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DELVE DEEPER

Exploring the Sunday Gospels
in the Year of Luke

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Welcome

“Put out into the deep” (LUKE 5:4).

This book began its life several years ago when we both attended a conference at our alma mater, St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth. There we bumped into the then editor of *Intercom*, Francis Cousins, who asked us to take on the writing of a series of reflections on the Sunday gospel readings, entitled “The Deep End.” For more than ten years we have shared this ministry, endeavoring to offer a fresh perspective on each week’s text. The reflections reach a wide audience thanks to their inclusion in parish newsletters and websites throughout Ireland and beyond. Recently, we were encouraged to put our reflections together to make them even more accessible, so we created this new resource that is now in your hand. While our original reflections were the starting point, in this book we have worked together to develop these further and to encourage the reader to engage more deeply with the word.

We are delighted that the timing of this publication means we are reflecting on Luke’s gospel for Year C, for it has much to offer

all who seek. In Chapter 5, Jesus urges Simon to “put out into the deep”—to cast his net out into the unknown. When Simon and the others do as Jesus asks, we read that they are “amazed” to bring in a huge haul of fish. Unexpected and abundant gifts are to be found in the depths when we are open to trusting and taking a risk. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus tells Simon. We invite you now to come on a journey with us, to leave the safety of the shore behind and, through the story of Luke’s gospel, to follow Jesus as he makes his way to Jerusalem. There will be many surprises and challenges as we travel through the year; Luke’s Gospel is “an invitation that awaits a response.”¹

Guided by Luke, we aim in this book to explore how the gospel can open up new possibilities for how we live. We strongly believe that the Good News can speak to our human experience, that the word is truly alive and active (Heb 4:12), and that everybody’s story is contained in it. It is powerful and radical, always pushing us to look with fresh eyes both inward at ourselves and outward at the world around us. The task of “interpreting the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel”² is as pressing as ever. We hope that *Delve Deeper* will help readers to integrate faith and life by putting themselves face to face with the word of God. The message of Jesus as presented by Luke has much to say to us. Our challenge is to see how this word speaks to us each week so that we can continue the narrative.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The Church year begins on the First Sunday of Advent and subsequently moves through various seasons: Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time. Each year we focus on a particular gospel for our Sunday liturgies, following a three-year cycle. We read and hear from the Gospel of Matthew on Sundays during Year A, Mark in Year B, and Luke during Year C. Then, the cycle begins again. We also hear from John’s gospel each year during Lent and Easter, and on some other feasts throughout the calendar.

So, welcome to Year C, where the readings are mostly taken from Luke's gospel, with the few exceptions mentioned above. The reflections in this book are designed as a companion for all those who would like to take a deeper look at the Sunday readings and explore how the gospel is relevant for our world today. They are short and accessible and can easily be read as a preparation for the Sunday liturgy, either for personal reflection or in a group. We also keep in mind all those who work in pastoral ministry who may also wish to draw on these reflections for use in various settings.

Each reflection begins with a reference to the gospel of the day. We highly recommend taking time to read the gospel text prayerfully before the Sunday liturgy (see the section on *Lectio Divina* below). Having prepared in this way, when we come to listen to the readings on Sunday, we hear the word in a very different way: bringing fresh insights and experiences with us. The reflections in this book could also be revisited during a quiet period later in the week.

Following each reflection, there is a "Go Deeper" section that suggests some steps we might take to live out the Sunday gospel more fully in our daily lives. As a companion to this book, we recommend that readers keep a journal where they jot down any thoughts that arise for them, including their responses to the "Go Deeper" questions. It is our hope that by the end of the liturgical year, readers will feel they have been on a journey with the Jesus of Luke's gospel and will be able to look back and see the fruits of this journey. As Pope Francis reminds us, "The words of the Sacred Scripture were not written to remain imprisoned on papyrus, parchment or paper, but to be received by a person who prays, making them blossom in his or her heart."³

