

***Themes from the Gospel of Luke:
Reflections by our Bishops***

*A resource for parish study
by the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, the Rt. Rev. Gary Gloster,
and the Rt. Rev. Chip Marble
edited by the Rev. Leon Spencer*

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Themes from the Gospel of Luke: Reflections by our Bishops

This brief study focuses upon three central gospel themes: *Mission*, the *Kingdom of God*, and *discipleship*, as revealed in the Gospel of Luke. We asked our diocesan bishop, the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, and our two assisting bishops, the Rt. Rev. Gary Gloster (now retired) and the Rt. Rev. Chip Marble, each to reflect upon one of these themes. The result reveals a vision of mission and ministry that we believe will engage people in our congregations in deeper understanding of Luke’s gospel as we hear it read as the principal gospel for Lectionary Cycle C. This study may help us hear this gospel afresh.

This study consists of three sessions:

- *Mission in the Gospel of Luke: A reflection by Bishop Michael Curry*
- *The Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Luke: A reflection by Bishop “Chip” Marble*
- *Discipleship in the Gospel of Luke: A reflection by Bishop Gary Gloster*

Discussion questions are either in the text or follow each reflection.

With this brief thematic approach to Luke’s gospel, we are obviously not taking everyone from the first chapter to the 24th. We are certainly not providing an exhaustive study guide. But the reflections are important nevertheless, because mission, discipleship, and the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God are central to our faith.

While these reflections and questions may stand alone as a brief series on the Gospel of Luke, we commend to you the thoughtful and eminently readable *Luke for Everyone* by Tom Wright.¹ *Luke for Everyone* is not a study but a commentary on Luke. That means, among other things, that there are no study or discussion questions.

For those who wish to delve more deeply into this gospel, we have added to each reflection a section entitled, “For further study,” in which we refer to relevant portions of Bishop Wright’s book and pose some additional questions. Those “further study” sections are written by Dean Leon Spencer.

As with other resources from the School of Ministry, this study seeks to provide experiences that are participatory, encouraging both deeper understanding and transformative reflection among a broad adult audience. Through a positive respectful conversation, we hope this study will contribute to strengthening the sense of community; affirm the biblical foundations of our faith; assist in developing practices to live into the new humanity offered to us through Christ; and challenge participants to relate study and reflection to action in the name of Christ.

¹ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004). Contact our own Education Liturgy Resources at 919-693-5547 for copies. Tom (N.T.) Wright is the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England.

As you enter into conversation, we commend to you the following prayers, adapted from *Good News: A Congregational Resource for Reconciliation*, by the Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston.²

An Opening Prayer

O God, we stand on the border to your Kingdom. We pray that your Holy Spirit will be with us to guide us in our discussions. Grant us an openness to hear you in the words of those around us, and courage to proclaim you in our own words, though the love of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank you for the presence of your Holy Spirit in this conversation. We ask that the Spirit will go with us as we leave this place to be your ministers. Give us grace to be healers of what hurts us and heralds of what makes us whole. In the blessed name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

² For further information about Bishop Charleston's resource, see <http://www.eds.edu/sec.asp?cat=1&page=163>.

Session 1
Mission in the Gospel of Luke:
A reflection by Bishop Michael Curry

Readings: When he came to Nazareth, where he has been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.
The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them,
“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke 4:16-21

All four of the New Testament Gospels tell the story and recall the teachings of Jesus. Each Gospel writer, however, does so from a unique perspective, offering unique insights into the greatest life ever lived. Sometimes you can discover the unique insights of a particular Gospel writer by considering what stories he or she told that the others didn’t. Sometimes you can see it in the way one writer tells the

story as opposed to one of the others. Regardless, each Gospel, while sharing the same story, tells that story in unique ways, with particular messages born of the Spirit.

The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are part one and part two of the same book, written by the same author. Both books are written to a Roman of some nobility named Theophilus (see Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1). And Acts 1:1 specifically refers back to the Gospel as “the first book” of this two-part story.

