

8 Questions

Luke 7:11 – 8:25

Attentive reading of Luke's gospel exposes as heresy the idea that the teaching of Jesus can only be carried out in another or later world, and that we must live this life in the world we have at least partly by other principles. That heresy usually reduces Jesus to a Savior of individuals who find separate salvations, one by one, according as they live this life in faith / good works. It misses the fullness of Christ as the Savior of Israel, according to the angel's promise and Zechariah's song.

And it leaves us with a world in chaos. In spite of all our "faith" and all our pretending that "this world" doesn't matter in the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are still desperate to be saved from this world's dangers and horrors. Terrorism, war, crime, recession and economic collapse: to escape these we look for other saviors whose authority and power enjoys a remit more immediate than that of Jesus.

So we choose Presidents and Prime Ministers and appoint generals and Chancellors of the Exchequer. We hoist our country's flag and we invoke the Queen's name; or we put our trust in the rich and successful and the brand names pushed at us thru our television screens. These will save us. These will make the world safe, or comfortable, or interesting for us. The people who know how to plug policies, how to buy or win votes, how to sell things, or simply how to stand up and be celebrities, will change the world for us so that we can live in safety and security, with a modest prosperity in this life, which, whatever we say on Sundays, matters very much to us.

And because we have separated the salvation offered by Jesus from the salvation we crave amid the threts and fragility of this world, we seek salvation here by other means than his. We contrive wepons of mass destruction, we market arms across the globe, we fite, we bomb, we send our children (or the children of our poor) to kill, to maim, to be killed, to be maimed, to be horribly disfigured; we shred the rights of people and we allow governments to kidnap, imprison and torture in our name; we bow to the banks and to the great corporations, we buy what they tell us and we accept their conditions for money, for work, for security in this life where we most want it. We accept that here, where it matters, salvation must be sought by "practical" means, thru trust in the people whose success is proven by money or power, and the leaders we elect at their behest. When

the salvation of Jesus is only a future dream, however much we believe in it, we look for our present salvation in a “realistic” application of the rules that have been shown to work here.

In spite of them never really working. For we remain afraid, unable to commit ourselves with conviction. Leader after leader collapses. We totter between extravagant hopes encouraged by conmen, and spineless cynicism, making failure our excuse for not hoping. If Jesus is only the kind of savior we have often made him, unconnected with the desperate need for change in the present world order, the world has no hope but to numb the pain while it waits for God to do something, or for an end.

We need to know who Jesus is, in order to know his relevance to the world we live in. It is not enuf to give him a role in some future scenario. Nor is it enuf to give him for the present a mere title. Like Mark, from whom he draws his account, Luke will show us how people were discussing who Jesus was, wondering, asking questions about him as he went thru Galilee proclaiming the kingdom of God. Their questions are not just a bit of history, but the questions that we too need to ask, to find out who and what Jesus is for our present world.

He did not come announcing “I am the Messiah” or “I am the Son of God” or “I am the savior”. To have made any such claim would have been to mislead the people. It would have raised false expectations based on whatever they thought “Messiah” or “Son of God” or “savior” ment. There wasn’t – and there still isn’t – any simple definition in scripture for any of these terms, and there wasn’t a redy-made package of prophecies you could just apply to make it all clear. Perhaps the whole history of Israel had been leading up to this point; perhaps everything God had sed and shown to his people was so that they mite recognise and believe in Jesus. But that belief came from meeting and learning about Jesus in their own times. It was a process of discovery, as it was for Jesus himself. The will and the intention of God were still unfolding in the history they were living – as it is unfolding for us now, in the history we are living.

He wasn’t – he still isn’t – anything for which we have a redy-made label, and so there is no substitute for getting to know him and sharing the experience of his story. Whatever we guess or say he is, Messiah, Son of God, King, the term itself will be defined by the person he proves to be, by his words and actions and relationships, by his understanding and presentation of God.

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So Luke now tells us about Jesus going around Galilee, the things he said and the things he did and what people made of him, and what his disciples learnt, or failed to learn. A lot of it was questions, for people didn't know, and, as I said, Jesus himself was still discovering.

