

True Disciples Grounded in God

KATHLEEN RUSHTON interprets Jesus's teaching on the beatitudes as told in Luke 6:17-49.

The Gospel of Luke is addressed to those living in the Gentile and Greco-Roman world. The story of Jesus is shaped to show them how they are to live and proclaim the Gospel in their cultures. For these people, "the twelve", are like windows into what it means to be authentic disciples. Like them, we need to interpret this discipleship in our own time and place.

Jesus — Solitude of Earth

For some time, Jesus has been carrying out the programme he announced in the synagogue in Nazareth when he read from the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed "the year of God's favour" (Lk 4:16-19). As his ministry unfolds, Jesus desires and experiences the solitude of Earth and nature. His baptism in the waters of the Jordan and time in the wilderness prepared him for the temptations (Lk 4:1). Before calling his first disciples, he departed for the wilderness (Lk 4:42). When he returned to the waterfront, the crowds "pressing in on" him were so great that he taught from Simon's boat. Later Jesus called Simon and companions on the Lake of Galilee (Lk 5:1-11) and, nearby, Levi the tax collector (Lk 5:27-28).

Before Jesus formally selected the twelve, he "went out to the mountain to pray and he spent the night in prayer to God" (Lk 6:12). The mountain, rich in biblical

symbolism, is where Jesus communicated with God.

Jesus's pattern of praying — intimacy with God in solitude on a mountain — is

repeated in the Gospel; Jesus is transfigured in prayer (Lk 9:28) and just before his passion and death he prays with his disciples on the Mount of Olives (Lk 22:39-46). More than in the other Gospels, Jesus is presented as praying in Luke.

Jesus Calls 12 Apostles

Just as Israel was descended from the 12 sons of Jacob, Luke images the community of the reign of God as resting on 12 chosen individuals (Lk 6:12-16).

They are called apostles — literally, the ones who are sent on mission. Notice the categories of people Luke says are gathered around

Jesus: "He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon" (Lk 6:17). The closest to Jesus are his newly chosen twelve apostles. Next is the wider group of disciples from which they were chosen. And then is the great multitude who have gathered from near and far.



Kathleen Rushton RSM lives in Ōtautahi Christchurch where, in the sight of the Southern Alps and the hills, she continues to delight in learning and writing about Scripture.



— 17 February —

RL 6th Sunday Ordinary Time – Luke 6:17; 20-26 and

RCL 6th Sunday After Epiphany – Luke 6:17-26

— 24 February —

RL 7th Sunday Ordinary Time and RCL 7th Sunday

After Epiphany – Luke 6:27-38

— 3 March —

RL 8th Sunday Ordinary Time – Luke 6:39-45

With Those Gathered

After a night of prayer and selecting the twelve, Jesus came down with them and stood with those gathered – not over or above them. The condition of the multitude is described vividly. They came to hear Jesus, those sick to be healed of their diseases and those troubled with unclean spirits to be cured. They “were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them” (Lk 6:18-19).

The crowd took the initiative. They tried to touch Jesus to be healed not from afar but through human contact. Jesus allowed himself to be touched. He communicated a desire to heal and a love that brings about wholeness. In front of this crowd of afflicted and burdened people, Jesus instructed the twelve, those who will serve as the windows through which Luke’s communities will witness authentic discipleship. Jesus’s *deeds* of healing (Lk 6:17-18) are followed by his *words* of teaching, preparing the twelve for mission (Lk 6:20-49).

"Congratulations" "Unfortunate"

If we set aside our own familiarity with the Beatitudes we will better appreciate the sharpness of Jesus’s sermon. Jesus “looked up at his disciples”, addressing them, calling them “blessed” (Lk 6:20-23) and inviting them to ongoing conversion (Lk 6:24-26). He addressed the disciples directly in the second person laying out the principles for inclusion in the reign of God: –“Yours is”, “You rich”.

Brendan Byrne suggests that “blessed” in this text is better conveyed as “congratulations”. The blessed formula declares a person to be in a “fortunate or advantageous position in view of a coming action of God”. On the other hand “woe” means “unfortunate”. But ideas clash provocatively for both the poor and the rich in the text. It shocks us to congratulate the poor on being poor, the hungry on being hungry, those who weep and those who are reviled for their situation. It seems crazy to assert that the wealthy, the well-fed, those who laugh and those who benefit from good reputation are unfortunate.

So who are those declared “blessed” in particular circumstances of poverty, hunger, pain, sadness and persecution? Jesus began by addressing explicitly “you” (the disciples) who are poor and rich, now (found four times in Lk 6:20-26). Remember “the twelve” are windows of what disciples are to be in Luke’s community, that is, the poor and the rich among them. So far, good news for the poor spirals throughout Luke (Lk 1:52-55; 4:18). God is on the side of the poor and pledged to act on behalf of the poor and marginalised.

The poor are certainly the economically poor. Traditionally, for those waiting for God’s salvation in the fullest sense, economic and social justice are included. Salvation also includes those who have a deep spiritual longing. Their vulnerability, openness and emptiness provide scope for God’s way and action. They are not passive victims.

The words of Jesus and the context need to be held together. Jesus is speaking to the disciples in the countryside, in front of the multitude – many of whom

are vulnerable and afflicted. Their vulnerability gives room for God to act.

To Go Beyond

“But I say to you that listen”, continues Jesus, taking vulnerability to new limits in a series of imperatives: “Love your enemies ... bless ... do good ... Give to everyone ... Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Do all of this in the face of “hate”, “curse” and “abuse” (Lk 6:27-38). True disciples are to go beyond, to do more than the golden rule, to be grounded in the covenant attitudes and actions of God. They are to be merciful as God is merciful.

Vulnerability means disciples are to engage in self-scrutiny. Jesus illustrates this humorously with a speck and the log (Lk 6:37-42). The “tree and its fruits” parable encourages commitment to right action (Lk 6:43-45). The “two foundations” parable invites reflection on the sermon. Its teachings advise disciples to form strong foundations to withstand the coming flood of opposition (Lk 6:46-49).

Window for Today

We can reflect on the sermon on the plain and its context for authentic discipleship for our time. Like Jesus, we can seek solitude and prayer in nature around us. And we can reflect on how “the twelve” provide a window for God’s mission of healing the Earth and the poor today. 🏡

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TRANSFORMED *in the* STRUGGLE

KATHLEEN RUSHTON'S reading of Luke 9:28-36 highlights the commitment that Jesus, and all disciples, give to understanding God's mission in the world.

Mark and Matthew tell us Jesus “was transfigured before them”. Luke describes this event differently – Jesus prays, his conversation with Moses and Elijah is revealed and the disciples “were heavy with sleep” (Lk 9:28-33). I will explore the possibility that the disciples are being offered both an example of Jesus praying at a time of difficulty and insights into his intimate relationship with God.

This incident happened as the Galilean ministry of Jesus came to a climax around questions about his identity and the direction in which God's mission was taking him. Disciples had asked: “Who is this ...?” (Lk 8:25) after he calmed the storm. King Herod had asked: “Who is this ...?” (Lk 9:9). The focus moves to the disciples. A new phrase in their formation has begun. They are to learn what following Jesus and his mission really meant.

Context of Mission

Jesus called the twelve to commission them on God's mission to do what they had seen him doing – healing, exorcisms and preaching (Lk 9:1-2). He instructed them: “Take nothing for the way, neither staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money, nor have two tunics ...” (Lk 9:3). Scripture scholar Michael Trainor links this instruction

to a “disposition towards creation and a resistance to the temptation to power, status and privilege” with which Jesus was tempted by the devil at the beginning of his ministry. The twelve's focus is to be on God's mission. They are to take no bag of possessions, to rely on God's providence for bread, to carry only one tunic and to have no money to purchase Earth's goods or satisfy their needs.

The disciples return from mission and tell Jesus all about it. Then, taking them with him, Jesus “withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida” (Lk 9:10). Crowds followed. Jesus welcomed them. Later, the disciples wanted Jesus to send the crowds away to get lodging and food. He challenged them to respond to the situation: “You give them something to eat.” With the hospitality of the superabundance of God, Jesus fed the crowds (Lk 9:12-17).

The Big Question

As often happens in Luke, significant developments begin with Jesus at prayer by himself “with only the disciples near him” (Lk 9:18). Then he asked the big question: “Who do the crowds say I am?” Then of the disciples: “But who do you say I am?” Peter's answer is spot on: “You are the Christ (the Anointed).” When Jesus talked for the first time about his coming suffering, death and resurrection, neither Peter, nor any disciples, disputed with him (contrast with Mk 8:32-33; Mat 16:22-23) when he explained that his being the Messiah would mean suffering. Suffering would be, also, the lot of the disciples (Luke 9:23-27). His followers are to deny themselves and “take up their cross *daily* and follow me”. “Daily” is Luke's addition. Jesus was talking about a spirituality for the long haul.

That events of Luke's account are found between this first (Lk 9:22) and the second mention of suffering, death

Kathleen Rushton RSM lives in Ōtautahi Christchurch where, in the sight of the Southern Alps and the hills, she continues to delight in learning and writing about Scripture.



RL Lk 9:28-36 - 17 March 2nd Sunday of Lent
RCL Lk 9:28-36 (37-43a) - 5 March Transfiguration Sunday and 17 March 2nd Sunday of Lent (alternative)

and resurrection (Lk 9:44; third, 18:31-33) which seem to be designed to help the disciples with the difficult instruction Jesus gives them.

Jesus Prays

About eight days later, with “Peter, James and John, Jesus goes up the mountain to pray”. The mountain, a place rich in biblical symbolism, is where Jesus communicates with God. A pattern of Jesus’s intimacy with God in solitude on a mountain is developed: before he selected the twelve (Lk 6:12) and just before his passion and death (Lk 22:39-46). Jesus is presented as praying in Luke, more than in the other Gospels.