One of the recurring themes in the Gospel of Luke and in the Acts of the Apostles is the conviction that the Gospel, the Good News of God’s reconciling love in Jesus Christ, can transform persons and societies *from* the nightmare that often is the world *into* the dream of God for all creation and the world.

Listen to some of the ways Luke uniquely lifts up this message. Mary the mother of Jesus sees in his birth God’s work of transforming the world into God’s dream of what it is meant to be. In her song, recorded only in Luke, Mary says that God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53).

Consider what the angel says to the shepherds announcing the birth of Jesus.

*In that region there were shepherds
living in the fields,
keeping watch over their flock by night.
Then an angel of the Lord stood before them,
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were terrified.
But the angel said to them,
“Do not be afraid; for see—
I am bringing you good news of great joy
for all the people:
to you is born this day in the city of David
a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.
This will be a sign for you:
you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth
and lying in a manger.”*

Luke 2:7-12

Shepherds in the biblical world were not the nice, gentle, respectable figures of biblical society. The late Professor Raymond Brown in his magisterial book *The Birth of the Messiah* says this of shepherds in the biblical world: “Far from being regarded as either gentle or noble, in Jesus’ time shepherds were often considered dishonest, outside the Law.” He goes on to say that “herdsmen were added by the early rabbis to the list of those ineligible to be judges

or witnesses since they frequently grazed their flocks on other people's lands."³

Shepherds represented those on the fringe, the margins of society. But the Good News of the Gospel transcends marginality and creates a new reality.

*“Do not be afraid,
Behold, I am bringing you [Gospel] good news
of great joy for all the people.”*

Luke 2:10

Luke in both the Gospel and Acts places special emphasis on the fact that the proclamation of the Gospel, the Good News, is the beginning of the transformation of individuals and societies. When Jesus begins his ministry, he identifies his work with the prophecy of Isaiah from the days of the exile. That prophecy sees the Spirit of God causing Good News to be declared. And that declaration of Good News (Gospel) is the beginning of a chain reaction of personal and social transformation.

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

Luke 4:18-19

Only Luke, of the four Gospels, tells the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus, in which Jesus depicts the kingdom of God as that reality when the injustice of this world is transformed by the justice of God (Luke 16:19-31). Only Luke envisions a world in which there is such a thing as a “good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25-37). Only Luke records the words of Jesus to the good thief dying with Jesus on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

In the Acts of the Apostles, the miracle of Pentecost happens as the Spirit is poured out, and incredibly the Gospel is both spoken and heard. At the center of the Pentecost experience is the molding and shaping of a community by the Gospel. As people heard, the Gospel barriers began to be broken down, bridges began to be built, and the new humanity in

Christ began to emerge. In Luke's vision of the early church the division between Jew and Gentile are overcome as all become one in Christ.

Luke's message is one in which the world is transformed by the Gospel. The down and out are lifted up and brought in. The despised and rejected are welcomed and accepted in God's kingdom. This is God's work and mission in the world. And the mission of the Church is to follow Jesus of Nazareth in doing God's work, living into God's mission in the world.

Luke's is an exciting and incredible Gospel. May the blessings of the One whose story the Gospels tell, be with you now and always.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. Bishop Curry notes that at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus identifies with Isaiah (the full passage, Luke 4:16-21, begins this session). What does this passage reveal about Jesus' mission?
2. Do you agree with Bishop Curry that the “declaration of Good News” when Jesus read from Isaiah in Nazareth began “a chain reaction of personal and social transformation”? What does your answer say to you about your own understanding of Jesus' mission, and ours?
3. Bishop Curry cites the parables of the rich man and Lazarus and the good Samaritan, and the story of the “good thief” on the cross. Why do you think he did that in an essay about mission?
4. Do you agree that the message that “the down and out are lifted up and brought in,” and that “the despised and rejected are welcomed and accepted in God's kingdom,” indicates “God's work and mission in the world”? Why or why not? If these *are* “God's mission,” what does that say to you about your calling? If these are not, what do you consider “God's work and mission in the world” to be?