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He was approaching a town called Nain when he met a funeral coming out. The only son of a widow had died, and many of the town were out to mourn with her. Jesus was sorry for her. He stopped the funeral procession and placing his hand on the bier, he said, "Young man, I tell you to get up." The young man sat up and spoke, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. It was an astonishing miracle, and people praised the greatness of God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us. God has come to his people."

Here then is a first response to Jesus: he is a great prophet, in whom God has come among us. But that by no means settles the matter. Word spread throughout the country, and was soon brought to another who was himself acknowledged as a prophet: John the Baptist. John was in prison, but he sent some of his followers to Jesus with this question: "Are you the One who is to come, or are we still waiting for someone else?"

The prophet John was looking for more than a prophet. Although a time might have come such as they had not seen in Israel for centuries, when great prophets would speak out in the name of God to tell them God's will for the nation, John was looking for more. Israel, who had seen (and resisted) many prophets, was waiting for someone greater. We should not imagine that there was a neat, ready-made concept of "the Messiah", a title which everyone understood, waiting for someone to come and claim it. But there was a hope, a longing built on a reading of their history, their prophets and their experience of God's love: for a leader anointed by God, a king like David of old, someone to rescue their society and deliver their people from injustice, oppressive government and fear: that is what they were waiting for.

So John referred to "the One who is coming". The most basic thing that can be said about the Messiah is that he is coming, from God. People are waiting for him with all kinds of different expectations, but hoping for someone to put their sorry world right and make them safe in it. John asked only if Jesus was the one who is coming, the one they had all been waiting for – or were they still waiting?

Jesus' answer takes us back to the manifesto of Nazareth. He was not claiming titles, any more than John was proposing a title, but he pointed to what was happening around him. What had been the effect of his coming to the towns of Israel? Jesus was at that very time healing the sick, delivering people from the oppression of demons, giving sight to the blind. John's followers could go back and tell him: "the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised – and there is good news for the poor." That "good news for the poor" did not mean "the gospel is preached to the poor." It meant that the good news the poor were waiting for, of liberation, justice, restoration and an end of poverty, was at last being brought to them: they are to be free of their debts and free of their chains.

Is this what we have been waiting for? Is this what God has promised us? If so, John has his answer. With this reply, Jesus sent back the message: "Blessed is the one who can accept and not be disappointed by what they discover in me." If people are put off by what they find in Jesus and his message (as they were in Nazareth) it's not because they don't want a savior or a Messiah; it's because they have their own ideas already about what such a one must be and how he must behave. They reject what they are not ready for, and nobody is ready for the acts of God.

When John's disciples had left to take an answer back to their master, Jesus put some questions of his own to the people who were with him. Questions about John, for many of them had gone out to the Jordan to hear him and to be baptised. Jesus asked them: "What did you go out to see in the wilderness? A reed blowing in the wind? A celebrity in fine clothes? No indeed, smartly dressed celebrities are to be found in the cities and the king's court. What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, a prophet, but much more than a prophet."

Jesus would not let them stick with their ready-made labels. Whatever Jesus was, John was already more than a prophet. Something had happened which changes all the rules and all expectations. John was greater than a prophet, greater than the greatest in Israel's story, because he was the herald of the kingdom of God. That someone, that something they were waiting for, that tremendous intervention of God, was so great that its mere messenger was greater than any born of woman.

And yet, he was only its messenger. The very least who is born to live in that kingdom of God is greater than John. If you ask questions about Jesus, or even John, you have to learn that something is happening, the coming of the kingdom, which challenges all your ability to measure and

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evaluate people. It is a new context for all your questions and changes the presuppositions for all your presuppositions about who anyone is.

