

Two men and Truth Luke 1:1-4

Some months back I was listening to a sermon by a well-known pastor. I won't tell you his name because some of you will think he's great and some of you won't, so I'll just keep you guessing. And this pastor was addressing other pastors and his advice was 'Keep telling your people about Jesus, keep putting Jesus in front of them'. I think that's great advice and that's what we intend to do and this morning we're starting a new Sunday morning series on Luke's Gospel. And we're going to call this whole series Meet Jesus. Because that is what every one of us needs to do.

Doesn't matter whether you're an old hand in the church and you've been a Christian for donkeys' years, or whether this is the first time you've set foot here. What you don't need is more religion or rules or morality, what every one of us needs is to encounter Jesus, come face to face with Him.

And Luke's gospel is all about Jesus. It's got songs in it, and they're about him; it's got prophecies and they're about him; all the action - and there's lots of it - centres around him; the miracles are done by him, the teaching comes from him, the plots are against him; the crucifixion attempts to nail him and the resurrection vindicates him. It's all about Him. As history it is his story.

And it's just possible that coming face to face with Jesus in this book will be less of a pleasant chat over coffee and more of a confrontation. Because if we have in our mind a picture of Jesus as a Californian hippy, with blond hair wearing a dress and sandals, going round drinking tea and being nice to people like a slightly camp English bishop then we've got a shock coming, because that's not the Jesus of the Gospels.

And Luke presents us with a man, and I mean that- a man, not a sort of asexual hybrid, a man, whose birth is surrounded by extra-ordinary events and who comes into this world with a single minded purpose: in Jesus' own words -Luke 19:10 - 'the Son of Man [Jesus] came to seek and save the lost.' That's what he came to do and that's just what he does. And to the disgust of the religious elite he draws to himself and loves and welcomes the poor and the outcasts, the sick and the sinful, gentiles and women and Samaritans and tax-collectors. All those society looked down on, even despised, Jesus called to come and when they came, he welcomed them. So He may not be like you expect Him to be.

And Luke devotes much of the book to recording Jesus' teaching. And it's explosive. It's not for no reason that the established church of John Wycliff and later Martin Luther's day and totalitarian regimes since then haven't wanted people to read this stuff, because it's a threat to them. But it's no less challenging for us who think of ourselves as Christians. And whether it's Jesus' condemnation of religious formalism or legalism or whether it's what He has to say about money, if ever there was an age that needs to be challenged by Christ's call to grace and radical discipleship it's us. And if Jesus isn't blond He certainly also isn't comfortable.

But running through all the challenge and the confrontation is the unadulterated love and mercy and grace of God poured out to us through Jesus' life and coming

to its culmination in his death in our place: the purpose of God to save and to transform our lives for good and for ever, to bring us into his kingdom through the gospel, the good news of His Son. And that's Luke's message. So, as we look at the weeks ahead, I for one am excited.

Read: Luke 1:1-4

Luke: a man like us

Now when I pick up a book I want to know something about the author. This may seem geeky to you but before I read something if there isn't a sufficiently detailed bio of the author in the book I'll google him. I want to know this guy, I want to know something about him, where he's coming from, is he the kind of guy I should pay attention to. But nowhere in the gospel does Luke give us any details about himself, not even his name.

So how do we know this was written by Luke? And who was Luke anyway?

CJ Mahaney tells a story about a pastor who shortly after starting in a new church started receiving regular anonymous letters that were critical and negative and obviously from a member of his congregation. And these letters were signed 'the Thorn'. And in his first letter the anonymous writer said, 'I figure that if St Paul needed a thorn in His flesh, you do to'. Now don't any of you get any ideas! But people can hide behind anonymity: either they haven't got the guts to front up or they're not really prepared to commit to these views in public and be known for them. But that's not what Luke's doing here. This Gospel isn't anonymous like that.

Scholars say that verses 1-4 that we just read are typical of the introduction to secular books of the time that are dedicated to someone in particular. And wherever that happens the man receiving the book - in this case Theophilus - would have known the author. It's not like he got this book in the post from a shadowy man of mystery. There would have been some kind of covering letter, or a title page, to go with it. So Theophilus would have known precisely who was writing to him and the very earliest manuscripts have written at the top 'the gospel according to Luke', and right from the start the early church was unanimous in saying Luke wrote it.

And the other reason we can know Luke wrote this, is because there's a volume two: the book of Acts and you can find it in your Bibles after John's Gospel. And at a specific point in Acts the author stops referring to what Paul and his travelling companions got up to and starts referring to what 'we' got up to: i.e. the author was now one of Paul's team: he joined Paul on his travels. And by doing some detective work in Acts and Paul's letters it's possible to pin that person down to Luke.