For Further Study

Any biblical commentary that begins with the sentence, “Space Aliens Took My Baby,” is bound to get your attention, but there is much more than that to commend Tom Wright's *Luke for Everyone*. We suggested in the introduction that Bishop Wright's commentary might be a good way to extend your study of the Gospel of Luke. Should you wish to do so, you might begin by reading his brief

³ New York: Doubleday, Anchor Bible Reference Library, 1976, 1993, p. 420.

commentary on the prologue (Luke 1:1-4), which gives some background to the gospel itself.⁴

As you will see when you read the “for further study” sections after Bishop Marble’s and Bishop Gloster’s essays, pointing to specific passages in Luke about the themes of the Kingdom of God and of discipleship is somewhat easier to do than pointing to passages about mission. How you might proceed with using Bishop Wright’s *Luke for Everyone* for further study of mission in Luke’s gospel is less clear.

One approach that you might take, individually or in a group, is to ask yourself what teachings, parables, or acts of Jesus described in Luke speak to you about God’s mission. Then, since this commentary is arranged “in order,” simply look up Bishop Wright’s commentary on the passages that speak to you of mission.

Another is to look at what Bishop Wright has to say about the passages Bishop Curry chose to cite in his essay. Those passages include

- Luke 1:52-53 The Magnificat
- Luke 2:7-12 The infancy narrative
- Luke 4:16-21 Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth
- Luke 10:25-37 The parable of the Good Samaritan
- Luke 16:19-31 The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus
- Luke 23:43 The good thief at the Crucifixion

Consider the question Bishop Wright raises in his commentary on the Magnificat.⁵ He has established the celebratory nature of Mary’s song of praise. He then asks a question that we may do well to try and answer:

5. “Why did Mary launch into a song like this? What has the news of her son got to do with God’s strong power overthrowing the power structures of the world, demolishing the mighty and exalting the humble?” Is this mission?

Or consider what Tom Wright says about Jesus’ teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth.⁶ Jesus was, he suggests, advancing a “claim to be reaching out

with healing to all people.” That echoes the verse Bishop Curry chose to quote on p. 4, from the infancy narrative, Luke 2:10 – “good news of great joy for all people.” Bishop Curry says what happened in Nazareth starts a process of “transformation;” Bishop Wright talks about its “challenge [to] all interests and agendas with the news of God’s surprising grace.”

6. Why is Jesus’ “reaching out to all people” seen as a “challenge” to the world? Is this mission?

In his commentary on the parable of the Good Samaritan,⁷ Bishop Wright maintains that at the heart of the confrontation between Jesus and the lawyer, which led to the story, “is a clash between two quite different visions of what it means to be... God’s people.” Jesus was “offering the way of living and showing God’s grace.”

We’ll return to Tom Wright’s commentary on the Good Samaritan in our final session, when Bishop Gloster posits some questions that relate the story directly to our lives of faith. For now,

7. What does this parable reveal to you about God’s mission?

And then there’s the parable of the rich man and Lazarus⁸ and the story of the good thief on the cross.⁹ Bishop Wright concludes that his prayer on the cross “shows that the promise [he made on the cross] is not to be taken as meaning that the only hope is in a life after death, vital though that of course is. Forgiveness brings the life of **heaven** to earth, God’s future into the present.”

That last sentence takes us nicely to the next session, on the Kingdom of God. It also permits us to return once more to the theme of *mission*. One widely respected definition of mission is that it is “the good news of God’s love, incarnate in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.”¹⁰

8. Does that definition capture what you are hearing from Bishop Curry and Bishop Wright? How do *you* hear mission in the Gospel of Luke?

⁴ Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, pp. 1-4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 126-129.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 198-202.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 281-284.

¹⁰ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, c1991), p. 519.

Session 2
The Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Luke:
A reflection by Bishop “Chip” Marble

Readings: “And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink,
and do not keep worrying.
For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things,
and your father knows you need them.
Instead, strive for his kingdom and these things will be given to you as well.”

