

1 Ruler and Savior

Luke 1

Altho he was a gentile, the physician Lukas had a good knowledge of Israelite history. He knew their writings and the stories from their past. He understood how they thought, particularly how they thought about God. And most of all, he understood how God had engaged with them and taut them to recognise and respond to him as God's people.

In his travels Lukas had met and delt with the Jews, and he had come to realise that they were special, the people of the real and living God. They had a unique culture of faith that was rooted in historical events but bound up with transcendent reality, a people who had met the One God and Creator of the world. Uniquely among the peoples, Israel had no gods. They had God himself alone. In the temple of Jerusalem there were no idols, no courtesies extended to the gods of neibors or conquerors, no kinship or social connection acknowledged with the pantheons of gods. God alone, holy and unique, related to no gods, but only to the people he had chosen for his own: this was their God.

The people of Israel, the Jews as they now were, had not been fortunate in many of their rulers - no more than most peoples. And their knowledge of God had not made them a powerful nation. Lukas knew that Israel had waited long, a helpless and subject nation, for a king or ruler to deliver them. Because they knew they were God's people, they never accepted being dominated and oppressed by one great empire after another. They could not accept that that was their history. Their understanding from God was older than all the empires, strong enuf to outlast them all, and alive with promise for the future. There would be more, for God was their Savior.

It was the faith and conviction of the Jews, their history and its strong cords of tradition that the Greek, Lukas, took up when he began to tell the story of Jesus. I say "Greek" but it would be better to call him a "Hellene". For the Hellenes are the people of the country we misname "Greece", and in Jesus' time they had spred their ideas and influence across much of the Mediterranean world. Altho the empire of Rome was the military and economic power, the business world and the thinking world's culture and language was that of the Hellenes, "Greek" as we call it.

For Luke, who wrote his gospel in Greek, the discovery of a different, Semitic, history in the writings of Israel must have been an exciting adventure, but most exciting of all was the realisation that here in this history, God, who is true God and God alone, had spoken and acted,

and that the words and actions of God were being fulfilled in his own day, in this Hellenic-Roman world where Israelites and Egyptians and Phoenicians and Gauls were all confronted by the unexpected and overwhelming reality of the Lord Jesus.

The birth that the angels proclaimed in Bethlehem would be God's answer to desperate needs that were as old as Israel's history and as urgent as life and death, an answer that would have resonance and meaning for Jews and Hellenes and Romans alike, and for all the peoples. It was God's answer to the cry of those who need God, an answer to history in the history of Israel, and in Jesus the Lord of Israel, who is now proclaimed as Lord of all the nations.

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History fulfilled – it was much more than a few prophetic quotes pointing to a coming Messiah: it was Israel's whole experience of becoming a people and needing God, thru two thousand years, from their ancestor Abraham, thru the leadership of Moses, the covenant and the Law, the rule of the great kings David and Solomon and the teaching of the prophets, right down to the new Temple recently built by King Herod in Jerusalem. That is the history into which Jesus was to be born, into the Jewish world of his time and into everything that had made it, to be its key and answer, to make it whole and to make it the history planned and carried out, completed and redeemed, by God.

It was a history of deep and painful contradictions: a people who had been liberated by God, yet they oppressed and exploited one another politically and economically; a people blessed by the faithful commitment of God to them, who yet had been unfaithful to God. It was the story and experience of a people who had learnt to worship God, transcendent, holy and good; yet they worshipped him in the temple of Jerusalem built by a cruel and selfish tyrant, whose power came from collaboration with the brute force of the Roman Empire. These days when the world's Ruler was born are identified in the reckoning of Luke's gospel as the days of Herod, King of Judea,¹ and even the mighty deeds of God, who creates and dates the universe, are dated by the ruler the Romans had chosen for Jerusalem.

In the days of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, a man of a proper Levitical clan, married to a true daughter of Aaron, of the highest priestly pedigree, whose name was Elizabeth. They were good people, living their lives in blameless observance of the Laws of God. Even in the light of God's unimpeachable holiness and truth, we might call them good people.

¹ Luke 1: 5

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And they were childless. Getting on in years now, they had no heirs, for Elizabeth was a barren woman.

What kind of a world is this?! Where a vicious tyrant has sons enuf to kill them in a fit of suspicious rage, because he has others to replace them, while a good-living and God-fearing couple have no one, no children, no descendants, no future. A murderous king is acclaimed as benefactor and builder of the Temple, while the wife of a priest who faithfully serves in it, must live with the shame of a barren womb!