LECTIO DIVINA

Lectio Divina means Sacred Reading. With roots that go into the Old Testament, *Lectio Divina* is one of the most ancient ways of listening for, and hearing, God's word in the Christian tra-

dition. Thomas Keating notes that *Lectio Divina* has been the mainstay of Christian monastic practice from the early days. It consists of “listening to the texts of the Bible as if one were in conversation with God and God were suggesting the topics for discussion.”⁴ It is a personal encounter with God. It is not the intention of this book to replace this ancient spiritual practice of *Lectio Divina*; rather we encourage you to use *Lectio Divina* as a method of reading the texts that are proposed for each Sunday, either in a group or in personal reflection. After that, you can move into *Delve Deeper*'s reflections for each day. They are food for the journey and not intended to be a substitute for time spent with God's word. By setting aside some time—we suggest half an hour—each day, the fruits of this practice will grow throughout the week and across the year.

Much has been written about *Lectio Divina*, but we recommend the following:

Lectio (Reading): We read the text two or three times, not with the head but with the heart. We linger on the words, savor them, and gaze at the text, allowing ourselves to become familiar with it and the word to take root in us. What have we noticed? A word or phrase may have arisen. We repeat this word or phrase silently, like a mantra. In a group setting, people can be invited to speak this word aloud, without commenting on it.

Meditatio (Reflecting): This involves pondering or *reflecting* on the word. What light does what we are hearing cast on our lives (our relationships, challenges, joys) or on the world?

Oratio (Prayer): We may be moved in our hearts to respond through spontaneous prayer. This is our response to what we have read and heard. This is our

side of the conversation with God. Through this process, as our prayer deepens, we begin to rest in God. The challenge for us is to allow space for this to happen, to discover the courage to let God speak in the silence, in the depths of our heart. It is a gift.

As we begin any spiritual practice, we may experience some resistance in the form of busyness or distraction. Bring this into awareness and gently name it. It may be useful to carefully consider your preparation for this time of encounter with God. For example, find a quiet place, set aside a specific time of the day, turn off your phone, and light a candle. Begin with mindful breaths, inhaling the peace of Christ and slowly exhaling any tension from the body. Do this ten times. Be aware of Christ's presence. Then begin your *Lectio Divina* process.

Through this ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*, we grow in awareness of Jesus alive in our hearts. We may feel an inner impulse to live out Christ's teachings in the world. Now is the time to turn to *Delve Deeper's* reflections in order to break open the word even further.

LUKE WHO?

Before we begin, it is worth knowing something about our gospel writer, Luke. Biblical scholars estimate that Luke wrote his gospel around AD 85, so it is unlikely that he was a contemporary of Jesus.⁵ He was an educated Greek speaker and a very skilled writer. Luke is often referred to as a physician (Col 4:14), and we are told he was a traveling companion of Paul (Philem 1:24; 2 Tim 4:11), so it is most likely that Luke wrote for a predominantly Gentile (non-Jewish) audience. The Third Gospel is not his only work, for he wrote a sequel known as the Acts of the Apostles. Luke is the only evangelist to tell us about his sources in the opening verses, where he says that they were "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ser-

vants of the word” (Lk 1:1–2). Luke would also have had Mark’s gospel (c. AD 70) as a source, and in addition a further source, labeled “Q,” which is believed to have been used by both Luke and Matthew but has been lost.

Luke tells us in his opening lines that he writes for someone called Theophilus (Lk 1:3–4), who may have been a patron of his, and whose name in Greek, interestingly enough, means “lover of God.” Whether Theophilus was a wealthy person who commissioned this work or not we don’t know, but we can take his name to mean that Luke writes for all those who love God, “so that you may know the truth” (Lk 1:4).

WHAT’S LUKE’S STORY?

