³¹ **'To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?**

³² **They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep."**

³³ **For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, "He has a demon";**

³⁴ **the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"**

³⁵ **Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.'**

The people reject Jesus

In the previous passages, Luke has shown what it was that John the Baptist and Jesus were offering. Here he shows how the offer was ignored.

Using a simple illustration, Jesus compares John and himself to children inviting people to join in their games, only to be ignored. John the Baptist invited the people to fast (see 5:33) and mourn. Jesus, the bridegroom (see 5:34) is inviting them all, sinners and outsiders included (see 5:30), to the wedding banquet. They will experience healing and forgiveness in his company. Highlighting this solidarity which he has with the poor, Jesus refers to himself as the 'Son of Man' (see the commentary on 5:24).

On the whole Jesus' contemporaries chose to stay where they were, and to ignore both John and Jesus. However, as the final remark makes clear, God's wisdom is demonstrated in the actions of John, and more especially in the actions of Jesus, the Messiah (7:22). These actions are the 'children' of wisdom. If the people continue to reject the salvation being offered, they must know that they are rejecting God's providential design, thereby choosing to stay outside God's chosen people.

Jesus is the incarnation of God's wisdom. Luke's final remark calls to mind the following from the Book of Proverbs, where wisdom addresses her children:

And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death. Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. She has sent out her servant girls, she calls from the highest places in the town, 'You that are simple, turn in here!' To those without sense she says, 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.

compare Matthew 11:16-19

– Proverbs 8:32 – 9:6

Jesus the bridegroom has come to reveal God's purpose which is to invite all to the Messianic Banquet:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

– Isaiah 25:6

Therefore thus says the Lord God: My servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry; my servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty; my servants shall rejoice, but you shall be put to shame; my servants shall sing for gladness of heart, but you shall cry out for pain of heart, and shall wail for anguish of spirit.

– Isaiah 65:13-14

We find a number of these themes in Isaiah 55. God invites the poor to his banquet, promising to make them an everlasting covenant (55:1-3). All are told to 'seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near' (55:6). God's ways and God's thoughts are declared to transcend our human expectations (55:9), and we are assured that God's purpose will be achieved:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

– Isaiah 55:10-11

Jesus is making the same plea to his contemporaries. They rejected John because he did not fit their expectations. Now they are rejecting him. They cannot see that his mission is proved to be from God because the poor are responding to him. The stage is prepared for the following scene in which one of the poorest of the poor, though rejected by the religious authorities, is welcomed by Jesus the bridegroom at his banquet.

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him-- that she is a sinner. ⁴⁰ Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'Speak.' ⁴¹ A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?

Where there is love, there is God

This scene illustrates Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. The woman is an example of the 'poor' who 'have the good news brought to them' (7:22). It also illustrates the contrast brought out in the previous scene between the Pharisees and others who reject Jesus, and the sinners with whom he is delighted to dine.

The key to this story is found in the parable and in the question which Jesus asks Simon the Pharisee. He speaks of two people who owe considerable sums to a certain person. One owes fifty days wages, a big enough debt. The other's debt, however, is huge: five hundred days wages! Neither of them can pay and the person to whom they owe the money cancels (*charizomai*, better translated 'graciously forgives') both their debts.

It is important not to miss this element: both debts are cancelled. In Jesus the barrier that divides the Pharisee from the sinful woman is broken down. This is surely another application of the truth expressed by Paul in relation to the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

– Ephesians 2:14

Note, further, that it is not the woman who has problems with the breaking down of the barrier, it is the Pharisee: 'Blessed are you who are poor ... woe to you who are rich' (6:20,24).

Jesus asks Simon which of the two will love him more. Simon gives the obvious answer, failing to realise how much he needs to be forgiven, especially for his judgment of this poor woman.

It would seem that we are meant to assume that the woman has heard from Jesus about God's offer of grace. Acknowledging her many sins, she has repented. Experiencing so much gracious forgiveness, she is moved to express the great love that wells up within her and, hearing that Jesus has been invited to a banquet, she comes to be with him and to present to Jesus some precious, perfumed oil.

