Journal of Dharma 43, 4 (October-December 2018), 431-456

THE MERCIFUL AND EMPATHETIC JESUS OF THE LUCAN GOSPEL

George Kaniarakath♦

Abstract: The Gospel according to Luke is remarkable in that it has an orientation to the whole of humankind - to the Samaritans, people of other nations and cultures, women and even sinners. The selection of materials in Luke like the parables of the Good Samaritan, and of the Prodigal Son are powerful indicators of the special thrust of the Gospel. This is amply clear in the teachings and deeds of Jesus who appears as ever open, merciful and empathetic to all. While accepting the equal dignity and worth of women and men, he was aware of their different roles in life. He was also open to people of other faiths. It shows that the divine mercy or action goes beyond all geographical, religious and cultural barriers, and Jesus is *the* saviour of the world.

Keywords: *Anawim Yahweh,* Christ-Centrism, Crucifixion, Ecclesio-Centrism, Friend of Sinners, Infancy Narratives, Poverty, Theo-Centrism.

1. Introduction

The Lucan gospel has a clear merciful, empathetic and universalistic approach to people, which means that the gospel is for all and addressed to all in a humane and welcoming manner. This gospel of mercy is noted for its attitude towards the other: (i) women, (ii) the poor, (iii) sinners and (iv) people of other nations and religions. These four aspects are relevant in a world where there is still lingering gender discrimination; where millions of people go to sleep with starved stomachs; where

♦**Dr George Kaniarakath CMI** is a biblical scholar, who had his higher studies in Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, Biblical and Archaeological School of Jerusalem and Pontifical Urban University, Rome. He is the founder and chief editor of the Hindi Theological journal *Sangam Darshan*.

people are branded as immoral and finally segregated and shunned because of differences in religion, race, culture, language or colour.

In the Lucan Gospel, the public life of Jesus is presented as a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and this travelogue style is found also in the *Acts* which moves from Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Luke has used Mark and another source called Q, and some of which are special to him and so called L as what we have in 9:51-18:14 containing the much valued parable of the Good Samaritan, the tax collector, the praying Pharisee, the rich fool, the rich man and Lazarus, the story of Zacchaeus and others.

2. Position of Women in Luke

"In the ancient Near East Women generally had no rights as free persons; they were always subject to a man, either her father or husband."[1] In Hellenistic, Roman and Jewish societies she was active in the domestic, private sphere, while men were active in the public sphere. The circumstances of women's lives and the opportunities available to them varied considerably to the class into which they were born and the place and time of their birth. The everyday lives of mainly the upper class Hellenistic and Roman women were often in tension with the ideal. Some Jewish women occupied leadership positions in the synagogues of the Diaspora communities. Alongside these apparent anomalies the gender perceptions of society characterised and influenced the life of most Hellenistic and Jewish women of this period. The gospels deal with women in a respectful and dignified way.

2. 1. Women in the Infancy Narratives

Luke wrote a narrative that began with the story of Jesus' birth (1:5-2:51). While both Luke and Matthew include birth narratives, Luke is unique in that the promise of God's salvation is engaged through Mary's response of faith. In the Lucan gospel, Jesus' birth is announced to Mary, not to Joseph, as is the

[1]J. L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London-Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965, 935.

case in Matthew 2:35. Luke's account places Mary at the centre in the infancy narrative while Joseph assumes prominence in the Matthean account. Jesus' mother, Mary is a virgin betrothed to Joseph, from the line of David. Jesus' conception is through the Holy Spirit and the name Jesus is given by the angel**.** There are a number of points distinctive to Luke who has clearly portrayed Mary as recipient of God's announcement of the birth of the Saviour. Luke has also included Elizabeth and the story of the birth of John the Baptist. Zechariah is a priest, from a priestly family of the division of Abijah (Luke 1:5). Elizabeth, his wife, was from the priestly family of Aaron. To be noted is that Luke introduces both Elizabeth and Zechariah as characters of equal importance. Every statement made of Zechariah is matched by what Luke says of Elizabeth. The priestly lineage and the names of both are given (Luke1:5). Both are righteous before God, both are childless, and both are getting on in years.

Elizabeth with her husband are said to be righteous (*dikaioi*). Elizabeth is the only woman to whom the term is applied. Elizabeth had passed child-bearing age. To be childless in Judaism was a disgrace, a great misfortune, a sign of divine punishment and a source of shame. In the Lucan narrative, Zechariah and Elizabeth are placed within the tradition of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 16:1), Isaac and Rebecca (Genesis 25:21), Jacob and Rachael (Genesis 30:1). The world of First Testament Judaism is focused on the Temple as Zechariah, the priest, takes his place in the temple cult and according to the custom wins the lot to burn incense. When Zechariah was alone at the altar of incense, Elizabeth was observant of all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly.

Zechariah fails to recognise God and God's messenger and asks for more knowledge, a sign. He also fails to remember the biblical tradition of the faith of Abraham. He fails to interpret correctly the initiative of God and asks for a sign and he is struck dumb. The sign given to him is that of silence. Although Elizabeth did not experience directly the angelic appearance, her interpretation of the sign of God's visitation is in contrast to Zechariah's response of unbelief. The narrative takes us from the

Temple to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth (1:23). The promise, made to Zechariah, finds fulfilment as Elizabeth finds herself to be pregnant. She, in contrast to Zechariah, understands this to be an expression of the compassion of God and interprets her pregnancy in the light of the First Testament precedence. Elizabeth, in contrast to Zechariah, recognises God's grace and announces her pregnancy as the gift of God. "This is what the Lord has done to me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (1:25).

