



“Are we There Yet?”

Studies for the Season of Advent

*Prepared by
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These studies are based on a selection of Gospel readings from the Revised Common Lectionary for the four Sundays in Advent. They take all three Year Cycles, A (Matthew), B (Mark), and C (Luke) into account, in part because they often deal with the same material. Where there do not, their readings are usually, at least indirectly, relevant to readings from other years. These studies therefore take this into account. In this way I hope that they can be used and useful in any one of the three year cycles. I have chosen to make the readings of Year C (Luke) the starting point.

1. Luke 21:25–36 – “The End is Nigh!”
2. Luke 3:1–6 – John, nicknamed the “Baptizer”
3. Luke 3:7–18 – John and Jesus
4. Luke 1:39–55 – Magnificat

It is an advantage that Years A and B often bring the same material as year C, for it helps us make comparisons between the three versions and to see how Matthew and Luke, who both use Mark for instance, rewrite and revise Mark in their own distinctive ways.

You can do all four studies or pick only those which interest you.

Each study asks you to read a passage from Luke, offers you a commentary which brings today’s thinking into dialogue with the text, and includes some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and when discussing a question to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation. The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Making these studies work for you and your group.

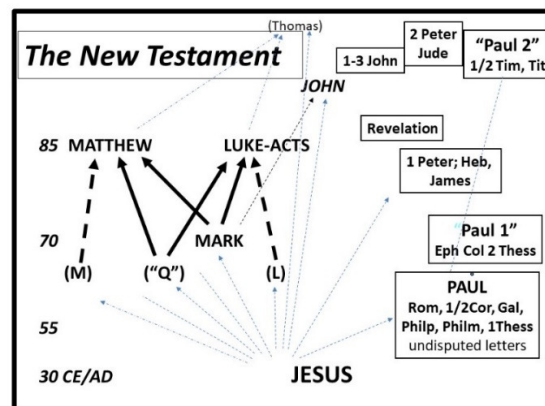
Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the gospel passage and the commentary and then look at the questions. Or you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, before going right through to the end and looking at the questions. Or you could start with a general question on the topic before doing one of the above. Or you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary before they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above.

... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

Before we start: ***We're not there yet!***

Four Sundays in Advent and then Christmas! At one level Advent Season prepares us for Christmas, the advent of Jesus. At another level, the Advent Season turns our focus to what is sometimes called the Second Advent, the second coming of Jesus. More than that, it draws our attention to the future and future hope. We begin in Study One with a focus on the future and conclude in Study Four with Mary and the Magnificat as our attention turns to Christmas. Looking forward in hope and looking forward to Christmas are two aspects of the one theme: what is good news for our world? How can we best think about it and engage in it?

Luke, like Matthew, takes Mark's gospel and supplements it. Mark was written around 40 years after Jesus, Matthew and Luke, probably some 10 to 15 years later. Mostly they stay with Mark's order and often they copy Mark word for word. They also supplement Mark. Hence, both are much longer than Mark. Sometimes they add material not known to the other. Sometimes it appears that they use the same material, especially where their versions are almost identical, as we shall see when they pass on sayings of John the Baptist. We call that common source "Q" (the first letter of the German word for source: Quelle).



Study Two and Three deal with John the “Baptist”, as Matthew and Luke choose to call him, or John the “Baptizer” as Mark prefers. In Study Three we shall also consider the reports which John’s Gospel (not the same John!) brings.

Advent is about hope. Hope makes living worthwhile. Hope looks to the future and has to be open ended. Hope often takes the form of dreams, flights of imagination and also the artistry which openness to the future generates. Behind hope is faith: the belief that things can change for the better. Behind that faith is love, not least the experience of being loved, which makes it possible to look forward in faith and hope. Listening to the hope articulated in ancient texts is not like listening to a lecture, but more like listening to an orchestral concert. Or, to change the metaphor, looking at what they say about hope is more like visiting an art gallery of surrealist painters, than visiting a photographic exhibition. Hope is necessarily always out of reach, so invites our imagination if we are to grasp its reality.

For further information on the Revised Common Lectionary see weekly commentaries:

<https://billloader.com/lectionaryindex.html>

These studies are prepared by Emeritus Professor William (Bill) Loader FAHA, a Uniting Church Minister and New Testament researcher and teacher. Photos are his own.

Luke 21:25–36 – “The End is Nigh!”

