Daily readings to prepare for session 6

Day 1: Messiah and the Gospels – Jesus enters the story

Read: Luke 1.1–4

Reflect:

What memories do you have of studying literature in school? The best books leave you feeling something or considering a change of perspective. That doesn't happen unintentionally. Authors write with a purpose and carefully craft their words to achieve it. The Gospel writers are no different; they write with intention.

What do we learn about Luke's purpose in writing?

One of the most frequently asked questions about the Bible concerns its reliability.

After all, sensational stories sell books but are they based on facts? Are the accounts of Jesus' life trustworthy?

Luke's Gospel is one of the earliest accounts of Jesus' life. He starts by telling us how and why he wrote. There's nothing cryptic about this preface!

Luke wanted to capture the authentic testimonies he heard on paper so that Theophilus could have 'certainty of the things' he'd been taught. He wanted Theophilus (whom we know little about, but his name means 'friend of God') to have confidence that Jesus really is who he claimed to be. Luke set out the story of Jesus's life to answer people's doubts, showing how he fulfils the story of God, Israel and indeed the whole world!

Luke's 'method' will satisfy many readers. He was a doctor, so he knew the importance of taking care and being orderly. Read his work and you'll see that he consulted primary sources, and records history, not hearsay.

Unlike most biographies, the Gospels only briefly mention Jesus' first 30 years. Instead, they focus on his final three years of ministry, and particularly his final week, as if to say, 'This is not a typical end – his death is the climax of his life!'

The Gospels are no ordinary biographies, because Jesus is no ordinary man. He's God entering his own story and walking onto the stage of human history. So, the clear intention of the Gospel writers wasn't just to record a great life from the past, but to call people, both then and now, to put their faith in Jesus.

After reading the Gospels, we must face the most important questions of all: do we believe Jesus is who claimed to be – the Son of God? And, will we make him our Lord and Saviour?

Respond:

Are you struggling for certainty today? Who can you be honest with and together work through your doubts today?

Day 2: Angels, a virgin and a song – the coming of Jesus
Read: Luke 1.1–56
Reflect:
Have you ever tried putting a face to a name? Maybe you've conversed with someone via email for a long time or listened to someone on the radio without ever seeing their face. When you finally have the chance to meet, perhaps they look different to how you imagined them.
Luke begins his Gospel account with a flurry of angelic activity. All of heaven knows that something major is happening on earth. At last, God is putting a face to the name!
What do we learn about Jesus and his mission from Luke's opening chapter?
Why Mary? And why Nazareth? The action didn't take place in the commercial centre of the world and Mary was no influencer! But that's exactly the point. God ignored all the rules of an effective PR campaign and chose the unlikeliest place and the most unlikely circumstances. God made himself an outsider, so the outsider can know that God knows them. God's heart is for the nobodies from nowhere and, ultimately, he came to bring the outsider in. How? Look to his name.
'Jesus' (verse 31) comes from an ancient Hebrew name pronounced Yeshua and it means 'the Lord saves'. Connecting Yeshua with the name 'Joshua' causes everything to fall into place. God used Moses to lead Israel out of captivity, but it was Joshua who led them into the promised land. Jesus is our new Joshua. And he doesn't just break the chains of oppression, he's the one who leads us into a wide open place. He's a rescuer and guide for the oppressed and the hopeless.
He was also to be given the throne of David (verse 32). We may not feel the weight of that statement, but Mary did. Look to her joyful song of praise to God for what he was about to do. It speaks of her amazement that God was including her in his plans and thankfulness that he was keeping his word.
God had promised David a descendant who would establish his everlasting Kingdom (see 2 Samuel 7.8–16), and rule with love and justice. God kept his word! Jesus arrived as saviour and king. He made a way for us to be saved, giving hope to the world and establishing a reign that will last for ever.

Respond:
Let your heart sing Mary's song, because Jesus is saviour and king!