2. 2. Women in the Public Life of Jesus

In the context of the public life of Jesus, Luke introduces the widow of Nain (7:11-17), the specially privileged widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 17:9; 4:25-30), narrates a parable about a widow (18:1-8) and highlights the generosity of the poor widow at the treasury (21:1-4). There are women who were sick or sinners who were healed by Jesus: A woman of the city, a sinner who came to Jesus at the Pharisee's house (7:36-50); he healed Jairus' daughter and the woman with the haemorrhage (8:40-55), the woman who was a cripple (13:10-17). Parables about the kingdom include the parable about the woman and leaven and the woman and the lost coin (15:8-10). Women who ministered, and who obeyed Jesus' words: Simon's mother-in-law (4:38-39), the women who travelled with Jesus (8:2-3), Jesus' mother (8:19-21), Mary and Martha who were visited by Jesus (10:38-42), the women along the road who declared Mary's womb and breasts blessed (11:27-28).

2.3. Women at the Crucifixion of Jesus

Two groups of women are identified in relationship to Jesus' death: the daughters of Jerusalem and the women from Galilee. Through the narrative of the daughters of Jerusalem Luke presents the consequences of Jesus' death for Jerusalem. In contrast, it is through the narrative of the women from Galilee that he announces that Jesus is alive and depicts the hope of the new community of faith. The daughters of Jerusalem (23:27-31) are located in the narrative as part of the crowd following Jesus to his execution. According to Luke, Jesus turns to these women

and prophesies that they will come to praise as blessed "the barren, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never gave suck" (23:29). Jesus' words to the daughters of Jerusalem reveal the fate awaiting the people of Jerusalem who failed to recognise Jesus for who he is. In these verses (23:27-31) Luke presents a situation similar to that of the woman in the crowd in Luke 11:27 where Jesus' words to the daughters of Jerusalem (23.27-30) include a negative form of the beatitude spoken by the women in the crowd in Luke 11:27. Jesus' words drew attention to the priority of listening to the word of God as the foundation for blessing.

The daughters of Jerusalem can be compared with the women from Galilee. Both groups of women are depicted as following Jesus as he travels to the cross. However, while the daughters of Jerusalem are caught into the life, and conditions of family and responsibility in the city that has failed to recognise Jesus as the prophet from God, the women from Galilee are among those who constitute Jesus' followers, the community of his disciples. The women from Galilee re-enter the narrative in Luke 23:49. In addition to Luke 8:1-3, the Lucan narrative identifies the women from Galilee on three occasions: at the crucifixion of Jesus (23:49), at his burial (23:55) and at the empty tomb (24:6). The women from Galilee provide a critical linkage among Jesus' Galilean ministry, his crucifixion, burial and resurrection. As such, their primary relationship to the word of God transforms their obligations and relationships to the biological family.

The women from Galilee play a central role in the narrative of the human response to Jesus' death as they are the first to proclaim his resurrection; they become the nucleus of the new believing community, and they are commissioned as witnesses along with the twelve and the others in Luke 24:48. The apostles are absent but the women from Galilee are present. It is probable that Mark 15:40ff in Luke's text has been distributed over both Luke 23:49b and 8:2ff.

Luke has chosen not to follow Mark's account where the centurion said "truly this man was the Son of God" (15:39), but

has drawn on a tradition from L. In Luke the male disciples did not flee at his arrest, "a great number of people followed him and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him" (23:27). Though he does not specifically refer to disciples or apostles in this regard, he notes that "all his acquaintances, including the women who followed him from Galilee stood at a distance, watching these things" (23:48-49); it is the women who are the witnesses to the crucifixion. The women from Galilee are mentioned again in Luke 23:55 in connection with finding Jesus' body.

The women follow Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb where Jesus is laid. The Lucan narrative speaks about the women from Galilee who were able to see the tomb. Like family members they prepare spices and ointments for anointing Jesus' body. Luke is careful to record the respect shown for the Mosaic Law in the narrative detail that the women delay attending to Jesus' corpse until after the Sabbath.

2.4. Women in the Resurrection Narratives

The Lucan narrative builds on the element of surprise by detailing the preparations of the women (23:56-24:1). The women who had seen the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid (23:55), who were prepared to complete the services for his burial (23:56-24:1) are confronted by an empty tomb. They respond in bewilderment. The women are the first to hear the message of resurrection, which confirms the discipleship of the women. In the empty tomb, in the midst of their perplexity, the women from Galilee are addressed by two men in dazzling apparel who announce the initiative of God (24:5). The two men invite the active response and participation of the women in God's initiative and address them as those who have received Jesus' teaching in Galilee. Through an invitation to remember the prediction of Jesus, the narrative strengthens the identification of the women as disciples in their own right. The women were part of the community of followers referred to in Luke 8:1-3.

2.5. Why no Female Apostle?

Luke presents Jesus as treating women as equal to men in dignity as is seen in the paralleling of events involving women and men. Of course, their role and function in life differ: Annunciation to Zechariah (1:8-23) and annunciation to Mary (1:26-38); Mary's *Magnificat* (1:46-55) and Zechariah's *Benedictus* (1:68-79); Simon Praising God at seeing the baby Jesus (2:25-35) and Hanna praising God (2:36-38). In his sermon in Nazareth, Jesus spoke about widows (4:25-26) and lepers (4:27). Jesus healed a possessed man (4:31-37) and Simon's mother-in-law (4:38-39). Jesus forgave the paralytic his sins (5:17-26) and the woman who wept at his feet (7:36-50). Jesus healed the centurion's slave (7:1-10) and raised back to life the widow's son (7:11-17); healed the Gerasene demoniac and raised Jairus' daughter (8:40-42a, 49-56) and healing the woman with the issue of blood (8:42b-48). Jesus offered Jonah (11:30) and the Queen of Sheeba as signs. In the parable of the mustard seed a man took (13:18-19) and in the leaven a woman (13:20-21). The woman bent with a spirit healed on Sabbath (13:10-17) is paired with a man with dropsy (14:1-6); the parable the man with the lost sheep (15:3-7) with the woman with the lost coin (15:8-10); of two men in bed one is taken, the other is left (17:340) and of two women grinding one is taken the other is left (17:35).