We begin with the reading from Luke and immediately we can see how Luke copied Mark, as has Matthew. We see this already in its first four verses in the table below.

<p>Matt 24:29–44 ‘Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and</p> <p>the powers in the heavens will be shaken.</p> <p>³⁰Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” with power and great glory. ³¹And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.</p>	<p>Mark 13:24–37 ‘But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and</p> <p>the powers in the heavens will be shaken.</p> <p>²⁶Then</p> <p>they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. ²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.</p>	<p>Luke 21:25–36 ‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for</p> <p>the powers of the heavens will be shaken.</p> <p>²⁷Then</p> <p>they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’</p>
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Before we turn to the content of what they were saying, notice how closely Matthew and Luke follow Mark. You can use colour coding or underlining to bring this out more. There are two important things to note in this regard. The first is that they were careful to copy and pass on what they found in Mark, and we can assume that Mark must have been equally careful in passing on what he found in his sources, whether they were written or oral. The second is that they both felt free to make changes and, again, we can assume that Mark would have felt equally free to make such changes. Sometimes such changes were to improve style. Sometimes they were to enhance and supplement content. This all means that if we want to know what Jesus might have said, 40 years before Mark, we need to take both observations into account. The result of such careful sifting is that we can usually be fairly confident about what went back to Jesus himself.

Famous last words! The gospels are first century biographies and, as with first century histories, there were trends and expectations. Authors needed to capture the significance of the usually famous person they were describing. For much of the gospel story there were collections of sayings and anecdotes which had been handed on, but there were gaps. Sometimes, therefore, authors had follow the practice of the best biographers of the day and imagine what kind of speeches their heroes would have made. We see this in the Book of Acts where Luke puts together speeches

attributed to great figures like Peter and Paul. Fortunately, he had some information passed on by word of mouth which ensured at least a starting point for his sketches.

It was usually expected that authors would conclude the account of a person's life with a speech which included what the author believed that the famous person would likely have wanted to say to future generations. These speeches were freely composed using what was known of the person's values and priorities. The gospel writers follow this trend. They put together Jesus' last words. This was not to show they were clever at literary art. It was to capture the message of Jesus for their own times.

Mark is doing this in Mark 13 where he portrays Jesus addressing the crisis of Mark's own time when the Roman general Titus had finally crushed the Jewish revolt begun in 66 CE, had captured and sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 70 CE. Mark's starting point was very likely to have been Jesus' own predictions that the temple would face destruction. Mark elaborates this for his contemporaries and has Jesus go on to use the illustration of new shoots on a fig tree heralding summer, to give a warning: "So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (13:29–30).



Titus Jerusalem Victory Arch, Rome

Earlier Mark cites Jesus as saying: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (9:1). People really did believe that the end was nigh. They could also be cautious. So in 13:32 Mark adds: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

Both Luke and Matthew adapt and supplement Mark's version of Jesus' last words. Matthew adds three extra parables: the parable of the ten girls (25:1–13); the talents (25:14–30); and the sheep and the goats (25:31–46). Luke also knew of the first two but had included them much earlier in Jesus' ministry. Luke adds some material but prefers to take a different tack. He has Jesus give final words of advice during his last meal on the night before his death. To compose this speech, he takes material which came earlier in Mark, about being a servant and greatness (10:40–45), and puts it together with other material to form an account of Jesus' parting words in 22:24–38.

The most striking example of portraying what an author believed would have been Jesus' last words, especially for the author's generation, is what we find in John's Gospel, written some 60 or more years after Jesus. As in Luke, the author places it in the context of the Jesus' meal and it runs from chapters 13 to 17 of John and includes Jesus' prayer. Behind all of this creativity we can sometimes trace sayings that go back to Jesus, including echoes of the Lord's Prayer in John 17. In all these speeches, authors were seeking to bring out the significance of Jesus for their time.

Where does this leave us? It means that when we are dealing with our reading, whether in its form in Luke or in Mark or Matthew, we are dealing with material which must be read in the world of its time, with regard both to its literary status and to its content.

