



Rev. Dr. Sarah Harris
(Carey Baptist
College; Priest
Assistant at the
Cedar Centre)

I'll bring you more than a song: Worship in Luke-Acts

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The writing of Luke is filled with the language and experience of worship. From the earliest stories we hear people declare their praise to God (1:46-55, 68-79; 2:29-32), literally an army of angels give their praise to God (2:13-14), resulting in no less than four songs of praise being recorded in the infancy narrative. For the more liturgically minded we also find Zechariah, Simeon and Anna faithfully worshipping in the temple; examples of pious Jews carrying out their worship. Mary undergoes the rites of purification (2:22), an offering is made for the birth of the baby (2:24) and we find the young family Jerusalem bound for the Passover festival (2:41). Rejoicing, praise, thanksgiving, and remembering are all intertwined in chapters one and two. This is a rich mosaic of faithful and praise-filled Jewish worship.

This continues in the narrative where the central character, Jesus, begins his ministry, and the reader finds him involved in synagogue worship in Nazareth (4:16-30) and then again in Judea (4:44; 6:6). One of the notable features in the narrative is Jesus' dependence upon his Father in prayer (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 11:1; 20:41).

The background to understanding Luke's portrayal of worship is Jewish prayer in the Second Temple Period. A Jewish person's life was focused and guided by prayer. When Paul spoke about "praying without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17) he spoke as a faithful Jew. Special prayers formed the beginning and end of each day and individual prayers, both liturgical and spontaneous, supplemented these. There was a rhythm to life and each corner of life was filled with prayer. The Psalter formed a critical part of this daily ritual. This was similar to what we now know as the Psalms, but it had some extra psalms and the collection was quite fluid. For the Jew, prayer was often corporate, but if this was not possible, cycles of prayer continued in the home including "grace after meals."

Jewish prayers were less about pleas for material possessions or seeking after reward, and they were not designed to manipulate God into doing their bidding¹. Prayers reminded people of God's

faithfulness in the past and were spoken out of the conviction that a faithful God would continue to answer their cry. Prayer included praise, thanksgiving, rejoicing, remembering, wisdom, lament and longing, and also spoke of future hope. It was woven into the fabric of life and not something performed between the "real tasks" of the day. We could even go so far as to say that prayer constituted Israel as the people of God, even if performed individually, for the act of praying connected the community together around God himself. Behind all of this prayer were a people who knew their scriptures well. Scripture was an important part of prayer. While the scope of the texts may vary according to whether you were a Pharisee, Sadducee or Essene, their scriptures moulded and shaped the people as they recited portions regularly at prayers, in their homes and over meals.

This is the backdrop to Luke's tapestry; faithful Jewish life where scripture-informed prayer speaks out God's goodness and grace. It is well recognised that Luke's writing draws heavily on the Jewish scriptures, and especially the Greek translation (LXX). He quoted the text on 34 occasions in the Gospel, but was more likely to allude to a text through similar ideas and language, weaving the stories in like atmospheric resonance. For Luke and for the community he wrote to, the story of God was their TV, their radio and their Wikipedia. They were so soaked in the text, that it only took a hint of a story to bring the whole text tumbling back with it, reminding them, warning them, comforting them. One aspect of prayer that features strongly in the Lukan narrative, is rejoicing (1:46-55; 2:20; 10:20-21; 15:5, 9, 20-24; 19:6). Rejoicing seems to be a lifestyle choice for a follower of Jesus.

So firstly, the Gospel endorses the need to worship God both with our songs, prayers and religious practice. It is entirely appropriate that we do so and if we follow any guidance from patterns we see in the Gospel, we should do more of it rather than less. But if we read more carefully, Luke

shows us signs that while these forms of worship are important they are not enough. This is not the entire picture of what it means to worship God in the Third Gospel.

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In Luke 19:37 as Jesus came down from the Mount of Olives in his "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem the multitudes of disciples shouted out their praise to God for the deeds of power they had seen. Their king had arrived:

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.

Peace in heaven and glory in highest heaven.

This echoes the multitudes of angels who have similarly declared their praise on the hillside to the shepherds in 2:14.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!

Praise encapsulates Jesus' ministry, heaven declares it first in the infancy narrative and finally humanity joins in when Jesus enters Jerusalem. But there are warning signs in the text that this praise, however appropriate, is inadequate for the people rejoice for the "deeds of power" they have seen; they celebrate for the wonders done in their midst. However, Jesus has previously condemned the people for seeking signs calling them *an evil generation* (11:29). Luke recalls that Herod is seeking to see Jesus perform a sign (23:8) and this is viewed negatively. The kingdom of God is not a "view-on-demand" commodity where Jesus plays to the crowds. It is a declaration that the world is being restored and redeemed from Satan who has kept it captive like the crippled women (13:10-17). This story, typical of many others, shows the crowd rejoicing at the wonderful things Jesus has done (13:17). One cannot but get the sense that this rejoicing is both appropriate and yet inadequate.

Unless it brings faith and transformation has the mustard seed really sprouted or is it still dormant in the ground? Is it really "more than a song," is it really worship?