So who was Luke? Do you know, it could hardly be better! In Colossians 4:14 Paul calls him Luke 'the beloved physician.' Which means he was a doctor. So he would be highly intelligent, very witty and no doubt good-looking. Luke's only

flaw was that he wasn't British. But like all foreigners I have no doubt he wanted to be.

But Luke was a gentile – like most of us he wasn't Jewish. He was one of the many gentiles who had come to hear about Jesus and became a Christian. And Luke himself wasn't an eyewitness to Jesus' life and ministry. He tells us in v2 who his sources were: to get his facts right he went back to those who had seen and known Jesus first hand, and to the men who became, as he calls them, ministers, servants of the word, of the message about Jesus. And he's talking about the apostles, the original 12, or with Judas' suicide, 11 disciples.

So Luke wasn't an eyewitness. He was a second or third generation gentile convert. Either he had heard the message of Jesus for the first time directly from one of the apostles, or he heard it from someone who had heard it. But the point is, he's a man just like us.

And you don't have to be a doctor to feel a kind of spiritual affinity for him. God takes hold of this man Luke, he's just a jobbing doctor, and He brings him to faith in Jesus, and then, in the Holy Spirit, Luke uses what God has given him: his education – he writes in very good greek, his training, his personality, the circumstances of his life– he ends up as Paul's travelling companion, maybe his personal physician, and he puts all of them to use making Jesus' name great.

Church, you don't have to be an apostle Paul – with his phenomenal mind and incredible theological insight. Luke's just a doctor, and maybe you're just a professional guy or a stay at home mum. But like Luke you and I can use what God has given us – your training, gifts, personality, skills, and you can use them for his glory in the situation where he has put us.

And I think Luke's opening comments here are wonderful, because this Gospel isn't about Luke. He doesn't even mention his own name. And it's not even about the apostles – they're simply eyewitnesses to what Jesus got up to, they weren't the event, they just got to watch the events. And they weren't the message, like they preached about themselves, they were servants, ministers of the message. Luke's gospel is all about Jesus and extending his name and fame in the world. And you and I can give ourselves to some other message or promoting ourselves or some one else. But not Luke. He takes all the stuff God has put into his life over the years, and in the circumstances where he finds himself, he uses it all to promote Jesus.

And you and I, we're next in line. You see the eyewitnesses and the apostles Luke relies on for his research they told Luke about Jesus. And this gospel is Luke telling us. It's like a relay race. They handed the baton to Luke and now he's handing it onto us. As Jude says in Jude v3 it's 'the faith once for all delivered to the saints'. And this life, your life is your leg of the race. The gospel of Jesus Christ has been entrusted to you. What are you going to do with it? Won't you join me and run with it and be like the two blind men who Jesus healed in Matthew 9:31 'and spread his fame through all the district.'

It was the same with Paul. He talks in 1 Thessalonians (2:4) and 2 Timothy (1:12) of the gospel that has been entrusted to him. But he doesn't keep it to himself. If he did, the likes of Luke and you and I would never have heard about Jesus. No, he tells others, and writes to Timothy, his beloved son in the faith, in 2 Tim 2:2 'what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses' – in other words what I have entrusted to you 'entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.' Keep passing on the gospel Timothy. Run with all the strength God gives you and keep handing on that baton.

And church I want to encourage you to do that. Do that in the home, with your kids. Do it with your friends. Ask God to give you opportunities to talk to them, to open up conversations so that they can know His grace and join the race. Do it by the way you use your money, where you give to. Do it by choosing to serve in church and the community.

And we also want to do this as a church. The other elders and I want to run with all our strength and keep passing on the baton. We want to equip you to run and you younger guys in particular, especially as we think about starting a second Sunday service, we're seriously praying and thinking how to do, how to pass on the baton. So would you pray for that? Pray that all of us would take the hint from Luke and be a receiving, running, passing church that keeps handing on the gospel of Jesus. And when the baton gets handed to you. Run with it.

Theophilus: a man like you?

Well, if that's something about Luke, who's Theophilus, the guy Luke's writing to? And the answer is we don't know. Luke calls him 'most excellent Theophilus', which is like saying 'your excellency': it's how they would address senior government officials. So it's possible that this man was someone of influence or money, who met Luke, got to know him got to hear about Jesus and asked him, commissioned him to write this account.

But the scholars say that what's interesting about this man is that Luke doesn't refer to him as a brother, and they'd expect him to if he was a Christian. And so Theophilus seems to be a man, another gentile, who has heard something already about Jesus, but wants to know more. He's heard good stuff from the likes of Luke, but no doubt he's also heard the other stuff against Christianity and Luke sits down to write this Gospel to help him and us come to know the truth.

And it's just possible you're like Theophilus. You know you're not yet a Christian. But something about Jesus or some of the Christians you know intrigues you, maybe interests you. But you also know what everyone else says – that no one in their right mind would believe this stuff, that science has disproved the bible, that Christianity's just a crutch. But still you're drawn just a bit and without kissing your brain good bye, you want to know more.

