

05. Luke 3:1-22



Luke now begins to give ‘an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word’ (Luke 1:1-2).

Among these eyewitnesses a special place is held by Peter, who early tradition claimed was the ‘inspirer’ of the earliest of the Gospels - that according to Mark.

‘Your sister church in Babylon [= Rome] sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark’ (1 Peter 5:13).

‘When Mark became Peter’s interpreter, he wrote down accurately, though not in order, all that he remembered of what the Lord had said and done’ (Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis early in the 2nd century, quoted by Eusebius *History of the Church* 3.39.151).

Gospel of Mark : Eusebius (c.300, HE II.15)

‘So greatly did the splendour of piety illumine the minds of Peter’s hearers that they were not satisfied with hearing once only, and were not content with the unwritten teaching of the divine Gospel, but with all sorts of entreaties they besought **Mark**, a follower of **Peter**, and the one whose Gospel is extant, that he would leave them a written monument of the doctrine which had been orally communicated to them. Nor did they cease until they had prevailed with the man, and had thus become the occasion of the written Gospel which bears the name of **Mark**.

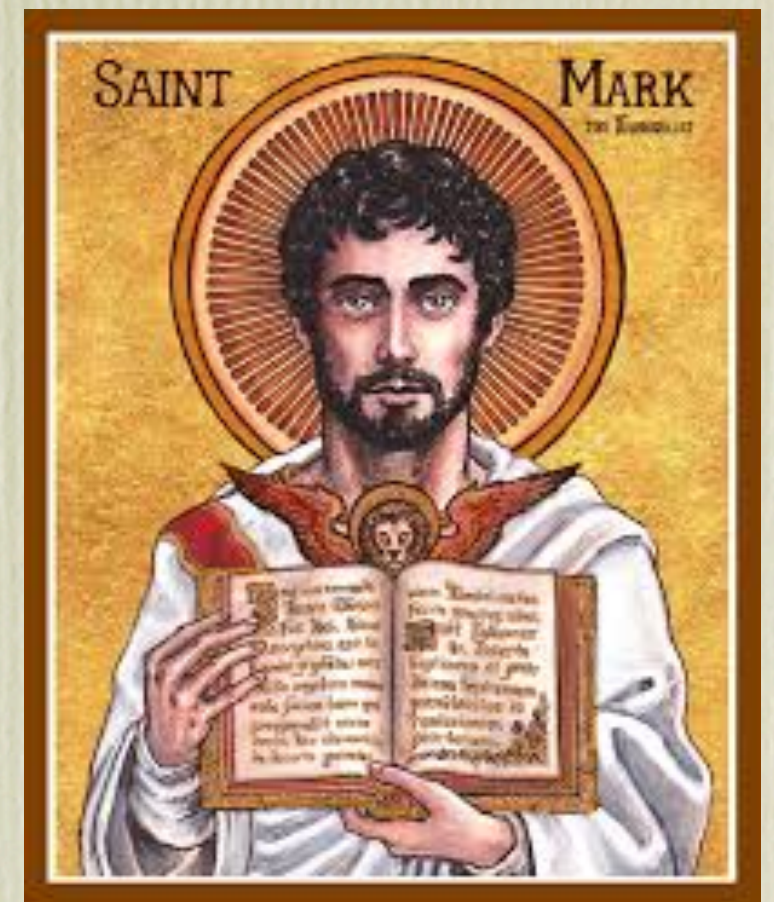
Luke follows Mark’s structure. His interpretive commentary is influenced by **Paul**.



Religious Experience

Faith seeking Understanding

Prayer
Cult
Life-style
Teaching



Peter

Mark's Gospel

Three portraits

Following Mark, but from his own perspective, Luke now presents three portraits, each of which creates a perspective that is central to his understanding of Jesus. Together they prepare the reader for a proper reading of the gospel.

First Portrait Luke 3:1-20 (Mark 1:2-8)

The first portrait is of **John the Baptist**, the prophet who prepares the way for Jesus.