However, the women are not included among the apostles, though Luke names some of the women disciples: "The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources" (Luke 8:1-3).[2] These women were not only associating with Jesus and his male disciples, but travelling along with them. We also see that at least some of these women, possibly widows, had control of their own

[2]This passage is seen as typically Lucan, see Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981, 695.

finances. It was out of their generosity that Jesus and his disciples were at least partially supported.

Although Jesus lived and moved with the cultural traditions of the first century, he ignored the limitations that had been placed on women by their culture. Women were free to follow him and to take part in his ministry. It seems to be a principle that God limits himself within any given context and culture in order to reach people to become his followers. For example, we know it was not God's will that Israel be governed by a king (1 Samuel 8:5-20). But once the nation had chosen to go that route, God worked within that context. Similarly an argument could be made that God did not want a temple built for him, (2 Samuel 7: 5-7, Acts 7:49-50), but it was David's desire to build him one. Yet God chose to bless the temple that Solomon built. The culture of Israel at the time of Jesus was indubitably patriarchal. Women were often regarded as mere possessions. We know that the eleven disciples themselves thought the women were speaking nonsense when they came and told them that Jesus had been raised from the dead (Luke 24:11). God limited himself within the patriarchal culture of the time in order to reach out to people with the transforming message of the Gospel.

We see that Jesus treated women with respect, as people of the same spiritual significance as men. On this point, scholars who favour women's ordination are agreed with those who oppose it. There is one significant aspect of Jesus' ministry on which they do not agree, and that is the implications of the fact that Jesus chose only men to be among the Twelve. Jesus, indeed, demonstrated a clear role distinction between men and women. It was not social custom or cultural pressure that caused Jesus to appoint an all-male group of apostles. If he had so desired, he could have, perhaps, appointed six men and six women as apostles. It is true that Jewish culture did accept women into positions of leadership. Just three decades before Herod the Great took over as king, Israel was ruled for years by Queen Alexandra. The fact that an occasional judge (e.g., Deborah, Judges 4-5), or ruler (Athaliah (842-837, 2 Kings 11: 3)

was a woman also demonstrates that female leadership was possible.

Jesus, who broke many religious conventions, did not challenge all the imperfect social customs of his day. He did not attack the Roman government, or the custom of slavery. Instead, he used slaves in some of his parables without even a hint that such a custom was anything less than what God wanted. Jesus indeed, challenged culture on certain points, but we cannot assume that he agreed with everything that he let stand. The persons are of equal value even though the same roles are not open to both.

When there were only eleven, Peter felt that it was necessary to bring the number back to twelve (Acts 1:22). Jesus was forming a new people of God, and the twelve disciples represented the twelve tribes of Israel, and for that reason they had to be twelve. Twelve Jewish males represent the twelve tribes and their patriarchal heads. It is the twelve apostles who will sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19: 28; Luke 22: 30). The new Jerusalem will have twelve gates, twelve angels, twelve foundations, and on them the names of the twelve apostles (Rev 21: 12, 14).

3. The Poor in Luke

The third gospel is also known as 'the gospel of the poor.' In his programmatic address in the synagogue of Nazareth (4:13-30), Jesus made his first mission statement citing the words of prophet Isaiah (61:1-2): "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (4:18-19). Here the Lucan Jesus declares his preferential option for the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed who include also the hungry, the weeping and the hated (6:22). Of course, the Matthean Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount offers blessing to the 'poor in spirit,' which can be understood in the context of the *anawim Yahweh,* the poor of the Lord who considered themselves as dependent

on the Lord than any wealth. Luke speaks about the objectively poor who struggled for survival. The rich are those who abound in resources and do not need to work for a living and who because of their undue attachment to wealth, refuse to heed God's call and let wealth become an obstacle to the Kingdom (18:18-30). They fail to put their trust in God (12:13-21), give themselves to enjoyment, become irreligious and fail to care for the poor (16:19-31). This is why even Zacchaeus is categorized as *plousios* until he was ready to give away his riches (19:1-10). Luke avoids attributing this term to Joseph of Arimathea (23:50) while Matthew does it (27:57). The rich at the time of Luke oppressed the poor economically and socially. Again through the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-30), Jesus teaches that one cannot be insensitive to the lot of those around and the parable of the rich fool (12:22-31) that one should trust in God than in wealth and again Jesus declared at a dinner party that our celebrations remain incomplete when the poor hunger outside (14:12-14).

Poverty can be understood differently as having no child, economic security, or social influence; in modern terms, having no man power, muscle power, or money power. At the time of Jesus, majority of the people in Palestine were poor peasants or fishermen or even beggars and slaves. Only some two percent of the people belonged to the elite group. The poor are elected to be close associates of Jesus as Mary and Joseph of Nazareth, the childless Zechariah and Elizabeth, shepherds, an old man and widow in the temple, and the fishermen as disciples. The voices of the widows were futile as they did not have anything or anybody to lean on. The good news is for the poor (4:18). Luke tells us stories about the widow of Nain (7:11-17). The story about the widow who offered at the temple the only coins she had (21:1-4), is touching and Jesus' comment on it, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on," is revealing. The widow who sought justice from an unjust judge with courage and persistence (18:1-8) is noteworthy.