In Jesus' presence, she is overcome by emotion and her tears wash his feet. Oblivious of everything but her gratitude and love for Jesus, she breaks all social taboos by letting down her hair to wipe away the tears (letting down one's hair was an intimacy given by a woman only to her husband). She then anoints his feet with the perfume. Her gesture only serves to confirm Simon in his opinion of her and of Jesus.

The man in the narrative, Simon, belongs to a strict religious sect which was committed to avoiding the slightest contact with sin. We should, perhaps, assume that he too has heard Jesus' preaching and has invited him back to a banquet, but only to humiliate him and attempt to demonstrate to the community Jesus' insignificance. With studied insult he neither greets Jesus nor offers him the customary hospitality of arranging to have Jesus' feet washed before he reclines at the banquet. The man's attitude to the woman indicates that he cannot think of her except as a sinner. If left unchallenged such an attitude among the religious leaders would eliminate any hope the woman might have of being accepted into the community.

Between the woman and the man is Jesus. He has accepted Simon's invitation. Seeing Simon's intransigence, and especially his attitude towards the woman, Jesus, in a forthright and uncompromising way, breaks social taboos by publicly exposing his host as the real sinner in the situation who is too self-opinionated to be even aware of his sin. Jesus declares that his debt, too, can be forgiven, but Simon is unrepentant.

By using a parable, Jesus avoids directly humiliating Simon. He also gently offers him an insight that could lead him to change his attitude. However, Jesus does not allow Simon or the others present to avoid having to make a choice. They must either accept or reject the truth so clearly expressed by Jesus. If they accept Jesus' word, they must recognise that it is the purist who is the real sinner, and that it is he and not the woman whose presence is defiling the banquet. They are also being challenged by Jesus to open their hearts and their social life to this repentant woman.

⁴³ **Simon answered, I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.**

And Jesus said to him, You have judged rightly.

⁴⁴ **Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.**

⁴⁵ **You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.**

⁴⁶ **You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.**

⁴⁷ **Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.**

But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.

⁴⁸ **Then he said to her, Your sins are forgiven.**

⁴⁹ **But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins?**

⁵⁰ **And he said to the woman, Your faith has saved you; go in peace.**

Forgiven love

In this way Luke demonstrates how Jesus carried out his mission as the Messiah. Luke is also challenging his contemporaries to face up to the social implications of the gospel which they claim to follow as disciples of Jesus. Indeed 'blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me'(7:23). The woman does not deny her sins. Her attention is focused on Jesus through whose ministry she has experienced God's forgiveness, salvation and peace. The Pharisee thinks of himself as without sin. At the meal it is he and not she who sins. She loves much because she has been forgiven much. He has much to forgive but is unaware of his need for forgiveness.

In her autobiography, Saint Therese of Lisieux has this comment to make on Jesus' parable about loving little when one is forgiven little.

Suppose a clever physician's child meets with a stone in his path which causes him to fall and break a limb. His father comes to him immediately, picks him up lovingly, takes care of his hurt, using all the resources of his profession for this. His child, completely cured, shows his gratitude. This child is no doubt right in loving his father.

I am going now to make another comparison. Suppose that the father, knowing that there is a stone in the child's way, hastens ahead of him and removes it, but without anyone seeing him do it. Certainly, this child, the object of his father's tender foresight, but UNWARE of the misfortune from which he was delivered by him, will not thank him, and will *love him less* than if he had been cured by him.

But, if he should come to learn the danger from which he escaped, *will he not love his father more?* Well, I am this child, the object of the *foreseeing love of a Father* who has not sent his word to save the *just* but *sinner*s (Luke 5:32). He wants me to *love Him* because He has *forgiven* me not much but ALL. He has not expected me to *love him much*, like Mary Magdalene, but He has willed that I KNOW how He has loved me with a love of *unspeakable foresight*, in order that now I may love Him unto *folly!*

She reminds us that the purest souls have been the ones most protected against falling into sin, and so have been forgiven-in-anticipation for the all the sins which, left to themselves, they would have committed. They can love so much because they know that their purity is all gift.