The people had accepted John, even despised collaborators and tax-takers, but the people's leaders had not. The respectable Pharisees and the experts in Jewish law had rejected him. They would not accept what God was offering them. In fact, it's difficult to know what they would accept. They were like sulky children who didn't want to play. If you offered to play weddings, they didn't want to; if you offered to play funerals, they didn't want that either. John had been an ascetic, fasting and abstaining from wine, so they said he was possessed by a demon. Jesus came eating and drinking freely, partying with all and sundry, and they said he was a glutton who kept bad company. They were not willing to accept anyone who challenged the narrow contours of their thinking or questioned the system in which they enjoyed prestige as leaders.

But God's children recognise the wisdom of God and accept it.

You won't make anything of Jesus by clinging to your known stereotypes. In fact, you won't know anyone that way. You won't see them, and you won't see the mercy of God reaching out to them.

Jesus had been invited to dinner with one of the Pharisees, and while he was there, reclining at table, a woman came in. Everyone knew who she was - her reputation was well established and no one needed to ask questions about her. Except, apparently, that Jesus didn't know. For she placed herself behind him, weeping profusely, and as her tears fell on his feet (he was reclining, feet stretched out on a couch, Roman style) she dried them away with her hair. She had brought in a jar of scented ointment with which she now rubbed his feet as she kissed them.

These were unthinkable liberties. That any woman should invade the male privilege of the banquet was not to be allowed, but that such a one as she should make contact with any man, should put her hand to one of the righteous, was an outrage! What kind of a prophet was this, who didn't know he was being touched by a sinner? Any respectable person, if she had so much as brushed against their cloak in the street, would have drawn it away angrily.

Jesus, seeing what his host was thinking (his face must have been a picture!) asked him what he thought about two debtors, both of whom could not pay, and both of whom were let off. One had owed fifty pounds, one five

hundred. Which of the two would be most grateful to their generous creditor? The Pharisee replied, “The one who owed the most, I suppose.”

That, said Jesus, was how it stood with this woman. Hers was the extravagant display of love and gratitude that made sense when you thought how much she had been forgiven. He said to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Who is this man who even forgives sin? And so easily and freely!

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There follows a bit of a digression.¹ Luke was probably reminded by the incident at the Pharisee’s house, of other women connected with Jesus. So he tells us now that, besides the male disciples of whom we hear a lot, there were some women going around with him, whom he had healed of various afflictions. Perhaps they did the cooking and washing, but Luke tells us, significantly, that some of them were well off (one was the wife of King Herod’s steward, Chuza) and provided for the group out of their own resources.

This must be one of the most frustratingly cryptic remarks in the whole gospel! It opens up to imagination a whole dimension of Jesus’ travelling ministry but gives us no details. After all, how did Jesus and his disciples eat? Obviously, they were given hospitality in towns and villages where they were welcomed, but day after day on the road, and three meals (or was it only two) every day?

Jesus, we know from his teaching, would have trusted utterly in God to provide for them, but we also know from the story of his temptations that he did not rely on miracles. No, if God provided for them, it would be as their Father, and Creator of all things. Resources for their needs would come to light in quite ordinary, though unforeseen, ways – one of which was the generosity and commitment of some people with money. And here we get a glimpse of it, such a woman as Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward, providing for them out of her financial resources. What a pity we don’t know more! It might very much alter the picture we usually conjure up of Jesus and his (male) disciples treading the dusty roads of Galilee.

Luke, as many have noticed, is particularly aware of the women in Jesus’ life and gives a very sympathetic picture of them. Perhaps it was his nature,

¹ 8: 1 – 3

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his feminine side a little more developed than that of most of the writers of the scriptures. Or perhaps it was a growing awareness of people in the Christian communities of his day, two generations after Jesus. We might be tempted to think that Luke invented this role for the women, constructing it out of his own sympathetic imagination, except that Mark, a very different writer, also mentions it.² Mark, the typical male author in a male-oriented world, says nothing about the women as he describes Jesus' ministry in Galilee, but then, at the very end of his gospel, when the women turn out to be the only witnesses to Jesus' resurrection and he has to notice them, he lets it slip that they had been going around looking after him all the time.

Perhaps this digression about the women is not such a digression after all. "You can tell a man by the company he keeps." Luke is describing Jesus thru the company he keeps, describing the women and their role and preparing us for other women of whom we shall hear soon.