Day 3: Temptation, healing and preaching – the ministry of Jesus
Read: Luke 4.1–44
Reflect:
God is not distant. He doesn't keep us at arm's length, even when we might expect him to. Involving ourselves in the mess of this world doesn't always seem worth it but, when it comes to God, Luke's Gospel bats that notion away.
Luke wants us to know that Jesus is the saviour of all people. And, in order to save people, he had to get his hands dirty. We have a God who doesn't turn his nose up at our mess but rather takes it on himself.
What did the temptation of Jesus (verses 1–13) mean for him then and for us now?
God's Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. Hoping that Jesus' resolve would be weakened after 40 days without food, the devil tried to entice him into various sins: from using his power to satisfy his own desires, to worshipping someone other than God, to putting God to the test.
Jesus left the wilderness victorious, ready to begin his public ministry. And the suffering he experienced wasn't without purpose. Hebrews 4.15 speaks of Jesus being a leader who is not 'unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses,' because he was 'tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin'. When we turn to him in our struggles, he truly can understand what we're going through.
Equally important is the fact that Jesus successfully resisted the devil and did not sin – not in the wilderness or at any time afterwards. In an echo of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, the devil tempted Jesus to turn a stone into bread and eat. But where they sinned, Jesus did not. Jesus is the new Adam and in him humanity gets a new start. Where once the relationship with God was broken, Jesus makes a way for it to be restored.
What do we learn about the priorities of Jesus' ministry in verses 14–44?
Jesus knew what it was to be busy, but he never lost his compassion for people. He healed the sick and drove out evil spirits because he cared deeply for individuals. Both his teaching and his actions provided a glimpse of how the world is meant to be and how it one day will be.
Jesus poured himself out for the people and we get a subtle hint of the toll this took on him when Luke records that 'at daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place' (verse 42). When people found him and made yet more demands he had to stick to his priorities: 'I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent' (verse 43). Jesus was focused on reaching as many people as possible.

Respond:
Ask God to help your life reflect the priorities of Jesus and equip you with everything you need.

Day 4: Calling, confession and transfiguration – the identity of Jesus
Read: Luke 9.1–36
Reflect:
Have you ever been part of a dysfunctional team? Because of the world we live in, there's a good chance you have.
Israel was a dysfunctional team. God originally called them to display his goodness and love to the surrounding peoples, promising Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation and 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (Genesis 12.3). But the Old Testament records Israel's dysfunctional teamwork: they couldn't remain united and on task.
Jesus' mission as the Messiah was to mobilise a new team that would display his sacrificial love.
What did Jesus call and equip the 12 apostles to do (verses 1–6)?
From a hated tax collector to an average Joe, Jesus really knew how to pick a team! This new team didn't have it all together but when Jesus gave them his authority, everything changed. Jesus is still doing this today; he's still picking ordinary people, empowering them with his Spirit and sending them out with authority.
Reminiscent of the 12 tribes of Israel, Jesus called together the 12 apostles and sent them out as his representatives to proclaim the Kingdom of God and heal the sick – a remarkable demonstration of his love, goodness and power to save.
What does Peter's confession (verses 18–20) and Jesus' transfiguration (verses 28–36) tell us about the identity of Jesus?
Peter announces his conviction that Jesus is the promised Messiah and then, about eight days later, Peter, John and James go up the mountain to pray with Jesus and see him in a changed state – they get a glimpse of him in his future glory.
Moses and Elijah appear too, representing the Law and the prophets of the Old Testament. Notice what they talked about – Jesus' departure, or literally his 'exodus'. Jesus had come to bring about the ultimate exodus, not just for Israel but for the whole world!
Finally, cloud descends on them, the sign of God's presence, and a voice declares, 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him'. These events dramatically reveal and confirm Jesus' divine status.
But don't miss Jesus' words to his disciples in verses 21–27. It must have been confusing to hear him say that he must suffer, be rejected and even die. Here is the paradox that runs throughout the life of Jesus – he is the king, but not the one we would expect: not born in a palace, but in poverty; not ruling by the sword, but

by God’s word; not oppressing others, but suffering for others. His crown was made of thorns.

Respond:

Do you ever feel useless or inadequate? Jesus sees beyond our outward appearance and says, ‘I want to use you to change the world!’ Follower of Jesus, remember the call and the authority you go with today!

Day 5: Parables, miracles and the cost – the call of Jesus
Read: Luke 18.1–43
Reflect:
Jesus was a master teacher and storyteller. He knew how powerful stories can be and he made a habit of telling them. Stories can get past people's defences and open them up to new perspectives. Parables were his way of communicating to the open-minded and simultaneously concealing truth from the closed-minded.
Will we let the stories of Jesus open us up or close us off to his central message about the kingdom of God today?
What do the parables of Luke 18.1–14 teach us about the nature of God's Kingdom?
From Jesus' time to today, we often find that the things we value are in opposition to the values of God's Kingdom. God's value system turns everything on its head. The Kingdom of God is where insiders are outsiders, and outsiders are insiders. Do you feel like an outsider today? Through his stories Jesus teaches that we should never give up on prayer because God is close to the hurting and the lowly, and he is concerned with justice.
Jesus' stories also reveal what true religion is. It's not about our outward appearance, but our hearts. Unless we humble ourselves, acknowledging our total reliance on the mercy of God like the tax collector in verse 13, although we might look 'good' on the outside we will remain unjustified before God.
Humility is the entry point for the beautiful new world of the Kingdom of God. This is so different from the values our world preaches.
What do we learn about the call of Jesus in the experience of the rich young ruler?
Ultimately, the rich young ruler was asking Jesus, 'What do I need to do to find real life?' Jesus' response was, 'Sell all your possessions.' Why did he say this? Because Jesus knew the young man loved his possessions more than he loved God. His response to Jesus showed he was in danger of trading eternal life for the immediate satisfaction of wealth. If we're honest, we're all in danger of making a similar trade.
The disciples were baffled by Jesus' observation about how difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God. 'Who then can be saved?' they asked. Jesus' response was: 'What is impossible with man is possible with God.'
Jesus makes the impossible possible. Jesus came to call back people who had traded away life with God for lesser things, be they rebels or young rulers. Jesus came to call back you and me.