I want to suggest to you that in the same way salvation is multi-layered for Luke and affects all parts of life, so too our worship should be an action that draws in and from every area of life. If it is simply limited to singing hymns, speaking words of praise when we see amazing things or even faithful adherence to tradition, we run the risk that we live like the multitude of disciples praising God one day and striking him another.

As the people come to be baptized by John in chapter 3, they ask how to live. *What must we do?* each asks in turn. John says to the crowd *be generous with what you have* (3:11), to the toll collectors *practice ethical business codes* (3:13), and to the soldiers *be content and make good use of your money* (3:14). In this they show their true Abrahamic heritage and they act as God's agents demonstrating the salvation of God. They bear fruits worthy of the repentance they have declared and the salvation God has given; true worship is evidenced in ethical practice; theology and ethics are two sides of the one coin.

At the heart of Luke's portrayal of giving God his worth is that we are called to love God and love people (10:27) and to love with a self-sacrificial love. Love is an action in Luke. It costs in monetary terms², it redefines family so others can be welcomed³, and it means welcoming those who you do not really like⁴. Luke sums it up simply when he says "It is hearing the Word of God and *doing it*" (8:21); it is picking up your cross daily and following Jesus (9:23) even to the point of giving away what you have (12:33; 14:33; 18:22) or losing your life (9:24; 23:46-47). It is radical discipleship. Jesus centres this radical discipleship in the reality of the cross – a shocking and repulsive image. Worshipping the Lukan Jesus is costly; it is about ethical practice which reflects the character and nature of God; it means following God who lost his Son to the cross.

Finally, worship is also seen in our attitudes and posture toward God and others.

There are many stories where we find people humble themselves before Jesus by returning to him and bowing down or sitting before him; Simon-Peter in the boat (5:8), the Gerasene demoniac (8:35), Jairus (8:40), the bleeding woman (8:47), the healed leper (17:16). Even the blind beggar is sitting by the roadside (18:38-39), and Zacchaeus humbles himself as he climbs down the tree when he complies with Jesus' request to stay at his house (19:6). Pre-eminently, we see this attitude of humility in the parable of the Pharisee and the toll collector (8:9-14). Humility comes at a social cost. We see this in the father who runs the gauntlet to protect his son (15:20), and Zacchaeus who faces possible ridicule when he responds to Jesus.

At a dinner party Jesus tells those gathered that they should sit at the lowest place at the table (14:10) rather than taking a prominent position and he challenged the guest list of Graeco-Roman dinner parties where reciprocity and future advantage were the desired goal. In a society based on rank and status, Jesus challenged the disciples to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind to their meals (14:13, 21). This was contrary to the theology on the streets which said it is the wise, the intelligent and the perfect who will gather in the messianic community (1QSa 2:11-12; cf. 1 Enoch 62:1-16; *Targum Isa* 25.6). The kingdom community was to be based on full inclusion of every social strata and the meal table which so often epitomized who was in and who was out, was to be a welcoming space where God's values were evident.

Luke's vision of worship is costly. It causes us to (1) live a life of prayer, praise and rejoicing, dependent upon God; but also (2), to embody God's ethics in our daily life; and (3) to live in humility toward God and others (often evidenced by our physical position). This picture is synonymous with discipleship. To worship God is to worship him with all of our being and with all of our actions. "Love God and love people." "Hear the word of God and do it!" "Take up your cross daily and follow." Anything less is inadequate.

The final point to consider is the so *what* question. So what that this is the vision of worship in Luke? So what that these are his three categories?

The result of true worship in Luke-Acts is that the "world" is turned upside down (Acts 17:6) or we might say the "world" is turned the right way up for God is now at the centre. In placing God at the heart of all of life, the cultural script, which in the 1st C acknowledged everything came from Caesar, was challenged. The Graeco-Roman world told its story through its architecture, its coins, and its statues. This was reinforced though the Imperial Cult where verbal allegiance was given to the Emperor. Much of this was designed as a social stabilizer to maintain the *pax Augusta* which had brought considerable benefit to the ancient world. But Jesus' concept of peace outshone, outplayed and would eventually outlast the Roman Empire's vision and structure. Justice belonged to God and not human rule and when Jesus proclaimed the anointing of God was upon him to inaugurate Isaiah's prophesy (4:18-19), he might as well as have lifted a battle cry and announced war. The disciples, of course, thought this is exactly what he had done, but then he failed to ever take up arms and fight and they were confused. Jesus' vision of a peace-filled kingdom based on God's character and will alone was well beyond the picture cast by the Emperor and the Empire.

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If Christians really want to challenge the society we live in, I want to suggest to you it begins with worship – deliberate actions which place God and his story at the centre of our whole lives. His story, his heartbeat must infuse our working world, our daily interactions, our use of money and time. And as we deliberately and collectively place him front and centre we will see the world turned upside down.

¹ J.H. Charlesworth, "Prayer in Early Judaism," ABD 5:449

² Good Samaritan (10:25-37), Zacchaeus (19:1-10)

³ Who are my mothers and brothers? (8:19-21)

⁴ Toll collector and sinners (5:30; 15:1-2; 19:7)