Jesus' Women disciples

Luke introduces us here to the women who are to become the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection (see 23:49,55; 24:1-8,10-11; see also Acts 1:14). Like Simon's mother-in-law (4:39) they are described as 'ministering'. They are instruments of God in sharing the mission of Jesus. It was not the custom for religious teachers to have women disciples. Here we see another dimension of the revolutionary nature of Jesus' ministry as he brings about the reversal of human expectations (see 1:51-53). It was Jesus' treatment of women that prompted Paul's remark to the Galatians:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ
Jesus.

– Galatians 3:28

It is a fact that Jesus chose only males for public leadership roles (6:13-14) – a practice continued by the early church (Acts 1:21-22). Some explain this by sociological and cultural considerations and argue that changes in society today rightly open this ministry to women. They go further and argue theologically that the Word of God in assuming human nature united the whole of humanity to God, and that those who represent him at the Eucharist should include both men and women to symbolise this truth as well as symbolising the priesthood of all the baptised, men and women.

Others argue that we must penetrate beyond sociological and cultural considerations if we are to understand why Jesus chose only men for public leadership in the community, and why the Christian community continued this practice. The person commissioned to preside at the Eucharistic assembly should symbolise Christ, the Bridegroom, in relation to the whole community as Bride. They go on to argue that this iconic symbolism is fundamental to the ministry of the one presiding at the assembly and can be represented only by a male.

Arguments based on the New Testament alone have not brought about a consensus. While this matter is being debated by Christians it is important to remember that the kingdom of God is centrally about communion with Jesus. It is about being a saint, and sanctity is measured by love:

The Church's structure is ordered to the holiness of Christ's
members. And holiness is measured according to the great mystery
in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the
Bridegroom.

– Pope John-Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* §27

From his first presentation of Mary (1:26-38), Luke continues to portray Jesus' women disciples carrying out this ministry of love.

¹ Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him,
² as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities:
Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,³ and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them [ministered to them] out of their resources.

⁴ When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable:

⁵ 'A sower went out to sow his seed;

and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up.

⁶ Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture.

⁷ Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it.

⁸ Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.'

As he said this, he called out, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

compare Matthew 13:1-9
Mark 4:1-9

God's word produces an amazing harvest

The appeal of a parable is not so much to the logical mind as to the imagination. The problem with most of those who opposed Jesus was that they refused, or were unable, to listen to anything that lay outside the logic of their prejudices. Jesus wanted to bypass such closed logic and so he used illustrations and stories to fascinate, intrigue, and sometimes to startle his audience. By using parables he hoped to break through the defences of their closed minds and, faithful to the mission he had from God, to entice their hardened hearts to be open to conversion.

Shortly we will examine an allegorical interpretation of the parable before us but it is important first to listen to Jesus' story and to imagine it precisely as a parable. An allegory, as we will see, is an attempt to draw out a meaning and apply it to one's life. The parable itself, however, as a parable, appeals directly to the imagination. We are meant to go below the level of the controlling intellect and to listen and imagine, letting the parable carry us in the direction of its central thrust.

Here the central thrust is clear enough. Every detail of the story is a commonplace, except the final one. Every farmer listening to Jesus knew that some of the seed unavoidably fell on the hardened earth on which he had to walk in order to plough and to sow. Even the level ground is generally very rocky and on the slopes rocks were used to form terraces. Inevitably some seed fell in among the rocks where it was not possible to control the weeds.

The one thing that no farmer had ever experienced was a hundred-fold crop. Herein lies the central interest of the story. What kind of seed can produce such an unbelievable crop? In the context, Jesus is hoping that his audience might realise that he is speaking about the word he is preaching to them and that he might touch the longings of their hearts and move them to want to listen.

The people had heard many words, and had often failed to let them strike home. The learned among them, if they took Jesus seriously, would have to admit that much of their learning was unsoundly based. Jesus is asking them all to cease focusing their attention on the words that in the past they have failed to receive. Yes, many graces have been lost and many opportunities not taken up.

Now, however, whatever the mistakes of the past they can begin to listen. If they do, they need not fear that their lives have been in vain, for the word which Jesus is preaching is so good that, if now they allow it to enter their minds and hearts and lives, they will find that the harvest will be unbelievable. It will more than make up for the losses that have occurred through past neglect, lost opportunities, or through following false directions.