What about the content? It is very clear that the first Christians shared the view of many of their fellow Jews, that history would soon come to an end. Terrible things were happening. It cannot go on like this. God needs to come and take control. For many, this meant that they hoped that God would raise up a king like David, a Son of David, who as God's Anointed (the meaning of "Messiah", "Christ") would overthrow the Romans and establish the kingdom of God. Some merged this hope with the enigmatic human figure depicted in the Book of Daniel. Daniel 7 depicted foreign nations as animals and Israel as a human figure, "one like a son of man". The vision portrays God taking power from the animals and giving it to this human figure, in other words, back to Israel. In time, people merged this image with their expectation of a King like David, a Messiah, and spoke of the coming Son of Man.

It was a dangerous idea. Roman authorities like Pilate were swift to quash it. Rumours that Jesus, or at least his followers, saw himself as some kind of Messiah provoked swift action. He was executed under the mocking charge, "King of the Jews". Pilate knew Jesus was not leading an armed band. Otherwise, he would have executed the disciples as well. But Jesus spoke of God's reign and that, in itself, sounded subversive of Rome's reign.

The Christian movement began by taking what was mockery and claiming it to be true. Jesus truly was the Messiah, the Christ, and so they came to be known as "Christians". They saw his resurrection, something expected in the end time, as a sign that history's climax was upon them and that God would soon appear bringing Jesus as their Messiah to reign in Jerusalem. In our reading Luke even adapts Mark to say as much: the Jerusalem inhabitants, to whom only in Luke Jesus' words were addressed, would soon be able to lift up their heads and see him coming to set up his reign there. Luke differs from Mark here because Mark, like Paul, saw Jesus, the Messiah and Son of Man, as coming with angels to gather the elect and take them presumably elsewhere, or perhaps also to Jerusalem.

The end was not nigh. 2000 years have passed. Their view of the world as coming to an end, like their view of the world as a flat saucer covered by a sky dome, belongs to a bygone era. They dreamed a dream of hope and populated it with favourite images of their times. Darkened sun and falling stars, images picked up from the prophets Isaiah and Joel, and earthquakes and wild storms, were familiar enough images of disaster. The eruption of Vesuvius which buried Pompeii in 79 CE was after Mark's time, but such experiences generated images of terror. By contrast, various images of hope arose: from a Jerusalem based kingdom, to a heavenly temple, to a city come down from heaven encrusted with gems, to a paradise garden, to a new heaven and earth altogether.

Details varied widely but inspiring them all was the belief that God cared and so fear need not rule. Jesus had brought healing and restoration in his ministry and embraced good news for the poor as both a blessed vision and as an agenda. Such love in the present generated hope for the future. Their images of immediate relief in their own time were left broken and unfulfilled, but not their hopes. It was never just pie in the sky, but always, or at best, having and being good news for the poor. The foundation for such faith and hope is not an image of a golden place or an image of a cosmic event, but a person. That person is the God we meet in Christ, a person not a place or time, and so always there. That is why faith survived its fallible constructions and imaginings. Love is faith's foundation and its source of hope.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why didn't Christianity simply die out after its predictions about the future failed to materialise?
3. If you haven't had any positive experiences in life, then it is hard to expect to have hope. Giving people positive experiences enables people to have hope. Every act of kindness sows a seed of hope. How do you play catch-up?

Luke 3:1–6 – John the “Baptizer”

Mark introduced his gospel with an account of John the “Baptizer”. Luke had already spent two chapters telling of baby John and baby Jesus and the hopes surrounding them – especially the latter, before he turns to Mark. Then in Luke 3, before he gets to Mark, he gives elaborate detail to date the beginning of their ministries. In 3:22 he explains that Jesus was 30 years of age when he began his ministry and all other detail concurs with Matthew’s independent dating which has Jesus being born in the last years of Herod the Great who died in 4 BCE. The calculations centuries later which put it at 0 BCE/CE were not far off.

By using the table below we can see how Luke shaped the story from Mark. Like Matthew, he reverses Mark’s order, choosing to describe John’s appearance first and only then citing Isaiah. There are two further changes. Both Luke and Matthew recognise that when Mark cited the words, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”, he was not strictly correct in attributing them to Isaiah because they come from Malachi 3:1 (echoing Exod 23:20), so they both leave these words out. Luke expands the quotation from Isaiah 40:3. He adds verse 4 and a shortened form of verse 5, which ends so appropriately by referring to salvation. Matthew also reworks Mark, but we will return to that in the next session.