All writers bring their own slant to things, and it is the same with the gospel writers. They have different audiences, styles, and focuses, but the hero of the story is the same—Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel writers provide us with four different lenses through which we look at the Jesus story. From Luke’s perspective, the theme of his gospel could be summed up as “The Great Reversal.” In his writing, Luke comes across as someone who wants the door of God’s Kingdom opened to everyone, which means overturning the unjust religious and political systems of the time. He sees hope for all in the message of Jesus. Luke sees the Kingdom of God present when all those who are on the outside of society experience inclusion as full members of God’s people. Jesus was put to death, as Luke narrates it, because of his radical inclusiveness and compassion. In this account, Jesus is not afraid to touch those considered “untouchable” and to heal those in need of healing, no matter what religious law he is breaking (Lk 14:1–6). He describes God’s Kingdom in parables, metaphors, and images—usually great feasts—centering his entire mission on bringing about its reality.

A note on language may be useful here. We have come to realize that the term “Kingdom of God” brings with it associations of empire and patriarchy. Various attempts have been made in

recent times to address this issue, for instance, by referring to the Kingdom of God as the “Kin-dom” or the “Dream of God.” Language will always be problematic and carry cultural baggage, especially when we are trying to describe something that cannot be seen in material form, something that is more a state of consciousness or a way of being than a physical reality. We use the phrase “Kingdom of God” occasionally in this book to stay faithful to the Scripture text, while also acknowledging the linguistic baggage.

Jesus’ inclusive vision for the world and for each person motivates his entire mission. Jesus is clear that the Kingdom he speaks of does not only concern the afterlife; it is also something here and now, in this time and space.⁶ Luke emphasizes that this Kingdom is not restricted to the confines of the Temple, the seat of power for the religious hierarchy of Jesus’ day. It is far bigger than that, and this fact will be too much for some to handle.

We can tell an author’s focus by noting what is unique to that writer, and it is worth remarking here that in all there are eighteen parables found only in Luke’s gospel. These include some very famous parables, such as the good Samaritan and the Lost Son.⁷ In these unique parables the focus is on compassion, forgiveness, and really *seeing* those whom society does not see. Luke gives a more prominent place than the others to the female followers of Jesus (Lk 8:1-3), especially to Mary, whom he depicts as the first disciple. Only in Luke’s gospel do we hear Mary’s Magnificat, where she proclaims that God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Lk 1:52-53).

Jesus, for Luke, is someone who has come to deeply challenge people’s expectations, who promises that the “last shall be first” (Lk 13:30), and brings “good news to the poor” and “release to captives” (Lk 4:18-19). As we journey through Year C, we are invited to hear God’s voice within and find our way as followers of Jesus of Nazareth, cultivating inclusiveness, compassion, and a love that can turn the world upside down.

Advent

Introduction to the Advent Season

W elcome to the first season of the Church's year, Advent. In the Christian calendar, Advent covers roughly the four weeks before Christmas, starting in late November or early December. Advent, however, is not simply a countdown to Christmas. Rather, we might think of this season as a signpost, marking our path, lighting our way, pointing to something beyond itself. Yes, it is a time of preparation for our celebration of the birth of Jesus, but it also marks a new Church year and a time to start over in our relationship with God and with others.

During the next few weeks, as we dive into Luke's gospel, we will meet John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. We will meet Mary as she looks ahead to the birth of her baby, and Elizabeth as she welcomes and celebrates this amazing news. In many ways, these characters are an unlikely bunch—a marginalized, pregnant young woman; an older woman unexpectedly pregnant, and an eccentric wilderness preacher—but we read

that they are all “filled with the Holy Spirit.” They are the first witnesses to Jesus’ coming into the world, and we follow their stories as they announce him to others.

During Advent, we are invited to a real encounter with Jesus. It is a time to wake up and to rediscover our joy in life. It is a time to practice the words of Mary, “Let it be,” and to be open to what adventures may come our way. We become more aware of God’s presence in the hidden places of our world, in ourselves and in the people around us. Can we be signposts lighting the path for others?

