

Study 1: The birth and childhood of Christ

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Please prepare for our meeting by reading **the first two chapters of St. Luke's Gospel** and thinking about the following questions. If you haven't time for everything, just do whatever you can – no one will check up on you. If possible, please bring a Bible with you to the meeting.

1. Why does Luke tell us so much about Jesus's birth and early life?

The Gospels of Mark and Matthew don't have any of the stories about Jesus's birth and childhood which are found in Luke's Gospel (although Matthew includes a different story, about the wise men and Herod). Can you suggest any reasons why Luke thought these stories were important for his readers?

2. 'The mercy promised to our fathers'

If you have time, count how many times words and phrases about rescuing occur in chapters 1 and 2, e.g. 'deliver', 'help', 'mercy', 'redeem', 'rescue', 'salvation', 'saviour' and 'save'. (Your answers may vary a bit, depending on which translation you are using.)

- i) Can you think of any books in the Old Testament which use these words a lot? Or do these words remind you of any Old Testament events?
- ii) How might these Old Testament associations help Luke's readers to understand who Jesus is and why he became a man like us?

3. Think about the nativity stories which you know from carols, nativity plays, pictures and statues. Compare them with what Luke says.

- i) Does the Gospel back up the following statements? Are they likely to be true?
 - a) Joseph was an old man.
 - b) Joseph was obliged to take Mary to Bethlehem with him.
 - c) Mary gave birth on the same night as she arrived in Bethlehem.
 - d) None of the inns in Bethlehem could offer Mary and Joseph a place to sleep intended for humans.
 - e) It was the middle of winter. (This one is tricky; but remember that the shepherds and sheep were outside in the fields.)
 - f) The angel spoke to the shepherds from the sky.
 - g) The shepherds found Jesus in a manger.
 - h) The shepherds gave Jesus a new-born lamb.
 - i) Mary had fair hair and a blue cloak; Jesus had curly golden hair and was amazingly big for a newborn.

- ii) Do you think it is important to distinguish between what the gospels say and popular stories about the nativity?
- iii) Can we make any good use even of stories which are not from the Gospel? For instance, is it ever helpful to use the ideas of 'amid the winter's snow' or 'no crying he makes' or 'if I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb'?
- iv) Do you think that everything took place *exactly* as Luke says? For instance, these chapters include three beautiful songs of praise and gratitude which are so inspiring that they are used every day in the morning and evening prayer of the Church (1:46-55, 1:68-79, 2:29-32). Do you think that Mary, Zechariah and Simeon must have used precisely those words? Does it matter?

4. Mary's example

- i) How did Mary react to the following events?
 - a) The angel's visit to her (1:26-38)
 - b) The shepherds' report of the angel's message (2:17-19)
 - c) Simeon's prophecy (2:25-35)
 - d) Finding Jesus in the temple (2:46-50)
- ii) What can we learn from Mary's example?