Jesus emerges from within the religious experience of Judaism, and John represents Israel in bearing witness to him. In his second book (Acts 19:4), Luke has Paul stating: “John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus”(Acts 19:4).

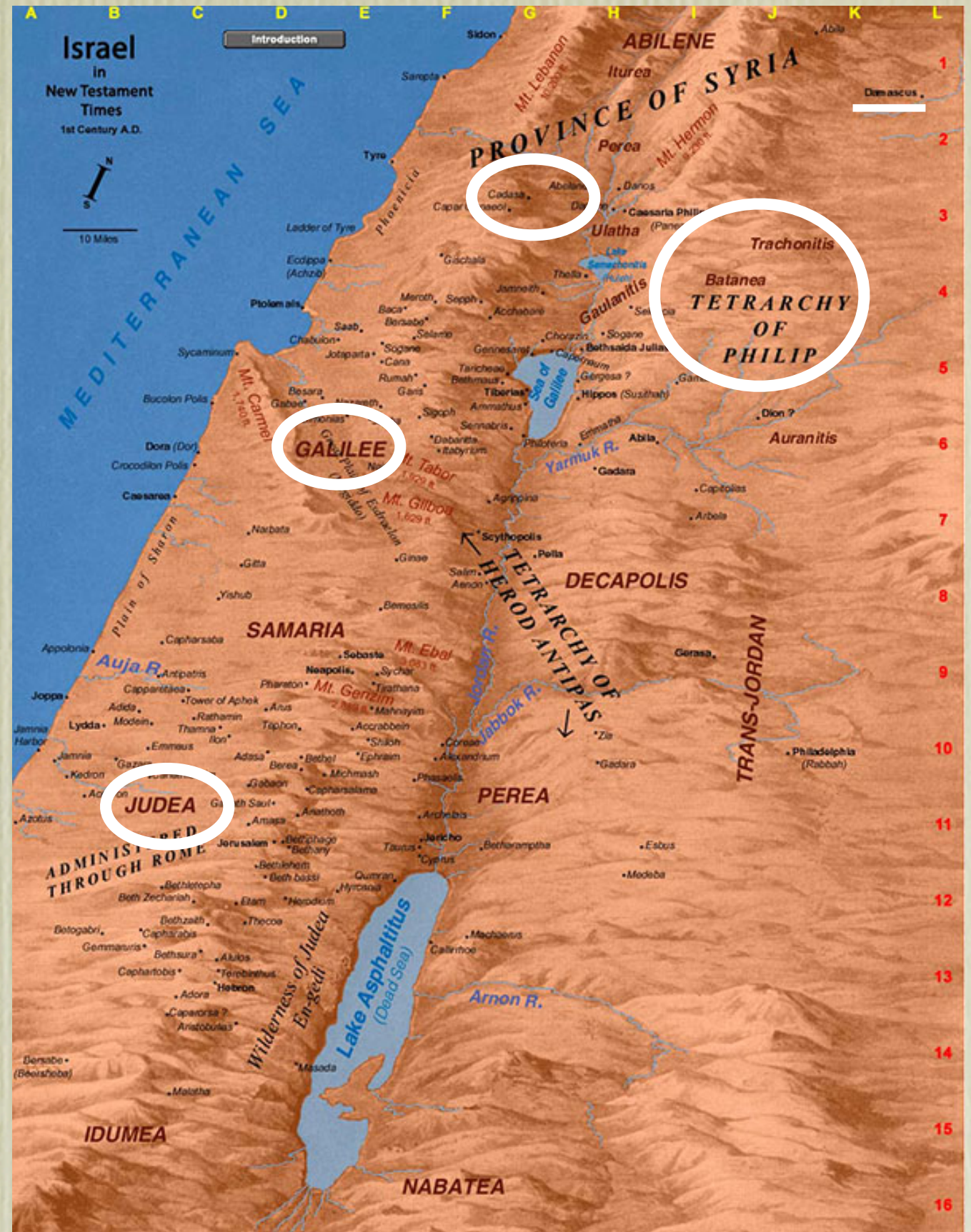
Luke presents John as an example to the Christian community, which is also called to bear witness to Christ in the Greco-Roman world.



