



# BIBLICAL RESOURCES



**Baruch 5:1-9; Psalm 126 (125); Philippians 1:3-6, 8-11; Luke 3:1-6**

## The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’

Luke 3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”



Tiberius Caesar  
Divi Augusti Filius Augustus

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

John the Baptist is the quintessential Advent figure in the Christian tradition, preparing us even today for the arrival of Jesus. This gospel passage (together with next Sunday’s) provides us with his basic teaching. The Isaiah citation marks John out as someone who prepares for someone else. John was immensely significant—to an uncomfortable degree it would seem—for early Christianity. (His followers continue to exist today the *Mandaeans*.) Jesus had been a disciple of John and, as such, had accepted his baptism. Jesus’ own ministry started from the moment his mentor could no longer function. Finally, Jesus’ initial proclamation resembled that of John himself. In other words, John the Baptist was essential for the Jesus story and for that very reason each Gospel needed to locate him as somehow preparatory or secondary. Mark’s discovery and use of Isaiah 40 (followed by Matthew 3:3; Luke 3:4 and even John 1:23) was a stroke of genius.

### KIND OF WRITING

There is a literary introduction to Luke’s Gospel in 1:1-4. This is followed by the birth stories, Luke 1-2. Finally, the actual story of the ministry of Jesus begins with this quite formal, second, introduction. Later summaries in Acts start with the ministry of John the Baptist.

The first verse sound very much like the opening of an Old Testament book, linking John the Baptist with the prophetic tradition (Jere 1:1; Hos 1:1; Amos 1:1). Three different kinds of information are given here: (i) the setting in the wide political and religious world—3:1-2a; (ii) the presentation of John as a prophet—3:2b-3; (iii) a proof text from the Hebrew Bible, locating John as a figure of fulfilment—3:4-6.

At the same time, this rather grand opening echoes Hellenistic biographies.

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness

### Thought for the day

The feats of engineering hinted at in the citations from Isaiah may seem physically daunting but are even more of a challenge on the intended spiritual level. The highway is for our God—and we could ask what in me impedes his way, how do I block the arrival of the Lord in my life? More positively, I could ask myself what do I do so that the Gospel may come alive in my life? With such cooperation from me, the Lord can and will bring to completion what he has begun.

### Prayer

O God, you search me and you know me. Help me to know myself better; help me acknowledge and set aside the blocks to your coming. You have indeed begun a good work in me and, in spite of my hesitations and resistance, I too want it to be brought to completion under your graceful care. Amen.

prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isa 40:3-5)

In using this quotation, Luke has made telling modifications to his source Mark. He leaves out the citation from Mal 3:1, relocating it to 7:27. He expands the citation to include Is 40:4-5 in order to bring out the universal nature of the Gospel. He omits the resemblance between John and Elijah, because, in this Gospel, it is Jesus who is the Elijah-type figure. Finally, the reader will notice the difference in punctuation between the original Isaiah and the use in Luke (and Mark):

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” (Isaiah)

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the

Lord.” (Luke)

Two other texts are cited or echoed in the last line of the citation:

The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. (Isa 52:10)

“It shall be that whoever remains after all that I have foretold to you shall be saved and shall see my salvation and the end of my world.” (2 Esd 6:25)

#### NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Disciples of John the Baptist continued right up the end of the first century, and beyond, as we can see from the Acts of the Apostles:

He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. (Acts 18:25)

Then he said, “Into what then were you baptised?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” Paul said, “John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” (Acts 19:3–4)

#### ST PAUL

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” (Rom 1:16–17)

For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! (2 Cor 6:2)

#### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 1** Tiberius reigned from AD 14-37 and the fifteenth year would, in principle, be AD 28-29. This is the clearest dating of the ministry of John and therefore of that of Jesus, as far as it goes. Things are not quite as crisp as that because Tiberias had three years coregency before the death of Augustus and, in any case, different calendars were in use (Julian, Jewish, Syrian-Macedonian, and Egyptian).

A complicating factor is the fact that the first three Gospels portray a ministry of one year while John’s gospel has a three-

year ministry. John’s time span is much more plausible. Pilate was prefect of Judea from AD 26 to 36.

Tetrarch meant a ruler of one fourth of a region, reflecting the division of the territory of Herod the Great after his death. Herod Antipas ruled in Galilee (4 BC - AD 39) and his brother Philip was Tetrarch of Ituraca and Trachonitis (4 BC - AD 34). Nothing whatsoever is known of Lysanias who ruled in Abilene, north of Galilee, in the anti-Lebanon mountain range. Why Luke would mention Lysanias *at all* is an enigma to scholars.

**Verse 2** Annas served as high priest from AD 6 to 15, and was succeeded by his son-in-law, Caiaphas, who served from AD 18 to 36. Technically, there was only one high priest as any one time, but people regarded Annas as still high priest even if “emeritus.”