Luke 12:29-31

The in-breaking of the Kingdom of God is the good news proclaimed by all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is the central proclamation of Jesus and John the Baptist: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying ‘the time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1:14). The Jewish Christian author of Matthew refers to the Kingdom of

God as the Kingdom of Heaven, to avoid the use of “God” in his witness. All three gospels refer to the Kingdom of God (heaven) many times as they proclaim the good news of the advent of God’s kingdom on earth.

Luke and the Kingdom of God

“Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

Luke 12:32

In baptism we are given the gift of the Kingdom of God and the gift of eternal life, life in the fullness of the kingdom beyond death. Earlier in Luke’s gospel Jesus addresses the crowds who were resisting his leaving, “but he said to them, ‘I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose’” (Luke 4:43). Jesus always pointed beyond himself to his father and his father’s kingdom.

The establishment of God’s kingdom and sovereign reign is the proclamation of the good news, and the call for repentance is a call to embrace the Kingdom of God and the values of the kingdom over against the kingdoms of the world and the values of the world. Jesus calls us to serve the “King of Kings” and the “Lord of Lords” as he did himself, and to be kingdom bearers giving witness to and proclaiming the in-breaking of God’s kingdom in our midst.

In his book *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg writes:

The phrase the ‘Kingdom of God’ is perhaps the best shorthand summary of the message and passion of Jesus. As a New Testament scholar has written: ‘ask any hundred New Testament scholars around the world, Protestant, Catholic, or non-Christian, what the central message of Jesus of Nazareth was, and the vast majority, perhaps every single expert – would agree that this message centered in the Kingdom of God.’¹¹

The good news is the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. And, where Jesus and his disciples are, there the kingdom is present and active.

Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal.

Luke 9:1-2

Luke records Jesus’ teaching that the kingdom is like a mustard seed (Luke 13:19); it is like leaven (Luke 13:21); it is like seed that is sown falling in good soil (Luke 7:11-15); it is like the father killing the fatted calf for his prodigal son (Luke 15:11).

¹¹ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harpers, c2003), p. 131.

Verna Dozier, who recently entered the fullness of the kingdom, wrote in her book *The Dream of God*:

I think the biblical name for God's dream is the Kingdom of God. That was the central thrust of Jesus' ministry....¹²

Where Jesus and his disciples are, the values of the kingdom are embraced. As disciples of Jesus we bear forth his kingdom and the values of the kingdom just as Jesus and his disciples did. We are also called to proclaim and give witness to the in-breaking of God's kingdom, the good news!

Jesus teaches his disciples to pray:

*Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.*

Luke 11:2-4

And he teaches about the values of the kingdom:

*Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the Kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled...*

Luke 6:20-21

I believe that Jesus offers his personal mission statement when he went to the temple in Nazareth and read from Isaiah 61:1-2:

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Values of the kingdom? They are both personal and social, calling for repentance, forgiveness and healing, and calling for justice and truth in the personal and public arena. They are Kingdom of God values as over against the values of the world.

¹² Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1991), p. 125.

Jesus, responding to the Pharisee's questions about when the Kingdom of God would come, had this to say:

*The Kingdom of God is not coming
with things that can be observed;
nor will they say 'look, here it is' or 'there it is!'
For, in fact, the Kingdom of God is among you.*

Luke 17:20-21

May we proclaim and give witness to the in-breaking of God's kingdom in this time, and bear forth the kingdom and its values in our lives to God's praise and glory.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. How would you articulate the "Good News"? Do you agree that the in-breaking of God's kingdom *is* the "Good News"? What meaning does it have for you personally?
2. What do you think this passage means: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom"? How is that reassuring? In what way might you see this "gift" as challenging?
3. What difference does it make to live in God's Kingdom and values as over against the world's kingdom and values?
4. How do you understand the comment that where Jesus and his disciples are, there the Kingdom of God is present and active? *Present* in what way? *Active* in what way?
5. Is the gospel, the "Good News," both personal and social for you? In what way?

For Further Study

While, as Bishop Marble's reflection reveals, passages about the Kingdom of God are dispersed throughout Luke's gospel, some scholars consider that the key focus on the Kingdom begins with Luke 17:20 and concludes at 19:27.