Luke 3:1-2

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, (28-29AD) when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea (26-36AD) and Herod was ruler of Galilee (4BC-39AD), and his brother Philip ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis (4BC -34AD), and Lysanias ruler of Abilene (?), during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas (18-36AD) the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Luke the historian



‘John went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance (μετανοία) for the forgiveness (ἄφεσις) of sins (ἁμαρτία).’

The expression ‘**forgiveness of sins**’ has occurred already in Zechariah’s hymn (Luke 1:77).

The word ‘**baptism**’ literally means being overwhelmed by or immersed in water. We find it used of Naaman, who is cured of leprosy by being immersed seven times in the waters of the Jordan (2Kings 5:14). Judith immersed herself in purifying waters in preparation for the mission God had for her (Judith 12:7). Metaphorically, the word ‘baptism’ can be used for being overwhelmed in other ways as well. In the Greek version of Isaiah, we find the expression ‘anarchy baptises (overwhelms) me’ (Isaiah 21:4).

‘John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance (μετανοία) for the forgiveness (ἄφεσις) of sins (ἁμαρτία).’

John’s baptism is described as a ‘baptism of repentance’. Repentance involves a change of mind and heart, and a turning to God. The people were being summoned in many directions by those who promised them salvation. The Sadducees were calling them to fidelity to the cult and to tradition. The Pharisees saw salvation as coming from fidelity to God’s will as expressed in meticulous observance of the Law. Another group, the Essenes, called for a withdrawal from the darkness of the world, in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

The Baptist stood out against all these groups. He called for a new way of looking at life, a change of mind and heart, a new vision. We are reminded of God's promise as expressed by the prophet Ezekiel:

‘I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh’ (Ezekiel 36:25-26).

Listen also to the exhortation of Isaiah: ‘Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice’ (Isaiah 1:16-17).

Preaching a ‘baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ is more than just a summary of John’s mission (compare Acts 13:24). Luke will go on to portray Jesus continuing the mission of John ‘I have come to call sinners to repentance’ (Luke 5:32) – a mission to be carried on by Jesus’ disciples.

Jesus said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem’ (Luke 24:46-47).

“Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Peter: Acts 2:38).

‘they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance’ (Paul: Acts 26:20).

John the Baptist gathered people on the far bank of the Jordan, and led them through the waters of the Jordan (their immersion, or baptism). Following in the footsteps of Joshua, John led them into the promised land, to claim it as their own, given to them by God. That land had been usurped and occupied by the Roman Empire.

John's ritual was a land-rights procession, a political act of resistance to the oppression of the Empire.

Luke 3:4-6

(Mark 1:2-3)

‘As it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,
quoting Isaiah 40:3-5 (composed in exile in Babylon)

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

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;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Luke is presenting John as a model for Jesus' disciples, who also have the mission of preparing the Lord's way (see Luke 7:27, 9:52; 10:1).

Luke's special interest in the universal scope of God's providential action is indicated by his inclusion here of the expression: 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God'. This picks up the theme already expressed by Simeon: 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel' (Luke 2:32).

Luke 3:7-9 (Matthew 3:7)

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptised by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Paul speaks of ‘waiting for God’s Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come’ (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

To grasp the significance of the expression we need to recall that God is love and that we are created to experience without distraction the intimacy of divine communion. It follows that all that is impure in us has to be burned in the fire of this love till nothing remains but love. This is a painful process, and though it is initiated by God’s love and has the purification of love as its goal, it is experienced as ‘wrath’.

If we obstinately reject God's love we will self-destruct. That is eternal 'wrath':

Paul writes: 'Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realise that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed' (Romans 2:4-5).

Luke 3:8-9 (Matthew 3:8-10)

Bear **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** (abanim)

to raise up **children** (banim) to Abraham.