The plea with which Jesus concludes this parable calls to mind the opening words of the prayer which was prayed each day by observant Jews: 'Hear, O Israel' (Deuteronomy 6:4). We are reminded also of the verse with which the Daily Prayer of the Church opens:

O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts.

– Psalm 95:7-8

We might also reflect on the following from Isaiah:

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live ... my word that goes out from my mouth shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

– Isaiah 55:3,11

Through Jesus' ministry God is speaking his word, the word for which they have been waiting. It will produce its amazing harvest where it is welcomed.

⁹ Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant

¹⁰ He said, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that

'looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.'

compare
Matthew 13:10-17
Mark 4:10-13

Understanding comes through listening to Jesus

The final words in this passage are a quotation from Isaiah in which God is encouraging the prophet to accept the mission to preach and not to allow himself to be dissuaded by the obstinate refusal of so many to listen. God promises Isaiah that his mission will succeed in spite of the blindness and hardness of heart which surrounds him. Jesus is facing similar rejection but he is determined to keep speaking the word entrusted to him by his Father and so to keep offering salvation to the crowds.

It could appear from the enigmatic 'so that' just before the quotation from Isaiah that Luke is interpreting Jesus as speaking in parables 'so that' people will not understand. This goes against the whole tenor of this section. We might better translate by a paraphrase such as: 'so that we might apply to them (those refusing to listen) the following words from Isaiah'.

In fact there are those who do not perceive and who fail to understand. Jesus, however, wants to reach them and so he continues to speak, inviting those who do not understand to keep pondering his words in their hearts. Perhaps, one day, the simple illustrations will do their work and when they are ready insight will come.

Jesus uses parables as a means of facilitating revelation. They remain, however, meaningless riddles to those who are unwilling to repent and who avoid any insights that might urge change upon them. There is something gentle about the use of parables for they respect the freedom of the listener. No one is forced to see, for a parable penetrates only so far as the listener is open to receive it.

At the same time, Jesus does not want those who are closed to his message to be able to use his words against him, or provoke a riot. His message challenged the power exercised by the priests, as well as that exercised by the Romans and Herod.

Those who seek out Jesus' company and are willing to be his disciples have revealed to them the otherwise hidden reality of the kingdom of God. God who 'reveals mysteries' (Daniel 2:28) has revealed himself and his action to these disciples of Jesus. This has been possible because they have been willing to leave all to follow him.

An allegorical application of the parable of the seed

If our heart is hard like the path in the field, the devil can take away even the word of God from us. We should pray for the gift promised through Ezekiel:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.

– Ezekiel 36:26-27

We can lose heart ‘in a time of testing’ and we can be distracted by ‘the cares and riches and pleasures of life’. We can set out along the way of discipleship and the fruit will begin to appear in our lives, but, in Luke’s words, it does not ‘mature’. We fall away and fail to reach the goal to which love is calling us.

Writing as he is for people brought up in Greek culture, Luke, like his mentor Paul, uses language drawn from the best of Stoic moral philosophy. What is needed is a heart that is honest (literally ‘beautiful’, *kalos*) and good, and a heart that, having heard the word, ‘holds it fast’. Even then it will require ‘patient endurance’ if we are to continue to bear fruit until the harvest.

¹¹ ‘Now the parable is this:

The seed is the word of God.

¹² **The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the *devil* comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.**

¹³ **The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away.**

¹⁴ **As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.**

¹⁵ **But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.**

compare Matthew 13:18-23; Mark 4:14-20

16 'No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light.'

17 For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light.

18 Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away.'

compare Mark 4:21-25
Matthew 5:15; 10:26; 13:12

Three proverbs

Placing these sayings here, one after the other, Luke forces the reader to stop and 'listen'.

The first saying focuses on the missionary aspect of the word. Jesus' revelation is to enlighten even by those who enter the house from outside (the Gentiles). We are reminded of another saying of Jesus recorded by John:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

– John 8:12

Luke repeats the saying later in his gospel to bring out the point that disciples need to purify their lives if they wish to see clearly and to attract others to the truth (Luke 11:33).