Finally, the important expression is heard: “the word of God came to X”, used with arresting frequency to introduce a man of God in the Old Testament (110 times in all, with Jeremiah as most representative—Jer 1:2, 4, 11, 13; 2:1; 13:3, 8; 16:1; 18:5; 24:4; 28:12; 29:30; 32:6, 26; 33:1, 19, 23; 34:12; 35:12; 36:27; 37:6; 39:15; 42:7; 43:8). The evocation of Old Testament models is very effective. The wilderness is both literal and symbolic. As symbol, it recalls the place of Israel’s formation as God’s covenant people.



**Verse 3** Four key terms are used: proclaiming, baptism, conversion (*metanoia*) and forgiveness. “Proclaiming” means literally heralding (hence our word *kerygma*). The baptism of John was a prophetic gesture, involving a once-off immersion, to be distinguished from the later baptism of Christian tradition.

As usual, “repentance” is not adequate here because it denotes only regret for the past whereas *metanoia* points to a turning around, so as to get a radically new view and direction forwards. In part, the turning around involves a change of behaviour, in response to forgiveness. *Metanoia* (as a verb) recurs only a few times in Luke: Luke 3:8; 5:32; 15:7. However, it comes back resound-

ingly at the end of the Gospel in Luke 24:45–47. There is a somewhat wider use in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 13:24; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20).

**Verses 4-5** Luke has extended considerably the citation first found in Mark 1:2. By the adjustment of punctuation (noted above), the text is made to point to John the Baptist, who was the voice *crying out in the wilderness*.

**Verse 6** The last line is adjusted to “all flesh shall see the salvation of God”, echoing Is 51:10 and 2 Esd 6:25, as was seen above. Thus, Luke universalises even the ministry of John the Baptist, as a preparation for the proclamation of Jesus. Salvation (as noun and verb) recurs: Luke 1:47, 69, 71, 77; 2:11, 30; 3:6; 19:9; Acts 4:12; 5:31; 7:25; 13:23, 26, 47; 16:17; 27:34; 28:28.

#### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

**1.** The manner in which Luke identifies in detail the time when John the Baptist started his preaching shows that Luke regarded this as a historic moment. Perhaps you can recall in detail the time and the circumstances of particularly significant moments in your life?

**2.** John called people to give expression to their desire for a change of heart by a symbolic baptism in the Jordan. When have you found it helpful to symbolise your desire to change for the better by some symbolic gesture, e.g., burning a packet of cigarettes, sending a card, making a phone call, etc.

**3.** Behind the quotation from Isaiah lies the practice of preparing festival routes for religious celebrations. Isaiah visualises such a celebration to celebrate the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem. Can you recall a particularly memorable Advent? What happened? Think of how you can do it this year.

#### PRAYER

God of our salvation, you straighten the winding ways of our hearts and smooth the paths made rough by sin.

Make our conduct blameless, keep our hearts watchful in holiness, and bring to perfection the good you have begun in us.

We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near: your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

# The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus

Phil 1:3 *I thank my God every time I remember you,* 4 constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 5 because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. 7 *It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.* 8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. 9 And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10 to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11 having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Although this is not yet *Gaudete Sunday*, the readings already strike a note of joy. Philippians 1 takes up the joyful tone of the first reading, bringing it into our Christian perspective. The full thanksgiving is given above because Paul goes on to give concrete reasons for gratitude and joy.

## KIND OF WRITING

(*Letter opening*, 1:1-2)  
Introduction, 1:3-11  
Situation, 1:12-26  
Thesis, 1:27-30  
Proof, 2:1-3:19  
    First development, 2:1-18  
    Second development, 2:19-3:1a  
    Third development, 3:1b-19  
Conclusion, 3:20-4:20  
(*Letter closing*, 4:21-23)

This is part of the thanksgiving in a Pauline letter, itself an innovation of the apostle. Paul uses the thanksgiving to anticipate topics to come in the body of the letter (the so-called “seeds of proof” or the *semina probationum*).

## CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Philippi was Paul's first community in Europe, established on the Second Missionary Journey. We know from 1 Thes-

salonians and 2 Corinthians how attached to the Philippians Paul remained and they to him.

The dating of the letter itself is disputed. Conceivably, it could have been written from Rome, Caesarea or Ephesus. Traditionally, the letter was written from Rome, just before Paul's own martyrdom. This would make Philippians his last letter and would document the apostle's state of mind right up to the end, perhaps c. AD 64. The chief evidence is reference to the *praetorium* (1:13) and the household of Caesar (4:22). But such details could fit other cities as well. Caesarea is also mentioned as a possibility.