Even now the ax 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.”

‘No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit.

Each tree is known by its fruit’ (Luke 6:43-44).

Luke 3:10-14

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

Even tax collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

Soldiers [Herod’s Jewish soldiers] also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

The practical responses given by John to those who ask him for direction illustrate the key elements of his teaching as presented by Luke.

In the tradition of the Old Testament, ethics centres on **justice**:

‘Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?’(Isaiah 58:6-7).

John’s preaching draws on this tradition, and in this he prepares the way for the ‘good news’ preached by Jesus.

Luke 3:15-16

(Mark 1:7-8)

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.

John knew that his contemporaries were suffering under all kinds of oppression. He knew that their only hope was to place their trust in God and to prepare like their ancestors for the journey on which God would lead them. To make this journey of liberation they needed the ‘**more powerful one who is coming**’.

Luke 3:16

(Mark 1:8)

I baptise you with water.

He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit *and fire*.

Luke has already in the infancy narratives established the continuity between John and Jesus. In focusing here on the baptism of the Spirit, he wishes to indicate how Jesus goes beyond John, and is, indeed, the fulfilment of God's promises. He will contrast the two baptisms again in his second book.

‘John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’ (Acts 1:5).

‘I [Peter] remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 11:16).s

‘Paul said, “John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” (Acts 19:4).

Luke 3:16-18

(Mark 1:8)

“I baptise you with water. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit *and fire*.

His 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.” So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

For John it is the fire of judgment. Jesus will reveal that the fire is a fire of love. We are invited to entrust to love whatever in us resists grace and we are assured that love will pursue us till we open ourselves to its power, until God is ‘all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:28).

How often we find ourselves struggling to find direction in a 'wilderness'. Tracks that we once followed now seem to go nowhere, or are swept away, and we find ourselves in a trackless waste. Loves that once sustained us have proved fickle and have gone. Worst of all, our own sins return to haunt us, and we are faced with our powerlessness to find direction and freedom. This happens to us personally. It happens to those we love and to communities that are significant to us.

Luke is inviting us not to lose hope but to realise that the desert can also be the place where a new life can be found and a new creation can begin. The prophet Hosea understood this when he had God say: 'I will now allure her [his people Israel], and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her' (Hosea 2:14). We too can prepare to encounter the one who is stronger than we are, the power and gentleness of whose Spirit can speak tenderly to us, and call us to journey with him to a deeper meaning and a fuller freedom.

Jesus was intimately connected with the history and the hopes of his own people. Paul says: 'In the Son of God, Jesus Christ every one of God's promises is a Yes' (2Corinthians 1:20).

If Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel, he is also the fulfilment of the promises made to any and every people ('all flesh'). This was Paul's belief and Luke shares it.

What, then, about the promises which God has made to us, personally and through the history of the people from whom we come? What about the promise made us when God imagined us into life with those unique and unrepeatable qualities that are ours; the promises made whenever anyone has responded to God's inspiration by mediating God's love to us; the promises that are made to us as the gift of life opens up for us with every new day.

For all the insufferable pain he experienced, the author of the Book of Lamentations could still write:

‘The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’ The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him’ (Lamentations 3:22-25).

The one to whom we look for forgiveness and healing to find direction when we have lost our way is the one whom our souls recognise. We are made for God and Jesus attracts us because in his person he fills our senses with the perfume (the 'chrism') of God. We can share his life and his grace, and become, as Paul says, 'the aroma of Christ to God' (2 Corinthians 2:15); but only when we have allowed Jesus to baptise us with his Spirit.

Are we ready for the change of mind and heart that this will require? Are we ready for the surprise that the good news will bring to our lives? Do we dare to believe that the news is, indeed, 'good'? Can we dare the desert journey, or will we continue to hunger for the times when self-reliance (that is, reliance on ourselves without recognising our dependence on God) seemed to work so well? If we are not yet ready for such a journey, let us read on, for Jesus, presented to us by Luke, may well attract us so that we will find ourselves captivated by him, and unable to resist the grace of companionship which he offers us, however high the cost might appear.

