

3 God at Jordan Waters

Luke 3; 4: 1 - 13

The message of salvation set out in the opening chapters of Luke's gospel is not redily endorsed by our world of the 21st century. In fact, it hasn't been endorsed by any of the worlds of any of the centuries, and yet it is the way of salvation, and there have always been those, not always the expected ones, who accepted and were changed by it.

Salvation is the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, God's charter for a people belonging to God. Salvation came to Israel under that charter alone. God came to be with them as God had promised, and, as always, the coming of God was recognised first of all by a prophet. It was John, the son of the priest Zechariah, who heard God's word in the wilderness, and recognised that God was coming, to save and to judge his people. For the prophets had always recognised that Israel could be saved only in a judgement that exposed and clesned her from her own sins.¹ The nation saved would be the nation freed from their sins of corruption, exploitation and faithlessness to God.

So John came preaching and baptising people in the waters of the Jordan River. His message: a change of heart in preparation for God, a change of attitude, behavior and lifestyle, in which even the sinners of a wretched nation could be made redy for the coming of God. They were to repent, to be changed thru and thru. Like cloth washed and dyed, John would immerse them in the Jordan waters, and release them, soaked, washed, changed and freed from sin.

They needed this sign of repentance and of God's acceptance as something immediately concrete to do and receive, but they needed even more the reality behind the sign. They needed the promise of God, and they needed the spirit to live as children of the promise. They could not count on their birth alone. Descent from Abraham would not be enuf to save them. For they were, as we are, children of vipers, fleeing from the wrath of God. But at least they were right to flee, if only they would flee in the right direction:

Start producing the real fruits of repentance!

They wanted to be saved; they wanted to be able to face God in hope, without dreding his judgement. And that was no matter of mere rituals, even baptisms. About that John had no illusions. If their lives did not bear fruit in justice and goodness, no boast and no amount of confidence

¹ cf Hosea 2 - 3; Isaiah 1: 21 - 28

in the God of their fathers would save them. To be saved, they would have to change.

He could have told them to pray, to offer expiatory sacrifices, to give to the upkeep of the temple, to recite the Law, or in some vague and general terms to keep faith with the God of Israel, and all this would have been approved by the best authorities, their rulers. But he knew the vicious economics at the heart of their sin, and that Israel's repentance must be a matter of pockets and possessions. They must lose their selfishness and begin to live in the solidarity of sharing. The rich must give. The person who has more than one suit of clothes must give away to the person without any. [The property owner who has two houses must share one, because there are homeless people. Those who have access to expensive private health care must pay for it to be made accessible also to the poor.] People with a good store of food must share it with those who go hungry. [The shareholders in a profitable fruit company, with huge plantations in a foreign country, must see that the land is given to the peasants who need it for their own food.]

Even the tax collectors: collaborators, exploiters, extortioners [even the bankers, directors of finance companies, speculators on the stock exchange, people who make their fortunes from the money fluctuations that devastate the helpless] they came, for even they were troubled with a conscience: "What do we have to do?" they asked. They would have to change, he told them. They must learn to take only what was due to them, not what they could extract from their subjects through the power they held in the economic order. Opportunity is a powerful temptation, and those whose fingers move the world's finances, at whatever level, delve deeply to grab a good share for themselves. It is not easy for the lucky ones, or the clever ones, in a Roman-ordered, or a British-ordered, or American-ordered world, to live the honesty and generosity that God will look for.

And even the soldiers, the corrupt police [even the Marines, the agents of the Pentagon and the Australian-trained Kopasus troops] were looking for salvation. "What do we have to do?" Was there anyone in Israel who did not know the iniquities of the army? Soldiers were responsible for order. They alone might lawfully use force, going everywhere armed for the purpose. And if they were hungry on the way, they could take what they wanted - no one would oppose them. It was a great career for bullies. In every street, every village and town, there were opportunities for making money. Someone caught in a minor or technical offence: no need to trouble the magistrates, when a quick payment would settle the issue. If someone wants the protection of the Law, you can give it at a price; and if someone else wants freedom from the law's inquisitive surveillance, you can arrange that at a price. Your sword, especially in an occupied country, is a great money-spinner.

Jesus Kyrios

John knew what to tell the soldiers. It would not be easy. For those who paid the troops were not generous, and would only despise their men for not making use of the opportunities that military service gave them. “You must leave off intimidation and bullying. Take no bribes. Make do with the military pay.” They too, in the mercy of God, would find salvation, but only a change of heart and practice would do, a radical change of attitude that would make not only themselves but the world in which they operated very different.