The invitation from Jesus is clear – he says, ‘Come to me. Let me make the impossible possible for you.’ Have you responded to the call?

Respond:

‘For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’ What difference could this teaching make to your day today?

Day 6: The trial, the cross and the tomb – the death of Jesus
Read: Luke 23.1–56
Reflect:
The cross would be a strange marketing choice for any brand. No major corporation would buy into it. But this symbol of execution has now become the brand logo of a global movement. The cross tells us that God so loved the world that his son was crucified for us.
What do we learn about Jesus at his trial?
Pilate's view of Jesus was clear – he had nothing on him. He also had the power to free him, but he was under pressure to condemn him and Jesus made no defence.
Jesus knew what had to happen; the prophet Isaiah had said it centuries earlier: 'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter' (Isaiah 53.7).
Jesus made sure nothing was going to hinder him from fulfilling his role. For sinful people to be made clean, a sinless man had to die in their place.
What are the implications of the cross for us and our world today?
From midday to 3 pm, darkness fell. The curtain of the temple was torn in two as Jesus gave up his spirit. These are not random details; they communicate what the cross is about.
On the cross, Jesus soaked up all of God's righteous anger towards evil. On the cross, Jesus was banished into deepest, darkest exile. He went there so that we don't have to. On the cross, Jesus made a way for us to come into God's presence. For on the cross, the greatest ever swap took place: Jesus took the treatment we deserve, so that we might receive the treatment only he deserves.
In John Bunyan's book, The Pilgrim's Progress, the pilgrim – whose name is Christian – makes his way up a hill, with a grave at the bottom and a cross at the top. He has got used to carrying a heavy rucksack of sin but, as he comes up to the cross, the burden falls off his shoulders and rolls down the hill and into the grave. Forgiven and freed, he 'gave three leaps for joy, and went on singing'.
Respond:
Are you struggling today? Remember that for us to go free, Jesus had to die. Knowing he was faithful to us then, do we think he'll abandon us now? He will not.

Day 7: Resurrection and ascension – the victory of Jesus

Read: Luke 24.1–52

Reflect:

Have you ever had a day where everything changed? Life has many ordinary days, but some stand out. Some involve decisions or events that alter the course of your life, such as wedding days and job interviews – once these days and moments happen, everything changes.

The Bible story is shaped like an hourglass. It all funnels down to a narrow point as the Messiah dies and rises again. It all centres on one weekend that changed the world.

What do the words 'he is not here; he has risen' mean for us today?

Luke records women arriving at the tomb to tend to Jesus' body with spices, as was the custom. The least they could do was give Jesus a dignified burial. Jesus really did die on the cross – you only bring spices to a tomb when you know there's a dead body there.

But they're met by two men who ask them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead?' (verse 6). The one they're looking for isn't in the grave and there's no need for spices because he's alive again.

When Jesus rose to life, he lifted humanity to new heights. He was the same person, yet totally transformed. This was a physical resurrection. This was a new creation.

What do we learn from the disciples' experience on the road to Emmaus?

The two who walked away from Jerusalem felt hopeless and deflated. They really had let themselves believe that Jesus was the one who would free them from the oppression of Rome (verse 21). They'd believed in a story, but it wasn't quite the one that God had written.

The risen Jesus met them on the road and took them through the Scriptures explaining how the whole story centred on him (verse 27). God was setting people free, not from Rome, but from their captivity to sin.

Like the two disciples, when we recognise Jesus and the significance of all that he has done for us, our hearts begin to burn and our spirits soar. God's promises and plan did not fail and nothing can derail the hope we have in Jesus. Because the resurrection of Jesus really happened, our lives don't end in hopelessness; instead, we have a sure and certain hope of eternal life.

Respond:

Followers of Jesus are people of hope. How could you extend that hope to a hurting and disappointed world today?