

Advent 2 2024

Important linkages (Luke 3: 1-6)

A Sermon by Mark Willis, Lay Reader

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am not a member of a book club. That may be because I am reluctant to stray from the authors that I enjoy, or because no one has asked me to join one. I like reading crime fiction, particularly authors who take me promptly to the crime scene, not wasting paragraphs on unnecessary context, but purposefully introducing the persons of potential interest to the eventual outcome.

A problem arises when, after a few chapters, I find myself unable to remember who is who and what relevance they have in the story. I waste time flicking back through the previous pages to remind myself who did what. A short interim recap and scene re-setting every now and then would be very useful.

Reading the bible presents similar challenges. Sin is clearly committed early in the story, and many persons of potential interest have been introduced. Each has an interesting role in the story, and some have stuck in my mind:

- Adam and Eve who were present at the crime scene and banished for their disobedience.
- Noah, who's ark showed the possibilities for salvation instead of condemnation.
- Moses who received from God ten important behaviours that we should live by; and
- Isaiah who foretold of a suffering servant offering salvation and a new kingdom.

But too many other characters have already come and gone, when at the start of Luke's gospel, another two arrive - John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. I have reached the point where a pause and recap would be useful. Fortunately, this is just what Luke is doing in our short Gospel reading today.

First, Luke sets out to anchor ourselves alongside real events in history. The history and politics of mankind has never been free from turmoil and strife, and conquest by the Romans has introduced another difficult period for the Holy Land. The Holy Land is now subject to rule by names that we will come to recognise as the action plays out - Pontius Pilate governor of Judea, Herod ruler of Galilee, and Caiaphas high priest. Thousands of years of pre-history have been brought to an end. We have just moved from BC to AD, anno domini.

Secondly, Luke introduces John the Baptist as the fulfilment of a prophecy made 700 years earlier by the prophet Isaiah (40: 3-5). John the Baptist is to be the forerunner of the Messiah, 'preparing the way for the Lord'. This preparation is crucial for the people to be able to receive the Messiah. John will preach a message of repentance and baptism, purification and renewal, in readiness to receive salvation. It will require a radical change of heart and life.

Thirdly, Luke's passage confirms that the message is not just for a select group. Salvation will be extended to all people, not just to Israel. The Messiah comes to bring salvation to everyone, to gentiles, to the poor, to the marginalised, to the sinful. John's message is for all people, across all political and religious boundaries.

Luke's recap provides a useful bridge between the covenants and prophecies within the Old Testament, and the action about to unfold in the New Testament. It establishes John the Baptist as a key actor who prepares the way for a coming Messiah, calling people to repentance and pointing to a salvation that will be accessible to all humanity.

That surely leaves just one person of interest to be accounted for. Jesus Christ, the fulfilment of God's promises of salvation, God himself coming to us. The servant King who crashes into our chaotic world as a child, the awesome power of God compressed into a helpless human body, determined to die for our salvation. That arrival will be celebrated once again on Christmas Day.

But within this period of Advent leading up to Christmas, we are preparing ourselves for the second coming of Jesus Christ. Preparing ourselves in a world that still remains chaotic. Remembering our calling as his disciples to prepare the way of the Lord, to spread to all others the message of belief, repentance and salvation, just as John the Baptist was called to do. Strengthening ourselves to carry the presence and power of God into this world, handing our lives over to God's will, just as Jesus handed over his life.

In this story of real unfolding events, I think that we ourselves have become persons of interest. This is not a fictional story, but an unfolding real-life biography. As we read through the chapters and books in the New Testament, will we find ourselves reflected comfortably in the narrative?

I now realise that church is a book club into which we are all invited, myself included. As participating members, I hope that we will all enjoy reading and discussing the events that unfold in the Bible chapters that follow.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.