

# Luke's Three Introductions

Last month we read Luke's Introduction, the opening sentence of his gospel. Since then, Sunday by Sunday, we have heard Advent passages about John the Baptist and Christmas readings of the pre-natal visit of Mary to Elizabeth, and the birth stories in Bethlehem. During January we will also hear of the boy Jesus in the Temple, and of his baptism and first sermon at Nazareth. We end the month by going backwards, to his purification, as a baby, in the Temple (Candlemas) - forty days after his birth, that's why we go back!

Though we dot around the opening chapters of the gospel, they really all form part of two more introductions, before the story proper of Jesus' ministry gets underway. Why do I call them two introductions, and what do they introduce?

Both sections begin with some historical information, placing the events within their context of time and place. This is how Luke tells us that these are real historical events about which he is going to write, but perhaps more importantly, it also tells us that God's Son has come into the real world. God has broken into the everyday history of humanity.

The first part (Luke 1:5) introduces us to stories of announcements and birth (and Jesus' birth itself is heralded by even more historical information). The second part (Luke 3:1) introduces us to stories of John the Baptist and the opening of Jesus' ministry.

The stories of birth announcements and birth are made up of two pairs – announcements to Zechariah and Mary, and the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus, all sandwiching Mary's visit to Elizabeth, where the two stories interlink and come to a climax in Mary's Song of Praise, the *Magnificat* – a summary of what God has promised in the past which is about to come to fulfilment. The women themselves are a symbol of what is happening – the lowly will be exalted. The stories are written in the style of Old Testament stories, and Elizabeth's story reminds us of all those other barren women in the Old Testament. John is the fore-runner, and by all these means Luke shows us that Jesus comes as the fulfilment of Scripture, rather than as something completely different. For Luke, history (God's time) is divided into three. There is the time of Preparation (Old Testament), and there is the Present time of the church (and we read this story in Acts). These both centre on the Time of Jesus Christ – his birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection. The angels tell the shepherds (also lowly people), and us, the readers exactly who Jesus is:

*“To you is born this day, in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord.”*

‘This child, born on a journey, with nowhere to lie except a manger, will become the man whose whole ministry takes the form of a journey, and who has nowhere to lay his head.’

This section comes to an end with Jesus’ two childhood visits to the Temple, one as a baby for his “purification”, and the other as an adolescent, astounding all the Temple dignitaries with his learning. We see Jesus steeped in the Jewish tradition, which ultimately will reject him. Simeon’s song (the *Nunc Dimittis*) places Jesus within that tradition, he is to be the *glory of Israel*, and also points us forward to Jesus’ role in the wider world, the *light to lighten the gentiles*. He tells Mary that a sword will pierce her soul, the cross is already looming its shadow over events.

Chapter three marks another new beginning, with its indication of timing and place in the wider world. Again, we see the story of John the Baptist and Jesus placed in parallel, John’s ministry preceding Jesus’ ministry. This is why Luke tells us of John’s imprisonment, before recalling Jesus’ baptism, which as with the Visitation forms the linking centre of the sandwich. We are again left in no doubt as to who Jesus is, for God himself speaks,

*“You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”*

God’s final words echo the story of Creation, where God repeatedly sees that *“it is good.”*

The climax of the story of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry is the story of Jesus’ first sermon, at Nazareth. We hear Jesus read from Isaiah, and announce, *“Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* Like the *Magnificat*, it sets out the manifesto of Jesus’ ministry. All that follows will indeed show us that Jesus is the fulfilment of God’s plans:

*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,  
To proclaim the year of the lord’s favour.* (Luke 4.18-19)

Jesus’ hearers are ‘at first amazed, then scandalized.’ Are we?

(Mary Witts)