

Study 2 - Listen to the witnesses



Domenico Ghirlandaio, Zacharias Writes Down the Name of his Son

Starting Point...

Do you have any 'I was there' moments which will always live with you?



'For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve...' (1 Cor 15:3-5)

They were there...

(Read Luke 1:68-79, Acts 10:39-43, 26:19-29, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11)

Luke has gathered material ranging from songs and letters to speeches, trial transcripts and biographical information, so that he can present to Theophilus evidence of the fulfilment of God's plan to bring his light to the world through Israel. He is keen to connect past with present witness. Zechariah's song of joy is full of the language of Old Testament prophets, showing a breadth of knowledge and insight into God's purposes, including Zechariah's own son who as a prophet will prepare the

way for the Messiah and give people 'knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.'

Zechariah was looking to the near future. In Acts we have Peter emphasising that he and the apostles were witnesses of all that Jesus did in Jerusalem and Palestine. Here is proof if you need it, he tells his audience, the apostles are witnesses to God raising Jesus to life after his death on the Cross. Their mission now is to tell the world that Jesus Christ is the Saviour who

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offers forgiveness of sins to all believers. It is a message Paul is keen to emphasise after his confrontation with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road, one which landed him in trouble with the Jews and brought him face to face with King Agrippa, who is so intrigued by Paul's testimony that he throws down a challenge to turn him into a Christian within the space of this short interview!

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul's message is consistent regarding the status and nature of Christ, and this is not just his

word and witness, or that of the prophets. Paul reminds them that Jesus did not just appear to the apostles or himself, but to over five hundred others, some of whom are dead but the majority still living. The crucifixion was common knowledge and accepted as fact, but the resurrection was a different matter, needing credible witnesses, which Paul is happy to supply.

Discussion...

1) Knowledge of Scripture helped Zechariah to understand what was happening in his life and that of his wife Elizabeth, when the angel appeared to him in the Temple. How do you see the connections between Old and New Testament?

2) For Paul it was personal witness that was so important, his vision of the risen Christ on the Damascus road. Where does the confidence in your faith come from?

Prophecy fulfilled...

(Read Matthew 1:18-23, 2:3-6, 12:14-21, Acts 2: 22-32)

The New Testament writers were keen to emphasise the importance of prophecies fulfilled when sharing the Good News about Jesus, none more so than Matthew, who was writing for a mainly Jewish Christian audience.

The quoted prophecy in verses 22,23 comes from Isaiah and speaks of dangerous times ahead, but Isaiah reassures the king that God will maintain his promise that a descendent of David will sit on his throne forever, and there will be a sign through the birth of a child who will be called Immanuel or 'God with us'.

Matthew sees, through eyes of faith, that these words find their ultimate fulfilment in the birth of Jesus. Adding to this Scriptural evidence, he gives us the words of the Magi, quoting from Micah 5:2 as to where the Messiah will be born. The

importance of Bethlehem to the 'big story' is its mention as the home of Ruth and Boaz, the ancestors of King David, and the birthplace of David himself. Matthew goes on to describe Jesus as the prophesied suffering servant of Isaiah 42:1-4, the one on whom God has poured out his Spirit with a specific mission in view.

Matthew gives many quotations from the prophets in telling the story of Jesus, often called 'fulfilment statements.' There is debate as to the total number of Old Testament quotes in the New Testament, varying from 283 to 1600, the former being direct quotations, but the impression is that writers felt it was important that their audience heard not only about the new things God was doing, but also connected these with the bigger picture of God's historic relationship with humankind.

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The passage from Acts is one example, where Luke brings us Peter's narrative, here connecting Jesus's death and resurrection, with the story of King David, using a principle of interpretation that would have been very acceptable to those reading these words.

Discussion...

3) Israel's relationship with their God was at the very least inconsistent, sometimes turbulent. With the knowledge you have of the Bible, how does its story speak into your own?

4) Why would God use Persian astrologers in forming the narrative about the birth of Jesus?

5) Is looking for any of the prophets' words that might, even though out of their original context, find their ultimate fulfilment in the life of Jesus, a legitimate use of Scripture?

Personal experience...

(Read 1 John 1:1-3, John 1:14, 1 Peter 5:1-4, Luke 24:24-48)

The writer of 1 John refers to the start of John's Gospel and the book of Genesis, telling his readers that what he is about to share is from the very beginning, from God the Creator, a message of life and salvation that finds its fulfilment in the person of Jesus, the Word of life, not only seen and heard post-resurrection but touched by so many. He is keen to emphasise that Jesus had a physical body, as some were refusing to believe this could be true. The gospel writer states plainly, 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' (John 1:14).

In his first letter, Peter writes to Christians elders in churches where there is persecution and urges them to remain faithful to Jesus. Peter considers himself a fellow elder because Jesus entrusted him with the care of his sheep (John 21:15-19), and having witnessed first-hand the sufferings of Jesus, he has authority to share with them what this means to believers. Peter talks of a crown of glory, such a contrast from the crown of thorns places upon Jesus' head on the Cross.

Luke relates the post-Resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. This precious text is not



Duccio di Buoninsegna, Washing of the Feet (1308-1311)

only a moving story but gives us personal testimony of both the empty tomb and Jesus's Resurrection.

In the meeting between the risen Jesus and the disciples, Luke, as with Peter in his letter is keen to point out the physical presence of Jesus as flesh and blood, not a ghost. We also have Jesus opening their minds 'so they could understand the Scriptures', vital for taking the Good News out to the world.

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Discussion...

- 6) How easy do you find it to see the appearance of Jesus as the culmination of all that has happened within Scripture, and what clues are there along the way?
- 7) We do not have the benefit of knowing Jesus as 'flesh and blood', so is it possible to get to know him as the early believers did?
- 8) How important is listening to and considering the personal experiences of others in the day-to-day business of life?

The witness of God...

(Read Matthew 3:16-17, John 12:20-32, 2 Peter 1:16-21)

The gospels give us the witness of God's own voice into the story of Jesus. Matthew describes Jesus's baptism, with God's voice ending a long silence to reveal himself again to humanity, echoing Isaiah 42:1, and introducing us to the description 'Son of God', the 'Suffering Servant', and even a veiled reference via Psalm 2:7 to the line of David. The phrase 'the heavens opened' is not an uncommon expression in Scripture, particularly at significant moments when God wanted his people to sit up and listen, and the Spirit descending as a dove points to the anointing of the Branch of David (Isaiah 11:2). Matthew packs a lot into two verses!

John also has much to tell in his gospel. The voice from heaven is the third and final instance recorded in the gospels (the second is at the transfiguration), and the

only one recorded by John. In each case it was a public acknowledgment of the sonship and authority of Jesus and an endorsement of his work by the Father. It is worth noting v. 26, where Jesus tells the disciples that his life is the benchmark for them to follow, and implicit in this statement is that in doing so they may well face danger, but in sharing his life and suffering they will also share in his glory (see also 17:24).

Peter shares the second voice from heaven as part of his argument for belief in the second coming, stressing the importance of the transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9:2-8) where he, James and John were witnesses and heard God's voice saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love' or 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (NRSV).

Discussion...

- 9) Hearing God's voice in such a spectacular way is possibly not the average Christian's experience, so how do we hear what God wants us to do?
- 10) Jesus' comment to his disciples on the implications of following includes the possibility of sharing in his suffering. Is this something you have experience of? Is it something that the Church emphasises, or places in the small print so as not to put people off?

Further thought...

Remember those who report from often dangerous places in the world, increasing our understanding through their experience and evidence.