

Deliverance in God through Jesus

St. Luke 3:2-3 “...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Three things stand out in the Gospel reading for today. First, Luke sets the context of the reading as a political one. Roman rulers are in control of Palestine. In this political governance structure there is a supreme leader with the title of Ceasar. Four regional leaders complete the level of full control Rome exercised over the Jewish people. With this governance structure there is no doubt as to who is in charge of the territory. A second thing that stands out is the role of religious leadership in this Roman governance structure. Two high priests were in charge of the temple at the time. Historians of Jewish religion have long noted the unusual occurrence of two high priests in position at any one time. I will return to this point later. Luke’s point is that there was strength in the religious leadership of the time. Yet, there is a third thing which stands out in the reading. Despite the political control of Rome, and the strength in the religious leadership, something was lacking. People in Israel were just as oppressed as were their forebears years ago in Egypt. Into this oppressive situation John the Baptist appears preaching a baptism of repentance. It is John’s preaching that Luke suggests provides the solution to the problem caused by sin as manifested in politics and religion.

Luke's Gospel was written between 35 and 40 C.E., following the death of Jesus. In the introduction to the Gospel, Luke points out that he is writing to a Roman official with a view to outlining some basic details about Jesus and his message of salvation. By announcing John the Baptist as a messenger coming from the desert or wilderness, Luke invites the people of faith to recall the event of God's deliverance of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt.

By taking a long wilderness journey, Israel experienced God's salvation or deliverance from slavery. In a similar fashion, Luke has John appearing from the desert or wilderness announcing the deliverance of all people, not just Jews, from the bondage of slavery or sin as a consequence of the politics and religious institutions of his time. Luke's commentary on the political and religious situation of the time was that people were not generally benefitting from these two institutions. In light of the problems, God intervened by sending John as a messenger of liberation. What is the nature of this liberation or salvation?

First, salvation is not to be found in the political realm. Politics is beneficial to people because it is a means of providing security for people as well as distributing and redistributing resources among the population. Security comes in the form of personal security by way of jobs, food, housing and stable families. Distributing or redistributing resources is critical since it is the business of government to secure the wellbeing of all people, especially the poor and vulnerable. Resources – both material and personal – may be found in abundance in one section of the society but not in others. Politics and its processes of governance are designed to facilitate the movement of resources in order to ensure that all citizens, especially the poor and vulnerable, are not left in a negative position. Reflecting on the situation at the time in Palestine, Luke seemed to have been of the view that there was a gap in the

level of security provided by the Roman administration. Salvation or liberation for the people was therefore not to be attained if the people were to depend on political leaders.

In today's world there is a seeming trust in politicians to solve our problems. We are presently looking to our political leaders to sign off on a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help us solve our balance of payment problems. We are being given the impression that if a deal is not signed there will be no financial hope for Jamaica. For those who take this view, the financial salvation of our country depends on our capacity to urgently sign off on a deal with the IMF. Luke was not so confident. In his view, the political structure at the time was more concentrated on dividing and ruling the people of God rather than seeking to advance their security and wellbeing. Similarly, it is not unknown for some of us to share the view that politicians are in position to improve their personal fortunes rather than free the people from the structures and institutions which are stifling their growth. For Luke, the welfare of the people is not to be found in the political institutions of the time.

What about religion? Like politics, Luke seems to have been of the view that this institution was just as hopeless in facilitating the deliverance of the people from Roman oppression. As I indicated earlier, Biblical commentators note that it is rather unusual to have two high priests in position at the same time. Two considerations are to be taken into account. First, special provision was probably made for two priests to function at the same time because of special circumstances. Second, retired priests may have been allowed to keep the title. In this case, two high priests would mean one in active service and the other retired. None of these are explained by Luke. We are therefore left with the fact of the narrative; two high

priests were in position at the time. The implication is that despite the strengthening of the religious structure, the living conditions of the people, especially the most vulnerable, was on the decline. For this reason, later in Luke's Gospel, Jesus speaks of liberation or salvation that he has brought.

In St. Luke 4:18 and 19, Jesus quotes from the Prophet Isaiah with reference to the nature of the liberation or salvation he brought for the people. He says,

¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Consistent with the preaching of John the Baptist Jesus announces that a new day has dawned with the intervention of God in history. In the history at the time political institutions were not working in favour of the people. Similarly, the religious institution was also not functioning for the benefit of the people. For John the Baptist, Luke and Jesus the systems established to care for people had failed them and so only God can intervene and provide the necessary liberation.

John the Baptist represents for Luke the best example of what it means to believe in a God of salvation or liberation. It is not by accident that Luke places John on the banks of the Jordan River. Bible readers may recall that it was at the bank of the Jordan River that a previous liberator of Israel, Joshua, stood with the people of Israel as they prepared to cross into the land of promise. Luke places John in a similar position at the river bank because he is of the view that a new day of liberation has dawned for the people of God. Politics and religion have failed to

provide the platform of liberation for the people of Israel in the first century of the Common Era. Through Jesus, whose Jewish name is Jeshua or Joshua, God is now committed to once again intervene in history, as he did during the time of another Joshua. John the Baptist proclaims the message of this new intervention by God. The message of liberation, which Luke adopts from the Prophet Isaiah, says,

A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.
⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

⁶ And all people will see God’s salvation. (Luke 3:4b-6).

Salvation, or God’s action in freeing people from sin, often symbolized by oppressive political and religious institutions, as in the case of Rome and Israel in the time in which Luke was writing, is an activity in history. This act of salvation is designed to free God’s people, especially the poor and vulnerable, from situations of poverty and distress.

Two things follow as a consequence. First, Luke wishes to emphasize the fact that God cares about people. God is not against institutions that have been established to secure people as well as ensure that food and other resources are distributed for the welfare of all. However, where these institutions fail to serve their purpose they are to be replaced and new ones put in place that will serve the interest of the majority. It is for this reason the hymn writer notes the following:

**On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;**

**awake and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings.**

For the hymn writer the cry of the Baptists rings through every age. Wherever and whenever people are oppressed in any way God will hear their cry and will intervene on their behalf.

Second, because God cares God will act for the sake of God's integrity. People living in situations of oppression may sometimes feel there will be no change in their situation. Luke uses the history of God's deliverance of the Israelites at the Jordan to pass on the message that God may seem slow to act but God will act for the sake of the salvation or liberation of His people. Just as it was done for Israel in the past God will do so again.

On this second Sunday of Advent, Christians are invited to renew our hope in God; hope that God will deliver us out of places, circumstances and situations that are not life giving and life affirming. Today we celebrate the work of all those who, like John, keep announcing the fact that God will deliver us from all evil. God may seem slow at times, but, like John, let us keep hope alive that the God who acted to deliver Israel in the past will act in the present to deliver us. Politics and religion may seem to triumph for a time. In the end, it is God alone who can save us because God cares for people and God will act for the sake of our salvation or liberation.