Now, the focus is on the experience of Jesus. He prayed about the problem of where God’s mission was taking him. His direction was set when in his hometown synagogue and in the tradition of the prophets, he proclaimed: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ... 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 favour” (Lk 4:16-19).

In doubt and bewilderment, Jesus prayed. Things came together. His glory, which the disciples saw, was the radiant joy that came with resolution of a horrendously troubling situation. Now divine power transformed him completely. He saw things from a different perspective.

But opposition abounded. His townsfolk tried to “hurl (Jesus) off a cliff” (Lk 4:28-30). Demons rebuked him. Scribes and Pharisees questioned him, accused him of blasphemy, of breaking the sabbath and were “filled with fury and discussed ... what they might do to Jesus” (Lk 5:21; 6:11). We can use the language of Catholic Social Teaching to describe Jesus’s sermon of the plain as an “option for the poor”. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, the reviled, excluded, defamed. Jesus declared, “Woe to you rich ... who are full ... happy now ... when people speak well of you” (Lk 6:20-26).

Why Suffering and Death?

From a historical point of view, Jesus suffered and died because he stayed faithful to his role in God’s mission with a courage that did not quit. He gave hope and good news to poor, marginalised people. This was dangerous to do in first century Palestine which was occupied and dominated by imperial Rome in collusion with local elites — Herod, scribes and religious leaders.

Was Jesus unaware of what was going on? Did he want to die? Of course not. He had a deep-seated commitment to his calling of who he was and what he was called to do. Yet Jesus was human. He struggled. He saw the writing on the wall. We can think of contemporary women and men who stayed faithful despite danger and the risk of death. For example, Dorothy Stang in the Amazon rainforest; Oscar Romeo and Jean Donovan in El Salvador; Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany; Martin Luther King in the United States of America; and Doctors without Borders in Syria.

My Chosen

In doubt and bewilderment, Jesus prayed. Things came together. His face lit up — “the appearance of his face changed”. His glory, which the disciples saw, was the radiant joy that came with resolution of a horrendously troubling situation. Divine power flowed through the person of Jesus in the mighty wonders of God’s mission. Now divine power transformed him completely. His clothing became “dazzling white”. He saw things from a different perspective.

Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus about his departure (*exodus*) which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. He had to verify and work out the implications that his impending death, his exodus, could be a saving event which paralleled the Exodus and stressed the unity of God’s action in history. The glory of God’s presence, often named as the Shekinah, is depicted as a cloud (Exodus 13:21) and indicated the nearness or presence of the unseen God. The voice from the cloud recalled the voice from heaven at his baptism (Luke 3:22) which spoke directly to Jesus and was heard by him alone: “You are my Son, the Beloved.” Now, the disciples heard from the cloud which overshadowed them, a voice speaking in the third person: “This is my son, my Chosen; listen to him” (Lk 9:35). Earlier in the story, the twelve were *chosen* by Jesus (Lk 6:13).

As disciples we might reflect on our participation in God’s mission. What sustains us in tough times? How do we keep our commitment to mission fresh? How do we learn about new directions in God’s mission? ☪



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HANDING OVER the SPIRIT

KATHLEEN RUSHTON explains John's version of Jesus's death as his handing over the Spirit at the heart of the universe to all beloved disciples.

Jesus as king. A seamless garment. The cry: "I am thirsty." The mother of Jesus, the women and the Beloved Disciple "near the cross." The piercing of the side from which blood and water flowed. Jesus entrusting his mother to the beloved disciple. All these details, found only in John, have influenced Christian spirituality and art profoundly. Scriptural quotations and allusions, imagery and symbolism, irony and double meanings abound. This is an interpretation

of the death-resurrection of Jesus refracted through the prism of John's theological responses to the struggles of communities in a particular time and place. Often obscured or overlooked in the Christian tradition are three interconnected strands which are critical to hearing both the cry of Earth and the cry of the poor: creation and re-creation, the last words of Jesus and the handing over the Spirit. I will explore these against the background realities of Roman power at the time.

upon the people and the land. In the devastation that followed the public execution of Jesus, disciples in the New Testament writings made three core moves in their understanding. They fused the cross and resurrection into one hopeful symbol – they did not ponder the cross and death of Jesus in isolation from his resurrection. Then, having fused the death, cross and resurrection, they looked back through this strong light at the whole life of Jesus and gave it saving significance. God did not just raise any one. The One raised had been involved totally in a passionate ministry. His words and action gave flesh to the God of mercy who frees slaves, leads exiles home and hears the cry of the poor. As a consequence, Jesus was put to death.

Finally, during the lifetime of Jesus, many disciples saw him as the expected Messiah who would restore their nation from foreign domination.

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Three Moves

Palestine had been a Roman colony since 63 BCE. Roman political and economic domination, with the collusion of local leaders, lay heavily

RL and RCL: Good Friday John

18:1-19:42

RCL: Holy Saturday (Alternative)

19:42

That hope ended with his death. A shift took place. Disciples saw the death-resurrection of Jesus as a new age of redemption. The narrower political leadership of messiah was rethought to include all people and the whole world. These three moves are very different from later ones such as Anselm's theory of satisfaction which focused on the cross alone as saving. The cross gave God payment for debt and said nothing of the resurrection. Scripture used a different language of being with, accompanying: "I am with you." Redemption means God walking with the people and creation in solidarity even to death. Elizabeth Johnson, in her book, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*, explains that this theology has a double solidarity "of the actual Jesus who lived with all who live, suffer and die, and of the resurrecting God of life with the ministering and crucified Jesus." John's Gospel tells of this in narrative and image.

Jesus Replied: "I am" (Jn 18.8)

There was official Roman interest in the arrest of Jesus in the garden (Jn 18:3, 12). A cohort (one-tenth of a Roman legion) and its tribune were involved alongside Judas and "police from the chief priests and the Pharisees". It was a confrontation rather than an arrest. Jesus was in control. He took the initiative. He spoke the first and last words (Jn 18:4, 11). He was conscious of what lay ahead of him (Jn 18:4). Coming forward, Jesus asked: "Whom are you looking for?" (Jn 18:7; cf. Jn 1:38; 20:15). At his: "I am", armed soldiers behaved unusually before an unarmed man — they fell to the ground (Jn 18:3–8).

At one level, Jesus was simply saying who he is, yet, there were other echoes (Ex 3:14). The disciples' escape was not desertion but highlighted his concern for "his own" (Jn 17:12). Jesus was about "drinking the cup" which was the consequence of his doing the works of God.

No Jewish court ever charged Jesus formally or condemned him. No Jews beat him or mocked him (beyond a single slap in Jn 18:22). Even though the Jewish leadership

instigated his trial and execution, the omission of the Sanhedrin trial — a trial before a Jewish judicial body — meant formal responsibility was with the Roman governor, Pilate. There is more emphasis on the political nature of the charges against Jesus than anywhere else in the New Testament. The Roman trial was dramatic, highly symbolic and structured in seven brief scenes (Jn 18:29–32, 33–38a, 38b–40; 19:1–3, 4–7, 8–11). Two trials took place: the literal trial of Jesus; and the figurative trial of "the Jews", at which Pilate and all humanity choose either the reign of God as revealed by Jesus in the world — or choose the world.

". . . There Was a Garden" (Jn 18:1; 19:42)

The passion and death of Jesus began and ended in a "place" where "there was a garden" (Jn 18:1; 19:42). He rose in a garden. The strands in the prologue (Jn 1:1–18), which inserted Jesus into God's creation and re-creation, continued in his passion, death-resurrection and his absence and presence in the Spirit. God "planted a garden in Eden, in the east" (Gen 2:8). Like a gardener, God cultivated it (Gen 2:9) and walked in it (Gen 3:8). Elsewhere, God was described explicitly as a gardener (Num 24:6; 4 Macc 1:29). As God is central to biblical creation so, too, Jesus is inserted in God's creation.


"It is finished" (Jn 19:30)

The works of God were to be finished by Jesus. This was especially so as his death approached "Jesus knew that all was *finished*" (Jn 19:28). His last words were: "It is *finished*" (Jn 19:30). His food was to *finish* the works of God (Jn 4:34). God gave him works to *finish* (Jn 5:36). Echoed here is Genesis where "God rested from all the work that God had done in creation" (Jn 2:2). Jesus spoke of God doing works through him (Jn 14:10) and those who believed in him "will do the works that I do and, in fact, greater works than I do" (Jn 14:12).

Jesus "Handed Over the Spirit" (Jn 19:30)

It is commonly understood that Jesus's death was being described

when he "gave up his spirit" (NRSV). Nowhere in the ancient world was death described like that. The word in Jn 19:30 means to "hand over" and was used for the betrayal action of Judas in the other Gospels. The Greek has no "his". So, a more accurate translation would be: "handed over the spirit". James Swetman observes that "at the deeper level the climax of the Passion of the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel is not the death of Jesus, but a bestowal of the Spirit". The Spirit was promised previously (Jn 7:39; 14:16–17). So, Jesus handed over the Spirit to his mother, the women and the Beloved Disciple near the cross.

And who is the Beloved Disciple? Sandra Schneiders suggests *each reader/hearer* is a Beloved Disciple to whom Jesus hands over the Spirit. Why? To finish the work of God's ongoing creation and re-creation (salvation). In this work the "Spirit, infinite bond of love, is intimately present at the very heart of the universe, inspiring and bringing new pathways" (*Laudate Si* par 238). 

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Love One Another – Our Work

KATHLEEN RUSHTON traces Jesus's words and actions in John 13:31-35 showing him bringing a new unity among people through love.

The season of Easter focuses on the risen Jesus who empowers the people of God every day of the year.