But this was one flaw in the universe that God was about to put right. When Zechariah's turn came, in the turn of his priestly clan, to offer sacrifice in the inner sanctum of the Temple, he was confronted there by a messenger from God, an angel, the sight of whom terrified him. A priest of long experience, he had never expected to meet a messenger of God in the Temple. The temple's holiest place, where its most solemn rituals were enacted by chosen priests alone, was not the place for visions.

But God does not speak to terrify, even here in holiest place in the Temple. The first word of the angel was of friendly reassurance: "Don't be afraid, Zechariah, your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth is going to have a son."

His barren wife, so long shamed by her failure, was to have a son! When God reaches out to save the world, this is where God begins. The first hand God takes is the hand of a woman who had lived in the shadow of hopelessness because she has failed to be a woman. That, for a woman, can be deep failure and deep shame, and Godself is sensitive to the shame.

There is a lot of pain and joy in history that goes unrecorded. It doesn't make the history books because it isn't noticed by the writers of history books, and since, for most of history, the writers have been men, it's the woman's history that has mostly gone unnoticed. But this one sharp thred of pain could not be missed. In a world where no career is open to women, and no independent way to welth, the childless woman must live in bitter humiliation. She has failed to achieve the "only" thing a woman can achieve: giving birth to a son for her husband, her family and her people. She is like a dry desert or a withered tree - no good for anything. From the very beginning, the suffering, and the revenge, of the childless woman had made its mark upon Israel's history.

The mother of all the people of Israel had been the childless Sarah, wife of Abraham.² Outshone and upstaged by her own servant, she could only be an object of pity to her husband and of shame and

² Genesis 16, 18, 21

reproach to herself, until God turned to her, touched her with life and made the barren womb fertile. As the mother of Isaac, at last, she was redeemed, and the first generation of Israel's history came with the salvation of a woman once shamed by her body's failure.

The pattern had been repeated in the third generation, when Rachel, the favorite wife of Jacob, had seen her sister and her servant and her sister's servant all giving healthy sons to Jacob while she remained fruitless.³ But God had turned to her in the end and quickened her womb. She gave birth to the sons Joseph and Benjamin. In the long history of Israel since then, how many others had lived and died in humiliation? We know of Hannah, the mother of Samuel,⁴ but there must be many more women of whom we know nothing. Throughout history, there are countless "small" people, whose lives, a powerful drama of triumph or defeat in their own household or their own village, go unnoticed when history is written; but God, who reaches out to fulfil and rescue history, reaches out to them.

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At this time too, God sent God's messenger, the angel Gabriel, to a young girl in the Galilean town of Nazareth.⁵ She was engaged to a local builder, who was a descendant of the royal and famous house of David. But I suppose there were many people who counted themselves descendants of the House of David, and Joseph, engaged to be the husband of Miriam, was no more than a skilled craftsman. Yet the angel greeted the girl who was to be a builder's wife, with profound respect: "Hail, most blessed one. The Lord is with you." Miriam, of course, was not used to anyone talking to her like this, and it frightened her, but the angel reassured her as he had reassured Zechariah: "Don't be afraid, Miriam, for you have found favor with God." "You will get life in your womb. You will give birth to a son and you will give him the name Yeshua. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob [Israel] forever; his kingdom will have no end."⁶

Now the word is out and God's purpose is declared. The young woman will conceive and give birth to a son who will rule as Israel's King. David had been the second and the greatest king ever to rule Israel. His name, and the story of his reign had come to stand for the highest ideals of justice, security and faithfulness to God. He was the one who had conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital, from

³ Genesis 29 - 30

⁴ The last of Israel's ancient heroes and the first of her prophets. I Samuel 1-2

⁵ Luke 1:26

⁶ 1: 31 - 33

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where he ruled over all of Israel. And this is the throne which will now pass to the son of Miriam.

He will be named Yeshua, Jesus. He will rule the House of Israel for all ages and his reign will never come to an end. From the many threads of history this one has been taken up for the angel's message: Miriam's son is to be a king for his people, as people remembered David. He will rule in God's name and in God's way, utterly faithful to God, and he shall be called the Son of God most High.

It is a profound and wide-reaching political statement: declaring no less than the total re-ordering of Israel's government. We should not leap in to "spiritualise" the angel's announcement. If there is to be any refinement of its meaning, let us wait for Luke to give it us as he tells the story. Meanwhile, the rule of a King in the line of David has been announced, a message that speaks of political and economic independence, good government, the peace and security of society, shrewd and popular rule and, above all, utter faithfulness to God. Here is a vision of social and political wholeness for a people who knew only too well the fear and the pain of bad government, disorder, occupation, oppression and exploitation. A long-nourished hope is about to be realised, and the social order of Israel, the people, the nation, is about to be mended and liberated under the rule of God.

It's a vision we must not set aside, for if we do, the gospel itself will dissipate into irrelevance.

