

Study 3: "Who is this?"

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 **Luke 4:31-6:11** 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.

Having prepared himself with prayer and deep self-examination, Our Lord now 'goes public'. Luke presents a series of episodes in which Our Lord's power, authority, and priorities are set out for everyone to see, and everyone is challenged to decide for or against him. These events are so familiar to us that it is hard for us to have a vivid sense of how startling and disconcerting they were.

1. "Extraordinary things"

This passage records a number of miracles: the healing of a man with an unclean demon (4:31-37); the healing of Simon's mother-in-law (4:38-39); many other healings and exorcisms (4:40-41); a wonderful catch of fish (5:4-7); cleansing a leper (5:12-14); forgiving and healing a paralytic (5:17-26). All of them except for the catch of fish were recorded in Mark's Gospel.

- i) When he was tempted, Our Lord refused to do miracles just to show that he could rely on the power of God (4:9-12). So why do you think he performed these miracles?
- ii) Why do you think that Our Lord silenced the demons and told the leper to tell no one?
- iii) Why do you think that exorcisms are so common in the Gospels?

2. "Who is this?"

Some people were thrilled by what they saw and heard, although that doesn't necessarily mean that they really grasped who Our Lord was or what he wanted; others were puzzled or upset.

- i) Different people responded very differently. How many different kinds of response can you identify?
- ii) What do you know about the different groups mentioned, 'the people', fishermen, lepers, pharisees, teachers of the law, tax collectors, disciples of John? (You can find some notes at the end of the sheet if you would like them.)
- iii) With which kinds of response do you feel most empathy?
- iv) Were the pharisees and teachers of the law wrong to be shocked when Our Lord forgave the sins of the paralysed man?

3. New wine

- i) What was unfamiliar and challenging in Our Lord's teaching and example?
- ii) What messages would it have given to the gentile and Jewish Christians for whom Luke was writing?
- iii) What messages does it have for us?

Notes about some important groups in Galilee and Judaea

The 'people'

In the 6th century BC the chief members of the leading political and religious families in Judah, the southern Hebrew kingdom, were deported to Babylon. (The same thing had happened to the breakaway northern kingdom more than a century earlier.) During their exile those who remained faithful to their heritage became increasingly exclusive. Since they no longer had the temple as their national focus, they defined themselves by circumcision, observance of the Sabbath and other religious laws, and racial purity. The descendants of the Jerusalem priesthood even began to see themselves as more authoritative than the surviving members of the royal family. When this exclusive elite was allowed to return to Judaea (a remnant of the kingdom of Judah) and rebuild the temple, they preserved and developed these attitudes. The Davidic kingship was never restored, and in time the chief priests became the highest political authority. (From 104 BC to 63 BC they even had the title of 'king'.)

This elite referred contemptuously to the people who had remained in Judah during the exile and could not prove their racial purity as 'the people of the land', and regarded them as religiously slack, racially degenerate, and in consequence excluded from God's covenant. (Indeed, the elite groups tended to treat the terms 'the people' and 'sinners' or 'failures' as more or less equivalent.) It is not clear how far 'the people' followed religious laws and attended the synagogues; there was probably quite a wide range of behaviour and attitudes among them.

The 'people' of Galilee were particularly suspect. Galilee (like Samaria), had been part of the northern kingdom, and the Babylonian invaders had diluted the Hebrew population by encouraging Arameans to settle there. In 104 BC the Judaeans priest-king Aristobulus I invaded Galilee and forced the natives to be circumcised. From that time Judaeans were encouraged to settle there, and Judaeans scribes often visited to supervise the synagogues and religious observances.

Scribes (also referred to as 'teachers' or 'lawyers')

In Judaea after the exile there was a great emphasis on living strictly by the Law or Torah (the first 5 books of the Old Testament). This led to the rise of the scribes, scholars whose primary role was to study, develop and apply the Law, but who also served as senior administrators, expert advisers and judges. Their training took about 30 years, starting in early childhood. Once fully qualified they had power to 'bind and loose', wore distinctive clothes (a long, fringed mantle), were called 'Rabbi' (although that term was also used sometimes for teachers who were not scribes, such as Jesus), and were treated with enormous respect.

Pharisees

The Pharisees were a sect who observed the Law particularly strictly, not just the written Torah but also the oral tradition of Torah interpretations. They referred to each other as 'neighbour', and tended to avoid social interaction with non-Pharisees. When the sect first arose in the 2nd century BC they supported the rule of the chief priests; but as the priest-kings became increasingly despotic, murderous, religiously slack, and reliant on the support of pagan potentates, the Pharisees became bitter opponents of their party (the Sadducees). Pharisees believed in the resurrection and tended to have a strong interest in angels, demons, warfare between spirits, and the end of the current age. In the time of Our Lord most scribes were Pharisees, although some were Sadducees.

Although the Gospels record that concern for ritual purity, complicated regulations and outward show had become more important than to some scribes and Pharisees than true justice and mercy, the Gospels also show that others had basically the right priorities (see Mark 12:28-34). Jews honour the scribes and

Pharisees as heroes and scholars who preserved the covenant and integrity of Israel through centuries of persecution and subversion.

Fishermen of Galilee

The fishermen worked for their living, but that does not mean that they were particularly poor or uneducated. All Jewish parents were encouraged to teach their sons a trade. There was a thriving trade in dried fish based in Magdala on Lake Galilee, and the parents of Simon, Andrew, James and John must have been fairly well off – they had their own boats and hired men, and were able to allow their sons to spend time in the Jordan area with John the Baptist. It is very likely that the fishermen (like Our Lord) could read the Hebrew Bible, as well as speaking Aramaic (the everyday language of Palestine) and enough Greek to deal with traders, officials and gentile neighbours. Fine handwriting on expensive materials would have been done only by professionals or highly educated people, but the fishermen could probably jot down rough notes on wax tablets or scraps of papyrus.

Tax collectors

Judaea and Galilee were parts of the Roman province of Syria, although most of the day-to-day management of Judaea was left in the hands of the temple officials (the chief priest and Sanhedrin) and that of Galilee in the hands of Herod Antipas. The people who managed taxes on behalf of the Romans were particularly despised, not just because they stuck their noses into their neighbours' affairs and were often extortionate, but also because they continually associated with non-Jews.