

**Inside Out Life (Luke 4. 22-30)**

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Who is he? The first four and half chapters of Luke's gospel could be said to be obsessed with this question. Who is Jesus? Where does he fit? To whom is he answerable? To whom does he belong?

At one level, Luke portrays Jesus as an insider to the story of Israel. He has familial connections to the Temple priesthood and is recognised as the fulfilment of Hebrew prophecy. He grows up an observant Jew and bursts onto the public scene by joining with his people in a good old fashioned rite of collective repentance, being baptised in the river Jordan. Up till then, there's been really only one hint of his wider human meaning. The devout Simeon, coming upon the infant Jesus being presented in the Temple, had proclaimed him as God's salvation 'prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles' as well as for 'the glory of [God's] people Israel'.

Immediately after Jesus' baptism, however, Luke does something unexpected. He launches, seemingly out of nowhere, into a genealogy, a long catalogue of Jesus' ancestry. Starting with his human father, Joseph, who was son of Heli who was son of Matthat, Luke works his way back through a list of 77 names tracing Jesus' line to the very end, declaring him to be finally: 'son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God'. This Lukan genealogy contrasts markedly with the one offered in the gospel of Matthew, which traces Jesus' ancestry back only to Abraham; that is, to the founding father of the people of Israel. The point is usually made that, whereas Matthew is concerned to emphasise Jesus as Israel's Messiah, Luke is concerned to emphasise Jesus as son of Adam, the restorer of the whole human race. It's the second hint in this gospel that Jesus' meaning is of universal significance.

And then comes today's reading. In the story, Jesus has just returned to his home region after his baptism. He's spent forty days (figuratively speaking) in the

wilderness, discerning the true shape of his calling. And now – clear in heart and mind, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit – he’s ready to begin his public ministry. ‘When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom’. And as you heard last week, he was given to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He read: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ... release to the captives ... recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free’. He rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant and says to those present: ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’. It’s an unforgettable statement of identity, and must have given his hearers goose-bumps. ‘The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him’, Luke writes; ‘All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth’.

But then, suddenly, it seems to go wrong. ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’ Often it’s assumed this question is asked in a belittling kind of way – a ‘who does he think he is’ tone of voice. And this interpretation can seem borne out by what follows. But some commentators suggest that ‘is not this Joseph’s son?’ is actually continuous with ‘all spoke well of him’. As in, hasn’t he done well? Ah, I remember him when he was just a small boy; he always was a deep thinker! A bit like my experience working at Holy Covenant in Cook when people used to come up to me after I’d preached, fondly reminiscing about when they used to babysit me. And if this is more the tone of voice we’re to imagine, then it’s Jesus’ words that seem contrary and even ungracious. ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself!” Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum”’.

Why is Jesus narky with them? Why does he disturb their proprietorial enjoyment of seeing their hometown boy made good? The issue seems to be that their approving response brings with it a deep-seated cultural assumption that Jesus will preference his ‘own’ people over others. He’s one of them and, writes Robert Tannehill, ‘according to the culture, this involves obligations. One must give

preference to one's own family and village'.<sup>1</sup> On this reading, when Jesus flings the proverb 'Doctor, cure yourself!' at those admiring him, it's not that he thinks they doubt about his ability; it's that he knows they want him to dispense his gifts close to home. After all, you've got to look after your own, don't you? They've heard he's done good things in Capernaum, now they're assuming it's their turn. But Jesus wants to challenge their blithe assumption that they have the larger claim.<sup>2</sup>

This is the context in which he points out the uncomfortable truth that in fact prophets are rarely popular in their hometowns. After all, it's the prophet's job to make visible the ways in which communities almost always end up privileging some at the expense of others, the 'in-group' at the expense of the outsider. Even the legendary Elijah and Elisha, now venerated from the safe distance of several centuries, didn't privilege their own. The truth is, Jesus says, 'there were many [impoverished] widows in Israel in the time of Elijah ... yet [he] was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in [the foreign territory of] Sidon. There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian'. The effect of these words was as if participants at a Maga rally were told by the main speaker they weren't deserving of special treatment, and weren't uniquely divinely approved; as if they'd been reminded that the illegal immigrants and foreigners down the road were the ones for whom God was more likely to act. 'When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage'.

On Luke's account, Jesus is an insider to the story of Israel. But he's called to work from inside out. Indeed, his real calling is to turn outsiders into insiders – or perhaps better, to abolish the distinction between inside and out altogether. This breakthrough to a non-tribal vision of God's anarchic mercy had been underway for centuries in the Hebrew tradition – as the stories of Elijah and Elisha show. It's definitively realised in Jesus in whom all barriers between peoples, all gradations of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Abingdon Press, 1996), p.93.

<sup>2</sup> Tannehill, *Luke*, p.93; see also Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), p.82.

specialness based on birthplace, lineage, and purity (as defined by the 'in-group') are rendered void. St Paul distilled the essence: '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'.

We're living, as you know, at a time when some leaders at home and abroad are actively seeking to weaponise difference, so as to foment division between 'us and them', between 'everyday Australians' and some nebulously defined 'others', between deserving and undeserving, between those deemed to belong and those who never will. It's the oldest method in the human playbook for gaining an identity and generating a sense of belonging; it's also the most boring, limiting and cheap.

Jesus teaches a different way. Connected to the long line of the prophets of Israel, filled with the Holy Spirit, he proclaims and enacts God's unchanging determination that all life be freed to be; that all life be given place. Spend six days in the wilderness, as Neil and I have just done, let alone forty as Jesus did, and it becomes incontrovertibly clear that diversity is the key to a flourishing, stable, regenerative whole. James Alison has said the whole point of Jesus' coming 'was to manifest God with us at our level, working out our salvation from within a human framework and allowing us to become inside participants in God's creative act.'<sup>3</sup> Alison calls this view of salvation the 'undoing from within so as to open us out to life' model. What is undone from within, by Jesus, is our threatenedness and miserliness, our impulse to dominate and control, our drive to secure our own interests and identity at the expense of others, without regard for the life of others. What is opened out is love.

We begin a new year at Benedictus and it's easy, at times, to be disheartened by the banal and destructive behaviour evident in some of our politics both here in Australia and around the world. By the repetition of the same old boring playbook. But in the context of the larger life in which we live and move and have our being, Luke reminds us that all this sound and fury, this self-inflating rage and

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<sup>3</sup> Candlemas Lecture delivered at Boston College on 7 February 2024.

manufactured resentment is ultimately pointless and powerless. Of course, it does harm and causes hurt, necessitates wise and courageous resistance and response. But in the end, it means nothing; it has no reality. And when we're sourced, as Jesus was, in that larger Life, though we may find ourselves threatened and buffeted by the violence of the crowd, we cannot finally be driven to destruction or turned from the way of peace. And just as Jesus, 'passed through the midst of them and went on his way', so we are called to stay focused on the truth of creation and the promise of life together, for our good and the good of all the world.