Matt 3:1–6	Mark 1:1–6	Luke 3:1–6
<p>In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,</p> <p>“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’.”⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.</p>	<p>The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.</p> <p>2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,</p> <p>“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;</p> <p>³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’.”⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.</p> <p>⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.</p>	<p>In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler¹ of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.</p> <p>³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.</p> <p>⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God’.”</p>

Why the nickname, “Baptizer/Baptist”? John acquired the nickname, the “immerser”, the “baptizer” or “Baptist” because he departed from the usual practice of encouraging people to immerse themselves for purification, whether ritual or moral, and instead took their immersion into his own hands. Instead of them immersing themselves, he immersed them. Why? Because it represented more graphically that it was God who did the cleansing.

John, too, shared the view that history was coming to its climax. Like some others, he located himself in the outback wilderness. Why? Because that was where Israel was before they entered the promised land. Their hope was that the promise of God’s intervention was about to occur. We know of other groups who used that passage from Isaiah and saw themselves as voices crying out in the wilderness telling people to prepare themselves for God’s coming. Originally the prophet was referring to the hope that God would come and bring the people back to Judah from deportation in Babylonia. It was a great image – make the road back to home! Let God lead us!

John was telling people to get ready. His was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That meant: be prepared to change your life around. Turn to God and let God forgive your sins so that you can start anew. It was striking that he called on everyone to do so. That included the self-righteous devout, but it also included the down and out sinners. God’s grace and forgiveness was there for all. That would also be at the heart of Jesus’ message and the church’s proclamation. They would later see Jesus’ death as like a sacrifice to atone for sins, but really the message of forgiveness was always there – in the messages of Jesus and John and in the faith of Israel. People who think forgiveness is the main or the only message of the gospel are in danger of missing the much bigger scope of Jesus’ message. It was something he assumed, not his main message.

Like a kiss, baptism can be a sheer formality. It is not magic. Combined with inward openness to what it outwardly symbolises, like a kiss, it can be a deeply significant event and celebration. Primarily it celebrates not my action, but God’s action and my submission to it, my receiving and benefitting from God’s love. Of course, it began as a challenge to adults, but wisely the Church saw it as equally appropriate as a celebration of God’s grace for children, for infants, for us long before we can know or understand what it symbolises.



The challenge then is to catch up with what it symbolised and make it our own.

John’s innovation was so powerful that followers of Jesus kept it going. So it remains with us as a sacrament, a symbol of God’s goodness. It is now linked primarily with Jesus where we see that best portrayed, thus in his name and so under his authority. Like a wedding, it means so much, but like a wedding it is only a beginning, the birth of something new. It takes much more to make a marriage.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What was/is good news in John the Baptist’s message?
3. “Getting the kids done” – can baptism still have meaning today? If so, what?

Luke 3:7–18 – John and Jesus

Jesus and John were inextricably linked. In this session we begin with a brief overview of how Luke and Matthew supplemented Mark with other sources at their disposal, including “Q” the collection of saying which they shared. The sayings from “Q” are in almost identical wording.

<p>Matthew 3:7–12</p> <p>But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.</p> <p>¹¹ I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”</p>	<p>Luke 3: 7–9, 16–17</p> <p>John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”</p> <p>.....</p> <p>¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”</p>
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In between Luke 3:9 and 3:16 Luke has inserted additional material which portrays John telling people how they should live. People should share clothes and food with those who have none. Tax-collectors should take only what they are entitled to and soldiers should not extort money from people by threats of violence.

John was impressive. Adopting a sparse lifestyle and living in the outback wilderness, he was warning people that judgement was imminent. He called on them to change radically, submit themselves to God and be baptized with water to save themselves being one day baptized in the fire of God’s judgement. Then they should live God’s way showing generosity and fairness.

Jesus was among those who let himself be immersed in the depth of God’s goodness. He was, in that sense, John’s disciple. This was hardly something that people made up. On the contrary, it was a fact that proved almost embarrassing. Who is the senior here? Normally it would be John. Were they ever in competition? None of our documents suggests so. John’s gospel, which sometimes passes on valuable historical information incidentally, reports that for a period before John was arrested, both were active at the same time. It also gives the impression that in its own time there were in existence some groups which saw John as the main figure and not Jesus. That probably explains the

way it reports John's response when asked if he was the Messiah: "He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah'" (1:20). It also explains his additions earlier in 1:6-8 ("There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light"). Such movements continued to exist and still today in Australia, there are migrants from Iraq who follow what is called the Mandaean faith which appeals to John as its authority and practises his baptism.

