

Luke 1:1-4

St Bart's, 27th June 2010

What a week it's been. England vs Slovenia – and we made it through to the quarter final. Maybe that was the highlight of your week.

Less exciting, but much more important, was George Osborne's budget. Tough times are ahead. I guess every one of us will feel the pinch as taxes rise and spending falls. George Osborne risks becoming the most unpopular man in the country – but he has tried to shift the blame to the previous government. “We have a terrible legacy” has been his message. “For too many years government policy has been 'spend now pay later'. We need to act now to prevent disaster down the road.”

The Church of England has a terrible legacy as well. For too many years, in parishes all over the country, it seems church policy has been “please come to church. We won't ask too much of you. Take communion, join the electoral roll, give some spare change. That will do – and we hope you don't mind.”

Jesus is completely different. I've been focussing my attention on Luke's gospel recently. Listen to Jesus talk about what it means to follow him:

- Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.
- Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I say?
- My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.
- If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Every day of our lives Jesus summons us to follow him and die. That is the call. The Bible says nothing about churchgoers. It says everything about being disciples. Learners. Followers.

Luke's gospel will challenge us to the depths of our being. If this message is true, then *everything* changes.

And so Luke begins his gospel by telling us that this message *is* true. This message *is trustworthy*. You can be *certain* of it. Luke says he has set out to write an orderly account of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. And there are 4 reasons why we can trust what he writes.

(I) This account is one of many.

Verse 1: “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us.” Luke's account of Jesus is not the only one. We have 3 others – Matthew, Mark and John – but it sounds as if there may have been others doing the rounds. Over time, the 4 gospels as we have them were recognised to be those that God had inspired. But as Luke wrote to Theophilus, Luke knew that Theophilus could check what he had written against what others had written.

Authors like Dan Brown, of the Da Vinci Code, will try to tell us that these gospels were written hundreds of years later by powerful bishops and rulers trying to force their version of Christianity onto others. But that's nonsense. The stories of Jesus were doing the rounds right from the beginning, of course they were! If anyone started adding new stories, they'd have been rejected straight away. We can trust Luke's account because it matches what others have said about Jesus.

(II) This account is based on eye-witness evidence.

Verse 2: the stories of Jesus were handed down to Luke and others by “those who from the first were eyewitnesses.” This isn't Chinese Whispers. This isn't some rumour spread on Twitter (that's an internet thing, for those who don't know). These are eye-witness accounts.

Do you remember how the apostle John began his 1st Letter? “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it.”

(III) (We can trust Luke's account because) Those who passed on the message were “servants of the word”.

Verse 2 again. The people who passed on the accounts of Jesus were not only eyewitnesses, they were also “servants of the word.” That is, the word – the message of Jesus – had supreme authority. These eyewitnesses had no right to change it, to tidy it up, to make it sound more impressive.

Again, people will sometimes tell you that the gospels might have their origin in historical truth, but that over time they were changed, bits were added – so that the Christ we see here in the Bible is not necessarily the same as the Jesus of history. But again, that is rubbish. The apostles were servants of the word, not masters of the word. As you read the gospels, I think this is just obvious. Jesus' hard bits of teaching aren't brushed out. The disciples frequently make mistakes, get things wrong – there's no attempt to make them appear as heroes. You can trust Luke's gospel because those who passed on the message were “servants of the word”.

As an aside, that's a phrase that I want to own for myself. As Vicar I have no authority of my own, except that of being a servant of the word. It is a priority of mine to spend time working hard on sermons making sure that everything I say is based on the Bible. If I ever teach something, from this pulpit or in conversation, that contradicts or ignores what the Bible says, then challenge me. Ask me how I support what I say, and if I can't defend what I say from the Scriptures, then tell me to shut up. Kick me out of the church! I am a servant of the word.

(IV) Luke has carefully investigated everything

Back to the Bible. Verse 3, “Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also for me to write an orderly account for you.”

Careful investigation. Luke admits that he is not an eyewitness, so he has investigated and researched the stories. All the stories. For example, it is very likely that Luke met with Mary, mother of Jesus. This is a gospel written with an eye for detail and accuracy.