The second saying seems, in this context, to be referring to the revelatory power of Jesus' words. The Letter to the Hebrews makes this point quite powerfully:

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

– Hebrews 4:12-13

This saying, too, is found in another context in Luke (12:2), where it is used to help encourage a disciple not to act out of fear.

The third saying seems to be telling us that the more we listen to Jesus' word the more we will be attuned to hear it (compare Proverbs 9:9). On the other hand, every time we fail to listen, it becomes harder the next time even to hear (compare Proverbs 8:36). There is a constant danger that we take it for granted that we are hearing, when in fact we are not really listening. Or, having listened once, we keep acting on what we have heard but stop listening, with the result that we are no longer acting on 'every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 8:3). Luke repeats this saying in a different context referring to our use of our God-given talents (19:26).

Intimacy with Jesus is experienced by doing God's will

In light of the fact that in Jesus' culture the social unit was the extended family, the expression 'your brothers' would, in the Aramaic speaking world in which Jesus lived, cover other children of Mary, or children of Joseph by a previous marriage, or Jesus' cousins.

There is one example in Mark's Gospel where men are spoken of as being Jesus' 'brothers' but their mother is not the mother of Jesus. In Mark 6:3 James and Joses are introduced as Jesus' brothers. Later in Mark 15:40 we are introduced to one of the women at the crucifixion. She is called Mary, but Mark cannot be referring to Jesus' mother, for he identifies her, not in relation to Jesus, but as the mother of James and Joses.

If the 'brothers' mentioned in this present text are part of Jesus' extended family, this would be consistent with the ancient tradition that Jesus was Mary's only child.

Here we learn that everything has to be redefined in the light of the gospel. There is a more important relationship even than that of family, namely our relationship with God and with those who are associated with us in obeying God's will. This truth accounts for the early Christian practice of calling one's fellow Christian 'brother' or 'sister' (Romans 1:13; 16:1).

Luke presents Mary as a model of obedience, of what Paul calls 'the obedience of faith' (Romans 1:5; 16:26; see Luke 1:38; 1:45). We have already seen something of the obedience lived by Jesus (2:51; 4:43) and by his disciples (5:5; 5:27-28).

To obey is to listen to God's word and to do what God inspires us to do. The English word 'obedience' expresses this nicely. It comes from the Latin *audiens*, meaning 'hearing', with the prefix *ob*, meaning 'right up against'. Obedience is a close, intimate, listening. This connection between 'obedience' and 'listening' is also expressed in Greek. The word for 'obey' is *hypakouô*, from *akouô*, meaning 'to hear' with the prefix *hyp-* meaning 'under'. To 'obey' is 'to listen from below', 'to listen from a position of reverence and humility'. In Hebrew the same word *sm'* means 'to hear', 'to heed', 'to obey'.

Jesus' mission is to 'bring good news to the poor' (4:18). Those who come to him, hear his words and act on them (6:47) are 'blessed' (6:20). They share his life of communion with God. They are his family.

19 Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd.

20 And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.'

21 But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.'

compare
Matthew 12:46-50
Mark 3:31-35

Doing God's will

The central importance of this teaching of Jesus on doing the will of God is clear from the whole of the New Testament and from the constant tradition of the Christian community. We are called to an 'obedience of faith' (Romans 1:5). In his Spiritual Canticle, John of the Cross writes:

The union of love of God is a habitual and loving attentiveness of the will to God.

– Spiritual Canticle 28.10

St Teresa of Avila writes in her Book of the Foundations:

When once a soul has resolved to love You and has resigned itself into Your hands, You will have nothing of it save that it shall obey You and find out for itself how it may serve You and desire to do so. It has no need to look for paths or to choose them, for its will is Yours. You, my Lord, take upon yourself the task of guiding it in the way which is the greatest benefit to it.

The highest perfection consists not in interior favours or in great raptures or in visions or in the spirit of prophecy, but in the bringing of our souls so closely into conformity with the will of God that, as soon as we realise that he wills anything, we desire it ourselves with all our might.

In the following prayer, Charles de Foucauld expresses his commitment to God's loving will. One could find similar sentiments expressed by any number of the saints. As we reflect upon it, let us pray to share the intimacy with God experienced by its author, and his fidelity as a disciple of Jesus.