It is not an accident that Luke specifically mentions these two types. The tax-collectors and the soldiers represented the power of government. They were not that power at its highest level, the kings, provincial governors and military commanders who deployed the resources of the Empire and took its richest spoils. They represented authority and power at the point where it touched the lives of most people, in policing and collecting revenue. They themselves were the smart or lucky ones among the ordinary people who had got a job with the powerful. They still moved among the lowest, braving the dust and rubbish of the back streets but taking their share from the labour of peasants and petty householders, and they did so with power that came to them from their superiors. They were the point at which government, remote in its luxury and power, made contact with and ruled the lives and economies of thousands of little, ordinary people; and, traditionally, they exploited that position. They worked at the cutting edge, where their selfishness, opportunism and bullying embodied the power and ambition of their masters and exercised it, to their own advantage also, in the world of the people.

If they were to change, if such officialdom took on a new shape, society itself would be different. Their repentance would be a challenge to all the workings of society: downwards, showing the people a different pattern of human behavior, in an unselfish exercise of power; and upwards, showing their powerful masters that it is only their greed and meanness that spoils the empire. Luke’s account makes it clear that salvation, and the changes it calls for, are not just private arrangements between each individual and their God. Repentance, changing ways and attitudes, is a public matter, as salvation is a public matter. Repentance will mean a radically different society, where people – exemplified by the soldiers and the tax collectors – live out in society the implications of a radically new attitude, a life that responds to God.

*

*

*

So impressive was John’s preaching that people began to wonder if he might be the Messiah, the ruler and savior whom many expected from God, but John scotched the idea. Someone was coming far greater than he, who would baptise them in fire and the Holy Spirit. The Messiah was coming, and soon, but his work for them would be of a wholly different order, of a wholly different power. John’s preaching was preparation for that coming,

when his baptism in water would be superseded. John prepared them for the judgement of God, but the Messiah would wield it.

Like the other gospel writers, Matthew and Mark, Luke tells us that Jesus too was baptised, but his way of telling it is remarkably different. Mark gives us a brief but vivid picture of John baptising Jesus and Jesus coming up out of the water, while Matthew elaborates this with a discussion between John and Jesus. Both of them tell of great drama at the moment of Jesus' baptism: the heavens opening and the spirit of God descending in the form of a dove and a voice proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God, in whom God puts all his confidence. But Luke seems to bury the moment of baptism in anonymity, with Jesus only one of many being baptised at the time. He glances back at it in a single phrase, telling us that Jesus was praying "after his baptism" when the heavens were opened.

So it happened, when the whole crowd of people had been baptised and Jesus, having been baptised, was praying, that the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit came down upon him in the bodily shape of a dove, and a voice declared from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; today I have begotten you." (3: 21 - 22)

Special as he is, his baptism is swallowed up in the whole crowd of penitents. He is one among many, and Luke goes on to give us the ancestry of Jesus, as one among the whole human race. He was reckoned to be the son of Joseph, "the son of Heli, the son of Matthat ..." all the way back to "Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God".

It seems that Luke has taken this great event of God's revelation: the Spirit of God coming upon Jesus and the voice that affirms his unique and glorious relationship with God, and deliberately immersed it, baptised it we could say, in the story of repentant Israel and indeed of all humanity. Jesus is the Son of God in a way and with an authority that has been nobody's before him, but he is so as one of a repentant people, and as one of the whole human race, descended in his own line from Adam, who was, in his unspoilt origin, the son of God.

Jesus is a member of Israel, repenting with the rest of his society, and he is a human being among the many descendants of Adam. The revelation of God and the salvation of God's people, tho it is from heaven announced by angels, takes place in humanity itself, in human history, the history of Israel and the human race, in which Jesus is immersed as one of many.

And yet he is the Son of God. Precisely in his being a son of Israel, heir to Israel's promises and to Israel's sins, he fulfils the purpose of God and receives God's fullest approval. He who receives in unreserved fullness the Spirit of God, the very heavens opening up for it to take place, is, like every one of us, a child of Adam. [He too is descended from those remote African ancestors who first evolved from the more primitive apes, to know themselves and their God.]