In Luke we have a number of references to the poor. Mary the mother of Jesus in her *Magnificat* calls herself 'servant' (1:48); the Lord has put down the mighty and exalted the lowly (1:48); the Lord filled the hungry and sent away the rich empty (1:52). The repenting people at the preaching of John the Baptist was told to share what they had with those who did not have (3:11). In his inaugural address in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus proclaimed release and solace to the poor and oppressed (4:18-19). He reminded that when there was a long and severe famine at the time prophet Elijah was sent to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon (4:25-26). In his plane sermon Jesus declares blessing to the poor and the hungry and woe to the rich and full (6:20-21). Everyone who begs is to be given (6:30). Jesus healed the Gerasene demoniac who had no house and wore worn clothes (8:27). The instruction given to the twelve on their first missionary enterprise instructed the disciples to carry no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, or even an extra tunic (9:3). What one needs is to search the kingdom of God (12:31) "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (12:34). Jesus himself has no place to lay his head (9:58). In the parable of the great dinner, the poor, crippled, and the lame from the streets and lanes are invited (14:15-24). Paradoxically, those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life keep it (17:33). The rich man had wealth as a hindrance to follow Jesus (18:22). Hearing the cry of the blind man for mercy in Jericho, Jesus stood still and when he was brought close, healed him (18: 42).

Concerning wealth Jesus declared that one cannot serve both God and *mamona*, money/god of wealth (16:13).The Pharisees were lovers of money and scoffed at Jesus (16:14) and in that Jesus narrated the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31). They thought wealth to be a sign of divine blessing and poverty a result of sin and the consequent curse of God. The rich man was well-dressed, ate well, and lived comfortably every day. Lazarus was dressed in rags, hungry, struggled to make a living; he was unclean with sores; he was even too weak to fight

off the dogs; he lived on the margins. Lazarus "laid at the man's gate," indicating that he was crippled or lame, and poor.

After death Lazarus went to Abraham's bosom, happy and banqueting (an imagery of reclining next to Abraham at a banquet). The rich man went to the Hades, where he was tormented. Here is a reversal of the situation. Social status and material possessions do not guarantee eternal life. The rich man did not do any injustice to Lazars, but he did not do him justice, which he owed him; he did not love his neighbour (Micah 6:8). We know from the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke that loving one's neighbour involved helping those around us when in need. The rich man was too good to be the friend of outcasts!

At the very beginning of the Gospel, in the *magnificat* (1:46-55), Luke foreshadows his disfavour towards the rich. This same message is amplified in the Woes pronounced in the plane (6:24-26) and then further intensified in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus through the reversals of fortunes (16:19-31). The rich are shown to be too much attached to their riches, which in turn become obstacles to enter the Kingdom (8:14; 12:13-21). Jesus spoke about the scribes who devour the widows (20: 47) by exploiting them in the name of piety. The extraordinary hindrance to their entering the Kingdom is made explicit in the case of the rich ruler: 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God" (18:24-25).

The Lucan Jesus shows great concern for people of all walks of life – the poor, the infirm, the outcast, the foreigner and the underprivileged, yet when he is confronted with the social practices that ran counter to his vision of healthy relationships, as the negligence and oppression of the poor by the rich, he does not remain passive but awakens the rich to the evil that they perpetuate in society and asks them to divest themselves of their wealth and be just to the poor (19:5).

Jesus is not against making life comfortable or rich; he narrated the story of the ten talents (19: 11-26) to teach that one should make the best use of what one has received from the

Lord. In Luke, Jesus mingles freely with the rich. It is evident in his acceptance of invitations to banquets from different classes of rich people like the Pharisees (7:36; 11:37) and the rulers (14:1, 12). Moreover, some well-to-do women provided for his necessities and those of the apostolic band of twelve from their possessions (8:3). He is also associated with the Roman Centurion and Jairus in the act of healing (8:40-56). The tax collector Levi became his disciple.

4. Jesus, the Friend of the Sinners

The most obvious and significant texts for a study on Jesus and sinners in the Gospel of Luke are the call of Levi (5:27-32), the sinful woman (7:36-50), the parable of patience with the barren fig tree (13:6-9), parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and the prodigal son (15), the Pharisee and the publican in the Temple (18:9-14), Zacchaeus (19:1-10), and the thief on the cross (23: 40-43). In four of these (the call of Levi, the sinful woman, the parables of the lost, and Zacchaeus) Jesus gets in contact with the "tax collectors and sinners," and that arouses the criticism of the Pharisees (in Zacchaeus from a crowd in Jericho), and ends with a teaching that defends Jesus' concern for the sinners. Of these central sinner texts, the calling of Levi comes from Mark (2:13-17) while the rest are all Lucan special material. As will be pointed out, the basic dynamics in all the rest follow that of the Levi story. They also bring up and expound aspects of a common message. Apart from the call of Levi, there is another text on Jesus and sinners in the Gospel as Luke's background material for the central sinner texts that reflects an early piece of information, namely that Jesus was mocked as "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (7:34).