The Gospel accounts record John as speaking of someone greater than himself who would come to execute judgement on God's behalf, wielding fire, baptizing people with fire. The sayings cited above from "Q" state this plainly. The story in the Gospels goes on to record that at Jesus' baptism God declares that Jesus is his Son and leaves no doubt that Jesus is the one whom John announced. Mark had John say that he would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Matthew and Luke add "and fire".



Jesus is therefore the senior, but there are problems. The story of Jesus is not about someone who went around burning people up and executing God's judgement. The "Q" source is aware of the discrepancy and so tells of John sending his disciples from his prison cell to ask Jesus what was going on, as much as to say: "You're not doing what I said you would do!" That is, in fact, part of the reading for Advent 3 in the Year of Matthew in the lectionary. It is Matt 11:2-7 with an almost identical parallel in Luke 7:18-23.

Indeed, Jesus was not doing what John predicted. So the story has Jesus respond by saying: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me" (Matt 11:4-6; similarly, Luke 7:22-23). Jesus had taken on a different job description which matched the hopes of the prophets for a time of healing and good news. Luke has Jesus announce this role using Isaiah 61:1 in his appearance at his home town synagogue (4:16-21) and illustrated it in the intervening chapters.

Jesus shared with John the view that God called on all to repent and receive forgiveness. Matthew even uses identical words, "The kingdom of heaven has come near", to summarise the preaching of John, Jesus, and the disciples (3:2; 4:17; 10:7). It is an adaptation of what he found as the summary of Jesus' message in Mark. It is striking that Matthew, thereby, has John proclaim the same message in this respect as Jesus. Only Matthew does this. Jesus and John differed strongly, however, in emphasis. Instead of staying with John in the outback wilderness, the place of preparation, Jesus set off for the populated regions of Galilee and Judea and claimed that the kingdom of God was already breaking in when he set people free from their demons and illnesses and embraced the marginalised and sinners with God's love and forgiveness.

He did not abandon John's message, but he supplemented it so that it took on new dimensions. His message was good news for the poor, not only as a future hope, but also as an agenda for here and now as people allowed the Spirit of God to inspire their living. His message was bigger than forgiveness. It was about belonging, something he loved to represent by the image of a feast where

there was a place for everyone, something for which he gave his life. It became the sacrament of Holy Communion where we feed on his vision.

Matthew had his own twist to the story. Yes, he reasoned, Jesus is the judge to come, but has come first to tell people what will be the basis of judgement by explaining the meaning of the commandments. He does that in the Sermon on the Mount and four other major speeches. In Matthew, judgement regains some of its prominence, but still the focus is life now, lived lovingly. His symbolic depiction of the last judgement as a separation of sheep and goats makes that clear (25:31–46). The ultimate criterion for measuring your oneness with God is not your words but your actions of kindness and generosity. As though on the receiving end wherever love is shown the judge declares: as you did it for them it was like you did it for me.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why was John troubled about Jesus and what does it tell us about their similarities and differences?
3. How important is forgiveness of sins and what is its place in the gospel?

Luke 1:39–55 – Magnificat

Are we there yet? Nearly. Just a few more days. The fourth Sunday in Advent in the Year of Luke contains the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) as an optional addition in the gospel reading. The Year of Matthew has Matthew's story of Jesus' birth (1:18–25) and the Year of Mark has Luke 1:26–38 and offers the Magnificat as an alternative for the Psalm reading. They all focus on how Jesus was conceived.

Just as it was standard practice for authors to construct what they believed would be a famous person's last words, as we saw in our first session – sometimes drawing on early memories, so it was with famous people's beginnings. Often there are signs and wonders, stars doing strange things and people coming from afar to hail the child. We know this best from Matthew, but it was also true of emperors and other famous figures.

One common element was to describe the birth as unexpected. Sarah was in her nineties, more than post-menopausal when she conceived and gave birth to Isaac and so arose what later would be called the people of Israel. Isaac was superior to his brother Ishmael born of Hagar, Abraham's slave, with whom he slept when desperate to have an heir. Many of the famous Old Testament women were "barren" as they put it, until God intervened. Hannah cried out and the story has it that God answered and so the famous Samuel was born (1 Samuel 1). Something similar happened with Elizabeth, who gave birth to John the Baptist (Luke 1:7–13).