The Sunday gospel readings for this period (Year C) are from John. Unlike the gospel characters, who did not have this Gospel in written form, the early Christian communities, from which this Gospel arose probably in the 90s, knew and experienced the risen Jesus. The post-Easter gospel readings show two ways in which people came into the family of faith after the resurrection. The first is *through the Holy Spirit* (eg, Jn 20:21-22; 14:23-29). And the second way is *through the work of the disciples* (Jn 21:1-19), which we will reflect on in John 13:31-35.

“That they may be one” (Jn 17:21)

In late first century following the disaster of the Roman

War and destruction of the Temple, groups of Jews sought various solutions for their situation and these groups are reflected in John's Gospel.

In the first half of the gospel, Jesus moved among representatives of some of these groups who were in conflict with one another. His barrier-crossing ministry of reconciliation focused on finishing the works of God by creating a new community. In action, he sought to bring into practice what he was to pray later: “that they may be one” (Jn 17:21).

The first representative of a “solution” group was the nationalist Nathanael, the “true Israelite” who was searching for a new “King of Israel” (Jn 1:47). Both terms implied he was among those who sought a nationalist and political liberator to free them from Roman domination.

Jesus then moved to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a “ruler of the Jews” and “the teacher of Israel” who came to him “by night” (Jn 3:1-21). He was from a group of secret believers.

Next we see Jesus with the woman of Samaria. Her despised people had long expected the Messiah (Jn 4:7-26).

Then Jesus is with the royal official of Herod the Tetrarch, the representative of those who put their heads down and colluded with Roman rule (Jn 4:46).

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19 May Fifth Sunday After Easter: John 13:31-35

“Whatever the father does, the son does” (Jn 5:19)

Against the background of the Genesis creation story, this Gospel places great emphasis on God as ongoing creator and sustainer of all life. Kinship also permeates the context of the time of Jesus. A father provided all that was needed for life. In this context the image of father unfolds as an image for God as creator and sustainer of life. This Johannine Gospel’s father-son relationship was influenced by and embedded in first-century social conventions. The total dependence of a son on a father socially, economically and culturally led to the understanding that a son was the most suitable agent to attend to the father’s business. This is captured in a hidden parable which gives a glimpse of a son apprenticed to his father’s trade (Jn 5:19-20a). The son watches his father working and imitates him. Crafts were hereditary and passed down from father to son. Jesus was a carpenter and a carpenter’s son.

“To finish the works of God” (Jn 4:34)

The images of God working and Jesus working abound. The works of Jesus testify that he is sent by God (Jn 5:37-38). He is to “finish the works of God” (Jn 5:36), which include healing the marginalised. The works of God are to come to completion in Jesus. This is especially so as his death approaches (Jn 19:28) and in his last words on the cross: “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). Jesus’s food is to finish the works of God (Jn 4:34). Jesus speaks of God doing works through him (Jn 14:10) and of how those who believe in him “will do the works that I do and, in fact, greater works than I do” (Jn 14:12).

“Good works” and “evil works” were not general expressions at this time. According to Jose Miranda they were “a precise technical term referring to helping those in need”.

“I am with you only a little longer” (Jn 13:33)

Judas went out. It was night (Jn 13:30). Jesus was with his disciples – although their weakness would soon be revealed, they intended to remain true and loyal. The departure of Judas began the movement towards the death of Jesus.


Throughout John, Jesus spoke of his death-resurrection in many images. Some are taken from creation or daily life such as the grain of wheat and the shepherd laying down his life for his sheep. Other images are abstract such as “glorification” which indicated that his death-resurrection was underway. There are five references in Jn 13:31-32 to the mutual glorification of God and Jesus which span the past, the present and the future in ways which are hard to unravel. In the biblical tradition, “glorify” is associated with the unseen presence of God in the saving event of the Exodus. While Jesus’s glorification is being brought about by betrayal and execution, the heart of “glory” or “glorify” centres on the revelation of God in the person and life of Jesus.

The intimacy and love which exists between Jesus and his disciples is expressed by the endearing term, “little children” (Jn 13:33). And the repetition of phrases such as “only a little longer” and “I am going” suggest a sense of loss and grief. Jesus was returning to God. The disciples cannot follow and experience his absence keenly. As the discourse unfolds we learn what will be done to meet this new situation.

“Just as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34)

Jesus gives the disciples a new commandment of love (Jn 13:34-35). The loss of the love of the physical presence of Jesus is to be compensated by the love they are to have for one another. Jesus had given them loving action as a paradigm for how they are to love – he washed their feet (Jn 13:1-17). Disciples are to do likewise.

The commandment of love was already in place (Lev 19:18). What was new is that after Jesus’s departure the disciples are to live love to such a degree that “everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35). The measure of this love is new: “just as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34). This is in direct continuity with the love that they have received from Jesus. He has spoken repeatedly about finishing the works of God. Disciples are to continue this work by their love for one another.

We face a new time in Aotearoa New Zealand. At the national memorial service for victims of the Christchurch massacre, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said: “We each hold the power [to combat hate], in our words and our actions, in daily acts of kindness. Let that be the legacy of 15 March.” Survivor Farid Ahmed said: “I want a heart that is full of love and care, and full of mercy, a heart that will forgive lavishly.” In our new time we are to move on to finish the works of God by creating new ways in word and action to “love one another just as I have loved you”. 

Painting: *The Washing of the Feet* by John August Swanson ©
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KATHLEEN RUSHTON
explains how Jesus
sends the Spirit to
reannounce truths we
may not have had the
insight, knowledge or
understanding to hear
before now.

IT'S TIME TO HEAR THE TRUTH

Jesus's words in John 16:12-15, proclaimed on Trinity Sunday, show how he remains with us *through the work of the Holy Spirit*.

The scene is the last supper (Jn 13-17). After the footwashing (Jn 13:1-30), Jesus gave a farewell discourse (Jn 13:31-16:33) and he prayed (Jn 17:1-26). His discourse has three parts: a beginning discourse (Jn 13:31-14:31), a central one (Jn 15:1-16:4), and a final one (Jn 16:4-33).

Cultural Framework

The earliest Christians would have recognised this talk by Jesus as a farewell address. It was a genre they knew when a well-known leader or teacher, such as Jacob (Gen 49) and Moses (Deut 31-33), gave instructions before death. In the ancient world the dying leader's or

teacher's farewell address contained their last will and testament. And it wasn't about goods and property as we have today.

The leader about to die expressed his deep concern for the wellbeing of the group in general as well as individuals after his death. He announced that his death was about to happen, he reviewed his life to set the record straight, stressed that relationships were to continue and predicted the good things as well as hard times ahead. He encouraged his followers to practise virtues and avoid vices. He named a successor, gave a legacy and finished with a prayer.

Two Levels

We find this framework and purpose used in the evangelist's creative presentation of Jesus's farewell address. Jesus's final words are of consolation and encouragement. And there is movement between two levels of time.

In the first level we are taken back to the last supper and the end

of Jesus's life on Earth and the actual situation of the disciples. Jesus talks of "going away", meaning he was departing from his present life in his suffering and death on the cross. His "return" to the disciples was to be as the risen Jesus.

In the second level we have the situation of the disciples after Jesus has departed this Earth.

As we read we can be aware that this situation includes us in our times and places.

Seeking Deeper Meaning

In the text, Jesus repeats the verb "declare" (NRSV) or "tell" (JB) three times (Jn 16:13, 14, 15). We find clues to its significance in the Greek Old Testament when this verb has the sense of re-announcing what has been heard previously — mysteries *already communicated*. So Jesus is encouraging the disciples to face the hard times

Kathleen Rushton RSM lives in Ōtautahi Christchurch where, in the sight of the Southern Alps and the hills, she continues to delight in learning and writing about Scripture.



16 June – Trinity Sunday:
John 16:12-15

ahead by seeking deeper meaning in what has already happened.

Scripture scholar Raymond Brown explains: "The declaration of the things to come consists in interpreting in relation to each coming generation the contemporary significance of what Jesus has said and done. The best Christian preparation is not an exact knowledge of the future but a deep understanding of what Jesus means for one's own time."

In other words, Jesus's ministry and trial are over. But the implications of his death and resurrection for all disciples and for all creation need to be worked out generation by generation in every place.

As Jesus knew the hearts of those earliest disciples, Jesus knows we are concerned with troubles (Jn 14:1, 27). He said: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (Jn 16:12). When they, and we today can bear it, the Spirit will re-announce, re-proclaim what has been received from Jesus who was sent by God (Jn 16:14).

God, Jesus and the Spirit

Jesus's identity and his relationship with God are the central issues. Jesus is "the way" because he is "the word made flesh" who reveals who God is ("truth"). When people come to believe *into* him, they share in eternal "life". In the work of guiding disciples, Jesus and the Spirit share similar titles. Jesus is "the truth" (Jn 14:6) and the Paraclete is the Spirit of Truth (Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13) who will "guide you into all truth".

The Greek word *pneuma*/Spirit is used throughout the Scriptures for the Hebrew *ruah* meaning the "wind". Sometimes it is translated as "breath" — essential for life. Both images, wind and breath, portray the Spirit's unseen wonder known by what it does, the effect it has and how it feels. The Spirit flows through all creation bringing life and love.

Just as Jesus teaches and guides (Jn 6:59; 7:14, 8:20), so does the Paraclete (Jn 16:13; 14:26). The Paraclete's teaching glorifies Jesus (Jn 16:14) and Jesus glorifies God (Jn 14:13; 17:4). As Raymond Brown says: "The one who Jesus calls 'another

Paraclete' is really another Jesus. Since the Paraclete can only come when Jesus departs, the Paraclete is the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent." Jesus named the Spirit as his successor who is a bridge between the past of his historical life and the post-Easter life of the Church in this world God so loves (Jn 3:16).

The ecumenical Christian Church is one of the largest groups of people in the world. It is time for us to "bear" to hear the truth and, enabled by the Spirit, transform our faith into action.



