

These six studies are designed to be used alongside daily Lenten readings through the Gospel of Luke. Daily readings, along with additional information and resources, can be accessed at www.redchurch.org.au.

WEEK ONE / Luke 1 & 2 - Peter Evans, Red Outer East

As we begin the journey of Lent, it makes sense that our hearts and minds instantly shift toward Easter... Good Friday; Easter Sunday; the long weekend.

The opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke provide a delightful, beautiful, poignant reminder that before there was death, there was life. And life in its most innocent form – a baby. Jesus. A baby born to a virgin, Mary, who was to be by his side til his dying day. A mother who treasured up the early blessings and pondered them in her heart. A baby given to make ready a people prepared for the Lord, but, who was also destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against.

Who of us can't imagine treasuring the delights of a first born? But envisaging our youngest as a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of the people Israel? I mean, we all love our children and have illusions of grandeur about their intelligence, development and proximity to greatness, but a Saviour, a King, the Christ?!

For Mary we can have admiration, a near-reverence for her role as the guiding paternal figure in our Saviour's life and a deep ache for what is to come in her first born's final heart-rending moments. But that is to come. For now, an embracing of these joyful first days will have to suffice. And a precious rare insight into Jesus' pre-teenage phase; that of a wise, articulate family truant. Yet ultimately, an obedient one.

The risen Christ we celebrate, the beaten and broken innocent we mourn, but this day, revel in the astonishing gift that is the beautiful baby. The Son of God; tiny, wrapped and perfect.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

+ This might be part of the Gospel story that you're quite familiar with. Take a moment to reflect on it afresh. What verse or part of a passage stands out to you anew? What might it change in your life as Easter nears?

+ A newborn baby brings unmistakable joy. Think about an area of your life to be grateful for the joy that it brings.

+ Jesus journeys closely with His Father in Spirit from before he is born. What is something in your life to be thankful for where God has been right by your side? In what ways is your life, or the life of someone you know, marked by a close communion with the Father?

+ We are at the beginning of Lent. Easter beckons at the finish line. Over the journey of the next 40 days or so, how do you feel God wants to shape your character, your heart and your responses along the way?

WEEK TWO / Luke 4:1-13 - Kelly Tulk, Red Blackburn South

Deserts or wilderness experiences of our own making, or that of circumstances, are both a blessing and a curse. In places where the noise of the world is turned down, the sweet voice of the Father can be so clear and comforting. But the wilderness can also be a place of torment – where outside of the protection of community our doubts and fears can seem to scream over our desire to find the peace of God in the gap. But to the wilderness we must go – at times.

In the wilderness, Jesus – fully human – eats nothing for 40 days and at the end is politely described as ‘hungry’! “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread,” (4:3) Satan chides. Among the many of Jesus’ miracles described in the scriptures, turning a stone to bread would have been quite ordinary. But answering with scripture, Christ puts his human need for food beneath his desire to do the will of the Father – this time is for fasting, not for food.

Jesus is then led to a high place, offered power and dominion by Satan, a similar promise to the one he made Eve in Genesis 3 ‘...you will be like God...’. How easily we humans give in to the promise of power! But not Jesus – a day will come for being lifted up, but this time is for being ‘made lower than the angels’ (Heb 1:9).

And finally, at the top of the temple, somewhat like a dare, Satan cries “throw yourself down”, quoting scriptural promises of an angel guard – but Jesus does not need to test God’s promises to trust in him – he knows the love of the Father.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- + What blessings or comforts do I seek before or instead of pressing into God?
- + What tests are you facing right now? How are the whispering voices trying to lure you off course, into doing the right thing in the wrong way, or the wrong thing altogether?
- + Do you look to scripture to find help and strength in times of temptation and trial? What is something you could practically do to grow in this area, to be ready and armed with scripture and God’s promises?
- + Like Jesus, we often find ourselves tempted to pursue or accept opportunities of public success, visible output or recognition. What is your family/industry/community’s version of public success? Is there a kingdom alternative that God calls you to pursue?
- + Do you find yourself wanting to test God’s promises in order to trust them? Is there something specific that God is asking you to take him at his word on? Ask someone to pray with you for an increase in trust, peace and firmness in standing in God’s word.

WEEK THREE / Luke 6:27-49 - Tracy Douglas, Red Blackburn South

Love your enemies, bless those who curse, don't judge, forgive others, give generously, bear good fruit, live out God's word... what an inspiration! Jesus succinctly presents the beauty and challenge of living a godly life. However, while inspiring, sometimes these teachings can feel like an impossibly long list of things we have to do and be. Oh, it's easier for Jesus – he's in full time ministry and doesn't have kids or an arduous work schedule or a SAC due next week.

