

## The Gospel of Luke

*I've Got Good News* | Luke 7.18-35 | October 11, 2020

### QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

As a prophet and disturber of the peace, John's whole confrontational life has led to this moment. This is the last we'll see or hear from John the Baptist in Luke's gospel as he won't get out of that dungeon alive. This is where John's story ends and Jesus' story really takes over. Luke tells us that from prison John sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the one who will finally bring forgiveness and freedom to his people, labouring under the thumb of the Roman empire. "Are you the Messiah, the one we've been expecting?" asks John, apparently even himself a little unclear on exactly what to expect from his mysterious cousin.

Jesus' answer is typically Jesus. He doesn't respond with a simple yes or no, but fleshes out what he's up to on his own terms. The Christian faith emphasizes Jesus so relentlessly because the Bible is crystal clear that Jesus is the person who shows us what God's like. And what we find in the gospels, like we see here in Luke seven, is that Jesus brings comfort to some people and confrontation to others. That's what this little back and forth between John and Jesus depicts. Even though Jesus is eagerly welcomed by many, his message won't go down well with everyone. As others have said, this is because Jesus has a way of questioning our answers rather than answering our questions.

### COMFORT

First, Jesus and gospel are deeply comforting, which is of course still too weak a word. But comfort is what Jesus brings to people throughout the gospel of Luke: "the Good News is being preached to the poor." Jesus' words to John the Baptist flesh out Isaiah 40: "Comfort, comfort My people," says your God. "With gentle words, tender and kind, assure Jerusalem... that her battles are over." This is the good news to the poor from Jesus. The comfort Jesus brings is multi-layered. He comes preaching that that change is in the wind; it's a comfort that God is righting wrongs and is on the hunt for what been lost; it's a comfort for the outsiders and impoverished because God's doing something about exclusion, evil and injustice.

As we read in Luke chapter one, Jesus comes “to give light to those sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death”. The gospel of Jesus is a comfort because it means that humanity doesn’t have to ask for love because love has already come asking after us.

But for many of us Jesus’ good news for the poor is hard to accept because no one interacts with us the way Jesus does. It’s hard to fathom that we don’t have to do anything in order for God to pull out chair and dish us up a meal. In human interactions, even deeply loving ones, there is always an element of transaction. Yet Jesus shows us that God doesn’t need anything from us, so there’s nothing to trade. Christian faith then is about accepting that God has a lot more to offer me than I have to offer God. That’s part of what St. Paul means when he said that “God has shown us his great love for us because while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 8). Another way of saying that is that in every relationship God has he always says I love you first.

So if we feel we’ve not got much to show for our lives; if we know we’re a mess and desperate for healing and forgiveness, kindness and restoration; if we’re hungry and naked and shameless about our need for God - Jesus arrives with good news for the poor. And for those who assume God wants nothing to do with us, or even that God is more likely to give us a bruise than bear hug, Jesus preaches the opposite.

## **CONFRONT**

For some people Jesus’ good news to the poor is disruptive because they don’t see themselves as impoverished and are quite happy to pretend they’ve got more power and status than they really do. They might even be fighting to hold on to that illusion by any means necessary. And those people, Jesus’ warns, may very well be looking us in the mirror. A friend of mine likes to say that with God we are safe but not always comfortable. Genuine love in any relationship will always challenge and change us and this is what God’s love does too. We meet a number of people in the gospels to whom Jesus brings a reality check and challenges with change. I’ve heard someone else put it this way: God loves us so much to take us as we are, but too much to leave us as we are.

Some of the people in Luke seven don’t listen Jesus because they don’t see their own poverty or pride. In the gospels these people tend to come off as immovably cold, overly self-assured or self-righteous. They’re certain they’ve got things

worked out for themselves and everyone around them. They expect Jesus to answer their questions rather than letting Jesus question their answers. In the gospels these people are inevitably confronted by Jesus. That's the meaning of Jesus' mysterious little poem later in Luke seven that seems to say that some people didn't listen to John the Baptist and now they're not listening to him. In other words some people want God to tune into their song, rather than them tuning into God's song.

So Jesus and his gospel are a bit of a double edged sword. Jesus not only answers the question "is God in my corner?" (to which the answer is yes) but also asks us the question "are you in God's corner?" (which we must answer ourselves). Humans sometimes have an awful tendency of objectifying and controlling each other, and sometimes we try to do the same thing with God. But our attempts at objectification and control never turns out well for anyone. When do we know we're doing that? When do we know we're not in God's corner? Probably when certainty trumps kindness; when self-assurance overrides self-control; when criticism eclipses compassion; when selfishness dominates a servant heart and our ego tries to overshadow the eternal.

So the warning here is this: if we've got even a little bit of power and if we call ourselves followers of Jesus, we had better ask ourselves how we use that power or we could find ourselves on the wrong side of God. Christians would do well these days to spend more time asking "am I on God's side" than "is God on my side?" How do we do that? By sticking with Jesus, watching him closely, and embodying his character. As Jesus says toward the middle of Luke seven, "wisdom is shown to be right by the lives of those who follow it". (Luke 7.35)

Now I should say that if we're overly concerned about getting on the wrong side of Jesus, the truth is we probably aren't. I'm a deeply flawed parent but even I don't waste time scrutinizing every one of my one-year old's mistakes. I just want to hear her laugh and watch her grow. If we're willing to hold open our hearts in humility to God in order to grow, be changed, even challenged, we needn't lose any sleep. Too much damage has been done by people saying we had better always double check if we're in good standing with God. Please don't hear that message in Jesus' message. As I said earlier, with Jesus we are safe just not always comfortable. If we find ourselves confronted by Jesus we can rest assured it's for the good of the creation he deeply loves - you and me very much included.

## **CLOSING**

"God blesses those who do not turn away because of me." says Jesus. This is just the right place for us to pick up the gospel of Luke again. Luke's biography gives us a resolute, compassionate, controversial Jesus who breaks our molds and questions our longstanding answers. He's not always the God the world wants, but the one the world needs. Poet R.S. Thomas wrote that "Christ comes to us in his weakness, but with a sharp song". Today, Jesus is still turning up with new sheet music in hand and asks us to sing. He invites us to quit rooting around in the garbage for scraps and to join the feast at his cross-shaped table.

## ***Discussion Questions***

- Share a time you felt comforted by Jesus and his gospel.
- Share a time you felt confronted by Jesus and his gospel.
- How has Jesus questioned your answers rather than answered your questions?
- How do we, as a church and as Christians, share Jesus good news with the poor? What does that look like now during a pandemic?
- How will you commit this week to letting that message be shared through the power of the Holy Spirit?