In Our Generation and Place

We can ask what the Spirit is re-announcing to us about the truth of God *already communicated* in what Jesus said and did. There are pointers. For example, the World Council of Churches recently released the *Roadmap for Congregations, Communities and Churches for an Economy of Life and Ecological Justice*

saying: "We invite congregations, communities and churches to join a pilgrimage for an economy of life and climate, to commit to make changes in the way we live, to share successful ideas and to encourage one another."

And the United Nations released the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) report on the global state of biodiversity to date. It reveals that 1 million species are threatened with extinction. It says: "We tried to document how far in trouble we are to focus people's minds, but also to say it is not too late if we put a huge amount into transformational behavioural change."

God Acts

We could think it is coincidence that these two reports were released so close to each other. But God acts through incidences, not coincidences. Jesus's words echo through the generations: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (Jn 16:12). The ecumenical Christian Church is one of the largest groups of people in the world. It is time for us to "bear" to hear the truth and, enabled by the Spirit, transform our faith into action. Pope Francis encourages us: "The Spirit, infinite bond of love, is intimately present at the very heart of the universe, inspiring and bringing new pathways" (*Laudato Si'* par 238).



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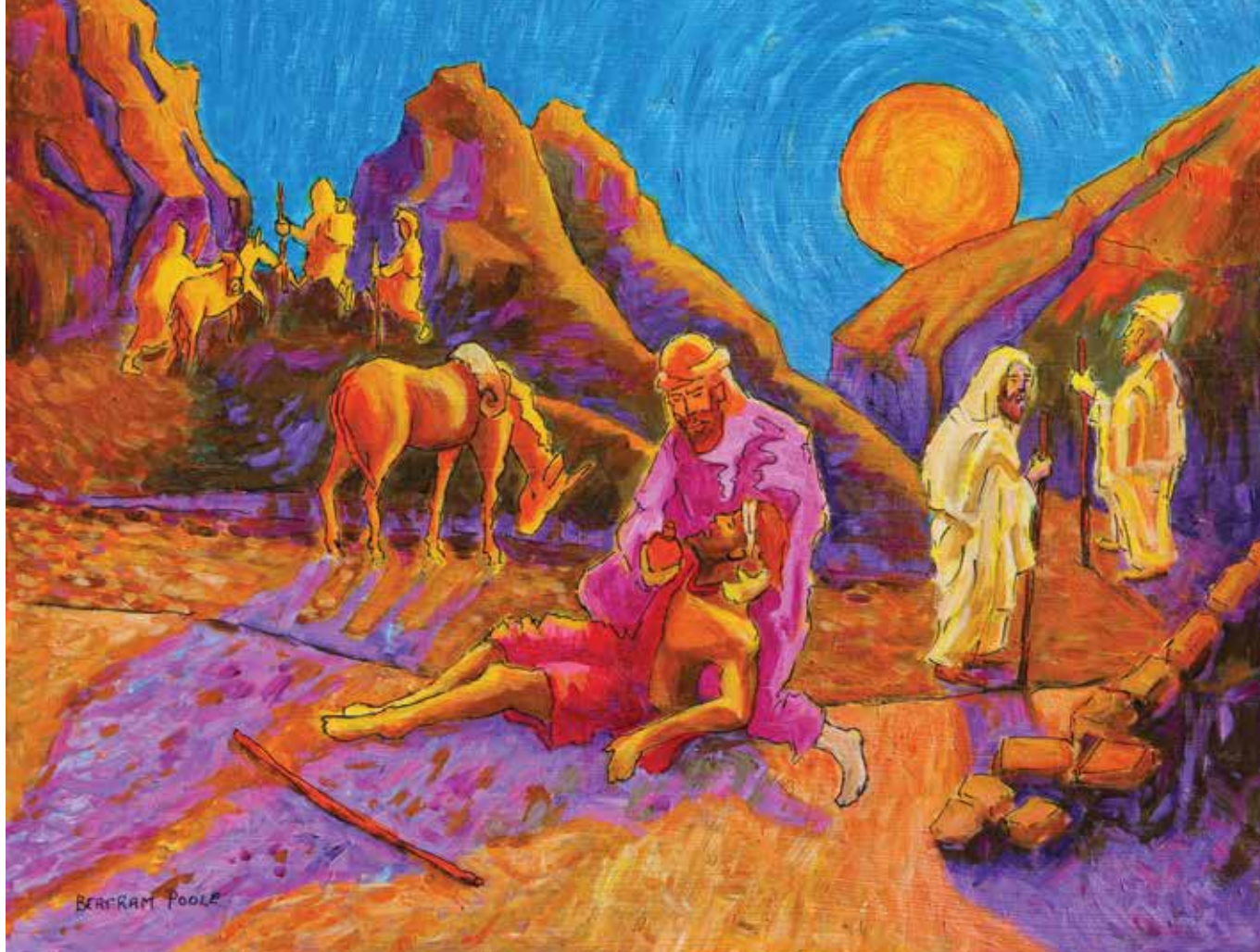
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GO AND DO LIKEWISE

KATHLEEN RUSHTON points to the radical challenge of the parable of the Good Samaritan Luke 10:25–37 for Jesus's first listeners and for us today.

"I was short of cash and suddenly, miraculously, a Good Samaritan leaned over and handed the cashier \$10 for me."

"I volunteer with the New Zealand Samaritans. We're there 24/7 to give confidential emotional support to those experiencing loneliness, depression or suicidal feelings."

These examples show how we use the phrase "good Samaritan", which comes from the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37. But Luke does not call the Samaritan "good". That addition came about only in the 19th century.

Kathleen Rushton RSM lives in Ōtautahi Christchurch where, in the sight of the Southern Alps and the hills, she continues to delight in learning and writing about Scripture.



Until then it was known as the "parable of the man who fell among bandits" — the focus being on the injured one. In the 19th century, there was a shift in wealth and influence in European society and the Church. Good people identified with the "good man", the Samaritan, the one who offered relief — just as they dispensed charity to the poor in their societies. So the focus changed from the wounded one to the rescuer — and the radical significance of the Samaritan was lost. Charitable people became known as "good" Samaritans: those with means giving to those who were dependent.

But parables are puzzling stories — they do not support the way things are or appear to be — and Luke 10:25–37 is no exception. So what can help us to understand the Good Samaritan story today?

The Questions

Interestingly, the parable is framed by questions. The lawyer asks: "Teacher, what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds by asking him what the Law says. And when the lawyer quotes the commandment, Jesus replies: "Do this, and you will *live*." The lawyer asks further: "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus responds by telling a parable to expand his question from: "Who is my neighbour?" to "*To whom must I become a neighbour?*"

14 July Luke 10:25–37
RL 15th Sunday Ordinary Time
RCL 5th Sunday After Pentecost

The Parable

The parable begins and ends with the person/*anthropos* who was assaulted. In using *anthropos* rather than man or woman, the story emphasises the humanity of the person, the human condition.

Jesus's Jewish listeners knew well the three classes of people serving in the Temple in Jerusalem: priests, Levites and laypeople. The priest, from the highest class, "was going down that road" – returning from Temple duties to Jericho, 27 miles away, where many wealthy priests lived. People were readily recognised by their dress, language and accent. The priest immediately identified a problem – if the half-dead person was not a Jew and the priest touched him, then he would have had to return to Jerusalem for lengthy purification rituals. He passed by.

Then the Levite, from the second class, came riding along and could see that the priest ahead had not stopped for the wounded person. He did not either. Maybe he could not risk facing the priest if he rode into Jericho with the victim.

Now, the listeners would have expected the third person to be a layman – and the one who would act. But no, the hero is a Samaritan, one from a race of people hated by Jews. This turn of events strikes at the heart of religious prejudice and racism.

The Samaritan "came near him . . . saw him . . . was moved with compassion . . . went to him." His compassion goes well beyond what is required by law. He uses all his resources willingly for the wounded person – oil, wine, wrappings, animal, time, energy and money. The listeners might have expected him to drop the person at the edge of the town. But no, the Samaritan risks his own life by taking the wounded person to an inn in a Jewish area of Jericho.

The last scene in the story takes place the following day. Again the Samaritan risks his life by returning to give the innkeeper two denarii – enough to cover food and lodging for about two weeks.

Listeners would have appreciated the risks involved. If the wounded person could not pay his debts he could have been sold as a slave (Matt 18:25). The Samaritan made certain that would not happen. And innkeepers could be disreputable – the Samaritan just had to trust him.

Jesus as the Samaritan

Some early interpreters identified the Samaritan with Jesus, saying that in this parable he was talking about himself. He was a saving outsider, one who did not fit their expectations, one who poured out his love for the wounded, the *anthropos*. The description of the Samaritan "having a heart moved with compassion" fits exactly how Jesus is described when he

sees the funeral of the widow's only son (Lk 7:13). And the Samaritan's life-risking action on behalf of the wounded fits the salvation story of Jesus as Christ.

What Could the Parable Mean for Us?

The human condition is as fraught and compromised today as it was in the time of Jesus. We have our own wounded humanity, our own outcasts – and our own fears and prejudices. And we have striking examples of those who reach out, like Jean Vanier who founded the L'Arche communities where those with and without learning disabilities share their lives together.

Or Dr Philip Bagshaw, founder of the Canterbury Charity Hospital Trust, established by the community for the community, where health professionals and people volunteer to provide free services for those missing out on healthcare or on waiting lists.

The really radical element of this parable is that both the wounded one and saviour are outcasts. The real challenge is to be compassionate even as we need compassion ourselves.


Be Compassionate Even as We Need Compassion

But the really radical element of this parable is that both the wounded one and saviour are outcasts. The lawyer cannot cope with where he found mercy, cannot even name the Samaritan – instead saying: "the one who showed mercy." The Samaritan acted in the face of rejection and prejudice. The real challenge is to be compassionate even as we need compassion ourselves.

