

5-11 December 2021 Luke 3:1-6

The great leveller

Read the passage from Luke. It is written below.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Bible notes

Traditionally, the point is made at Epiphany that Jesus was born as a sign and a gift for all people, not just the Jewish people. The same point is present in the characteristically Lukan use of 'all' in verse 6. Here is a preparing of the way for an understanding that God's salvation (through Jesus) is for all people and, arguably, all creation.

Luke's inclusion of the rogues gallery (vv.1-2) raises questions about the nature and scope of salvation. These characters could be seen as the sort of hateful people that Zechariah speaks of in the canticle reading. Commenting on this verse, Joel Green writes that, for Luke 'the reconciliation of God's people and deliverance from enemies are both part of one movement. For him, visions of salvation cannot be categorised as social or religious or political, for the epoch of peace is characterized by all of these' (Joel B Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans, 1997 ISBN 978-0-8028-2315-1). So, salvation is in part a liberation from those who oppress and abuse. Paradoxically, it is also the gift offered to all people – including the unsavoury characters listed by Luke. There are challenges here for how we understand salvation, and how we pray for those who might be the contemporary equivalents of Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas, etc.

There is a recurring theme in Luke of the levelling of social status – the humble exalted and the exalted humbled. When John quotes Isaiah, a picture is painted of the creation of a level playing field. The language is metaphorical and we

need to be careful of interpreting it literally, but for people weighed down with worry and oppressed by injustice, this is profoundly hopeful. As noted above, John was preaching in physically the lowest place on earth. Present-day politicians talk a lot about levelling up. Here we have the forerunner of Jesus preparing the way for the one who will truly provide the means of transformation for all.

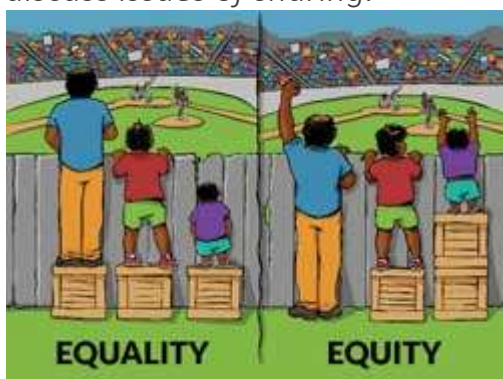
Reflection

Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.

Many will remember Captain Sir Tom, who in 2020 (for his 100th birthday) walked to raise millions of pounds for the NHS. Some may also remember hearing about Kevin Sinfield, who ran seven marathons in seven days in support of his former rugby league teammate Rob Burrow, who has motor neurone disease. Neither of them needed to do what they did, but they were compelled to do so by their love and compassion for others. John the Baptizer didn't need to go into the wilderness as he did – or did he? Perhaps love and compassion compelled him, too. Perhaps, having experienced God's love and compassion for himself, he wanted to help others to see that, despite their sinful nature, God loved them with all and wanted them to know life in all its fullness. What about us – do we have love and compassion for our friends and family, and for our neighbours, and for the people we work with, spend leisure time with – enough to let them know about Jesus?

Questions for reflection

You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues of sharing.



- Which is better: equality or equity? Indeed, what is the difference?
- Imagine that the fence shown was taken down – this might be labelled liberation. Which was John advocating? And Jesus?
- And where are we in this mix – are we for equality, or equity or liberation? How can we empower others to see that they can be freed from any oppression that they are feeling?

Prayer

Adapt to your local context.

We thank you, God, for your richness.

We thank you for the way your light lets us see the world and its people.

We thank you for diversity and difference in people and places.

We thank you for signs and symbols and glimpses of your kingdom.

We thank you for bolts out of the blue that reveal you to us
and for the tiny flame that offers us assurance.

We thank you for your care through the hands of others,
hands of family, hands of friends and hands of strangers.

We thank you that in others we see you
and that through seeing you we see them in different ways.

We thank you that in wilderness experiences you come to us,
that you come in word or deed, that you come in touch or gift,
that you come in cacophony or whisper, but come you do.

We are all your people, all your children, all your flock,
and for us all you care – to you we give our thanks and praise.

Amen.

A prayer to end the Bible study

May the road we travel be smooth and straight,
every rut filled in, every bump smoothed out,
any diversions easy to navigate, any obstacles easy to manoeuvre round.

May good companions share our journey,
and may we be voices for good in the world,
a sign of Jesus' love for all.

We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.