Luke 3:19-20

(Mark 6:17-18)

But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by John because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

Luke concludes this section on John by mentioning John's imprisonment. He promised us 'an orderly account' (1:3) — orderly from the point of view of narrative theology, not chronology. He is about to retell the story of Jesus' baptism and though it is clear from the tradition that it was John who baptised Jesus, Luke wants to complete his account of John's ministry before beginning that of Jesus so that he can highlight the new beginning effected by Jesus. It is Jesus who baptises with the Holy Spirit and with fire (3:16; see also Acts 1:5, 11:16). It is through Jesus that God's reign is manifest (7:28) and the good news is proclaimed (16:16). Herod rejects John's word and is able to imprison him, but he cannot 'shut up' God's word.

Second Portrait Luke 3:21-22 Mark 1:9-11

The focus of attention in the second portrait is **Jesus**, and precisely the intimacy of his relationship with God (his **divinity**). As we watch Jesus throughout the gospel Luke wants us to see the action of God's Spirit at work in Jesus. As we listen to Jesus' words we are to realise that we are hearing words inspired by God.

Luke 3:21

Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying

Here, at the beginning of his entry into public life, we see Jesus mixing with sinners and choosing to identify with them. In seeking John's '**baptism of repentance**' (3:3), Jesus must have been looking for a new heart and a new mind: a new vision of how he and his contemporaries might break free from sin. He himself — so those who knew him tell us — was sinless, but he certainly felt the weight of sin all around him, and, as we shall see, he closely identified with those who were its victims.

Luke 3:21

Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying

Jesus must have often experienced the burden of helplessness, as he found himself confronted with the despondency, pain and distraction surrounding him and the emptiness of religious practices that left people in their sin and in their misery. The intimacy of his own experience of God must have led him to believe that there had to be a better way, and so, hearing of John, he joined the pilgrims.

Luke 3:21

Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying



Our attention is riveted on Jesus. Luke does not describe the baptism and does not mention John. His interest is in the communication between God and his Son. Luke tells us that Jesus was **praying**. The divine revelation made to Zechariah was also at a time of prayer (1:9-11). It was the same for Anna (2:37-38). Luke will return, again and again, to Jesus' prayer (5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:28-29; 10:21; 11:1-2; 22:41-42; 23:34; 23:46). This focus on prayer is found also in Acts (Acts 9:11-12; 10:2-6, 10:9-16; 13:2; 22:17-21).

Luke 3:21 **the heaven was opened** (Mark 1:9)

Isaiah 64:1-12

‘O that you would **tear open the heavens** and come down ... From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him ... We have all become like one who is unclean, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people. Your holy cities have become a wilderness. ... and all our pleasant places have become ruins. After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?’

Luke 3:22

(Mark 1:9-11)

and the Holy Spirit
descended upon him
in bodily form like a dove

Creation (Genesis 1)

Noah (Genesis 8:11)

Song of Solomon (2:10-14)

And a voice came from heaven,
'You are my Son, the Beloved;
in you my soul delights' (Isaiah 42:1)



Isaiah 42 (composed in exile in Babylon)

Here is my servant Israel, whom I uphold,
my chosen one, in whom my soul delights.

I have put my Spirit upon him.

He will establish justice for the nations.

He will not shout or raise his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.

He will establish justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law [his Torah].

Isaiah 42 continued

Thus says God, the Lord,

who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:

I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

‘A light of revelation to the Gentiles’ (Luke 2:32)

Those of us who have not been baptised may experience the desire to know what Jesus knew on the day of his baptism, and to join with that community of people who, while constantly struggling with sin, know that there is forgiveness and believe that God does indeed delight in us. The following call, found in the Isaiah scroll, can be read as a call to follow the attraction of our heart in drawing close to Jesus:

‘Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant’ (Isaiah 55:1-3).