It was Luke, who made this theme central for all subsequent Christianity. Luke, certainly, did not create the picture of Jesus as a great "friend of sinners" from a vacuum. He found it in the earliest written sources about Jesus, namely, the Gospel of Mark and the Q source, and it is possible that he knew other traditions about the matter as well. Apart from Luke's special material there is not much material in the other gospels. In Mark, there is

the account in which Jesus calls the tax collector Levi and thereafter shares a meal with him and many toll collectors and sinners (2:15-17); both Luke (5:27-32) and Matthew (9:9-13) repeat it with small changes. In addition the Q source contained a speech of Jesus in which he quotes a jibe levelled against him, a "glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:31-34 / Matthew 11:16-19). Otherwise there are only two passages in all of Matthew, Mark and John that speak about Jesus as a special friend of people who were thought sinful in some special and concrete sense. The first is Matthew 21:31-32, in which Jesus claims that the tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the Kingdom of God before the high priests and elders of his day (21:23) because they believed John the Baptist. In this saying, Jesus sets tax collectors and prostitutes as examples of the right kind of faith. The second is the story of the adulteress (John 7:53-8:11).

The third gospel is known as the 'gospel of mercy.'[3] In addition to the two passages taken from Mark and Q, Luke tells of Jesus' encounter with the woman who was reputed as a sinner (7:36-50). In his fifteenth chapter he lets Jesus tell the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son to defend his meals with toll collectors and sinners in the face of the Pharisees and the scribes. The parable of the sheep appears also in Matthew 18:12-13 but Luke connects it unambiguously with Jesus' toll collector and sinner followers. In 18:9-14 Luke has Jesus tell the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the Temple. In 19:1-10 he tells how Jesus met Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector. Finally, he recounts Jesus' gracious exchange of words with one of the criminals crucified with him (23: 43). In Luke, Jesus' relationship to tax collectors and sinners, otherwise a minor feature in the Jesus tradition, figures again and again. The scenes and parables are delivered with memorable story-telling skill and pathos and the idea is developed and enriched.

[3]John Paul II, *Dives Misericordia,* Vatican: Editrice Vaticana, 30 November, 1980, 3.

Luke's presentation of the theme has left the deepest imprint on how Jesus has been seen by Christians.

Today most of the scholars of the historical Jesus lay great emphasis on Jesus' friendship with tax collectors and sinners; it should have been a quintessential feature in the public activity of Jesus; his meals with them are also of remarkable. The son of man came to seek out and save the lost" (19:10).

4.1. In the Typical Parables in Luke 15

Jesus begins with a pastoral scene that would have been very familiar in Palestine. A shepherd had a hundred sheep that would indicate he is modestly wealthy, since the average flock ranged from twenty to two hundred head. Such flocks were an economic resource, since they provided wool and mutton. During the count as he gathers the sheep at day's end, the shepherd notices that one is missing. Jesus' original hearers probably assumed that the shepherd asks a neighbour to keep an eye on the ninety-nine so that he can search for the missing sheep, though the story does not offer this detail. The sheep needs to be found; otherwise it may be permanently lost or attacked by hungry predators. It is risky to be a lost sheep.

The parable pictures God's desire to find sinners and bring them back into the fold. Thus the owner arranges a party, asking his neighbours to celebrate with him when the lost sheep is found. Jesus says, "there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (15.7). When a sinner turns to God, heaven throws a party. The prospect of such joy keeps Jesus associating with sinners.

The second parable parallels the first. Here a silver coin has been lost. It sounds as if the coin is a drachma, which equals a denarius, a day's wage for the average worker. The search is likely to be taking place in the evening, since the woman must light a lamp to look for the coin. She sweeps the house clean, looking carefully, until it turns up. We can almost hear her "there it is!" Like the shepherd, this woman calls her friends together to celebrate the discovery of the lost coin. So "there is rejoicing in

the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (15.10). The reference to angels is a circumlocution for God's joy. The courts of heaven are full of praise when a sinner turns to God.

The second parable stresses the search a little more than the first. Recovering a lost sinner may require to take diligent effort. But the effort is worth if when the lost is found. Sinners should know that God is diligently looking for them. Disciples should diligently engage in the search for sinners on behalf of the Master they serve. Jesus provides a clear example for us to follow. Finding lost "sheep" and missing "coins" is a disciple's priority. Jesus involved himself with sinners; so should disciples.

The third parable of Luke 15 is a more elaborate treatment of God seeking sinners. One of Jesus' best-loved parables reveals far more about God's mercy and love. It is well described as 'gospel within the gospel', the greatest short story of the world. We know that the parable is speaking about a merciful Father than that of a prodigal son. The parable is found only in Luke and is allegorical. The father in the parable stands for God, the Father and the prodigal son represents the lost ones like the tax collectors and sinners. The elder brother represents the 'righteous' Pharisees and Scribes with all who belong to the 'holy' circle claiming to serve God correctly, but are harsh to the apparent law-breakers and sinners.

The parable opens with the younger son's request to have his share of the property. Since the son is still single, he is probably in his late teens. The Greek term for the inheritance is suggestive, "the life" *(ton bion).* He wants his portion of what his father will leave him. In a Jewish context the younger brother would receive half of what his elder brother received (Deuteronomy 21:17). Having divided the property between the two sons, the father watches the younger son depart. In his own style of life, the son loses everything in loose living. No further details are given. In fact, the text says he wasted (*diaskorpizo*) his resources. Following his financial failure, famine strikes the land, and he is helpless and in need. Seeking a job, he ends up feeding swine, a job of great dishonour for a Jew (Leviticus 11:7;

Deuteronomy 14:8; Isaiah 65:4; 66:17; 1 Maccabees 1:47). As a Jew working for a Gentile and caring for swine, he can sink no lower; he had no other go as the inevitable fell on him. Though employed, he could not satisfy his hunger: "He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating" (15.16). None had anything better to offer him. Even the unclean animals were better fed than he was. Here is the misery and inner and outer emptiness of the sinner. The son reflects on his condition and remembers that his father's servants at home have a far better life. The sinner discovers his desperate situation outside of God's family being utterly alone and he devises a plan of return. He would confess his sin before his father: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men" (15.19). This expresses the humility of one who turns to the Father.