A change to the very structure of the nation – that is what the announcement means to Israel. That is what it meant to a Judean girl in a provincial town in Galilee. The puzzle is that the announcement is being made here, and not in some more central place, in the Sanhedrin or the Temple in Jerusalem, or at least among the town leaders. But perhaps God has to make sure that the mother knows her role. Perhaps the more important people will come later ...

Something else is a problem for us, altho it wouldn't have been for Miriam or for any of her people. The role announced is not a democratic one. We who have lived thru the twentieth century have seen enuf of heros who come with absolute power to rescue, to rule and to ruin their people. Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, Franco, Mao, Idi Amin, Marcos, Mugabe and others, saviors who rule in public adulation, who rule with the unquestioned charisma of hero and benefactor, and then become dictators, destroying their people. Absolute power is not our tradition, and we prefer to see our leaders elected, by a population who can unelect them – even if elected leaders have often shown that they too can be disastrous, and little inclined to respond to the electors' will.

However, talk of a King may remind us of something else that we have long carried with us, if not from experience, then from imagination and memories passed on in the fairy tales of our childhood: the idea of a wise, strong, good ruler whose judgement and decision is accepted by all, who is loved and obeyed, to the great good, peace and prosperity of all his people: a fairy-tale King. But is reality ever like that? Do Kings, any more than fairies, really exist?

Still, we do, in spite of many disappointments, persist in wanting our leaders to be heroes we can look up to. Even when we elect them, we choose, in the 21st century increasingly against a background of anxiety and fear, the one who projects himself, or herself, as a hero to rescue us from the mess that the previous leader has left us in, or to save us from the troubles and threats to which we feel exposed in an increasingly dangerous world. Tho we boot out governments that have let us down, we keep on indulging the hope that the next one we elect will really save the nation. We seem to be torn between cynicism and all-too-gullible enthusiasm, either doubting that any government will ever rise above muddle, lies and self-interest, or streaming onto the streets to welcome the next new President or Prime Minister whose star has risen, as our beacon leader into a new age of prosperity and security.

The twenty-first century reader, wise after many events, might well watch how the story unfolds before giving unqualified welcome to the idea of a God-given ruler who comes as savior; but we will be wiser still not to reject the old Jewish dream, and even not to lose faith in our own dreams, while we learn from Luke's gospel what God means by it all.

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Elizabeth and Miriam were cousins, and when Miriam heard that Elizabeth was also pregnant she hurried off to Judea to visit her. They had a lot to share, each of them doubly alive, fulfilled in God's gift of life with all its strength and joy. Luke tells us that when Elizabeth greeted her, Miriam replied with a song of praise to God. It's a literary device of course, but true to Miriam and true to the occasion. Luke wants to show us, in the heart and the words of Miriam, the joyful expectations that will be fulfilled by the one who now comes to rule Israel.

That song is the one we call the "Magnificat".⁷ In it, Miriam rejoices in God her savior as she speaks out for the poor and the hungry, for the small, weak people against the rich and powerful who lord it over them. She knew that the time had come when God would change the

⁷ I have written about this and the other songs from the beginning of Luke's gospel in "Jesus Messiah" Ch.1: Song for a Child.

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world, and that the child now quickening in her womb, would bring down the proud, scattering the confident plans of those who were so sure of themselves, demolishing mighty thrones and sending the rich away, empty of all their boasted resources. Salvation would be a revolution, a world re-ordered in favor of the small and needy.

There was much in Israel's tradition, in the Prophets, the Law and the Psalms, for Miriam to draw upon, and her song is a texture of quotes, building its theme from the psalms, the books of Samuel and Genesis, from Job and the Prophets. For Miriam is celebrating Israel's God, who had long since shown himself the defender of the poor and weak, who had long since shown that he abides by his promises and fulfils the covenant he made with his people. Miriam rejoices because God is faithful to her and to his people and because he has chosen now to carry out the revolution he had always promised, often enacted in the past, but now, finally, fulfils with the coming of David's heir.

But salvation is more than rescue and revolution. It is also a radical change of heart in those whom God reaches out to save. We are to be saved, most profoundly, from ourselves. For it is in our guilt, the sins that fester among us, that our most fierce and dangerous enemy lies. If we are to be saved, and the wise know it well, we will have to be rescued from the evil we ourselves have wrought. We will have to be instructed and led to the freedom of repentance.

