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THE
GOSPEL
OF
LUKE

FOR
MEDITATION
AND
HOMILIES



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INTRODUCTION

Lectio Divina means ‘divine reading’ and describes a way of reading the Scriptures whereby we gradually let go of our own agenda and open ourselves to what God wants to say to us.

The first stage is *lectio* (reading) where we read a passage from the Scriptures, very slowly and reflectively, pausing over every significant word and phrase, so that the Word sinks into us.

The second stage is *meditatio* (meditation or reflection) where we think about the text we have chosen, and then meditate on it so that we may find what God wants to say to us.

The third stage is *oratio* (prayer or response) where we leave our thinking aside and simply let our hearts speak to God.

The final stage is *contemplatio* (contemplation or rest) where we simply rest in the Word of God; that is, we listen at the deepest level of our being to God who speaks within us. As we listen, we are gradually transformed from within, so that the Word has its effect on the way we live.

These stages of *Lectio Divina* are not fixed rules of procedure but simply guidelines as to how the prayer normally develops. Its natural movement is towards greater simplicity and silence, where talking gives way to listening.

One of the great advantages of this form of prayer is that it improves the chances of our letting God speak to us rather than always having us speak to God.

If I have a problem with this time-honoured form of prayer, it is that it does not seem to include, at least directly, a deeper understanding of the meaning of the text by reading what scholars have to say to us concerning it. Perhaps this reflects the idea that praying the scriptures is one thing, while studying them is something quite different. Against this I would maintain that study *is* prayer if our purpose in studying is to understand better what God is saying to us. Why should we base our meditation on our own false understanding of a passage when a better understanding is available to us from people who have spent their lives seeking the deepest meanings in the scriptures?

I suggest that the place for study can be either before we begin the whole process of *Lectio Divina* of a particular passage or, in a briefer form, at the stage of *Meditatio*. I have tried to cater for both of these possibilities.

This book is not a learned treatise on Luke’s gospel.

There are many other books that seek to provide this and I must refer the reader to them. The sole purpose of this book is to assist in meditation and homilies on this gospel, and the commentary limits itself to aspects of the gospel that are directly relevant to these two purposes. The chapter and verse references are given here so that we can read the passage from our own copies. For copyright reasons it was not feasible to reproduce each passage in full.

I also make no attempt to provide ‘model’ homilies on each passage. Homilists are so different from each other that no one can write anyone else’s homily for them. This is as it should be, for every homily should come from the heart. So all I do is offer a brief commentary on each passage, then give points that might assist in meditation and in preparing a homily. The rest – of necessity – is up to the individual.

THE INFANCY NARRATIVE

1:1-4: PREFACE

The first four verses of the gospel are a free composition of Luke, not based on any sources. They consist of a single sentence, written in a formal literary language that is quite different from the language of the rest of the gospel. They are a conscious imitation of the formal prefaces used by a number of other ancient writers of historical works. The first message is, therefore, that Luke is intending to write as a serious historian like those other writers before him.

It will, of course, be history written according to the understanding of his own time, quite different from anything we understand by historical writing today. We insist on hard historical fact, while in ancient times people largely told history through stories, and the details could be freely changed or invented in order to bring out the meaning of the story.

He claims that what he writes will be complete, accurate and thorough ('after investigating everything carefully from the very first'), and that it will be set out systematically ('an orderly account').

He does not pretend to be uninvolved and purely dispassionate, for he states that he writes 'so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed'. He will write history, but it will be history in the service of religious truth, and he will present his material in a manner that makes this clear.

Theophilus ('lover of God') may have been a real person, e.g. a patron who provided the money to enable Luke to carry out his work, or a personification of the audience Luke was addressing.

Put yourself in the place of Luke as an educated third-generation Christian who has been asked by the community to provide a written account of the life of Jesus that could then be handed on to later generations. How would you go about telling this story? What are the most important things you would want to emphasise about Jesus? From your own personal thinking and prayer, how do you best sum up Jesus? Who is he for you?

1:5-23 – THE ANNUNCIATION TO ZECHARIAH

Only Matthew and Luke have infancy narratives and they are totally different from each other, so we are dealing

with freer compositions. While the infancy narrative of Matthew has elements of foreboding, the dominant note of that of Luke is joy. There is a contrast between the high Greek style of the first four verses of Luke's gospel and the many Hebrew and Aramaic words inserted into the present passage.