So God's reign is found in most unlikely people and places – in the unexpected, in the outsider regardless of race or ethnicity. Racism can surface when the religious and racial attitudes of the community are exposed.

The cost and risks taken by the Samaritan point to Jesus. Asking ourselves the question: *To whom must I become a neighbour?* will cost us. This parable guides us into the works of mercy – into *becoming* a neighbour. We will see a need and respond with "a heart moved with compassion".

And in a world of structural sin where immense harm is done to vulnerable people through political and economic systems which function to benefit the few, we need to look at the root causes of suffering and injustice, to the works of justice.

We can choose to pass by "on the other side of the road". Or we can cross the road – each person in their woundedness neighbour to another wounded one and the wounded Earth. The ethical demands are boundless. 



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Awake to Serve

KATHLEEN RUSHTON tells how the parable of the serving master (Luke 12:32-48) can influence our responses to injustices in our world.

The gospel of Luke was written 50-55 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The risen Jesus was expected to return. But he had not! A long section of Luke (11:14–14:35) which jars with and often offends today's readers addresses the question of how to live and make sense of this "in-between" time. Jesus is sharp and confronting — but there is more to it than this.

"On the way to Jerusalem"

In Luke 9:31, Jesus talked about his *exodus* – his departure. He "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51). Until he arrived there, we are told repeatedly that he is "on the way"; in the countryside, passing through villages and towns, "on the way to Jerusalem".



Kathleen Rushton RSM lives in Ōtautahi Christchurch where, in the sight of the Southern Alps and the hills, she continues to delight in learning and writing about Scripture.

Jesus spoke the word of God to three different groups "on the way". To the crowds, he gave warnings and called them to conversion. To his disciples, he gave encouraging instructions. And to the Pharisees and lawyers who opposed and resisted him, he spoke mainly in parables of resistance.

Our reading has three parts. In the first part (Lk 12:32–34), Jesus speaks intimately and encouragingly to his disciples, "my friends": "Do not be afraid, little flock." God is determined to give them the *basileia*/the reign of God. If they are centred in God, nothing else matters.

In the second part, Jesus tells a parable (Lk 12:35–39).

In the third part (Lk 12:40–48), Jesus explains the parable after Peter asks: "Are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?" (Lk 12:41).

The Parable

This parable is one of those puzzling stories which turn the familiar into the radical — convention is subverted to bring about change.

Jesus gives a wonderful image of the master who withdraws from a banquet, arrives home and finds his faithful slaves are expecting his return. He dresses like a

11 August

RL 19th Sunday Ordinary Time: Luke 12:32–48

RCL 9th Sunday After Pentecost: Luke 12:32–40

slave himself, stands behind his reclining slaves and serves them with part of the banquet.

History Behind the Text

The parable has a context: a particular world with norms that are being challenged. Translators and others often shy away from the word “slave” as “servant” seems more acceptable. But in the hierarchically organised society of Jesus’s time, there were rigid, clearly defined roles and relationships. The master would have belonged to the wealthy upper classes whose way of life depended on a slave labour force. The brutal punishments to which slaves were subjected are well documented (Lk 12:46-48). While the slaves in the parable behaved as slaves were required to — alert and waiting for the master’s return — it is the master who shocks by stepping out of his prescribed role.

We can be awake to the reality of modern-day slavery and the various forms of trafficking of humans in our world which is all too real — the third-largest global criminal industry behind drugs and arms trafficking.

Theology In the Text

Disciples are to “be dressed for action” or to have their “belts cinched tight”. It reminds us of God’s direction to the Hebrew people on the eve of Passover to let their “loins be girded” for their journey (Exodus 12:11). In the heat of the climate, women and men wore long loosely fitting robes nearly touching the ground. Slaves and workers would tie a belt or rope firmly around their waist and tuck their robes up out of the way if they were preparing to walk a distance or do strenuous work. They were ready for action with “lamps lit”. Today we’d say: “to have our boots on.”

Two key words help us understand this parable. English translations usually say the slaves are “waiting” for the “return” of the master. But these words also mean the slaves were “expecting” the master who “withdrew” from the banquet to come to them. “Expecting” is more active and exciting than “waiting”. And “withdrew” suggests that the master slipped out of the banquet before it was over.

So the master comes home, find his slaves “expecting” him “so they may open the door to him as soon as he comes”. But instead of being tended to by his slaves, the master fastens his own belt like a slave and invites them to recline to eat (as was the custom). He comes and serves (*diakonēo*) them — meaning serving as if carrying out a sacred mandate, or ministering to them.

The parable begins and ends with: “Blessed are those slaves” (Lk 12:37, 39). The slaves do not earn blessedness by working or serving but through being what they are: ready, expecting, a happy, blessed presence in the household. Jesus is encouraging his disciples to be the same.

Spirituality Called Forth by the Text

The parable urges us to watch. To stay awake. It is about being like the slaves: alert to the present “sitting with reality, allowing it to work on us” as theologian Dean Brackley puts

it. We are to be watchful and wakeful — contemplative. We can dismiss contemplation as a way out of the ordinary every day — a way to focus on higher things. But the parable turns this on its head: it urges us to be contemplative in our wakefulness to the moments of everyday reality. We are challenged to “dress for action” and “expect” to find the Risen Jesus in the ordinary things of every day. Watching and staying awake is prayer. In the parable, we contemplate Jesus ministering to “blessed” disciples just as we are called to find ways of ministering to those around us.

And what of that uncomfortable word, “slave”, that translators shy away from? We can be awake to the reality of modern-day slavery and the various forms of trafficking of humans in our world which is all too real. The United Nations says people trafficking is the third-largest global criminal industry behind drugs and arms trafficking. Maybe, like the master of the parable, we need to consider withdrawing from the rich banquet of our lives — often furnished from slavery and exploitation — to attend to how we can support the abolition of slavery and trafficking once again in our world. That could be by learning about modern slavery and the organisations and government initiatives that are working against it. We can buy from those companies who conscientiously check that their supply chains and the entire process in the production of their goods is free of slavery. By speaking out against modern slavery and supporting the initiatives of those focused on freedom for all workers, we can minister to the poor who depend on us for the kind of life God dreams for them. ☪



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What Will I Do?

KATHLEEN RUSHTON explores the parable of the unjust manager in Luke 16:1-13.

A number of disreputable characters feature in the parables of Jesus, but the unjust manager is in a class of his own. He is a clever, crafty criminal and Jesus commends him! This is a puzzling parable which turns things upside down to bring about transformation – and it still speaks to us today.

Jesus is “on the way to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51–19:28), a physical journey which is calling disciples to an inner journey of being transformed into “people of the resurrection” (Lk 9:20:36).

The parable of the unjust manager shares parallels with the father and the two sons parable (Lk 15:11–32) which Jesus told to the Pharisees and scribes.

When first written the Gospels had no chapter divisions, so the unjust manager parable is like an appendix to the parable of the father and the two sons. It, too, is about

God, sin, grace and mercy. Jesus could have been using a well-known case as an example. This certainly would have had the disciples' attention and they would have expected him to disapprove.

Background to the Text

In the preindustrial world of Jesus, agriculture was at the centre of the economy. Issues revolved around who had control of the land, what the land produced and who had power over the surplus. Palestine was part of the commerce of the Roman Empire which had a uniform currency. Its roads ensured commercial routes of worldwide trade. Rich land owners in this network employed estate managers who exercised considerable authority. They rented out property, made loans and settled debts in the name of their master. Managers lived on fees collected from debts and rents, and by charging debtors

interest on what was owed. All transactions were recorded in a written contract approved by both parties.

Rural people had a commonly held notion of “limited goods” – there was only so much wealth and land to go around. So when a man was described as “rich” it would have meant greedy.

Closer Look at Story *Manager Dismissed*

In the parable the rich lord orders the manager: “Give me an accounting of your management” – meaning show me the account books. The manager is fired immediately – but he keeps the books. He now has no authority so any action he takes will not be binding on the lord.

Now Jesus's listeners would have been stunned by the manager's sudden dismissal because in their world a person in authority would not dismiss anyone without lengthy negotiations. For example, the manager could have drawn on family affiliations: “My father served your father. My grandfather served your grandfather.” Or, he could have blamed others or confronted whomever reported him. He could even have brought influential people to plead his case. But in the story, the manager tried none of these. He remained silent – seemingly accepting his guilt. That he accepted immediate dismissal was totally confusing to the listeners.

Manager Looks to His Future

The manager was amazed at the lord's mercy – he was dismissed but not fined or imprisoned. He made a realistic stocktake of his situation. He was incapable of hard physical work. And he feared being reduced to begging – a too-common occurrence.

So before the news of his sacking got out, he worked out a way whereby “people may welcome me into their homes” (Lk 16:4).

He called in the debtors on his list one by one. They would have assumed he was acting under the lord's instructions.

He reduced their debts and the reductions were enormous. For example, 50 measures of oil was worth about 500 denarii – a farm worker's wage for 18 months. It is possible of

course that the manager was cancelling his own cut of the takings.

The Lord's Response

Now the rich lord faced a dilemma. If he undid the arrangements, he risked alienating villages where his amazing generosity was being celebrated. But he would be praised if he allowed the arrangements to remain.

Surprisingly, the lord praised the manager for acting "shrewdly" (NSRV) or "astutely" (JB). The word *phronimos* suggests the cleverness required for self-preservation. It is not necessarily ethical but means that the person plays their cards well.

The Parable for Us

We can see the likenesses between the parable of the unjust manager and the parable of the father and two sons (Lk 15:11-32). Both have a noble father/lord who shows mercy to a wayward underling. Both have an ignoble son/manager "squandering his property" (Lk 15:13; 16:1). Both underlings faced the truth and loss of their situations and then cast themselves on the mercy of the noble one. Both deal with broken trust and its consequences. So how does this shape our thinking of God's mercy today?