The letter seems to presuppose visits back and forth, which might be difficult with travel to distant Rome in mind (2:19-30; 4:16-18). A more recent proposal is Ephesus, about a week's distance from Philippi. This would imply a date somewhere in the mid-50s.

## RELATED PASSAGES

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1Thessalonians 1:2-7)

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—or rather so that we may be mutually

encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. (Romans 1:8-12; cf. Philemon 1:4-7)

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 3** Very typically, Paul's first prayer is one of thanksgiving for the communities he has founded. They form part of his relationship with God; when he thinks of them, his mind turns spontaneously to God.

**Verse 4** Paul's prayer is constant (“always”; see the examples above) and joyful. In spite of all the stresses in his life and ministry, Paul is a happy believer and a joy-filled apostle.

**Verse 5** Two key words are used here. Sharing translates *koinōnia*, which means participation, fellowship and communion (see Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 1:9; 10:16; 2 Cor 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:13; Gal 2:9; Phil 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; Phlm 1:6). The gospel, for Paul, means the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The word is very common in Paul: see Phil 1:5, 7, 12, 16, 27; 2:22; 4:3, 15, for example. “From the first day” must mean from the start of the journeys of Paul.

**Verse 6** The first day suggests the last day, the Day of the Lord, towards which believers are journeying. Conversion is never “over” but God is always at work on us. The language of the first day and the last day constitutes an echo of creation, when God began a work and also brought it to completion.

**Verse 8** Paul uses an oath formula to convey his sincere love for the Philippians. NB compassion, a word meaning what we call a “gut reaction.”

**Verses 9-10** Paul prays explicitly and earnestly for the friends in Philippi.

**Verse 11** Harvest is traditional “end-time” language from the bible.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. For whom do I give thanks constantly? Who are the people who are part of my prayer?
2. God has begun a great work in me... how do I see him bringing it to completion?

## PRAYER

Help me, loving God, to embrace your plans for me that what you have begun you may bring to completion. Amen.

## God will lead Israel with joy

Bar 5:1 Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,  
and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.  
2 Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;  
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;  
3 for God will show your splendour everywhere under heaven.  
4 For God will give you evermore the name,  
“Righteous Peace, Godly Glory.”  
5 Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;  
look toward the east,  
and see your children gathered from west and east  
at the word of the Holy One,  
rejoicing that God has remembered them.  
6 For they went out from you on foot,  
led away by their enemies;  
but God will bring them back to you,  
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.  
7 For God has ordered that every high mountain  
and the everlasting hills be made low  
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,  
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.  
8 The woods and every fragrant tree  
have shaded Israel at God’s command.  
9 For God will lead Israel with joy,  
in the light of his glory,  
with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This joy-filled poetic passage establishes the tone for Advent, a season of conversion characterised by joy in believing.

### KIND OF WRITING

*Prophetic address:* Baruch 4:5-5:9, in which the prophet links the return from exile to conversion of heart. Although written so much later, the themes of Baruch are, nevertheless, exile, disobedience, conversion and return. This reminds people that the current oppression would also come to an end, as had previous ones.

### ORIGIN OF THE READING

Baruch is one of the Deuterocanonical books. This reflects the fact that while a Hebrew original is conceivable, the earliest extant text of Baruch is in Greek. Broadly speaking, the consensus is that Baruch was written during the “Greek” period, 332-63 BC, most likely in the second century BC. Rather more precisely, there is a hypothesis that it was written at a time when a portion of the Jewish population in Jerusalem had come to an “understanding” with their overlords, the Seleucids, and were urging fellow Jews to do likewise. Such considerations lead scholars to posit 163-162 as the time of writing.

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

*Verses 1-2* Awake, awake, put on your

strength, O Zion! Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for the uncircumcised and the unclean shall enter you no more. (Is 52:1; cf. 61:10)

*Verse 4* The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. (Is 62:2-4)

*Verse 5* Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” (Is 40:9; Cf. 43:; 51:17; 60:4)

*Verse 6* Thus says the Lord GOD: I will soon lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples; and they shall bring your sons in their bosom, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders. (Is 49:22)

*Verse 7* Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and

all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (Is 40:4-5)

*Verse 9* Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (Is 60:1-3)

### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 1** The first verse sounds the only “negative” note and the rest of the reading is immensely positive.

**Verse 2** The metaphor of being clothed is sustained in the following verses.

**Verse 3** A universal promise of salvation, indicated by “under heaven.”

**Verse 4** A new name means a new identity *and reality*.

**Verse 5** Jerusalem is addressed and invited to look east. The cause of this gathering of the dispersed is “God has remembered them.”

**Verse 6** A sharp contrast is drawn between the abject deportation and the glorious return.

**Verse 7** God is portrayed as a “civil engineer;” levelling the roads. Cf. Is 40.

**Verse 8** Even nature joins in and does its bit for those on the way home.

**Verse 9** The ground for all this hope is God’s mercy and righteousness, his covenant qualities from of old.

### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

**1.** It is easy to give in to the temptation of downheartedness. Can you hear the call to a more joyful, life-giving experience of the faith?