Father, I abandon myself into your hands.
Do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you.
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my spirit.
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you Lord,
and so need to give myself into your hands, without reserve,
and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.

The chaos around us cannot keep God's word from us

It is clear from the primeval narratives of creation (Genesis 1:2,6-8) and the flood (Genesis 6-9), that the sea was for the Jews a symbol of chaos, and therefore of the forces of evil which resist God's creative and redeeming action. Jesus is venturing out into the midst of chaos and the waves hurl themselves against the boat, seeking to destroy him. Jesus is clearly unafraid. The same cannot be said of his disciples. Jesus appears not to hear the cry, but the awakened Christ (the Greek could be translated 'risen Christ') is truly caring, and at his command the forces of evil fall silent. We are watching the Creator vanquishing the sea monster:

You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

– Psalm 89:9-10; see Jonah 2:2-9

Jesus asks them: 'Where is your faith?'. Are they doubting the trustworthiness of God: that he saves those who trust in him? There is a kind of doubt that is consistent with faith: the doubt that rises from a humble mind which recognises the limits of its own understanding. This kind of doubt is important. It is the cutting edge of the mind seeking deeper insight. Such doubt is accompanied by wonder and is characteristic of a mind that is open to mystery.

There is, however, another kind of doubt: one that feeds on fear. This is the doubt of a small mind, a doubt that leads to cynicism and despair. It is as though a person expects to be able to understand everything, and the realisation that this is not the case produces insecurity and fear. We have encountered the injunction 'Do not be afraid' from the opening scene of the gospel (1:13). It is fear that enslaves us.

Yet there is another and more profound 'fear' which overwhelms us when we realise the tremendous distance that separates us from God. Out of this fear faith can be born, so long as we do not sink into our own misery but cry out to Him who alone can save us. We are not to remain locked in this fear. Whatever might be happening around us and to us, Jesus, though apparently ignoring our cry, is there with us in the boat. He cares for us and wants to save us. As Paul says:

Nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

– Romans 8:39

²² One day he got into a boat with his disciples, and he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side of the lake.' So they put out, ²³ and while they were sailing he fell asleep.

A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger.

²⁴ They went to him and woke him up, shouting, 'Master, Master, we are perishing!' And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm.

²⁵ He said to them, 'Where is your faith?' They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?'

compare
Matthew 8:23-27
Mark 4:35-41

²⁶ Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, *which is opposite Galilee.*

²⁷ As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. *For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.* ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me' – ²⁹ for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. *(For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)* ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. ³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. ³² Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission.

compare Matthew 8:28-32
Mark 5:1-13

The chaos within us cannot keep God's word from us

Sometimes we are able to believe even though everything around us seems to be in chaos. But what about when the chaos is experienced within? What about when our psyche is falling apart and we experience a profound oppression from within? In this scene Luke demonstrates that not even that kind of situation can separate us from the healing and redeeming word of God coming to us in Jesus.

Luke locates the episode on the eastern, and therefore non-Jewish, side of the lake in the 'country of the Gerasenes', called such by Luke because of the city of Gerasa about fifty kilometres from the lake. The deranged man, wandering among the tombs and howling in the night, has been broken by the awful meaninglessness of his world. Others cannot cope with him and so they have tried to bind him and lock him away. He, however, will not be confined and is crying out to be released.

Then Jesus enters his world, and with Jesus comes the power of God. The deranged man sees Jesus with the kind of lucid clarity known only to those who have suffered severe mental illness. His cry of recognition echoes that of the man in the synagogue at Capernaum (4:34). Across the chasm that separates the pure from the impure, he senses that Jesus understands his cry, and he is right; Jesus knew what it was like to cry to God in distress:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

– Psalm 22:1-2

The man runs up to Jesus, wanting healing, while at the same time attempting to push Jesus away, afraid of what might happen to him if the healing he desperately wants is granted to him. Again we hear the cry: 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?' (see 4:34). There is no place for evil in the presence of God. God, however does not stay away from evil, but comes to the one trapped in it to liberate him.