Sinners have nothing to rely on except the Father's mercy. They recognize that they have failed and can claim nothing except mercy. The Son returns home humbly and repentant to be received back as a servant than as a son; he proceeds with a confession. The father does not even wait for what the son says. The father's reaction is astounding: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him (*splanchnizestai*), (which is a typical expression in Luke 10:33; 15:2) he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (15.20). We learn that the action breaks all Middle Eastern protocol; no father would greet a rebellious son this way. But as is often the case in Jesus' parables, the twist in the story makes the point. The son is satisfied to be a slave, but the father will restore him to full sonship. Literally, the father drapes himself on his son's neck (*epepesen epi ton trachelon*). He is pleased and thrilled to see his beloved lost son return back home. A fattened calf is prepared, and a party will is held. Fatted calves were saved for special occasions like the Day of Atonement. This is not just any party; it is a rare and complete celebration. There is rejoicing for the lost son, now found (vv. 7, 10). The note of joy about the son's return is crucial in the passage, as is the restoration of sonship privileges. The son has come from

destitution to complete restoration. That is what God's grace does for a penitent sinner. On the plane Jesus told his disciples to "be merciful just as their Father is merciful" (6:36). The enraged elder brother does not go in to join the festivities. The father's compassion does not cease. He comes out to the angry brother and tries to calm him down. The elder brother pleads his faithfulness despite the lack of celebration for him at any time in the past. Not even a "kid" has been butchered for him. The elder makes a serious complaint that he deserves to be treated better. In his audacity and anger he refers to his own brother as "this son of yours." He speculates that the fellow has wasted his money on harlots.

The father has a ready reply reconciling the brothers. He accepts his elder son and acknowledges that all that the father has belongs to him. There is no reason for jealousy. In a sense the elder son has always had access to celebrations: the animals are his! But there is great reason for celebration and jubilation, as his brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (15:32). He is told that his brother who was strayed has come back. Family ethos means that the son and brother should be received back in joy and jubilation. The focus should be on the relationship and the inward and outward transformation that has occurred in the strayed member. Such a son, brother or sister is to be welcomed back into God's family with joy.

The parable teaches that repentance means an absolute reversal of mind. The lost son has become a family member again; the acceptance of the penitent son is total. God pursues sinners as they are his children and as he mercifully loves them too. His other children also should rejoice and celebrate anybody's conversion and return home. Reconciliation involves besides God, the individual and the community.

4.2. Zacchaeus, the Tax Collector (19: 1-10)

The Tax collectors were never been popular in Judea and Galilee during the Roman era, they were particularly hated as they collaborated with the foreign oppressors. Zacchaus' sin was of a

concrete social nature.[4] However, when he heard that Jesus was around, he wished to see him, perhaps out of curiosity. As he was of small stature, he ran in front of the crowd and even climbed a sycamore tree to get a good view of Jesus. Seeing the short man in the tree, Jesus called him by his name, though never seen before, "Zacchaeus, hurry down, for I mean to stay at your house today" (19:5). Jesus knew to whom he was speaking. The people were astonished and they began to grumble saying that Jesus becoming the guest of a sinner. Zacchaeus became aware of his state and promised that he would give half of his wealth to the poor and would pay fourfold to whom he had defrauded. And Jesus solemnly declared that salvation had come to this son of Abraham, as the Son of Man is to seek out and save the lost. This wasn't the first time they had criticized Jesus and his disciples for associating with those the Pharisees considered off-limits. Sometime earlier, during a banquet given for Jesus by a tax collector named Levi, a group of Pharisees questioned Jesus' disciples. The Pharisees asked, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and "sinners'?" Jesus responded by saying: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:29-31).

4.3. In the Passion Narratives

Unlike the other synoptic gospels, in Luke we do not have the agony in Gethsemane; the stress here is on Jesus' compassion, and forgiveness. Besides, he points to three increasingly marginalised groups that mocked and jeered at Jesus: the Jewish leaders, the Roman soldiers and the criminal on the cross. In each case they sarcastically taunted Jesus acting like the Messiah; Jewish king or saviour they thought he claimed to be.

Although Jesus was innocent, he was "numbered with the transgressors"; Luke 22:37 quotes Isaiah 53:12. Luke gives few details about these men other than that they were criminals. The place of execution was called in Aramaic "Golgotha," which means, "The Place of the Skull." Jesus, at the time of his own

[4]Anie Pesonen, *Luke, the Friend of Sinners,* E-thesis, University of Helsinki, 2009, 202.