At this busy time of year, we are often caught up in the frantic joys, and sometimes struggles, of the season. The lead-up to Christmas evokes different emotions and memories for each of us. As we enter this new season and new Church year, it is important to take some time to check in with ourselves. The gospel texts for the next few Sundays offer us the opportunity to go back to the beginning and enter fully into these Spirit-filled days when the advent of Jesus, the light of the world, is so eagerly anticipated.

First Sunday of Advent

GOSPEL: LUKE 21:25-28, 34-36

Stay Awake!

As we take our first steps into Advent, the message is to stay awake! In today’s gospel we meet Jesus toward the end of his ministry, instructing the disciples to be aware of the signs of the times and to stay “alert.” It is a message designed to keep his followers on their toes.

It can be easy for us to fall into a comfortable rut, not really

engaging with the wider world. When we do look up, we notice “the worries of this life”: in the natural world, in troubled countries, in our Church, perhaps in our own families. But what would happen if we were to truly wake up? We can think of many people who are awake to the problems in society. One who comes to mind is Malala Yousafzai. In 2012, when she was fourteen, Malala was shot and almost killed on her way to school in Pakistan. She was targeted for campaigning for the rights of women and girls to education, a fight she continues today. She has said, “We realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced.” Another person who embodies this spirit is climate activist Greta Thunberg. Her “School Strike for Climate” began in 2018 with her sitting alone outside the Swedish Parliament. Since then, her protest has grown into a worldwide movement of young people calling for action to address climate change.

Both of these young women are “awake” to the world around them—their eyes are open, they see the injustices, and they have acted. They are forging a brighter future. Countless others are reaching out, speaking against injustice, and working to heal wounds in the natural world, in communities and families. We can’t afford to sleepwalk through life when the gospel challenges us to be bearers of hope and good news. This Advent, we are called to be awake.

When we start to act, hope is everywhere. So instead of looking for hope—look for action. Then the hope will come.

♦ GRETA THUNBERG⁸

GO DEEPER

- As we begin this journey, think of a time when you felt truly “awake” to events around you. Can you become more awake to the gospel alive and active in the world?

- Awakening to the realities of the world or even of our own lives can be a painful experience. As Greta says, hope is found in action, in small steps. What small step can you take this week?

Second Sunday of Advent

GOSPEL: LUKE 3:1-6

Preparing the Way

Compare these two scenes. First, picture the flurry of activity that happens when a foreign dignitary—president, prime minister, or pope—visits your country. They are welcomed with a red carpet, leaders greet them, streets are cleared to whisk them to a reception, and they are given the finest accommodation with catering to match. Now, imagine an asylum seeker arriving at a port or airport. In Ireland, for example, they are brought to a reception center and then moved to a direct provision center to await a decision on their application—a process that often takes years. Yes, they have shelter and food, but they have limited freedom and few opportunities for involvement in society. The system has been rightly criticized as inhumane. This is just one snapshot of the unequal world we live in. Many people are denied the opportunities most of us take for granted. Those brought up in poverty, homelessness, war, or direct provision have a difficult road ahead. The system is stacked against them.

Today we meet John the Baptist, whose task is to “prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight,” much as a messenger might do for a queen or king or some other VIP. John’s was a radical voice, urging people to open their eyes and change their hearts. What if we changed our hearts this Advent by reaching out and removing the obstacles in front of people? What if we

“prepared the way” for Jesus by smoothing the path for others, tearing down the walls of prejudice in our hearts and the walls in society that keep people apart, even one brick at a time? As individuals and Church, we can be the “voice in the wilderness” calling for and bringing about change.

What Jesus never said: “Feed the hungry only if they have papers”; “Clothe the naked only if they’re from your country”; “Welcome the stranger only if there’s zero risk”; “Help the poor only if it’s convenient”; “Love your neighbor only if they look like you.” ♦ JAMES MARTIN, SJ⁹

GO DEEPER

- John promised that rough paths would be made smooth. What are some of the rough paths in your own life? Talk to Jesus about them.
- A radical change of heart is needed right across society to honor the dignity of every person not just in words but in action. Consider some ways your parish could reach out to migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in your community.

