

Luke 3-4

As I mentioned last week, we will delay our study of Luke 1-2 until we cover them along with Matthew 1-2 as the “Infancy Narratives” during the season of Advent. The public life of Jesus starts with Luke 3. The year is approximately A.D. 27-29 and John the Baptist does his preaching as the new Elijah preparing the way of the Lord (Is 40:3-5, Lk 3:4-6). It is very appropriate for Luke to quote Isaiah 40, which is the beginning of the second part of this book, called Deutero-Isaiah, where the Messiah is shown to help the poor and is portrayed as the “Suffering Servant,” whom Jesus fulfills. John says he is not the Messiah and baptizes only with water; the Messiah will come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, fire being the sign of purifying, refining, and cleansing our souls. In verses 9 and 17 John warns us of the eternal fire. The good will be saved; the evil will be punished. With John the time of promise, the period of Israel, ends. With Jesus the time of fulfillment, the period of Jesus, begins, followed by the period of the Church, as we saw in Luke’s second book, Acts of the Apostles.

At the Baptism of Jesus we see Jesus praying (3:21). Many times in Luke we see Jesus at prayer, one of the dominant themes in this Gospel. He gives us excellent examples of the importance of prayer in our lives. As Jesus is baptized we observe the Blessed Trinity together all in one verse (3:22), with the Holy Spirit as the dove, the Father as the voice from heaven, and the beloved son, Jesus.

The genealogy of Jesus may on the surface appear to be boring reading. We will analyze this more in detail when we cover the “Infancy Narratives” and Matthew 1, which also presents a genealogy. The two are not the same. One important theme that Luke wants to present here is that Jesus came for all nations, so his genealogy goes back to Adam, the father of all men. Matthew wants to emphasize Jesus’ bond to Israel as the Messiah of the “Chosen People,” so his genealogy goes back to Abraham, the father of the Israelite nation. There are also other differences that we will analyze later. One other fact that Luke includes here is that Jesus, the Son of David, was 30 years old when he started his public life, the same age as David when he became king of Israel.

Luke 4 gives the narrative of the “Temptation of Jesus.” The number 40 (days or years) is a characteristic time frame in both the Old and New Testaments: Noah and the flood (Gen 7:4,17), Moses’ fast on Mt. Sinai (Ex 34:28), Israel’s journey in the desert (Deut 8:2), the twelve spies’ inspection of Canaan (Num 14:34), Israel’s oppression by the Philistines (Judg 13:1), Elijah’s fasting (1 Kgs 19:8), Nineveh’s opportunity to repent at the preaching of Jonah (Jon 3:4), the Birth of Jesus to the Presentation in the Temple (Lk 2:22), and the Resurrection to the Ascension (Acts 1:3). We see in both Luke and Matthew the same three temptations (see Mt 4:1-11) except that Luke switches the order of the last two temptations. The reason is that much of Luke’s Gospel is arranged as a path or journey to Jerusalem, so the last temptation is in Jerusalem. Also in the temptations we notice that Jesus quotes Scripture from the Book of Deuteronomy three times. The devil tries to trick him at last with a half-truth when he quotes Ps 91, but of course it doesn’t work. It does however teach us to be wary of how the devil tries to trick us sometimes!

One of my favorite stories in the Gospels is Jesus beginning his ministry in Luke with the reading of Scripture in the synagogue of Nazareth. In Lk 4:18-19 Jesus quotes from Is 61:1-2 to emphasize the spiritual liberation he will give, not the political or military deliverance that the Jews were seeking from the Messiah. Also, the simple phrase “The Spirit (the Holy Spirit) of the Lord (the Father) is upon me (the Son)” can be seen as a reference to the Trinity. At the conclusion of the reading Jesus identifies himself as the awaited Messiah when he says “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21). He is rejected in his home town of Nazareth. Jesus names other prophets who also go to the Gentiles: Elijah and Elisha. Even the demons admit Jesus is the Son of God (4:34, 41). Shouldn’t we also believe?

There will be no *Bible Page* next week. Read Luke 5 and 6 for Aug. 28.