Matthew's story is openly based on five quotations from the First Testament, while Luke weaves the First Testament allusions into his story. There are in fact allusions to many different persons and stories, making the point that the story Luke is about to tell does not begin here, but had its origins in the distant past and is the fulfilment of a multitude of promises.

If one goes through this story and the story of the appearance to Mary in the next scene statement by statement, there is a very close parallel between them, though with the latter story always superior to the former. This alone tells us that we are dealing with two literary constructions, not literal accounts of what happened.

The story begins with the historical note that it happened in the time of Herod the Great and, therefore, between 37 and 4 BCE. Despite all the allusions and literary constructions, the story has a factual basis.

The two protagonists, Zechariah and Elizabeth, are presented as representatives of the anawim, the faithful remnant of poor people through whom salvation would come. This couple had the affliction and social stigma of barrenness.

The story begins in the temple and will end there in its last verse (24:53). There were 24 priestly sections that handled the daily service in the temple on a rotating basis, and many priests within each section. So the choice of Zechariah was a rare (and perhaps once-in-a-lifetime) occasion for him. In typical fashion (appearance of angel, fear, explanation, objection, sign) an angel appeared and, in a rich and lengthy passage, spoke of who John would be. There are references to Samson, to the prophecy of Malachi and to Elijah. It is not said that he will be Elijah returned, but he will have the role of Elijah in turning the hearts of people to God.

Normally when the priest came out of the sanctuary to where the people were waiting, he was expected to bless

them; but Zechariah could not do so because he was dumb.

The great story of salvation has begun, but, in typical biblical fashion, at this stage its unlikely carriers are an elderly pregnant woman hiding herself away and an elderly dumb man. To outsiders nothing was happening, and yet the great story prepared for over thousands of years was already taking place.

John's task will be 'to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord'. Great events were happening, but there would be no coercion. If these great events were to have good effects, hearts had to be prepared and open. The great events would be actions of God but, to produce effects, there would have to be a positive response from human beings, and that is where the problem would lie, both then and throughout later history.

A prime method of meditating on this passage is to seek out the many references, especially to the great barren women of the First Testament, such as Sara (Gen. chapters 16,17, 21), Rebecca (Gen.25:21), Rachel (Gen.30), the mother of Samson (Judges 13) and Hanna, the mother of Samuel (1Sam.1). The story Luke tells began in the distant past and is the fulfilment of that past.

Scientists tell us that the world began with a Big Bang. I believe that this Big Bang was an explosion of God's love, for it is the nature of love to reach out to others. At first there were only gases, heat and energy swirling around, but over immense periods of time more solid objects began to form as the gases coalesced. Stars, planets and galaxies were eventually formed. They had their great beauty, but they could not respond to God's love. More time passed, until within the oceans the first primitive life forms came into being. They developed until some began to crawl out of the sea onto the land and colonise the grasslands, the trees and even the air. The animals were beautiful, but they too could not respond to God's love. More time passed until a few animals began to stand upright on two feet. Human beings slowly evolved and began to think and to feel. At long last there were beings who could actually respond to God's love.

All of this process from the explosion of love in the Big Bang to the first response to God's love had taken, so scientists tell us, nearly fourteen billion years, and over all that time God had patiently waited and waited. Only then did God actively intervene in the history of this world by sending a special person, an only Son, to show the world

what the greatest and most profound love really looked like, in the hope that others would imitate this love and the process of development might accelerate. God waited all that time and, if necessary, will wait for as long again for the full working out of the divine plan for this world. I suggest that the final goal of the divine plan is that the human race should continue to grow and grow until it in some manner returns the world to the love from which it came. If that takes another fourteen billion years, then so be it, for God can wait.

If God has waited that long, then waiting has its importance for us too. If something is important enough, it is worth waiting for. Each year during Advent we wait for Christmas, the coming again of Jesus into our world, the yearly reminder of the love that created this world. In Advent we are called to join God in an active waiting. We are called to make ourselves an active part of the entire divine plan for this world and move that plan forward as best we can.

1:26-38 – THE ANNUNCIATION TO MARY

As already noted, this story balances, statement for statement, the story of the appearance of the angel to Zechariah. By this means Luke creates a strong contrast between John and Jesus, and between Zechariah and Mary.