death, prays for those who are killing him (23:34). He, in fact, put into practice what he had already taught his followers (6:27-28). Jesus also describes those who are putting him to death as not being aware of what they were doing. Peter takes up this theme in Acts (Acts 3:17; 13:27; 14:16; 17:30; 26:9). Jesus prayed not for his own forgiveness but for the forgiveness of the sins of others; although he identified himself with sinners was not himself a sinner. Often when a man was put to death, the reason for his death sentence was written on a plaque and hung around his neck. The reason that the Roman authorities found it acceptable to crucify Jesus was because he was a rival king. Luke alone records a detailed interchange between the two criminals and Jesus (23:39-43). Although in Matthew (27:44) and Mark (5:32) both criminals ridicule Jesus, presumably the second criminal realised his error and repented of it as recorded in Luke 23:39. The first criminal, most abusively and sarcastically states, "Are you not the Christ?" Clearly he does not think so, but again ironically the question is framed to expect a positive answer. With an insulting statement, he was echoing the contemptuous mocking of the Jewish rulers and the Roman soldiers. Yet this first criminal wanted something from Jesus, which the other two antagonists did not. He wanted Jesus to relieve him of his physical suffering and imminent death. The second criminal however responds very differently; he admitted his guilt humbly without any self justification. We are not told why he saw Jesus in a way that no one else did. Yet somehow, through God's grace, he knew that Jesus was innocent and that his death was a total travesty of justice. The compassion, love and mercy that Jesus shows this criminal are overwhelming. With absolute certainty Jesus tells him that together they will be in Christ's kingdom.

On the cross Jesus prayed, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Jesus looking down from the cross between the two criminals sees the soldiers who mocked him, tortured, scourged and nailed him to the cross. Jesus also thinks of those who sentenced him to death as Caiaphas and the high priests of the Sanhedrin. Even at the

extreme moment of pain and angst he prays to his Father to forgive the offenders. Here we have one of the most touching narratives in the entire Bible. Jesus was burdened by physical, emotional and perhaps even spiritual agony of the cross, and he still expressed the divine nature of his love for humanity.

4.4. The Modern Controversies

Who are the "sinners" and how much the Lucan picture is accurate is disputed among scholars today. Joachim Jeremias thinks that Jesus' loving and forgiving attitude to tax collectors and sinners was the central feature in his ministry and in stark contrast to the attitude of the Pharisees.[5] He sees a large class of people that the Pharisees despised as sinful. These consisted people who were engaged in "despised trades," and the poor and uneducated people referred to as '*am ha'a-arets*, "the people of the land". All of these would have been "deprived of their Jewish civil rights." Jesus, according to the author, threatened the authority of the Pharisees by proclaiming that the sinners were especially called and favoured by God, as well as by eating publicly with them. He was a liberator of a significant section of the people. Jeremias defends the authenticity of most Lucan special material, including all the Lucan sinner texts listed above. His views have been strongly criticized by E. P. Sanders[6] in whose view Jeremias' analysis of the Palestinian society in the day of Jesus is based on a misinterpretation and projection onto the past of Rabbinic texts, by putting the poor and the uneducated ('*am ha-'arets*) together with "sinners." Jesus went with the sinners not to share in their revelry, but to lead them to the correct way of life.

While authors wrote for and against Jeremias, Marcus J. Borg has tried to combine the views of Jeremias and of Sanders.[7] In his

---

[5]Joachim Jeremias, *Die Gleichnise Jesu*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1958; *Jerualem zur Zeit Jesu: eine kulturgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur neutestamntlichen Zeitgeschichte* (3. Neuarb, 1962, trans., *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, Fortress Press, 1969.

[6]E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism,* London: SCM Press, 1985, 174-208.

[7]Marcus D. Borg, *Luke: A New Vision*, San Francisco: 1989.

work, he envisions a large group of sinners and outcasts, which included both the notoriously "wicked" (murderers, extortionists, prostitutes, and the like) as well as members of certain occupational groups, taken straight from Jeremias. These people were counted as "non-Jews" and were "virtually untouchables." Like Jeremias, Borg lumps the impoverished landless together with these; in his view, the difference between the "starkly poor, living on a mixture of begging and day labour," and the outcast must have been "almost imperceptible." Jesus' deals with the outcast were part of Jesus' active campaign on behalf of these people: "Jesus' table fellowship with outcasts was an enacted parable of the grace of God, both expressing and mediating the divine grace."[8] Borg sees the parables of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:9-14) together with the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep and the Prodigal Son (15) as authentic and belonging to Jesus' defence of the sinners.

5. Conclusion: Jesus' Mercy beyond Frontiers

Of course, all the four gospels have a universal orientation but Luke is the most universal of the gospels and it is evident from the beginning to the end. Luke has left out many of the details that would have been unintelligible to the non-Jews. Unlike the genealogy in Matthew, which begins with Abraham, the known father of the Jews, in Luke Jesus was the "son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God" (3:38). In Luke the angels announce to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem the good news of great joy for all the people. Luke alone reports about seventy two disciples being sent out on a temporary mission and in the Bible seventy refers to all the nations (10:1-16). Besides, he leaves out the restrictive idea found in Matthew (10:5). In Luke Jesus is open towards the non-Jewish Romans and others; Jesus manifests a positive attitude and approach towards the ethnic and religious outcasts like the Samaritans (9:52; 10:3217:16); Luke alone reports that of the ten lepers healed, only one, a Samaritan turned back "praising God in loud voice" (17: 11-19); Jesus is a light for revelation to the other nations (2:32; 4:26-27).

[8]Borg, *Luke*, 56.

Jesus proposes a Samaritan (For the Jews the Samaritans were a heretical and schismatic group of spurious worshipers of the God of Israel, detested even more than pagans)[9] as a model of charity open to all (10:25-37). It is the outcast who helps, not a priest or Levite, who goes far beyond and cleans the victim's wounds with oil and wine, then bandages them. After this, he puts the man on his donkey and takes him to an inn. He takes two silver coins, a considerable amount in those days, and promises to reimburse the innkeeper for any further expense. This is an exceptional level of assistance, especially for a total stranger and someone who is supposed to be a social outcast.