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

GOSPEL: LUKE 1:26-38

The First Disciple

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception celebrates Mary’s holiness from the moment of her conception, “full of grace” and “blessed among women.” This is a pure gift and demonstrates God’s love for the human race gloriously at work. Mary must

have treasured this gift, never to have felt separated from God's love and grace. This does not mean that Mary did not have to endure the struggles of life as all the rest of us do. In today's gospel we see her struggling with the angel's message.

When the angel Gabriel drops in uninvited to her and announces that she will carry a son, Mary's response is one of amazement: "How can this be?" She is right to be alarmed. Leaving aside the physical questions raised by the message, Mary knows that this is a situation that could bring social condemnation for her, even the real possibility of the death penalty. So, while we like to give Mary comfortable titles, let us not forget the challenge she faced at this moment as God intervened so radically in this young girl's life.

Mary will give space to God within her very body as she carries this baby inside her womb. She will give birth and breastfeed as a homeless woman in an animal shelter. Her Holy Family will be marginalized from the very beginning of this story. It is in this reality that God asks for space to dwell. We are reminded here of God's presence in the most hidden parts of ourselves and in the most broken parts of the world.

Luke places Mary in his opening chapter as a disciple. Even though she is initially disturbed by Gabriel's message, Mary questions, ponders, listens, and then responds with enormous trust, going out to proclaim God's word to Elizabeth. Mary does not know where her heartfelt "Let it be" will take her. It is a courageous move, one that will bring both joy and heartbreak. Mary, the first disciple, will stay true until the very end.

Now I ask you: will you weave a body of humanness for me? I need a tunic of humanness in which I can become one with my creation. Will you make that human body for my eternal presence? Will you give birth to my love, in your own life, so that all creation might be restored to wholeness?

♦ MARGARET SILF¹⁰

GO DEEPER

- Reflect on your day. Where was God present? When did you experience light, peace, joy? Was anything revealed to you today? In these Advent days, keep watch for God's presence in hidden places.
- Difficult decisions often require a struggle and, like Mary, we can become distressed. Sometimes a messenger helps us to discern. Reflecting back on these moments in your own life, when have you found this to be true?

Third Sunday of Advent

GOSPEL: LUKE 3:10-18

Quiet Joy

In today's gospel, John the Baptist cautions against the temptation to get caught up in having more than we need. If you have enough, share with others, he advises; do not charge more than your due, and be fair and honest in your dealings. His preaching leads people to question whether John himself might be the Messiah, but he sets them straight. He is laying the groundwork for Jesus, preparing the way for his radical vision of a world where justice reigns.

John's message is clear and practical and every bit as relevant for us today as it was in his time. It is easy for us to forget what is truly important when we are caught up in the merry-go-round of consumerism that pervades our world at this time of year; we lose touch with the heart of the season. By way of contrast, we should remember that for many people this is also a time of great generosity, with an outpouring of support for charity collections, appeals for food and toys, and ethical gifts.

Today is known as Gaudete Sunday. "Gaudete" means rejoice. It's an ideal time to recapture what Pope Francis refers to as "quiet joy"—the joy of God's love, of the blessings in our lives, of being able to share with others. It is a good time to take stock of how our Christmas preparations are going. If you are fortunate enough to have enough of everything, you might see a way to cut back on spending and donate some money or time to a favorite charity. If you are struggling with seasonal expenses, perhaps you might take a breather and consider reaching out for help. We pray that the joy of the gospel will fill our hearts as we continue our Advent journey.

Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of [God's] love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.

♦ POPE FRANCIS ¹¹

GO DEEPER

- Take a break today from the shops, the lists, and the "noise" of media. Take a walk in nature. Rest in the quiet joy of God's love.