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Jesus had a large crowd listening to him and he told them the story, the "parable", of a very careless farmer. The man went out to sow seed, but instead of carefully sowing it where it would grow well, in the best soil, he just chucked it about everywhere: on the hard-trodden path, where it was trampled on or eaten by the birds; on the rocky ground, where there was not enough moisture to keep it growing; in the ruf, among the thorny weeds where it was choked by the tuffer growth. But some of the seed fell on good soil, where it grew and flourished and produced a crop a hundredfold. (That's a return of 10,000%!)

Like many of Jesus' parables, it's a story to amuse and startle. It is meant to show the extravagance of God's enthusiasm and vitality. But where Luke tells it, at this point in his gospel, it seems at first oddly out of place (another digression?) but on closer inspection it turns out to be deliberately and thoughtfully placed. Because we know that Lukas had the text of Mark before him³, we have here an opportunity to see his author's mind at work, as he rearranges the material he takes from Mark.

Mark has it with a little collection of parables about how we are to proceed and the kingdom which is now shaping our history. They follow a description of the people around Jesus, the crowds, the Twelve, his relations, the hostile experts in the Law and his true kinship with all who do the will of God, and are then followed by dramatic accounts of Jesus' power

² Mark 15: 40 - 41

³ Mark 4: 1 - 9

in confrontation with the forces of nature and the forces of evil. In Mark's dynamic style the story keeps moving forward in uninterrupted flow.

I believe that Luke has set this parable here, in the midst of questions about who Jesus is and episodes that show him in the setting of his company – you could almost say his defining company – because he wants to keep together the discovery of what the kingdom is like and how it comes about, with the revelation of Jesus' role and identity. The parable of the reckless farmer is a description both of the way God works in the coming of the kingdom, and of the role and work of Jesus as he goes about teaching. Our thoughts about who Jesus is should never be far from our recognition of the remarkable course of the Kingdom of God.

His disciples asked him later what the parable ment, and he gave them an explanation. But first, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, he gave them an explanation for his speaking in parables at all. His disciples who followed and trusted him closely, who were with him and willing to find out more, would be able to understand. But others, the crowd who just came for the occasion,

tho seeing, would not see,
tho hearing would not understand,

as Isaiah says.⁴

It mite seem harsh, as if Jesus has deliberately packed his teaching into riddles to hide it from the “vulgar crowd”. But we know from his teaching and his behavior everywhere else (for instance his treatment of the woman in the previous incident) that that was not the case. He was in fact quoting the bitterly ironic statement of the prophet Isaiah because he finds himself in the same situation, with a public that doesn't want to understand, because it mite mean responding, believing and changing. A form of teaching that should be clear and helpful becomes an obstacle to them because they don't want to understand.

In fact, as we all find, parables are an excellent way of teaching because people get the story, the picture described, even if they don't get all the meaning. Some will remember it and perhaps come to understand it later. Others, who are serious about following Jesus (not just gaping at him) will ask, will learn, will understand.

⁴ Isaiah 6: 9 – 10

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There are many questions, not just about the parables, but about Jesus himself, and the one big question is, whether we will stay the course when we start to get answers. Who is Jesus? What do we make of him? What will he make of us? Is he a king or is he a prophet? In the gospel he has been announced as the Savior-King, but we see him going about Galilee gathering disciples. Isn't there a credibility gap between the King, the heir of David, and the wandering teacher with his followers?

Now we think we know how to bridge that gap and make the picture whole. Jesus, we say, is a king in a very different sense, and his kingdom is not here but in heaven. He gathers disciples and teaches, because the only way for us to reach his kingdom is to learn about it and believe in his power to get us there. People (even his disciples sometimes) failed to understand him because they were expecting a Savior to make a difference in this world, while Jesus was trying to tell them about a kingdom in another world. But the disciples were being taut so that, eventually, they would be able to teach others, so that everyone who believes the message and does as Jesus teaches them would be brought into his kingdom.