Some interpreters see the "lord" as applying to Jesus. Just as the manager is confronted by his personal crisis, so are we exposed by the challenges of the reign of God.

And there is the silence. Once confronted the manager accepts his actions. He chooses to risk his future because he has confidence in his lord's mercy. He acts resolutely to give himself a new start.

Scripture scholar Tom Wright asks: "Does this parable call the Church to learn to think unconventionally, make new friends across traditional barriers, to throw caution to the wind and discover again in the truth of the Gospel as our lasting home?"

The rich person was perceived as greedy in a world of limited goods. Maybe we can think of the manager not as "squandering" the lord's property but as creatively redistributing the lord's wealth. Or was the debt he wiped money owed to him personally? Does the puzzle


of this parable make us question the way we think of wealth distribution today — especially in New Zealand, which now has the widest and fastest-growing gap between the rich and poor in the so-called developed world?

"Does this parable call the Church to learn to think unconventionally, make new friends across traditional barriers, to throw caution to the wind and discover again in the truth of the Gospel as our lasting home?"

The parable could cause us to reflect on the payment of fair wages to workers and the responsibility of businesses and individuals to contribute a fair share of taxes to the common good. The manager could well be the teacher of Christian communities regarding this practice of justice.

John Paul II in *On Social Concerns* reminds us of the structures of sin operating in our societies. He described it as "the collective behaviour of certain social groups, big or small, even whole nations or blocs of nations" where "cases of *social sins* are the result of the accumulation and

concentration of many *personal sins*." These personal sins cause, support or exploit evil — eg, the impoverishment of peoples, racism, destruction of environments, human trafficking, tax evasion. Those in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit social evil fail to do so out of laziness, fear, silence, complicity or indifference. In this way, as individuals we lend support to the structures of sin.

The parable of the unjust manager is as surprising and puzzling to us as it would have been to the disciples. But that it puzzles us is also what makes it so fascinating and worthwhile to read: we are forced to think about wealth — what it is, how we use it, how we participate in its distribution — and to think, too, about how we understand mercy. 

22 September – Luke 16:1–13
RL 25th Sunday Ordinary Time
RCL 15th Sunday After Pentecost

Painting: *The Tax Collector* (1542)
by Marinus van Reymerswale
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Kathleen Rushton RSM lives in Ōtautahi Christchurch where, in the sight of the Southern Alps and the hills, she continues to delight in learning and writing about Scripture.

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Healing and Gratitude

KATHLEEN RUSHTON reflects on the story of Jesus healing ten men with leprosy in Luke 17:11-19.

When travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jews went usually through the Jordan Valley rather than through Samaria (Luke 9:52-53). However, Samaritans feature in Jesus's journey to Jerusalem — Jesus scolds disciples who wanted fire to destroy the Samaritan village which had not received them (Lk 9:54-55). And in a parable, a Samaritan extends what is means to a neighbour (Lk 10:33).

In Lk 17:11 Jesus went "through the region between Samaria and Galilee". In a village in that in-between region, and in a story found only in Luke, is an example of the faith of social outcasts being highlighted over that of insiders.

Background to the Text

The medical condition of the 10 men who approach Jesus is not what is known today as Hansen's disease or leprosy. Medical scientists and biblical scholars believe that true leprosy, which is only mildly contagious, did not exist in first century Palestine. What might be called "biblical leprosy" describes several chronic flaky or scaly skin conditions in Leviticus 14-15. These afflictions were feared because they made individuals and communities unclean or impure.

Scripture speaks often of those with chronic illnesses and afflictions. The lament psalms link physical affliction and incapacity with poverty. Psalm 31:10 tells us: "My strength is diminished in my poverty and my bones waste away." The poetry of Job 29:12-17 links the poor with sickness and incapacity.

Restrictions applied to people who could offer worship. They must not have bodily defects. Anyone who was blemished, blind, lame, had a mutilated face, "a limb too long", a broken foot or hand, an itching disease or scabs, could not offer sacrifice

(Lev 22:17-23). God sides with the oppressed, the poor, the marginalised and the outcast. They receive God's special care and attention. In contrast, those afflicted by chronic illness are pushed aside by the healthy and by those who control access to the centres of public life and religion.

Asking for Mercy

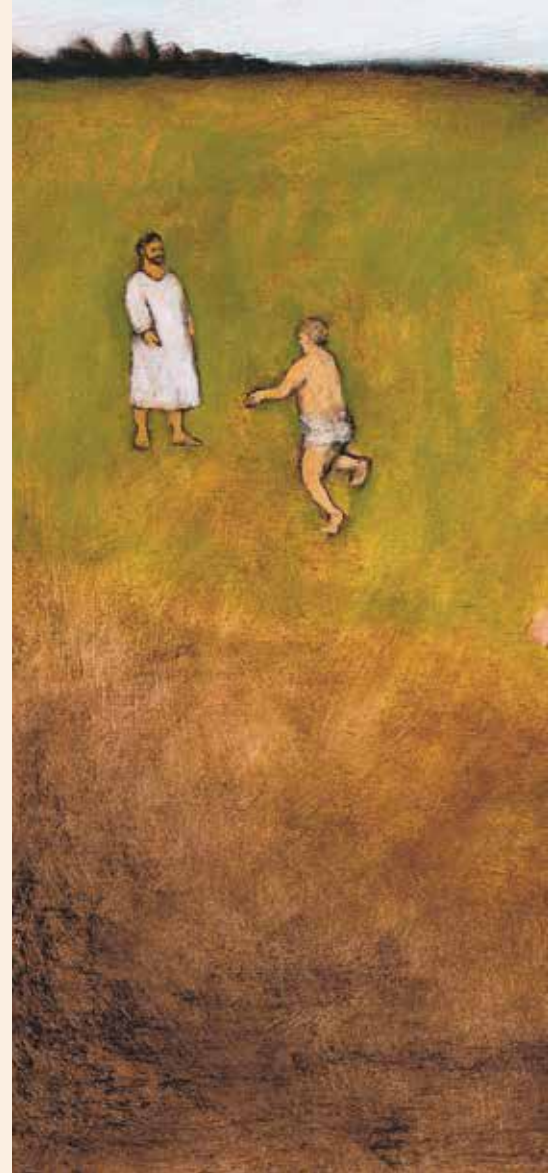
In so many ways, this story links with the theology found in Luke's text. The men approach and call out: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." These outsiders are insiders — the disciples and these 10 are the only characters who called Jesus "Master" (Lk 5:5; 8:24, 45; 9:33, 49).

Showing "mercy" (*eleos*) is associated with God's visitation. In her song, Mary refers to God's mercy (Lk 1:50, 54). God's great mercy was shown to Elizabeth (Lk 1:58). Zechariah tells of God's mercy being promised to our ancestors (Lk 1:72) and that by "the tender mercy of God, the dawn from on high will break upon us" (Lk 1:78). The cry of 10 men echoes the cry for mercy of the poor man (Lk 16:24) and of the man who is blind (Lk 18:38-39).

Significance of Samaritan Returning

These outsiders express the important qualities of discipleship, shown earlier in the Gospel by the mother of Jesus (Lk 1:38; 2:19) and affirmed in the Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:46-49). They heard the word of Jesus and acted on it by going to show themselves to the priests to be examined and then undergo ritual cleansing as prescribed in Leviticus 13-14.

Although the 10 men are all outcasts they mix together regardless of being Jew or Samaritan. One of them — a Samaritan while presumably the others are Jews — returns "praising God" (Lk 17:15) which in Luke is a faith response to the wonders of God. "He prostrated himself" on the sacred earth at the feet of Jesus and thanked him.



The Samaritan's healing has tones of resurrection. He is released from a form of death. Jesus tells him to rise up and "go on your way" (Lk 17:19). His faith has not cured him but has saved him — as did the faith of the anointing woman in house of Simon (Lk 7:50), the woman with a haemorrhage (Lk 8:48) and the repentant criminal at the cross (Lk 23:43).