He finds himself unable to answer Jesus' direct question: 'What is your name?'. He does not know who he is, for his psyche is a constant battleground for the many forces ('legion') which are tearing him apart. He is one person one moment and another the next, a constant prey to the vagaries of his uncontrollable mind. Jesus heals him by his presence and by the peace and serenity, the security and love that emanate from him. He puts meaning into the man's meaningless world.

We have to go to the imaginative drama of folklore for the account of the expulsion of the demons into the pigs — unclean animals (Leviticus 11:7) and so fitting recipients for unclean spirits — and of their flight into the lake, and so into the abyss — their proper home.

The core of the narrative, however, is a simple story of Jesus conquering all that inhibits the fullness of life to which we are called. It is yet another miracle of love, illustrating the words of Isaiah:

Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

— Isaiah 43:1

The effect on the local people is instructive. When they actually saw 'what had happened', they were 'afraid'. They, too, were living in a world of 'tombs' and 'darkness' and 'pigs' but, unlike the man whom it suited them to treat as deranged, they did not realise it. One is forced to ask: 'Who is really deranged?'

The answer emerges as the scene comes to its close. It is the 'deranged' man who alone sees Jesus for who he is and who longs to remain close to him. The locals, who consider themselves sane, are so in appearance only, for they refuse to look at themselves or at the world they have constructed. All they see is Jesus coming into their world and disturbing it. Their only desire is to get rid of him.

³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵ Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.

³⁶ Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed [saved]. ³⁷ Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.

³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹ 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

compare Matthew 8:32-34
Mark 5:13-20

The deranged man of Gerasa

We are reminded of the following words from Isaiah:

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually; ... who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine's flesh; ... who say, 'Keep to yourself, do not come near me.

– Isaiah 65:1-5

The heart of Jesus, however, goes out to them as it went out to the poor man. He would love to have this man close to him, but sees in him one who can help his fellow countrymen, and so he entrusts him with spreading the good news of God's mercy among them.

It was the clarity of this man's seeing that made him so vulnerable to the overwhelmingly destructive power of the world in which he lived. It is this same clarity that enables him to see Jesus. Now, healed through the Holy Spirit that has emanated from Jesus and has penetrated his psyche, he is the one who can take this grace to others who are living in the same world but who fail to see it. Like Jesus himself (4:43), this man must go, not where he wants but where God sends him. He becomes a missionary of the good news in the non-Jewish world.

The good news is that nothing — not even a psyche that has collapsed in despair before the onslaught of evil — 'will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:39). Under the broken psyche of this poor man was a self made by God in God's image: a hidden self, an 'inner being' that yearned for communion with God and for a place in the community. We might pray for each other the prayer of Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.
I pray that, according to the riches of his glory,
he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being
with power through his Spirit,
and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith,
as you are being rooted and grounded in love.
I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints,
what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
Now to him who by the power at work within us is able
to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,
to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

– Ephesians 3:14-21

This work cannot happen without the pain of purification. Let the cry of the tormented man be ours, and let it be a prayer to Him who purifies us that we may experience the freedom to love.

Not even death can keep God's word from us

In this scene, Luke asks the ultimate question: What about death? Does death separate us from the love of God? Can God's word conquer this final bastion of the power of darkness? The crowd 'waiting for' Jesus represent the whole world waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled (3:15; 7:19-20).

The story of the woman who has been haemorrhaging for twelve years provides extra dramatic tension to the scene. She has been losing blood for twelve years: her life (Leviticus 17:14), like that of the little girl, is draining away. Like so many others (6:19), she wants to touch Jesus. She manages to do so and is healed. Her ailment meant that she was considered ritually unclean (Leviticus 15:19). This in turn meant that anything she touched had to be excluded from the assembly for the period prescribed by law. There is something about Jesus that causes her, as it caused the leper (5:12), to ignore the law and approach him.

Jesus, knowing that her need is for an even deeper contact, invites her to come forward. She does so, and through her communion with him, finds a more profound healing: the healing called here 'peace', a word found frequently in Luke's gospel (see 1:79; 2:14,29; 7:50; 10:5-6; 11:21; 12:51; 14:32; 19:38,42; 24:36). It carries the meaning of 'wholeness' and 'harmony'.