Much closer to the story of Mary and Jesus is the conception of Melchizedek as told by the author of 2 Enoch, who wrote about the same time as the gospels. His mother, Sopanim, declared, "I do not understand how my menopause and the barrenness of my womb have been reversed" (71:7). An angel had to persuade her husband, Nir, not to divorce her for adultery, because her conception was a miracle, just like in the story of Mary and Joseph.

How could this be? Their usual understanding of human reproduction was that the man placed the seed (like the fertilised egg) in the woman's womb and she incubated and nourished it. This is why people traced ancestry through males. What really were they saying about Mary? Did an angel impregnate her so that Jesus was half human and half angelic or even half divine? Nothing in Matthew or Luke suggests that they saw Jesus as a hybrid. Rather, the assumption appears to be that God made a human fertilised egg and planted it supernaturally in Mary. It was a way of explaining and celebrating that Jesus was special, indeed the Messiah whom God sent.

Both Matthew and Luke have the story and must have drawn from an earlier source. They developed it in different ways, but clearly, both found their Greek version of Isaiah 7:14 to be a useful text which they could apply as a prediction of what had happened. Originally, in the late eighth century BCE, the prophet Isaiah had declared in God's name that the people of Judah, Israel's southern kingdom, need not fear being overrun by the Assyrians as the northern kingdom had been and had come to an end. In as short a time as it takes for a young woman to marry and have her first child, they would see deliverance and know that God was with them and could therefore call the child Emmanuel. The Hebrew original spoke simply of a young woman – the Greek, of a virgin which was not an unreasonable assumption. In the hands of Matthew and Luke the prophecy in its Greek translation fitted so well the story of Mary.

Only Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus' miraculous conception. No other New Testament writer shows signs of knowing it. Indeed, Mark depicts Mary and family as not realising who Jesus was, nor his special status (Mark 3:21–36). Some people read the story as literal history. Some see it as legendary, like other such stories of miraculous conception.

Whichever stance you choose, there are some dangers to be avoided. The main focus of the story is not Mary. It is Jesus. It has been helpful to have Mary as a model of faithfulness before God and a model of motherhood. It has been unhelpful, however, when people have seen her as the ideal woman, as though truly holy women remain virgins. Sadly, such devotion even resulted in attempts to explain that Jesus' brothers and sisters were really his cousins!



The song Mary sings, called by its Latin name, the *Magnificat* (all jokes about your favourite feline aside!) helps set things right. Like Zechariah's similar declaration, Latin: the *Benedictus* (1:68–79), the *Magnificat* begins by referring to Mary's devotion but quickly moves to the real agenda: hope for the poor, expressed in terms of what God has done in the past and so will do in the future. "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (1:51–53).

Both songs are songs of liberation. There will be justice and peace. The angels also sing of this to the shepherds. "Peace on earth", was the language of Rome's propaganda, as it hailed its achievements through its enthroned emperors marketed as sons of God or gods. It stands in stark contrast to Jesus, Son of God, and his message. Enthroned? No – put in a food trough and later crowned on a cross. Peace? Real peace with justice.

The devout who populate Luke's infancy narratives, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon, and Anna, yearn for change. So also did Joseph of Arimathea. Similarly, when the disciples of Jesus met the risen Jesus on the Emmaus Road, they expressed the same hopes and their disappointment that deliverance had not come (Luke 24:21). According to Acts, in their last encounter with him they broached the subject again: "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel" to which Jesus replied the timing was in God's hands (Acts 1:6–8).

Mary's song is in that sense timeless. It is still the cry for liberation and hope for the oppressed. It was what Luke meant when he depicted Jesus as proclaiming good news for the poor and saying: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God; blessed are you who are hungry now; for you will be filled" (6:20–21). Luke does not want us to read these aspirations as all already fulfilled in Jesus nor thereby to reduce the gospel message to salvation from sin, forgiveness. Forgiveness of sins was, of course, fundamental to Jesus' message as it was to John's, but the real message of hope was much bigger. It is, alas, too often lost when Christmas is reduced to celebrating the forgiveness of sins which opens our access to heaven. Mary takes us much further because Luke knows that the real significance of Jesus is a much more radical hope.

Infancy narratives of this kind are never just about babies. They are always primarily ways of celebrating who they became. It is no different with the Christmas stories.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Birth Narratives of famous people in the ancient world are not primarily about babies – why? What are the birth narratives about Jesus telling us?
3. Mary – a model for you?