Believed and accepted, this is a beautiful picture, and it has inspired good Christians in many generations, but it is heresy – in the original sense of selecting part of the truth and treating it as the whole. The strongest and most attractive heresies are those that select a maximum of truth (that's where they get their strength) but leave out some vital but troublesome features (that's where they get their attractiveness).

This particular heresy is in fact close to what Luke will tell us in the rest of his gospel, but it ignores the fact that he has set the whole story not as the rejection but as the fulfilment of Israel's age-old hopes and longings, the fulfilment of God's promise that Israel, a people with a place and a history in this world, will see salvation come from God. The story of the remainder of Jesus' life and the story of his death is a shock to Israel's and to our expectations, but precisely because it is the story of God's way forward for this world and its history. Trying to move it all away to another world is only our way of avoiding the shock and the challenge.

We have to ask ourselves whether we are really receptive to the word of God as Jesus speaks it, or are we only waiting to wrap it up, to reinterpret it, in our safe and familiar heresies? And "we" is not just individuals. We don't decide alone how we understand Jesus' teaching, but work it out together and reassure one another with agreed interpretations. Whole churches and nations can be working on a false understanding of Jesus and his teaching.

The seed sown in the parable, Jesus told his disciples, is the word of God. People hear it, but some are quickly distracted and it's gone. Others warm to the idea, but they find themselves in a weed-bed of rival messages, worries, pressures, attractions, that strangle the life out of them. Others, like plants in shallow earth, react with great enthusiasm, as long as it's new and exciting, but when the pressures mount up and their faith is put to the test, they wither away. Jesus painted an accurate picture of future Christian history, altho he was talking about his own people and times.

It's a catalogue of failure, but there is also success, and that success outweighs all the failure. God's reckless enthusiasm, not targeting the message but casting it before all and sundry, does bear fruit. There are those who hear, and grasp and respond with lasting faith. The crop comes back a hundredfold.

The teachings of Jesus are not cryptic messages for the initiate. No one lites a lamp and then covers it up with a bowl or shoves it under the bed. There are no hidden messages that won't be brought to lite and made clear. It's not just for Jesus' closest associates, but for all who will receive it, and the more they receive, the more they'll be given; but those who think they've already got it all, will lose what they thought they had.

Something is happening that challenges everyone to search their own heart and to make sure they are really listening. Jesus, the master, is teaching us about the kingdom of heven, how it shapes up, how it works, how it spreads, who's involved and how they relate to him. Jesus and the whole work of Jesus are to be understood in the parable of the sower, in which we begin to find out what it is for him to be Lord and Savior, for he will be so with the hundredfold that springs up here in spite of apparent waste and failure. It's time, as I hope we'll see, to shake off the heresy.

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Some of Jesus' family – his mother and his brothers – came looking for him. There was a crowd of people listening to him, so they couldn't get thru, but someone got word to him: "Your mother and your brothers are outside. They want to see you." That's another way of knowing a person: knowing their family. In your family you belong, you matter. They are your closest ties and your strongest affirmation. People who want to impress and establish themselves as somebody must have a family to present. In most previous ages it was the family you came from. In our modern society it is the family you have made. Nobody runs for President of the United States without a showpiece wife and children / grandchildren to display.

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In Jesus' society much more than ours you were nobody without a family. That was why life could be so hard for widows and orphans. Conversely, a respected and influential family guaranteed your acceptance in the world. Yet Jesus was prepared to set aside his family, or rather, to identify with an entirely new family. He responded: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God, and do it."

Who is this whose family are all who hear and obey the word of God? One day he was crossing the lake of Galilee with his disciples and he fell asleep in the boat. He must have been tired, because, altho a storm blew up, he slept on thru it. His disciples, in a panic, woke him up: "We're going to drown, Master!" But he stood up and rebuked the wind and the waves, so that they subsided into calm again. And he wondered that the disciples had been in a panic. "Where is your faith?"

Where was their faith? They were left wondering in astonishment: "Who can this be, that even the wind and the waves obey him?"