Zechariah, who breaks into song at the naming of his son, John,⁸ tells of a Savior-King who will rout the enemies of Israel:

He has raised up the valiant horn of our salvation
in the House of his son, David –
to rescue us from our enemies
and from the clutches of all those who hate us. (1: 69, 71)

He speaks of a people who have been freed from fear to worship God in holiness and justice all their days. But as he does so, his song moves away from the deeds of war to a greater salvation that dawns in the coming of God, a profound meeting of hearts, where the deep heart of God encounters the guilty heart of his people in forgiveness, light and peace. Here is the ending of sin, a radical new beginning, as a people given over to death in their dark ignorance of God learn to recognise at last the way of their salvation.

It is very different from Miriam's vision, as different as repentance is from revolution, and yet the songs are in harmony. It is Miriam and Zechariah together who open up God's vision of salvation: a new peace, safety and wholeness of life that is the gift of God to his people, forgiveness for their own twisted lives and society, and liberation,

⁸ The song we now call the Benedictus.

freedom from the threts of hostile forces. It is a mending of hearts and a mending of nations.

Miriam and Zechariah celebrate a new order, where the rich and the powerful no longer take for themselves what the world offers, where the poor receive the blessings of God and the little people, so long trampled on, are lifted up in honour. They celebrate the dawning of salvation, the way opening up to a just and happy society structured according to the will of God, where God's people, rescued from their enemies, and forgiven for wickedness and foolishness, thrive in the boundless space and freedom of God's mercy.

For both of them, it's a very different picture from the private salvation that is popular in many Christian circles, where society and government, politics and social action, are seen as distractions from our other-worldly salvation, which is God's separate and individual gift to each one. God comes and speaks to us in our hearts, and if we come together, it's to make a church or fellowship, where we can encourage one another on our essentially private journeys. Or it's to get a lift from powerful preachers and orchestrators of the gospel drama, some encouragement from leaders who remind and reassure us that we really are on our way to heaven. If there is a message for others in our experience, it is not the message of the angel Gabriel or of Miriam or Zechariah. It is rather the good news that they too can believe, and so hope for a similar salvation of their own (which, if they join us, also helps to reassure us of the validity of our own faith).

With such a belief, we do good deeds in the world as a kind of concession, because Jesus recommended loving our neibor. Certain kind actions for the truly needy are a program we take up for him. It may win converts, and it is certainly praiseworthy, but we guard against it becoming a conviction of faith, a passion for salvation, because that would immerse us into an unsaved world and diminish the pure faith in which, we think, we are really saved.

Not, of course, that we don't get immersed in that unsaved world, but that's Mondays to Saturdays (with time out for mid-week fellowship, bible study and prayer) when we work, shop, relax and get excited about our other, outside-of-salvation interests. That's our way: salvation on Sundays.

It's not at all like Miriam's religion, or Zechariah's.

Then there is another version of private salvation, the Catholic version, which is much more committed to doing good deeds in the world, because this is how we obey God's command and secure his acceptance for salvation. It is also affected by a persistent memory (tho it's centuries out of date) of a time when the church did rule society, and a feeling that the world would be better if that time could

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return. In this version, if young pregnant women involve themselves in social action, it's highly commendable; but they don't sing revolutionary songs, and they leave any proclamation of theology to the ordained clergy. And the ordained clergy, mindful of their limited influence, concentrate on controlling the faithful, focusing their attention on the sacraments and keeping repentance to a list of private sins.

It's salvation of a sort, but we're not going to find it in the gospel Luke has passed on to us.

Nor will we find the salvation promised so often in the 19th and 20th centuries by the propagandists and activists of revolution. The emancipation of man (sic) from superstition and fear, the triumph of the proletariat in a classless society, a liberation we can win by fighting for it, a new order we can build by killing its enemies or by strict adherence to its ideology, in short the man-made, self-made, power-dominated salvation that made up the dreaming of many an activist of the 20th century and left them all disappointed by its end, salvation as an earthly paradise without need of God, built on the reason, the freedom and the strength of the human spirit. In the songs of Miriam and Zechariah both, we have fair warning that we won't find God's endorsement for a do-it-yourself salvation. Salvation will be, and already is, the work and the gift of God, who comes to the rescue of an oppressed, broken, benighted and helpless humanity, reaching out in love and mercy to save them.

And there is one other dream of salvation that we will not find endorsed in the gospel. It is an ancient, but persistent and very modern dream of salvation, to which Christians, from convinced Catholics thru to devout evangelicals, eagerly make their allegiance. Its acknowledged prophets, in our age, were Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher, but they preached the message only as one already widely accepted, winning because they rightly read the hearts of the voters. This was the ideology and revolution that finally did win in the 20th century and now proclaims itself permanently victorious: manifest reason, practical realism, the first priority of sound government and the final arbiter of human action, the true focus of bold thinking, the reward of right behavior, the rule of a triumphant god and the one assured way of salvation: Money.

Miriam had this to say about it:

He has scattered the big-thinkers in their dreams of power;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich
away empty.