**2.** The reading calls us to go back into our own experience: when have you known such grace in the past and does the memory of that reality sustain you today?

### PRAYER

God, Holy One, everlasting and full of mercy, in you we place all our trust. In times of distress, open our heart to true life and joy in believing that we have new courage and be sources of encouragement to all we meet. Amen.

# THE LITURGY

## Baruch 5:1-9; Psalm 126 (125); Philippians 1:3-6, 8-11; Luke 3:1-6

### READINGS 1 AND 3

The first reading, which picks up the language of Second Isaiah, prepares us for the citation from Isaiah in relation to the ministry of John the Baptist. Mark was the first to use this citation and Luke, in his redaction, expands and enriches it.

### THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Although Baruch was written much later than the actual exile in Babylon, this psalm from the time of the deportation itself captures the joy of liberation.

### SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

#### First Reading

*Baruch 5:1-9*

Like many of the prophets, Baruch wrote at a time of religious oppression, when the people were truly disheartened. It may be that we today need his message of encouragement as never before.

#### Second Reading

*Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11*

How should we live so as to be ready to meet our maker? In this prayer, St Paul explores how we may go on growing in the faith.

#### Gospel

*Luke 3:1-6*

The contrast between the grand opening and the actual humble beginnings of Christianity is clearly intended by Luke. From the very start, the reign of God was very different from the kingdoms of this world. In a remote corner of the Empire, something was stirring which would definitively change world history.

### WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

#### Monday 10 December

*Isaiah 35:1-10*

Transformation is the message today, first in images (the desert in bloom), then in physical cures (the blind shall see etc.) and finally in the human heart (everlasting joy on their faces).

*Luke 5:17-26*

The effort of the friends is very impressive in this story...and their efforts meet with a double response, healing and forgiveness. On a spiritual level, we can be "paralysed" too and in need of a word of mercy.

#### Tuesday 11 December

*St Damasus, bishop of Rome*

*Isaiah 40:1-11*

Powerful images in this reading should awaken a deep longing in our hearts. Let us come again to the great shepherd of our souls, holding us and leading us in all circumstances.

*Matthew 8:12-14*

The parable of the lost sheep makes a direct link with Isaiah. Of course, the ninety-nine who don't stray at all also don't really exist! We are, all of us, lost sheep and in need of guidance.

#### Wednesday 12 December

*St Finian, bishop*

*Isaiah 40:25-31*

Our reading today is really a meditation on God and in particular on the "beyond-ness" of God (his transcendence). The fact that God is so other in this reflection is a source of hope and renewed energy.

*Matthew 11:28-30*

"Yoke" was a term used in a very positive sense by the rabbis to refer to the guidance of Torah, by which the faithful plough straight furrows in life. Jesus himself is now our Law and his guidance is light.

#### Thursday 13 December

*St Lucy, virgin and martyr*

*Isaiah 41:13-20*

The opening line of this poem give the key to the rest: *Do not be afraid*. The reading goes on to explore such deep trust using several metaphors: harvesting, drought and barrenness.

*Matthew 11:11-15*

So, who really *was* John the Baptist? In Jesus' estimation, John was the greatest of the old dispensation. In orthodox tradition he is called the forerunner, the

*prodromos*. Yet even he falls into the second rank compared with the least in the kingdom of heaven!

#### Friday 14 December

*St John of the Cross, priest and doctor*

*Isaiah 48:17-19*

There is a great promise in this reading, but also one big "if": if only you had been alert to my commandments. Isaiah can tell us the rest!

*Matthew 11:16-19*

There's no pleasing some people seems to be the message of this passage.

[The very last line, puzzling to us, calls for special comment. The passage comes from the Q community, who produced the *Sayings Source* (Q), behind parts of Matthew and Luke. In the view of that community, John, Jesus and their members were all children of transcendent wisdom. Originally, the last verse read: *But Wisdom was vindicated by her children*. (Q 7:35; see Luke 7:35.) For Matthew, Jesus himself is our Wisdom and so he alters the text and continues his portrait to Jesus as wisdom in Mt 11:25-30.]

#### Saturday 15 December

*Ecclesiasticus 48:1-4, 9-12*

Elijah remained a figure of fascination long after his death, as we hear in this reflection. An Elijah-type figure was expected to usher in the long-expected Messiah. The blessedness of this is caught in the very appealing beatitude which closes the reading.

*Matthew 17:10-13*

As noted above, the expected Elijah-type figure was based on Mal 3:1. By identifying John as Elijah, Jesus affirms the significance of the present moment and his own ministry.

