

TFTD 25.1 A voice crying in the wilderness

Ash Wednesday March 5th Luke 3.1-6



WELCOME to your TFTD for Lent 2025! Every day in Lent (except Sundays), right up to Easter Day (April 20th), we hope to send out a Thought For The Day by email, with reflections and prayers based on readings from the Gospel of Luke. I say ‘hope’ because they aren’t written yet (!) — but we’re stepping out in faith, relying on our trusty TFTD team of Robin Pye, Nick Thompson, Linda Lonsdale, Nathan Jarvis, John Murray, Rhona Dalziel, Rachel Roberts and Ernie Rea to take you on a thought-provoking journey through Luke’s Gospel over the 40 days of Lent. Feel free to use your TFTD any way you want: for a prayerful moment over breakfast, or coffee, or last thing at night; to share with a friend; to spark a discussion — even to come and tell us when you don’t agree! But my prayer is that these reflections will resource your own Lenten journey and bring us all closer to Christ.



In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into into all the region around the Jordan river, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Luke's Gospel has more than one beginning. There's the opening preface (Luke 1.1-4), where the author tells us about his aims and methods in writing. Then there are the well-known Christmas stories, of the baby born in Bethlehem to be the Saviour of the world — of Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds, and the faithful old people (Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna) who greeted his coming. That's all in the first two chapters, which act like a prelude to the drama. And here, at the beginning of chapter 3, comes this grand opening sentence to the drama itself. The main actor, Jesus, doesn't come on stage till later on in this chapter (3.21-23). But first, like a fanfare of trumpets, comes the herald, John the Baptist, with a message of repentance and forgiveness. Ta-dah!

Luke obviously wants us to know that this story he has to tell is a story of global significance. He starts by going to the top, to the Roman emperor himself. As you'll know if you watched *I, Claudius*, Tiberius was the stepson of the first Roman emperor, Augustus (the one who ordered the census in Luke ch.2). All official documents in the Roman empire were dated by the year of the emperor's reign: in fact this is the pivotal date of the New Testament, the one on which everything else depends. Since Jesus was 'about thirty' at the time (3.23), we can count backwards from the 15th year of Tiberius to the birth of Jesus — which gives us the turning-point between BC and AD, which is still (allowing for a few historical adjustments) the basis of our whole modern western dating system. (It was a ninth-century monk called

Dionysius Exiguus who worked that one out.)

But have you spotted what a reversal that entails? In the Roman empire, the emperor was at the centre of everything: power was concentrated in Rome, and cascaded down through provincial governors and local princes (like Pilate and the Herod family) who controlled the lives of the ordinary people of the empire, right at the bottom of the power-chain. But Luke is drawing us into a topsy-turvy story where the most important thing that's happening is not in the emperor's palace in Rome, but out in the desert where God's Spirit breathes God's word through the voice of a prophet named John. A voice of hope — a hope for a different world, a world based on God's values, not the emperor's. A prophet who sees that the world needs to change if God's kingdom is to come, and has the courage to be that lonely 'voice crying in the wilderness' (v.4).

So right away we discover some of the basic themes of Luke's Gospel: the coming of God's topsy-turvy message of hope; the 'great reversal'; the need for change; the possibility of repentance, and the offer of God's forgiveness. Not a bad place to start our Lenten journey on Ash Wednesday, when we remember our dusty origins as sons and daughters of Adam, and kneel in repentance to receive the sign of the cross on our foreheads.

God bless,

Loveday

Dust you are, and to dust you shall return: turn away from sin, and follow Christ.

Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made
and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent.
Create and make in us new and contrite hearts
that we, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness:
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