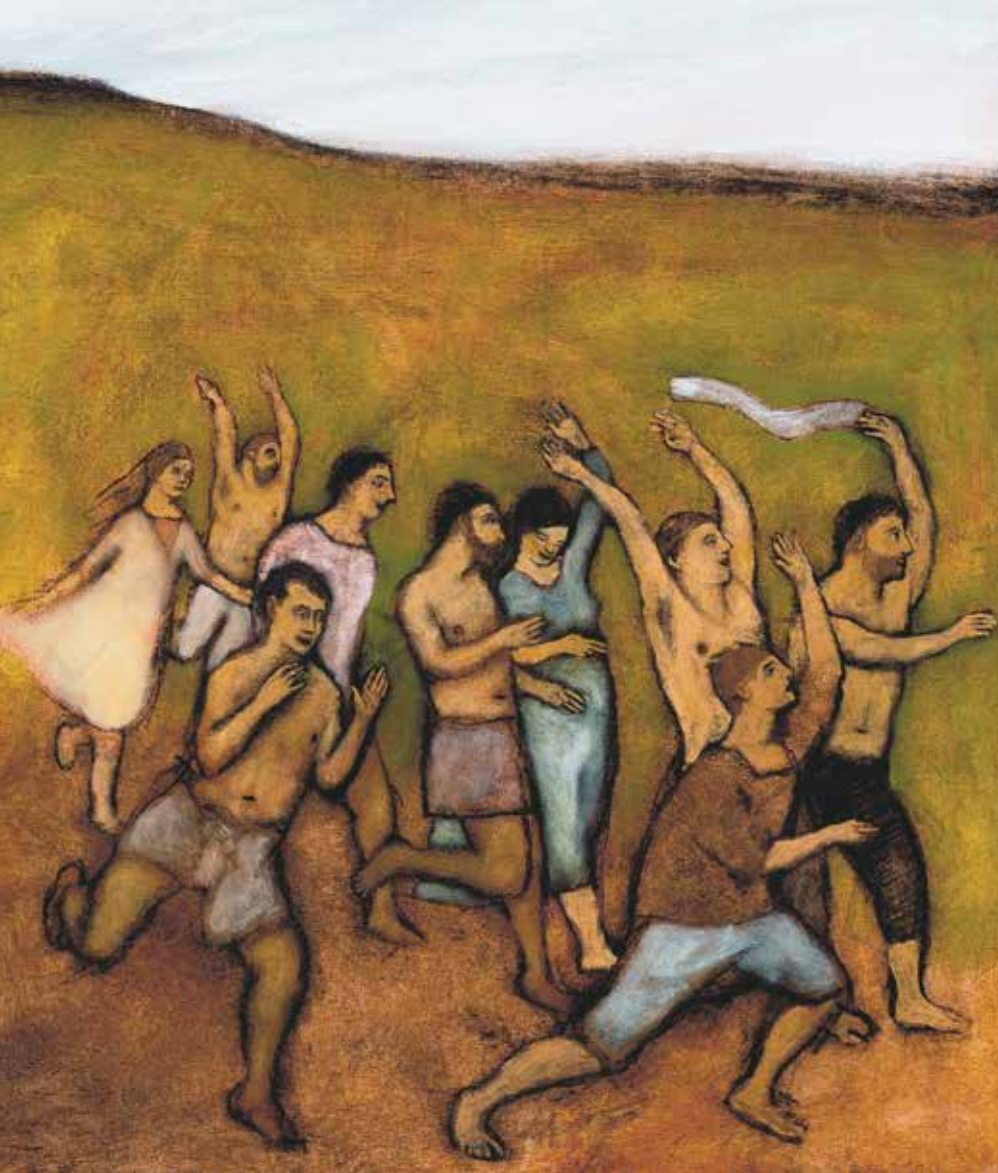
This Story for Us

In the New Testament, the noun leprosy (*lepra*) and the adjective leprous (*lepros*) are found only in the Synoptic Gospels. Leprosy names the disease of a man Jesus healed (Mk 1:42, Mt 8:31; Lk 5:12,13). Luke adds that "the man was full of leprosy." According to Mark and Luke, "the leprosy left him," while Matthew says: "his leprosy was cleansed."

The adjective "leprous" is used of Simon at whose house Jesus is dining when a woman anoints his head (Mk 14:3; Mt 26:6). The commission of Jesus to his disciples includes "make clean the leprous" (Mt 10:8). "The leprous

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thank Jesus. We can reflect on our own giving and receiving gratitude especially for God's providence which we can easily overlook.

Leprosy Today

I visited the graves of people who had died at the leprosy colony on Quail Island, in Lyttelton Harbour. It was established in 1907, the only one in New Zealand. In 1925 the remaining people were sent to a colony in Fiji. About 30 years ago I accompanied a Missionary Sister of the Society of Mary who worked with the Pacific Leprosy Foundation on the Tonga island of Vava'u. The biggest challenge they faced was shame – felt by those who had the disease and their families.

And leprosy still exists – the Pacific Leprosy Foundation provides information about the disease itself and those who suffer from it. Leprosy is a disease of poverty and remains a serious and social problem in the Pacific and New Zealand. Today, the Foundation manages projects to assist those affected by leprosy in Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, New Zealand and Tuvalu. Medical advances now provide both a cure for leprosy and for prevention. If resourced sufficiently, this disease could not only be mitigated but eliminated. 🗨️

13 October Luke 17:11–19
RL 28th Sunday Ordinary Time
RCL 18th Sunday After Pentecost

Painting: *Ten Lepers Healed* by Brian Kershnik ©
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are cleansed" is found in the report Jesus sends back to John the Baptist (Mt 11:5; Lk 7:22). "Leprous" is used to describe many who were afflicted in the time of the prophet Elisha (4:27). And in our healing story are 10 leprosy men (*leproi andres*) (Lk 17:12).

But the word "leper" is not found. Persons are not named by, or after, or from the disease which afflicts them. Some Bible translations are mindful of this. The New Jerusalem Bible has "ten men suffering from a virulent skin-disease." The Rheims translation (first published 1582) has "ten men who were lepers." Other versions have "ten lepers."

The implications and outcomes of translating the adjective leprosy (*lepros*) into the noun leper or lepers, can make us take stock of the ways we might label people with a sickness or disability.

This story invites us to be mindful about how we name people. Giving people the name of their sickness, disability, race or other difference from us, hinders us from relating to

them as neighbours, fellow disciples, friends. Instead we want to focus on the person – not on the condition.

In Luke's Gospel the 10 men society had cast out are shown to have recognised Jesus who healed them. Significantly in this story the person who was most marginalised, not just by skin condition but also by race, is the only one who returns to



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PUT IT IN YOUR HEART

KATHLEEN RUSHTON introduces the apocalyptic writing in Luke 21:5-19 and suggests how it can help us think about and act on the crises of our times.

In a recent *New Zealand Listener*, religious thinker and author Karen Armstrong wrote about the tendency across world religions today to read scripture in a literal way. Premodern readers, in contrast, had a much more inventive and mystical approach to reading sacred texts. As the end of the liturgical year draws near, we have the opportunity to rediscover the art of scripture in the apocalyptic writings of Luke 21. The apocalyptic genre is found in biblical and non-canonical writings.

Imagine a Different World

The word “apocalypse” means an “unveiling”. Vivid symbols and imagery serve to lift the veil of ordinary experience to reveal things as they really are. These writings

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word of God” which break into the situation of the pilgrim People of God who need encouragement or guidance or a call to conversion and recommitment. David Rhoads explains: “An apocalyptic stance is more radical than a prophetic stance. Prophecy calls for a reform of the current order. Apocalyptic literature challenges readers to question the core values that make the society work and dares its readers to imagine a different world.”

We need to resist reading Jesus’s words in Luke 21:5–19 in an exclusively literal way. They’re sharp, harsh words and in vivid imagery portray a difficult destiny, a sense of time running out, impending judgement, expectations of “the end” and the meaning of “the in-between” times. While we can’t easily make sense of Jesus’s message today, his sense of urgency and insistence will speak to us. Never in the history of

humankind has the Earth community been as alert to a global crisis of such social, economic and ecological proportions as now.

Three Stages of the Gospels

Luke 21 oscillates backwards and forwards and inwards and outwards into the mystery of Jesus who in his humanity unveils the mystery of God. In unpacking this chapter, it is helpful to recall the three stages of the formation of the Gospels: stage 1: the time of Jesus and his life in Earth; stage 2: the time of the oral tradition when the Risen Jesus was proclaimed in the preaching of the disciples (30s–70s CE); and stage 3: the time when the four Gospels were written (70s–90s).

These stages are implicit in Luke 21. The first part (Lk 21:5–24) addresses the hard times experienced by Luke’s community in the Roman Empire in the 80s, about 50 years after Jesus’s death (stage 3). Jerusalem

had fallen and the Temple had been destroyed (70 CE). Jesus is presented in Luke 21 using symbols and imagery to talk about those events as if they were still in the future. The gospel drama itself, however, is set in Jesus's lifetime (stage 1). The destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple had not yet happened (stage 2). The second part (Lk 21:25–36) creates confidence for yet another time of Jesus – now, our present and future time when we glimpse him so we may “stand with confidence before the Son of Humanity”.

Jesus in Jerusalem

Jesus's long journey to Jerusalem ends. Large crowds welcome him into Jerusalem (Lk 19:28–40). Once there he weeps over the city, cleanses the Temple and teaches even though the leaders watch him and send out spies (Lk 19–20). Jesus watches “the rich people putting their gifts into the treasury” and the poor widow giving all she has (Lk 21:1–4). All was not well with the Temple system.

The disciples are in awe at the beauty of the Temple (Lk 21:5). Rightly it was considered one of the most beautiful buildings in the Roman Empire. Jesus's vivid description of the destruction of Jerusalem (Lk 20:20–24) recalls historical events which for Luke's community had already happened. In the spring of 70 CE, the Roman General Titus captured and destroyed the city and the Temple. Even now in Rome we can see Judean captives carrying the seven-branched candlestick and other treasures from the Temple embossed on the Triumphal Arch of Titus built to celebrate this victory.

For Our Reflection

We read and reflect on Scripture in our quest for God's mission in our times which will bring us to moral and spiritual transformation and ethical action to change the way things are. We seek to ponder the Word of God in our hearts as Mary did before she decided on the right actions for her (Lk 2:19, 51). I offer three suggestions for our own pondering which may inspire and help us imagine the transformations needed in our time.

Jesus warns of the times when “you have the opportunity to testify” (Lk 21:13). In facing those times Jesus warns: “Beware lest you be deceived” (Lk 21:8) and “do not panic” (Lk 21:9). Luke is concentrating on the community's suffering during the days of hardship, persecution, destruction, wars, earthquakes, famines and plagues. What happened to Jesus and his disciples in their time is written as if it happened in the time of Luke's hearers and through the living Word as in our time today. We can ponder the suffering of people and lands devastated by war, forests burnt for pastoral development, oceans used for waste disposal, species habitats ruined and imagine a restored world. We can learn from the ignorance of the past, the abuse of power and wilful destruction and work together now to halt the damage and restore health within Earth.

After the invitation in Lk 21:5–13 of “a chance for you to bear witness”, we are asked to “put it in your hearts” (this is the literal Greek, as opposed to “keep this carefully in mind” (JB) or “make up your minds” (NRSV)). This echoes what Elizabeth's and Zechariah's neighbours felt at John's birth: “All the ones hearing *put in their heart*” (Lk 1:66). We can understand this as heart stuff – our quest for God and for transformation – something that is definitely relevant for us today. Jesus continues promising the Holy Spirit

“for I will give you speech [literally, a mouth] and a wisdom . . . you shall gain possession of your lives by your *consistent resistance*” (Lk 21:19). It is by pondering and evaluating the information available to us in light of the overall gospel message that we commit to a new way – to action with others to relieve suffering and allow life to grow.