Her faith (compare 7:50) has brought her not only freedom from haemorrhaging, but salvation. And salvation can come only through Jesus. As Peter declares before the Jewish council:

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.

– Acts 4:12

⁴⁰ Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him.

⁴¹ Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house, ⁴² for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying. As he went, the crowds pressed in on him.

⁴³ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her.

⁴⁴ She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her haemorrhage stopped. ⁴⁵ Then Jesus asked, 'Who touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.' ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.' ⁴⁷ When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared *in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed.* ⁴⁸ He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'

compare Matthew 9:18-22
Mark 5:21-33

49 While he was still speaking, someone came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer.'

50 When Jesus heard this, he replied, 'Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved.'

51 When he came to the house, he did not allow anyone to enter with him, except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother.

52 They were all weeping and wailing for her; but he said, 'Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping.' ⁵³ **And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead.**

54 But he took her by the hand and called out, 'Child, get up!'

55 Her spirit returned, and she got up at once.

Then he directed them to give her something to eat.

56 Her parents were astounded; but he ordered them to tell no one what had happened.

compare Matthew 9:23-26
Mark 5:34-43

The three disciples who witness this miracle are the same three who are chosen later to witness the transfiguration (9:28).

When Luke tells us that the child 'got up', he uses a word (*egeirô*) that is used for 'rising from the dead' (see 9:8,19; 11:32; 16:31; Acts 9:36-42), including Jesus' resurrection (see 18:33; 24:7,46; Acts 2:24,32; 3:26; 10:41; 13:33-34; 17:3,31). This is surely relevant to the inner meaning of the scene.

The fact that the child was twelve, the same number of years that the woman had been ill (8:43) is another reminder of the universal scope of God's saving power in Jesus (compare 6:13).

Jesus addresses her as 'child'. The Greek *pais* can also be translated 'servant', a title used of Jesus himself in Acts 3:13,26; 4:27,30. It is through her union with Jesus the servant of the Lord that she is able to break free of death. Jesus directs them to give her something to eat. The life received from Jesus needs nourishing (compare Acts 9:19). We are being prepared for the next section which centres on Jesus feeding the crowd (9:12-17).

The scene is not meant to raise our hopes that, when the time comes for us to die, we will be brought back to this life. It does, however, demonstrate the power of God to reach beyond death, and to take us from death into the life-beyond-death. Luke is encouraging the members of his community to trust that the risen Christ will be there on the other side of death, and that he will take them by the hand and raise them to share his risen life. Luke shares the faith of Paul, his mentor:

Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

1Corinthians 15:25-26

Death has been swallowed up in victory.

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?

– 1Corinthians 15:54-55

When we speak of the spiritual life, we are not speaking of experiences that are unrelated to our bodies. God's Spirit touches us, as it touched Jesus, in every part of our human condition, gracing and transforming our minds and our hearts, but also our affections and our senses. Like the woman in the scene before us, we need to touch and we need to 'feel in our body' that we are healed. Like the little girl we find ourselves lying there, unable to move, longing for his touch to bring us life.

We are here at the heart of the mystery of Jesus. It is not enough to have fine thoughts and high ideals. We are human and we need to put a face on God. We need to feel the warmth of God's affection. We need God's touch.

It is this that Jesus' disciples found in him, and Luke wrote his gospel that others might come to know Jesus and share in this experience. Let us take time to be that woman, to experience our need for healing and to seek him out to touch him in whatever way we can. Let us be that little girl. Let us not give up hope, but wait on his touch, knowing that he has come that we might live and live to the full (John 10:10).

A story is told of some soldiers who were advancing against a retreating army. They came upon a church which had been shelled and found a large broken statue of Christ in the rubble. As an act of devotion they attempted to reassemble the parts, but were unable to find the hands. Since they had to move on, one of them took a board and scribbled on it: 'I have no hands but yours'. He propped the board up against the statue and left.

'I have no hands but yours!' If the risen Christ is to touch me, it will have to be through your hands. If he is going to touch you it will have to be through someone who is graced by him to touch you. Let us, then, take to heart Jesus' request at the last supper:

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

– John 13:34