As Tom Wright structures these passages, they begin with explicit teachings about "the Coming of the Kingdom" (17:20-37), followed by "the Parables of the Persistent Widow and the Tax Collector" (18:1-14), "The Rich Young Ruler" (18:15-20), "Jesus Heals a Blind Beggar" (18:31-43) and "The Calling of Zacchaeus" (19:1-10) before returning more explicitly to the theme of kingship with "The King, the Servants and the Money" (19:11-27).¹³

¹³ Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, pp. 207-227.

We will not take you through Bishop Wright's commentary; it is for you to read, should you find it helpful. We will, however, draw your attention especially to his commentary on the first and difficult "coming of the kingdom" passage (17:20-37). After taking us through Jesus' apocalyptic warnings, he returns to 17:21, which he translates as "God's kingdom is within your grasp." He writes:

The phrase... doesn't just tell you where the kingdom is; it tells you that you've got to do something about it. It is 'within your grasp'; it is confronting you with a decision, the decision to believe, trust and follow Jesus. It isn't the sort of thing that's just going to happen, so that you can sit back and watch. God's sovereign plan to put the world to rights is *waiting for you to sign on*. That is the force of what Jesus is saying.¹⁴

Bishop Wright then moves on to the several parables that follow, suggesting that they are "leading us toward Jerusalem" as Jesus speaks of "the extraordinary challenge of entering God's kingdom." He writes:

Jesus was putting [forth a message of] God's kingdom, God's sovereign saving power operating in a new way for the benefit of the whole world. This meant that already, in the **present**, the period of time they spoke of as 'the age to come' was breaking in. It would come fully in the future....¹⁵

Consider again this term, "in-breaking," that both Bishop Marble and Bishop Wright use.

6. What does "in-breaking" of the Kingdom of God actually mean to you?

And consider, finally, Bishop Wright's writing about the verse, "God's kingdom is within your grasp." Bishop Marble talks along similar lines when he suggests that we are being "called to proclaim and give witness to the in-breaking of God's kingdom, the good news!"

7. Do you agree that God's sovereign plan "to put the world to rights is waiting for you to sign on"? Have you?

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 210.

¹⁵ *Ibid*., pp. 215-16.

Session 3
Discipleship in the Gospel of Luke:
A reflection by Bishop Gary Gloster

Readings: Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them,
“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children,
brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.
Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost,
to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish,
all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’

Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and
consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?
If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.

So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

Luke 14:25-33

I’d like to begin this essay with a story: “The Silversmith.” It goes like this: *There was a group of women in a Bible study who began a study of the book of the prophet Malachi. As they were studying the third chapter they came across the image of God being likened unto a silver refiner working his trade. “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.” The verse raised questions in the minds of the women and they wondered about the nature of God and what it meant. One of the members volunteered to find out about the procedure. She committed to finding out and reporting to the group.*

The woman was silent for a moment pondering these words and then she asked the smith, “How do you know when the silver is fully refined and ready?” He smiled and answered, “Oh, that’s easy, when I see my image in it.”

The woman called a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him work. She made no mention of the nature of her inquiry except that she was interested in the process.

As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. As he began this process he explained that the metal needed to be held in the middle of the fire where the flame was the hottest and would burn away the impurities.

The woman thought of God holding us to such a hot and possibly uncomfortable place. Reflecting on the verse “He sits as a refiner...,” she asked if it was necessary for him to be there with the silver for the entire time it was being refined. He answered that it was not only necessary that he sit there the entire time but that he keep his eyes keenly focused on the silver all the while it was in the fire. He further explained that if the silver was left in the fire for one brief moment too long it would be destroyed.

Luke and Discipleship

Being a disciple is being willing to place oneself in the hands of God, to know that the journey is not easy (Luke 10:3; 14:25-33) and to be aware that one’s own ambitions are not central (Luke 9:46-62). Yet being a disciple is also to be in a relationship that trusts that God does not abandon nor forsake the disciple. As the story tells us, God sits with us in hand, watching us intently and lovingly fashioning us. Both God and the disciple are joined to make God’s image visible and known in a very broken world. As disciples, part of our role is one of trust and surrender.