Put these 4 things together

- this account is one of many
- it is based on eye-witness accounts
- those who passed it on were servants of the word
- it has been carefully investigated

put these together and we can have confidence in this gospel.

That is so important. As I said at the beginning, if this message is true – then it changes everything. God wants you to put all your eggs in the basket marked 'Jesus'. You are called to entrust yourself

entirely to him.

At school, and during my time at University, I did quite a lot of caving, or potholing. Whenever I mention caving, everyone always thinks of small, tight tunnels. There are plenty of those. But there are plenty of large caverns. One cave is Lancaster Pot. Up on the Yorkshire Moors, a metal plate on the ground can be opened up to find a narrow hole dropping away. But don't be deceived. You abseil, awkwardly, through some 20feet of passageway. But then suddenly it opens out, and you're dangling from a single rope, the floor 70 feet below. Hanging in mid air, that's when you need to know that the rope is trustworthy, and that the other end is firmly attached to solid rock. You have entrusted yourself entirely to that rock.

We are to entrust ourselves entirely to the rock that is Jesus. You can be a churchgoer and actually your life depends on the size of your bank account, or the security of your job. But being a disciple is completely different. Being a disciple means adapting our spending according to Jesus' teaching. Being a disciple means raising children according to Jesus' teaching. It means setting our church priorities in line with Jesus' priorities.

If we are hanging EVERYTHING off Jesus then we need to know that this gospel is trustworthy. And Luke insists it is. Here, in these pages, Luke's writing will enable you to know the CERTAINTY of the things you have been taught.

So read it. Pick up a gospel and start reading. Get into the Bible. Put your roots down deep in God's Word. Maybe the Explore Notes or *Time with God* will help you do that.

Let me close with one final thought.

Look back at verse 1. “Many have undertaken to draw up an account

of the things that have been fulfilled among us.” He doesn't say, “the things that have happened among us” but “the things that have been *fulfilled* among us.”

Luke's gospel will show us how to live. But more importantly it will show us God keeping his promises. The promises, predictions and plans made long in the past, recorded in the Old Testament: these have been fulfilled and Luke shows us how.

Luke's account is trustworthy, but it also reveals a trustworthy God. A God who keeps his promises. A God whose word you can depend on.

Keeping promises can be costly. Let me give you a simple example. We're opening our home to you this afternoon. Essentially we've made a promise – that if you turn up, between 3 and 5 pm, we promise to let you in and serve you tea or coffee and cake. To keep that promise is costly. It cost money to buy the ingredients to make the cakes. It cost me time yesterday as I tidied up my study. And if, at 5 minutes to 3, I am watching, say, an old episode of Top Gear and really enjoying it, it will cost me to turn it off and open the door.

It's a silly example. And of course the cost is worth it, because we get to know you better. But it shows how keeping promises can be costly.

And it cost God everything.

God promised to save a people for himself. He promised to create a people who would bring his blessing to the whole world.

And it cost him. To keep his promise God the Son left the glory of heaven and was born as a servant in a backwater of the Roman Empire. To keep his promise the Lord was persecuted, tempted, rejected, despised.

To keep his promise to you and me Jesus went to the cross. There he paid the ultimate price. The sin of the world was heaped on him, judgement day fell on him as he died.

But ask him, “was it worth it?” and the resurrected Lord Jesus will say, “YES.” “Because I get to know you.”

Luke's gospel is trustworthy. It needs to be, because Jesus calls you to death, everyday. To be a disciple means entrusting every part of your life to him. Yet, as you do so, you are giving yourself to One who gave himself for you. He paid the price. He is trustworthy even to the point of death. Come to him and find the certainty of God's love.

For use on another occasion:

G. K. Chesterton on Humility

But what we suffer from to-day is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt -- the Divine Reason. Huxley preached a humility content to learn from Nature. But the new sceptic is so humble that he doubts if he can even learn. Thus we should be wrong if we had said hastily that there is no humility typical of our time. The truth is that there is a real humility typical of our time; but it so happens that it is practically a more poisonous humility than the wildest prostrations of the ascetic. The old humility was a spur that prevented a man from stopping; not a nail in his boot that prevented him from going on. For the old humility made a man doubtful about his efforts, which might make him work harder. But the new humility makes a man doubtful about his aims, which will make him stop working altogether.