It is this “consistent resistance” (usually translated as “patient endurance”) that challenges us today. It suggests a positive, courageous, unyielding, loving, responsive lifelong perseverance to resist ways that destroy and dare to imagine and act on life-giving options for the common good of the Earth community.

We read scripture in mystical and inventive ways in our quest for God in order to be transformed to take little steps to live with wonder, respect and reverence for people and all life in Earth in our challenging social, economic and ecological times. 🧑🏿🧑🏻🧑🏾

17 November Luke 21:5–19
RL 33rd Sunday Ordinary Time
RCL 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Painting: *Blue Rope* by John Dahlsen
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Theology



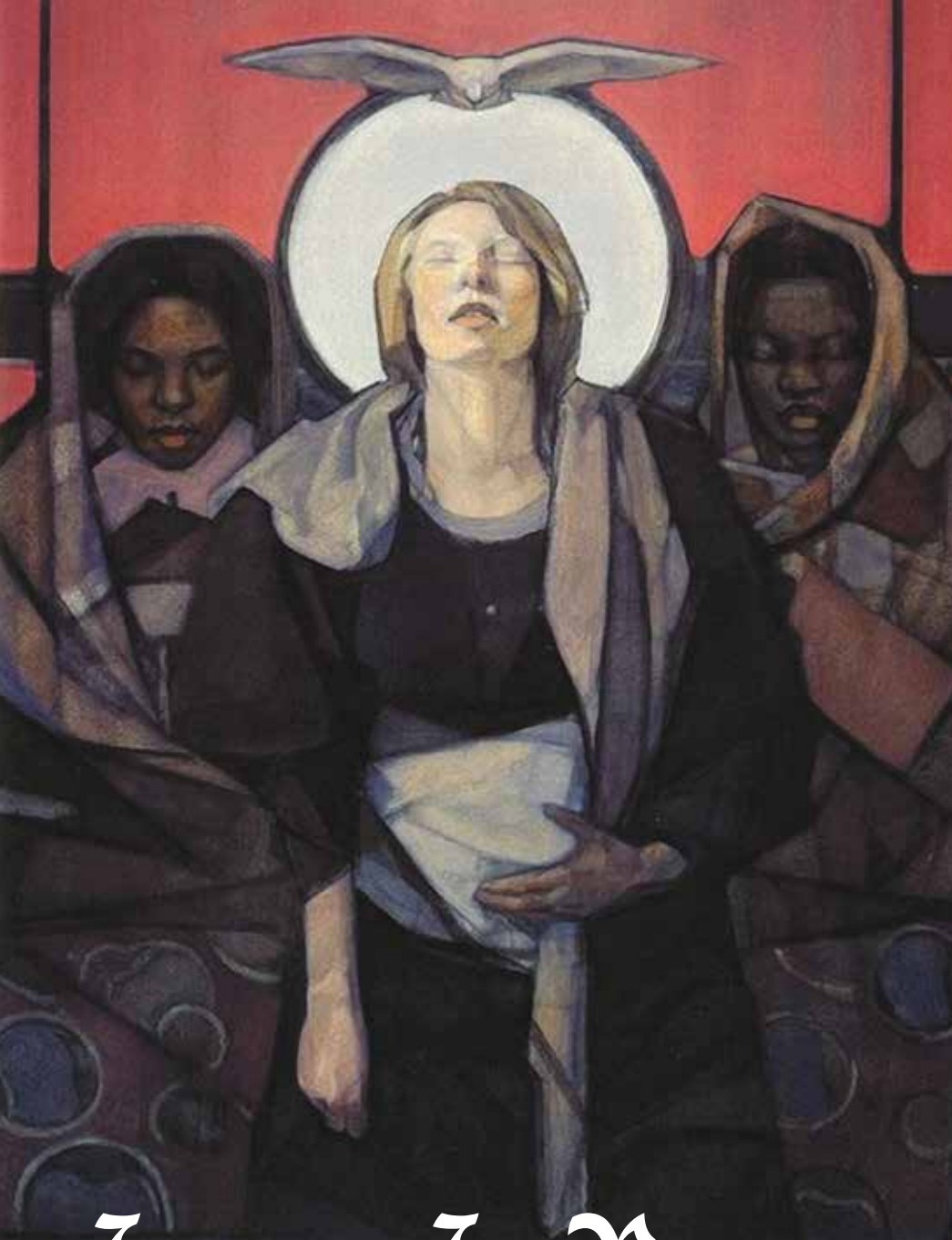
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Jesus Is Born

KATHLEEN RUSHTON explains how our usual image of the birth of Jesus is different from what we find in Luke 2:1–20.

We'll see many Christmas cribs in homes and churches this season — Joseph, Mary and the baby in a stable with animals and with shepherds and kings visiting.

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These crib sets derive more from the Protevangelium of James, a “novel” written about 200CE by an unknown Christian, than from the Gospels. And even our understanding of the gospel accounts need to be informed by a knowledge of the first-century Middle Eastern community and culture.

Community Involvement

In Luke's Gospel there is no mention of the Bethlehem community into

which Mary and Joseph arrived. Yet in that culture a woman about to give birth would have been given special care and attention by other women.

The biblical scholar Kenneth Bailey, who lived and researched in the Middle East, suggests that Luke's Gospel gives us insight into the hospitality and care given to Mary. He points to the shepherds who “returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen” (Lk 2:20) — the “all” would have included the quality of hospitality that they received. If the family had not been sheltered and cared for adequately, the shepherds would have been outraged and said: “Come home with us! Our women will take care of you!” The honour of the village rested on hospitality.

Joseph of “the House and Family of David”

Luke writes of Joseph returning to his origins. He set out from Nazareth in Galilee for Bethlehem, the city of David, in Judea to be registered because he is “of the house and family of David” (Lk 2:4). When Joseph introduced himself as “Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat” (Lk 4:23-24) we know homes would have opened to him because the extended family and their connection to their place of origin was important in the Middle East.

Joseph was “royal” being from the tribe of King David. Even though the Hebrew Scriptures call Jerusalem the “City of David”, locally Bethlehem was known as the “City of David”. As a member of that famous family, Joseph would have been welcome. Another possibility would have been to stay with Mary's cousin Elizabeth who lived close to Bethlehem.

“While They Were There”

Jesus was not born the same night as his parents arrived. They had time to find shelter in a house.

Simple houses in Palestine usually had only two rooms. One

room at the end of house was kept exclusively for guests. The other was the main room where the family cooked, ate, lived and slept. At one end of the family room steps led down to a door, or a section of the room was partitioned off with timber where the family's donkey, cow and few sheep were herded at night. People and animals used the same door into the house. When Joseph and Mary arrived the guest room was already full so they were taken into the family room.

So when we read that Mary laid the baby in a "manger, because there is no place for them in the inn" (Lk 2:7), it's important to have the house layout in mind. The manger was a hollowed out stone placed by the animals' part of the family room. In Luke, the translation of "inn" means simply "a place to stay" – different from "the inn" in the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:34–35).

"And She Gave Birth"

When Mary was giving birth the family room would have been cleared of men. The local midwife and other village women would have attended, advised and cared for Mary. As was usual for a newborn in this peasant culture, Jesus was placed in the manger in the family room.

This is a different scenario from what we have grown up with and that shown in Christmas crib scenes – a couple alone with their new baby. Nancy Action says that such scenes draw our attention away from "that graced moment in the generosity of women, of patience, of vulnerability, of sacred waiting and of knowing that is resonant with the human experience of childbirth across many times and cultures." In fact, the God of love is born in a humble situation but one full of intimacy and community.

Reflecting on the Gospel

We recognise Jesus's birth as the incarnation of the Divine in our world – the common home of all life. But we can be so caught up in our human community that we miss the significance of Divine incarnation for the community of planet Earth and the cosmos. This can stop us from appreciating the revelation of God in

our midst through birth, hospitality, care and community in all its diversity and complexity.

At this time in particular we can become more attuned to evolutionary consciousness which John Haught describes as our capacity to be conscious participants in the evolution of our cultures and human community in order to "contribute, both as one human family and each one in our own modest way, to the ongoing creation of a now-awaking universe."

We can be so caught up in our human community that we miss the significance of Divine incarnation for the community of planet Earth and the cosmos.

This may sound out of our reach, beyond our understanding, but we see it taking "flesh" around us in simple and profound acts such as welcoming immigrants, attending to threatened species, including broken families, honouring difference, encouraging growth, learning about the cosmos. And we can connect with the depths of incarnation through contemplation and reflection.

We have many examples of how people are becoming more aware of the dignity of the life of other than human creatures. Recently two of Aotearoa New Zealand's Olympic

sailors set up a charity for the conservation of ocean life. Their first focus is to preserve the antipodean albatross. They explained: "We need to step up as a team because there are things we can do today to save them from extinction. These birds are New Zealanders."


Pope Francis is encouraging us to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home in order to care for it. He says that for deep change it's "not enough to include a few superficial ecological considerations while failing to question the logic which underlies present-day culture" which is human-centred and too often profit driven at the expense of other life.

In our gift giving this Christmas (as well as a subscription to *Tui Motu*) we might consider donating to charities which give animals – chickens, goats – to families in poor regions who can look after them and will be sustained by their eggs and milk. It's another way of stretching our focus on the Divine in the community. 🌅

Christmas: Both RL (Midnight and Dawn) and RCL (Eve, Morn and Middyay) use verses from Luke 2:1-20

Painting: *Mary with the Midwives* by Janet McKenzie © 2009 USA
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