Jesus Kyrios

*

*

*

After his baptism, led by the Spirit of God, Jesus went out into the wilderness. There, he went without food, and the devil tempted him. Mark, Matthew and Luke all tell us about the temptation of Jesus. It was the beginning of his public calling, for he was of an age to “go public” and like any of us, he had to learn what his vocation was. What was it that God his Father was giving him to do? He did not have it all before him, like a divine blueprint, but with human wisdom and searching, enlightened by his Father, he was beginning to understand.

It was a time for being alone with God, for setting aside the ordinary, daily needs of his body and for exploring, in thought and prayer, the meaning of the task he was being given. It was a time for growing self-knowledge, a fuller understanding of who he was himself and his relationship with God, and it was time for the devil, the tempter, the seductive voice of plausible human reasoning, to offer him a more attractive interpretation of his mission.²

First of all, he was hungry, and the devil put to him a very reasonable proposition:

If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.

(4: 3)

It made sense. If the Son of God is hungry, he has surely the power from God to meet his needs. The very stones will become bread for him. Of course, that’s only if he is the Son of God. This is a two-way temptation. Jesus might refuse to try the miracle because he is not sure of his relationship with God. Perhaps he can be got to doubt it.

But Jesus neither doubts nor exploits his relationship with God. To be the Son of God is not about seeing to his own needs, but about depending on, living from the very word of God. It is not a licence to run matters to suit himself, but a relationship of humble dependence on God.

Then again, perhaps Jesus is not yet wholly decided for God. He is only at the beginning of his great career, whatever it is going to be. Perhaps he can still choose, and if the devil makes him an attractive enough offer he might choose to serve the devil.

Then, taking him up high, the devil showed him in one moment all the kingdoms of the world. “They are all mine,” said the devil, “and I

² I have written at greater length about the temptations of Jesus in “Jesus Messiah”, also available on uruvacu.co.uk. There I followed Matthew’s account, in which, as I explained, the order of experiences is more psychologically understandable. But Luke has his own reasons for putting the temptation on the temple high in the last place: for him it is the climax.

give them to whoever I want to. I will give them all to you if you will fall down and worship me.”
(4: 5 – 7)

Jesus is offered an easy way to power, to such power as passes for power in the world, bedazzling the ambitious and the easily-awed alike. He can have it for nothing, if he will only worship the devil who gives it. Such is the price of power as we know it. To take it, to use it, is to accept its values and so to worship the giver of power. Jesus will not do so, and rejects the temptation. But temptation it was, not just a pretend temptation. Jesus was really able to see what he might receive and what he might do if he accepted the devil's way. He did not, because he chose to go the way of God:

“It is written: You shall bow down before the Lord your God and worship him alone.”
(4: 8)

The devil then took him to Jerusalem and stood him on the parapet of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels to take care of you. They will lift you in their hands, lest you stub your foot against a stone.’ ”
(4: 9 – 11)

In Luke's way of telling the story, this is the climax of the temptations. “All the kingdoms of the world” are of less significance than Jerusalem. Jesus has dismissed the crude temptation to power (as perhaps the devil thought he would) but that being so, it brings them back to the question: if he is the Son of God, what should he do? Forget the vast empires of the world and their hollow show of power. It's soon lost anyway. Here is Jerusalem, and the House of God. Here is the power that will outlast all powers, the seat of the kingdom that will never be overthrown. Here is real power, God's power, in the city chosen by God, in the Temple of Jerusalem.

If Jesus is the Son of God, he is heir to all this. He is right to reject the second-rate splendour of the kingdoms of the world. Rome and Alexandria and Athens, London, Washington and New York, mean nothing beside the real greatness that is Jerusalem and the glory that dwells there. Let him claim it, publicly, if he is the Son of God. Surely, if he descends now in a display of God's power, borne down on the hands of angels from the parapets of the Temple, he will receive his kingdom, and his people, who need him, will receive their ruler.

If he is the Son of God. Jesus had recognised that his relationship with God was not a privileged power to get whatever he wanted. Now he recognised that it was not a demonstration of glory with which to dazzle and astound an audience. Nor would he use it as a lever to force the endorsement of God:

Jesus Kyrios

Jesus told the devil: “It is also sed in Scripture: ‘You shall not make tests for the Lord your God.’ ” (4: 12)

The Temple, the house of his father, is not a place for Jesus to shine in and to show off, but the place for him to do the work of his Father. That he is the Son of God will be seen from what he does, and his actions, from this point on, will show us both who he is and who God is whose Son we see. If he is indeed to enter upon his reign in Jerusalem, it is God, not the devil, who will show him how. Jesus will present himself in Jerusalem, but in the very different way of God.