Paul Tillich cautioned against explaining the “vertical dimension” by beginning with God. “For people in our objectified world take ‘God’ as an object whose existence or non-existence is debated

like that of another galaxy. This denies the divinity of the divine.” A disciple is one who lives for God, who trusts that God is in all of life and that God will do the revealing. We begin with who we are and in the realm that we live.

The dictionary defines a disciple as one who is “a believer in the thought and teaching of a leader, a follower...” In our case as Christians it is Jesus the Christ whom we love, believe in, and follow.

Discipleship is not just belief or cognitive acceptance, but a way of living a life that bears the quality and the stamp of Jesus. Indeed it is the way in which God and Jesus becomes known, i.e. in and through people. Our cognitive responses coupled by our actions and life are ways in which we teach and act as disciples of Jesus.

Stories and Discipleship

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’

Luke 10:33-35

Stories are a vital part of discipleship. The stories Luke uses in his gospel are sure signs of how Jesus lived and how he wants us to live our lives as disciples. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is one of Luke’s most popular and well-known stories. In it Luke gives us a profound model for keeping Christ alive as well as the essence of his ministry and thus a key to our discipleship.

All of us can recall moments in our own lives in which an unlikely person has knelt by our side, poured on healing oils and comforted us as we lay in a “ditch” scarred and mangled by some marauder. Maybe we have been caught up short in the awareness of our disdain for the person who has gone out of their way and even risked danger to do the neighborly thing, the Christ thing. Possibly we have heard the voice of Jesus challenging us to broaden our thinking about whom our neighbors are, how we should interact with them, and that exclusion of anyone is not the way of Christ.

Consider these questions for reflection and conversation:

1. What are our Good Samaritan stories?
2. How have we known or exhibited discipleship after the fashion of the Good Samaritan?
3. Who have been the surprise witnesses to us of the way Christ would want us to live?

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Luke 15:20

Another well-known and popular story about Jesus which is a definite clue to our discipleship is the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-24). My preferred title is “The Lost Sons.” Our waywardness and our belligerences may bear a strong resemblance to that of the two sons. Our need of warmth and the parent’s love may have sent us running for home hoping for a place in life that is a freedom above and beyond the pigsty we might have fashioned for ourselves and which has sucked life from us. Our hearts may have leaped for joy when we, staggering home, have seen the Father running toward us with arms outstretched to welcome us with healing love. This fuels the desire to be a disciple.

4. Consider this story of “The Lost Sons.” How will we “disciple” after the model of this story?

As we reflect upon discipleship in light of these and other stories Luke uses in his gospel,

5. How does our story flow from these stories?
6. How does our story connect with these stories?
7. What stories do we tell?

Discipleship and the “Outsider”

Luke may well have been an “outsider,” a respected “outsider,” but nevertheless a man who could have been considered not in “the group.” He was a non-Jew Christian among the almost total community of Christian Jews. From this vantage point he may very well have understood the message of Jesus to a greater depth than his Jewish colleagues who thought of themselves as the “in crowd.”

Luke goes to great lengths to include, give first row seats to and even champion the cause of those whom society and the religious establishment would want to ignore, write off and exclude. Laborers (Luke

2:8-20), women (7:36-50), children (9:46-48), foreigners, the poor (16:19-31), the sick (5:17-26), and sinners are highlighted by Luke as recipients of God's grace through Jesus.

There were and are today folk who stand on tiptoe looking for a break in the storm, a place to find acceptance and some sign that the God who gave them life still hovers 'round offering grace and love. Luke's portrait of Jesus has Jesus delivering the needed "Word" to the excluded. As a disciple one is inescapably cast in the role of defending and advocating for the outcasts and the shunned.

8. How does our piety or religious belief lead us to confront and exclude?
9. How have we welcomed the outcasts?
10. Have we risked crucifixion because of our advocacy for the outcasts? Being a disciple of Jesus the Christ may very well lead us to this kind of sacrifice.
11. How have we been the "Word"?