Well, Luke's your man. As he writes to Theophilus he writes to you as well. And I would encourage you: read the book. Read it for yourself. When I started at secondary school I was given a New Testament and this little book intrigued me, but my family were completely a-religious and the only Christians I knew I

thought were nutters, so every night because I didn't want to be discovered, I would read the gospels under my duvet cover with a torch, and my family never knew a thing. So people don't even need to know you're doing it! And if that's you, take the daring step to ask God to speak to you through the book. If there is no God you lose nothing and if there is a God and if what Luke writes here is true you might just gain everything.

There is such a thing as certainty:

In his excellent book *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, John Piper has a chapter entitled 'Brothers, don't confuse uncertainty with humility'. His point is that in this pluralistic, relativistic, so-called tolerant world of ideas it's no longer acceptable to be certain about truth especially about objective religious truth; the kind of certainty that says look, if Christianity is true then Islam and atheism can't be and so on, and that is considered arrogant and proud. Piper writes: 'If you say of anybody's view of God that it is wrong and harmful, you will be accused of arrogance.'

And Piper says that the danger is that Christians mistake being uncertain about truth with humility. But you can be humble AND certain. Absolutely certain, and at the same time profoundly aware that your knowledge of the truth is not because you are any better than anyone else. Conviction and certainty are not the same as arrogance. And uncertainty and lack of conviction are not the same as humility. As GK Chesterton wrote 100 years ago, and how true he has proved to be 'we are on the road to producing a race of man too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table'!

And Luke tells Theophilus here that having gone back to the original sources and interviewed the eyewitnesses and spoken to the apostles and investigated the events surrounding Jesus in detail, Theophilus can be certain of the things he has been taught. Theophilus, you can trust it. This is truth you can build your life on. What ever you may have to suffer for it, it's worth it. Whatever you lose to gain it is profit. I've checked this all out Luke says, and your excellency, you can have certainty about these things. And church, so can we.

Luke's not dealing here with fuzzy feelings, or religious mirages that when you try and get hold of them they evaporate and escape like mist between your fingers. He's describing real, tangible, factual events with a real flesh and blood man Jesus. In v1 he calls it 'the things that have been accomplished among us'. God has done something here, he says, through Jesus God has intervened and accomplished something in our time. And I'm going to set out for you what that is, he says, and Theophilus and all of us, you can be certain this is true. Luke knew that and Theophilus and you and I can know that.

But what if you don't? What if you struggle with doubts, and you're less than certain? Well, if you're already a Christian you need to take courage because we all doubt. And you might think you're the only one, but listen, all of us, at various times go through times when we doubt. And if you don't, either you don't think enough, or maybe satan doesn't think you're worth bothering with! But it's what you do at those times that matter. If you just leave it and don't address it, those

doubts have this habit of gnawing away at faith. They're like termites eating away at the foundations. And I would encourage you, when doubts come, wrestle with them. Do the dog work of going to the Bible and other books, of reading up on this or that area. Talk about it with a friend, or if you haven't got a friend come and talk to me. And get into a home group: I think our home group has proved so helpful as we've just talked over and openly discussed some of our doubts and the stuff we can't get our brains round: but you've got to cultivate honesty in that group. But above all, humble yourself. Get before God and tell Him, Lord, I'm struggling in this area but I know that you are way greater than me, so whether I understand this or not, and I want to if I can, I'm trusting you that you know what the truth is.

But what if you're not yet a Christian, and you doubt the existence of God, or the veracity of the bible, or the factualness of the resurrection? What should you do? Well, to quote Tim Keller, just think about doubting your doubts. Because it's possible that at the moment what you're doing is holding the truth at arms length and instead of trusting the truth and doubting your doubts, you're trusting your doubts and doubting the truth. And you may have a 1000 questions of this or that, but what you find is that when you meet Jesus, and encounter him as we will when we go through this book, those questions either become less important even if they still go unanswered, or they begin to fall into place. It's Jesus you need to meet.

And this truth Luke's going to present to us isn't just sterile facts about Jesus. The gospel, these things that God has accomplished among us, this Jesus event, is life changing. Luke knew that for himself, he had experienced that and so had the original disciples. It doesn't come out in our translations so well but in the Greek what Paul says is that these men were from the beginning eyewitnesses and became ministers, servants of the word. They weren't always like that. They were fishermen, and tax collectors, and freedom fighters, full of their own doubts. But having met Jesus the became something different, they were transformed by their encounter with Jesus and at the cost of all but one of their lives they spread that message across the Roman world. Which is what Luke's second volume is all about.

The gospel of Jesus is trustworthy, it is certain, it is life transforming truth. Theophilus could build his life on it, and so can you.