But Jesus has his own pressures. He knows he's soon going to die an agonising, humiliating death separated from his Father God, condemned and betrayed by the very people he is pouring his life and love into. So how does he do it? How does he live such a self-giving, true, holy, God-focussed life day after day?

There's the key: God-focussed.

The life Jesus lives – the compassion he demonstrates, the truth he speaks, his generous responses to the situations before him – overflows from a life and will completely aligned with his Father. His generous and benevolent Father God who is so eager to pour out every good gift into the lives of those who truly seek him because of his great love – for us!

So often we strive to be good Christians, to live like Jesus, and fail because it's impossible in our humanity. But as we seek the Father – really seek Him – in prayer, worship, wonder and humility, with an awareness of our total dependence on him, we can gratefully accept his gift of life and love given by grace, not needing to be earned. Instead of being things we grit our teeth and do, love, forgiveness, generosity and holiness will flow naturally and spontaneously from hearts awash with the life and love of God.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- + Does living a godly life tend to present more as beauty or challenge to you? Are there particular situations that are more one than the other?
- + Share an example of a time when you walked in alignment with God and found Him giving you grace beyond what you would have had outside of Him. Did it change the way you reacted, behaved, spoke or felt?
- + What does it look like for a disciple's life to be consistently God-focussed? Do you believe that through Jesus this can be the norm rather than the exception? What does the Bible tell us about victory in the battle between spirit and flesh?

WEEK FOUR / Luke 9 - Sue Allison, Red Blackburn South

Luke 9:28: the mountain top, the Transfiguration. Wow! The presence of God in the fullness of his holiness, his majesty, his glory, his voice, clear and loud. So awestruck.

The next day, down the mountain: 'I begged your disciples to drive it out but they could not' (9:40); 'but they did not understand' (9:45); 'an argument started among the disciples' (9:46)...

This can be my experience in just one day. I spend the morning sitting in the presence of God, realigning my spirit, sensing his presence and hearing the whisper of his voice. As the day continues I wonder at prayers that don't seem answered, of things I don't understand, and my internal battle to die to self. So what brought the difference in Jesus: What gave him authority? What gave him wisdom? What graced him with humility?

I keep going back to Luke 9:35: 'This is my Son whom I have chosen.' Jesus' identity was secure. Though his feet were on earth, his identity was in heaven. He was the son of God. He knew he was loved, he knew he had purpose, he knew whose authority he had.

So today I stand in front of the mirror and as I look at my reflection, I make the declaration: I have been chosen by God. I am a daughter of God. I am loved by God; He has a plan and a purpose for my life; I have been washed free of sin, guilt and shame. Jesus' power that conquered death lives in me! He has given me all authority to bring the Kingdom here on earth. As I make the declaration a change comes upon me – it starts with thankfulness, gratitude, humility, an enlivenment in my spirit, a boldness creeps in, an authority and empowerment. With my identity in Jesus secure, it impacts my every day with freedom from condemnation and victory with which I face challenges.

Questions for reflections and discussion:

+ Reflect for a moment on the truth that you are chosen and beloved by God. What sort of feelings does this provoke in you? Does it seem familiar or foreign to your identity?

+ C.S. Lewis says, "The goal towards which He is beginning to guide you is absolute perfection; and no power in the whole universe, except you yourself can prevent Him from taking you to that goal." How do you hold yourself back from the ways that Christ is wanting to make you holy and whole, a reflection of himself?

+ Not only is it crucial that we know who we truly are in Christ, we need to know who Jesus is, too. What he asks of Peter in 9:20 he asks of you too: 'Who do you say I am?' Imagine you are sitting with Jesus. What would your response be to him today?

+ What is one area of your life that God wants to transform to reflect your true identity in Him? How will you surrender that this week?

WEEK FIVE / Luke 13:22-30 - N.T. Wright, *Lent for Everyone, Luke*

True prayer is always humble. By definition. True prayer means recognising that God is God and that we... aren't. It also means doing something inexplicable in terms of the present world of space, time and matter: it already says, 'I believe in someone who is there, who is my Lord, even though I can't see him.'

So learning to pray means learning to abandon pride. It's easy for those of us who have been brought up as Christians, churchgoers, in a supposedly 'Christian' country, to imagine that we are, as it were, Jesus' natural followers; that we can coast along and get there all right whatever happens. These stern warnings should send us back to our prayers, back to our knees, back to humility and trust. We cannot presume. We dare not.