For Further Study

Bishop Gloster's reflection refers to various passages throughout Luke that reveal insights about discipleship, especially the stories of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the Prodigal Son. (15:11-32). Read what Bishop Wright has to say about these two stories.¹⁶

Notably, Bishop Wright concludes his comments about the Good Samaritan by writing,

What is at stake, then and now, is the question of whether we will use the God-given revelation of love and grace as a way of boosting our own sense of isolated security and purity, or whether we will see it as a call and challenge to extend that love and grace to the whole world.¹⁷

12. In what way does this quote relate to what Bishop Gloster has to say about "The Outsiders"?
13. Do you find in this comment a "discipling" message of inclusion? In what way, in what way not?

With the Prodigal Son, Bishop Wright notes that the story is unfinished: We don't know how the younger brother will now behave, or whether the two brothers will be reconciled. He suggests that this is

because we are supposed to think it through, to ask ourselves where we fit within the story, and to learn more about ourselves and our churches as a result. . . . How can we move toward becoming people through whom 'resurrection' happens to others? How can we celebrate the party of God's love in such a way as to welcome not only the younger brothers who have come back from the dead, but also the older brothers who thought there was nothing wrong with them?¹⁸

When he asks, "Which role in the story do you and your church find comes most naturally to you?" he is asking much the same question as Bishop Gloster does in questions 5 and 6. Consider again your understanding of *discipleship* in the light of these questions.

Some scholars point especially to chapters 12-14 for teachings about the risk of discipleship. Bishop Wright divides these chapters into commentary about "warnings," various parables (including the one about the "rich fool," the one about the fig tree, and the one on the "great banquet"), and other subjects before returning explicitly to the theme of discipleship with "The Cost of Discipleship" (Luke 14:25-35),¹⁹ the text of which appears at the beginning of this session.

It should be clear, from our bishops' essays in three brief sessions that the themes of *mission*, the *Kingdom of God*, and *discipleship* are intimately related. Consider what Bishop Wright says in his section on "Reading the Signs of the Times" (Luke 12:49-59).

The church has from early on read this chapter [ch. 12] as a warning that each generation must read the signs of the times, the great movements of people, governments, nations and policies and react accordingly. If the kingdom of God is to come on earth as it is in **heaven**, part of the prophetic role of the church is to understand the events of the earth and to seek to address them with the message of heaven.²⁰

¹⁶ Pp. 126-29 for the Good Samaritan, and pp. 185-92 for the Prodigal Son.

¹⁷ Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, p. 129.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-182.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

While “reading the signs of the times” is a favorite phrase for those engaged in the prophetic witness of the church, the act of doing such “reading” is a matter of *mission*, the *Kingdom of God*, and *discipleship*, for *all* of us. Here, in this session on discipleship, these verses (Luke 12:49-59) call us again to affirm – as Bishop Gloster suggests in his essay – that “discipleship is a way of living a life that bears the quality and the stamp of Jesus.” To live a life in that way, we need “to understand the events of the earth and to seek to address them with the message of heaven.”

14. How do you “read the signs of the times”?
15. How, as Bishop Gloster asks, will you “disciple” in light of those signs?

Finally, in his commentary on the “Cost of Discipleship” – the Lucan passage with which we began this session – Bishop Wright observes this:

Since Christianity has often, quite rightly, been associated with what are called ‘family

values’, it comes as a shock to be told to ‘hate’ your parents, wife and children, and siblings; but when the instruction goes one step further, that one must hate one’s own self, and be prepared for shameful death (‘take up your cross’ wasn’t simply a figure of speech in Jesus’ world!), then we begin to see what’s going on. Jesus is not denying the importance of close family, and the propriety of living in supportive harmony with them. But when there is an urgent task to be done, as there is now, then everything else, including one’s own **life**, must be put at risk for the sake of the **kingdom**.²¹

16. What “urgent task” do you see for you as a disciple of Jesus?
17. Returning to a similar question about “risking crucifixion” (question 10), are you prepared to undertake that “urgent task?”

²¹ *Ibid*, pp. 180-81.