The great lesson of this exemplary story is that "anyone who helps someone in need is a neighbour to him. Our love for others cannot and should not be limited to our blood relations, neighbourhood, religion or any consideration other than that of humanity."[10] Luke also reports about the healing of ten lepers on his way to Jerusalem in the region between Samaria and Galilee, of whom one only returned to thank Jesus when he found that he was healed; and he was also a Samaritan. Luke has also the story of a centurion with humble and genuine faith (7:1-10).

Salvation is for "all" peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles (2:30-32). Here again we notice a modification: Luke changes the singular (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6) into plural to include both the Jews (who were the People) and the Gentiles. Even when Jesus announces his social manifesto, he speaks in terms of universality: the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (4:16-18). We are assured toward the end of the gospel that "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (24:47). Hence in the beginning as well as at the end of the gospel we have the inclusive idea that Jesus is for all the nations. In this vast complex of the Lucan plan of progressive realization in the history of the sovereign plan of

[9]MacKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 765.

[10]G. Kaniarakath, *Jesus Christ: A Meditative Introduction*, Mumbay: St Pauls, 2008, 163.

God which offers salvation to all, it is an invitation directed to all to join the Jesus movement.

The important question today is, can we or should we restrict salvation to any particular religion? The answer is an emphatic 'NO" and there are many ways of explaining it. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger**,** before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, with the approval of the then Pope John Paul II, accepted in a document called *Dominus Jesus*[11] a modified form of "anonymous Christianity": "Nevertheless, God, who desires to call all peoples to himself in Christ and to communicate to them the fullness of his revelation and love, does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals, but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors."[27] Therefore, the sacred books of other religions, which in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers, receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace which they contain."[12] Here we are invited to ponder over the text "Christianity and the World Religions" of the International Theological Commission which was approved *in forma specifica* by vote 30th September 1996 and was submitted to its president, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who has given his approval for its publication.

Before Vatican II, Jean Daniélou[13] and others spoke of the cosmic covenant of God with Noah involving divine revelation in nature and conscience, different from that with Abraham. These are seen as stepping stones having some salvific value with stumbling blocks. Only in Christ and in church are they fulfilled. Karl Rahner and others wrote: "... the offer of grace in the present order of things reaches all men and that they have a vague, even if not necessarily conscious awareness of its action and its light. Given that man is by nature a social being,

[11]Joseph Ratzinger, *Dominus Jesus*, Vatican, 6 August 2000

[12]Ratzinger, *Dominus Jesus*, 1.8.

[13]Jean Daniélou, *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament*, London: Felix Faber, 1957.

religions, insofar as they are social expressions of the relation of man with God, help their followers to receive the grace of Christ (*fides implicita*) which is necessary for salvation, and to be open in this way to love of neighbour which Jesus identified with the love of God. In this sense they can have salvific value even though they contain elements of ignorance, sin and corruption.[14]

Different attempts have been made to classify theological positions on the salvific value of other religions: ecclesio-centric universe or exclusive Christology, Christo-centric universe or inclusive Christology, and thirdly theo-centric universe with a normative Christology. Some theologians adopt the tripartite division *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, and *pluralism*, which are seen as parallel to: *ecclesiocentrism*, *Christo-centrism*, *theo-centrism*.

Ecclesio-cenrism with the idea *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* finds not many supporters; Christo-centrism accepts that salvation may occur in religions, but it denies them any autonomy in salvation on account of the uniqueness and universality of the salvation that comes from Jesus Christ. This position is the one most commonly held by Catholic theologians, even though there are differences among them. It attempts to reconcile the universal salvific will of God with the fact that there are human beings within other cultural traditions and religions who are to be part of it.

Theo-centrism claims to be a way of going beyond Christo-centrism, a paradigm shift. It acknowledges the riches of religions and the moral witness of their members, and, as a final concern, it aims at facilitating the unity of all religions in order to encourage living together and working for peace and justice in the world. Again a distinction is made between a theo-centrism in which Jesus Christ, without being constitutive of, is considered normative for salvation, and another theo-centrism in which normative value of Jesus Christ is not recognized. In the first case, without denying that others may also mediate salvation, Jesus Christ is acknowledged as the mediator who

[14]Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, New York: Seabury Press, 1992, 202.

best expresses it; the love of God is revealed most clearly in his person and in his actions, and thus he is the paradigm for the others; and without him we would remain without salvation. "But the claim of the unique saviourhood of Christ is not the same as the claim that the Christian religion is the only sphere and source of salvation."[15]

In the second case Jesus Christ is not considered either as constitutive of, or as normative for human salvation. God is transcendent and incomprehensible, so that we cannot judge his intentions with our human modes of understanding. Thus we, can neither evaluate nor compare the different religious systems. Finally *Soteriocentrism* radicalises even further the theo-centric position, since it is less interested in the question of Jesus Christ (orthodoxy) than in the actual commitment each religion makes to aid suffering humanity (orthopraxis). F. Knitter holds a theo-centrism relativising the language of the Second Testament.[16]

This writer believes that Jesus is constitutive and normative for human salvation as he is the only mediator of salvation who is available to all who seek God (1 Timothy 2:5-6), and salvation is possible even without knowing and recognising him, through the religions they live and practise sincerely.[17] Evangelisation and dialogue are still valid for a better understanding and appreciation of the different religions. However, everybody should be free to choose and practice her / his religion.

[15]Sebastian Athapilly, *Jesus Christ, the Saviour: One of the Many…?,* Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2013, 92.

[16]Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitude Toward the World Religions*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985.

[17]George Kaniarakath, "God Beyond Frontiers," *Journal of Dharma* 37.3, 2012, 363-373.