Jesus had to make exactly that point to his contemporaries. Like John the Baptist before him, he had to warn them that they couldn't assume that being children of Abraham meant they had an inside track, 'a backdoor to heaven' as one of today's Jewish teachers has put it.

Jesus doesn't tell them, in this passage, what they must positively do. He merely warns them against presumption, and tells them that there will come a time when the people who thought they were 'automatically' part of God's people will find they're outside, while plenty who never imagined they'd have anything to do with the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be inside.

The shocking warning to the insiders is matched by the surprising grace towards the outsiders. That fits exactly with the constant theme throughout Luke, for instance in the Beatitudes and Woes: blessings on all the wrong people, woes on all the right ones! That puts pressure on those of us who might assume that we are the 'right' ones: to recognise, both in how we pray and what we pray, that everything we have, everything we are, is a gift from God, and that neither we nor anybody else deserve it.

Prayer like that will be humble. It will also be a sigh of relief. We don't have anything to prove, anything to earn.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

+ Prayer is definitively humble. What do you think this means? Does this impact your experience or expression of prayer?

+ It would be devastating to meet God and be told 'I don't know you.' How can we be assured of our knowing/being known by God? How can a disciple know their master?

+ We are 5 weeks into Lent. What has God been teaching you so far? Is anything new about Jesus, his disciples or his ministry standing out to you?

WEEK SIX / Luke 19:28-44 - Paul Flavel, Red Blackburn South

You can imagine the scene: people chanting, shouting and singing, centuries of despair giving way to audacious hope. Yet behind this celebration we find ourselves confronted by a deeply troubling question: how is it that a crowd could turn so dramatically from singing 'Hosanna' on Sunday to chanting 'crucify him' by Friday?

The key to answering this question lies in the understanding that this was not actually the first ever triumphal entry into Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus' entry, the palm branches and singing were already 'kind of a thing.'

Before Jesus, quite a few other budding Jewish kings and conquerors had triumphantly ridden into Jerusalem, normally after winning great battles, defeating their oppressors, releasing the captives and cleansing the temple. In every other example the aspiring messiah would ride in on a big white war horse as the people would chant "Hosanna, Hosanna in the highest, Blessed is he who come in the name of the Lord." People would wave palm branches and lay their cloaks in front of the procession. Sound familiar?

So on this occasion, the scene of Jesus' triumphal entry is playing out exactly as it had many times before, however, in this procession there is one very significant difference: there are no big white war horses. In fact there are no horses of any kind – Jesus is riding on a donkey.

We must not miss the significance of this delicate animal exchange. Here Jesus takes a traditional presidential inauguration ceremony and completely turns it on its head. This procession has now become an ingenious piece of subversive political theatre. By swapping the horse for a donkey, Jesus is declaring that He is different to all other kings. The lowly donkey announces that the Kingdom that Jesus is establishing is the upside-down Kingdom of God and that the territory he is restoring is fundamentally the territory of our hearts. This Jesus revolution is starkly different to all other revolutions.

This is a great bit of theatre – except for one small problem – the donkey king is not the kind of king the people want. They want a military king that fulfills their predetermined agenda. A king that grants their wishes. A king that represents their political ideology. A king to help them win. Essentially a white horse king – not a donkey king.

And that is where this ancient scene becomes a little bit uncomfortable today ... Because quite honestly I want a king that fulfills my predetermined agenda. I want a king that grants my wishes. I want a king that represents my political ideology. I want a king that helps me win. Hey I'd really love a big white horse kind of king.

But time and time again the King Jesus I meet is not actually the king I thought I really wanted.

And so here I am standing amongst the same old crowd. Still faced with my own dreams of health, wealth and happiness – yet the King I look to is still that same old donkey King....

So what words will I chant next? 'Hosanna', or 'crucify him'?

Or perhaps, more preferably, words that are far less selfish than either of those two.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

+ In what ways do you see Christians today fitting Jesus into their own version of what they think he should look like? Do you think we would be surprised by his appearance or approach if Jesus rode into town today? How can we keep our vision of King Jesus aligned with truth?

+ Authority is inherent to kingship, but it doesn't necessarily guarantee submission (just read the next chapter of Luke!). Does your submission to Jesus match your declaration of his kingship? What areas of your life can people look at and see that Christ is King?

+ Have you ever found yourself switching from 'Hosanna' to 'crucify him'? How does the crowd influence you in this regard? What can we learn from the disciples' behaviour in this passage?

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