John will be great before the Lord (1:15), but Jesus will be great and Son of the Most High (1:32). John will prepare a people (1:17), but Jesus will rule the people (1:33). John's role is temporary (1:17), Jesus' kingdom will never end (1:33). John is to be a prophet (1:15), but Jesus more than another prophet: he is Son of God (1:35). John will be 'filled with the Holy Spirit' as a prophet (1:15), but the overshadowing of the Spirit and Power will make Jesus 'the Holy One'.¹

Zechariah was a senior male who held an official position and exercised his office in the temple, the very centre of national life. Mary was young, female, poor, with neither husband nor son to give her any standing, and living in an insignificant village far from Jerusalem. Zechariah was childless because his wife was barren; Mary was childless because she was a virgin. By his question Zechariah implied that 'This can't happen', while Mary by her question simply asked

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina series, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1991, p.38.

how it was to happen. Zechariah was held in his doubt by being made dumb, while Mary spoke the eloquent acceptance, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'.

The greeting of the angel is quite beautiful and euphonious in Greek (*chaire kechairitomene*), but difficult to translate. The nearest one can come to a literal translation is 'Hail, Graced Lady'. 'Full of grace' comes from the Vulgate Latin and runs the serious danger of the reading-in of far too much later theology concerning grace (and this in fact happened). Johnson proposes 'Hail, Gifted Lady' and suggests that the plain meaning is given by the gospel itself, 'Hail, you who have found favour with God'.

Zechariah was disturbed by the angel's presence (*tarasso*), while Mary was even more disturbed by the angel's words (*diatarasso*).

The message of the angel was given to Mary in two stages. At first she was told that her child would be the Messiah, for the term 'son of God' was used of the Messiah and also of angels, kings, prophets and others. Then, after her question concerning how things were to happen, she was told that her child would be 'Son of God' in a far more literal sense, for the Holy Spirit would come upon her; this was entirely without precedent.

The virginal conception of Jesus is affirmed, but it is set forth in order to explain something about Jesus, not primarily about Mary: 'therefore he shall be called God's Son'.²

Fitzmyer also points out that the literary composition of Luke's infancy narrative belongs to the third stage of tradition, and so is a poor basis on which to attempt to answer questions concerning the Mary of history, the first stage of tradition.³ This comment must be applied in a particular way to the words, 'I do not know a man'. In itself it is a simple statement of fact, indicating only that Mary did not at that time have sexual relations with a man, and it would be wrong to read into it statements about her psychological condition or future intentions.

In this scene the story of redemption passes from a senior male to an unknown and unimportant junior female. It passes from the temple in Jerusalem to an obscure village. And yet Mary is greater than Zechariah, as her son will be greater than his.

² Joseph A Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, The Anchor Bible, Vol.1, 340-341.

³ Fitzmyer, 341.

For Luke the story had to begin in the temple in Jerusalem (and it will end in the same place in 24:53), but it has quickly moved to an insignificant village, for this is a divine story that will overturn all human expectations.

Chaire kechairitomene: 'Hail, Graced Lady, the one who has found favour with God.'

In our own dealings with God we are capable of both replies: 'This can't happen' and 'How is this to happen?'

'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

You are going about your daily duties in your home when an angel appears, uses beautiful words about you and tells you that you are to play an important part in a special divine plan. This could be the basis of a nice daydream, but imagine that it actually happens. Imagine that there is a real divine plan for this world and you are being thrust into a crucial and central role, with little in the way of explanation and without knowing what will be asked of you. In real life, not in a daydream, how will you respond? Would you at least want the answers to a whole series of questions before you responded? And yet there is a divine plan for this world and you do have your part in it, a part that no one else can supply for you.

Last Christmas I watched part of the Carols in the Park celebration on television. It was a real family affair and the Christmas spirit was present in abundance. There was nothing at all that I objected to. And yet I couldn't help noticing that only a few of the carols mentioned the birth of Jesus. It was announced that a radio survey had shown that the most popular carol is 'Jingle Bells', with 'Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer' second. There is a vast secular Christmas in Australia. I don't like its commercialism and there is far too much alcohol consumed, but otherwise it has many positive elements to recommend it and I am glad it exists. But I have to fight to ensure that my own personal Christmas is centred on the birth of Jesus.

1:39-56 – THE VISITATION

So far in this gospel we have had the announcements to Zechariah and Mary, both concerning the birth of a baby. The first was met with scepticism, the second with faith. Now the two stories are brought together. The sceptical man was still dumb and is left out, and it was the strong women of faith who now met each other. In their sharing of their stories faith became knowledge, testimony and celebration. In that celebration there was already present the beginnings