2. What can we learn from the life of Jesus?

The four gospel writers each offer their own distinctive portrait of Jesus and his ministry. Luke clearly thought that it was important to give people an account of Jesus’ life. In the preface to his two-volume work (Luke 1:1-4), how does Luke commend his writing to his readers?

Why does Jesus matter to you? What, in your opinion, are the three most important things he did? What do you think is the most important thing he said or taught? Do you know where to find this in the gospel stories of his ministry? If not, how would you set about tracking it down?

Like everyone else, Jesus died. What significance does his death have for you? Unlike anybody else, Jesus rose from the dead. What does his resurrection mean to you? When Peter is arrested and put on trial for healing a lame man in Jesus’s name (Acts 4:1-12), he quotes Psalm 118:22, saying that Jesus is the stone which was rejected, but which became the cornerstone. What do you think he means by this?

Jesus himself quoted this verse at the end of one of his parables (Luke 20:9-18): what do you think is the point of this parable? In the parable the vineyard owner sends his ‘beloved son’ to the tenants: that is how God addresses Jesus when he is baptised (Luke 3:21-22). In what sense is Jesus ‘the Son of God’?

The quotation from Psalm 118:22 talks about the stone being ‘rejected.’ It is immediately after Peter recognises Jesus as the Christ of God that Jesus talks about his forthcoming rejection by the elders, chief priests and scribes (Luke 9:18-22); he said that the Son of Man (his customary self-designation) *must* suffer and be rejected: why do you think that Jesus had to suffer before entering his glory (Luke 24:26)? ‘Christ’ means ‘the anointed one’: when and why was Jesus anointed by God (Luke 4:16-19)? Peter was not the first to recognise that Jesus was the Christ: the demons were way ahead of him (Luke 4:38-44). What does Jesus tell us here about the reason for his coming?

The kingdom of God was an important element in Jesus’ teaching. When he taught his disciples the Lord’s prayer, he told them (and us!) to pray to the Father, saying, ‘Your kingdom come.’ What do you mean when you pray this? What would it look like for your prayer to be answered? What do you think ‘the kingdom of God’ looks like?

What happened when Jesus proclaimed the kingdom (Luke 9:11; 11:20)? Should we expect similar things to happen when we proclaim the kingdom (Luke 10:1-3, 8-9, 17-18)? Why, or why not, should that be the case, do you think?

Jesus spoke about the kingdom in what is frankly a bewildering variety of ways: the kingdom can be possessed (6:20); it comes upon people (11:20); it can be compared to a mustard seed or a batch of leaven (13:18-21); the kingdom is within us (17:20-21), and we both receive it and enter it like little children (18:15-17). We might feel it is impossible to formulate a clear-cut definition of the kingdom that does justice to Jesus’ language! But having taken some time to consider how Jesus proclaimed the kingdom, and to look at some of his teaching about the kingdom, has your understanding of the ‘kingdom of God’ expanded or changed? Let me pose you an unfair question: if someone were to ask you, ‘What is the kingdom of God?’ how would you answer them?

Before he was excommunicated, Alfred Loisy (1857-1940) was a Roman Catholic priest, who memorably observed that, "Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church." How do you respond to his saying? What is (or should be) the connection between the church and the kingdom?

What impact should the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life have on us as individuals and as a church? How should we pray in response to what we read? What should we do?

Grant us to look with your eyes of compassion,

O merciful God, at the long travail of mankind:

the wars, the hungry millions,

the countless refugees,

the natural disasters,

the cruel and needless deaths,

man’s inhumanity to one another,

the heartbreak and hopelessness of so many lives.

Hasten the coming of the messianic age

when the nations shall be at peace,

and men shall live free from fear and free from want

and there shall be no more pain or tears,

in the security of your will,

the assurance of your love,

the coming of your Kingdom,

O God of righteousness, O Lord of compassion. Amen.

(George Appleton, from *The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer*)