

'He shall be great', Luke 1. 32. Family Hour, Augusta. 30 October 2011.

My reading for this morning comes from Luke chapter 1, from verse 26.

[Read Luke 1. 26-32a.]

'He shall be great', Gabriel announced. And how right he was!

According to verse 3, Luke addressed his gospel in the first instance to some highly placed individual – to 'most excellent Theophilus'.¹ And I think we can assume that, with a good Greek name like that, Theophilus would have been more than familiar with the exploits of the young Macedonian king – already known² then to the world as '*Alexander the Great*' ... and familiar too with the life of the man of whom Luke speaks in verse 5 as 'Herod, the king of Judea', but who, largely on account of his many architectural achievements, would soon be known, if he was not *already known*, as '*Herod the Great*'.

But it was of neither Alexander nor Herod that Gabriel used the word 'great'!

Some six months before, according to verses 13 to 15, an angel of the Lord had said something similar to the ageing priest Zacharias in the temple, 'Fear not, Zacharias ... your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John ... *he shall be great* in the sight of the Lord'. But the greatness of John was *very different* from that of the Lord Jesus.³

For John's greatness – 'in the sight of the Lord' as Gabriel said – in God's estimation, that is – was derived *entirely* from the honour God bestowed on him of being the herald of the One who would 'be great', not only, as John, in terms of his office, but in terms of His person. For if, according to the words of Zacharias in verse 76, *John* would be '*called the prophet of the Highest*', according to our text, He, the Lord Jesus, would be '*called the Son of the Highest*'.

And John would himself acknowledge three times over in later life that 'He who comes after me (the Lord Jesus) is preferred before me (He 'ranks', that is, 'above me, He surpasses me')'.⁴ For, whereas he, John, baptised with water, our Lord would, as John said, 'baptise in the Holy Spirit',⁵ and, whereas he, John, was, as our Lord Himself once affirmed, 'a burning and a shining *lamp*'⁶ (as John 5 verse 35 should be translated), our Lord *Himself* was, according to John 1, 'the true *light*, which, coming into the world, lightens everyone'.⁷

'He shall be great', Gabriel announced. And how right he was!

And, without question, He is great in *every one* of His offices.

Luke tells us, for example, towards the beginning of chapter 7 that, when our Lord had raised the widow of Nain's only son – then being carried out for burial – the huge crowds who saw what was done 'all glorified God, saying, A great prophet has risen up among us'.⁸

Not that such a claim went unchallenged. Later in that very chapter, we are told that Jesus was invited to the house of a Pharisee named Simon. While He was there, 'a woman in the city who was a sinner' entered the house, positioned herself at our Lord's feet, weeping, and proceeded to *wash* His feet with her tears, *wipe* them with her hair, *kiss* them with her lips and *anoint* them with her fragrant oil.

Simon was horrified, and, Luke records, '*speaking within himself*', said 'this man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner'. Our Lord revealed to Simon immediately that He was indeed, at the least, 'a prophet' ... both by answering Simon's *unspoken* challenge, and by informing him that He (Jesus) knew not only that the woman's sins were many, but that, on account of her faith in Him, they had been forgiven – and that this was the reason she 'loved much', as she had demonstrated by her actions.⁹

O yes, He was great in His office as prophet. But not only so. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of Him at the close of chapter 4 as our 'great High Priest, who has passed through the heavens'.¹⁰

It has been estimated that there were about 100,000 priests in Israel in New Testament days. And, at the time, the nation boasted many *chief* priests – being members of the families of the various recent high priests. And, over the history of the nation, there had been in excess of 80 *high* priests. Although, sadly, in more recent centuries *many* of these were not *legitimate* high priests, not being descended from Aaron.

Over the previous 240 years or so (stretching back to the days of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabees, referred to prophetically in Daniel 11) there had been no less than 42 high priests – five appointed by Greek kings, eight by popular decree, 22 by Herod and his family, and the remaining seven by Roman governors (procurators or prefects) – with the office often going to the highest bidder.¹¹ It was neither a happy nor an edifying story!

But – leaving aside these less worthy specimens – even Aaron himself (though called and appointed by God¹²) had *not* been a *great* high priest.

And *even* Aaron and *his legitimate successors* had never ‘passed through’ that which our Lord has. On the Day of Atonement, *they* sacrificed both sin offerings and burnt offerings at the brazen altar, and then ‘passed *through*’ the court of the tabernacle, *through* the first veil, *through* the holy place, *through* the second veil, into the holy of holies to sprinkle blood both on and before the mercyseat.

But *our great high priest* towers over them all, in that *He passed* – not through the various compartments of some earthly structure – whether tabernacle or temple (even *if* built according to God’s pattern) – but through the heavens – through both the atmospheric and vast stellar regions ... and whatever else is out there.

And so, as in His office of prophet so also in His office as priest, our Lord Jesus transcends all others.

And, still on the subject of our Lord’s offices, in Matthew 5 the Saviour spoke of Himself, the Messiah, as ‘the great King’ ... ‘swear not at all’, He said, ‘neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, because it is the city of *the great King*’.¹³

O yes, I have heard, both in 2 Kings 18 and Isaiah 36, the loud-mouthed Rabshakeh of Assyria sound off, more than once, to Hezekiah and the Jews then besieged in Jerusalem about ‘the great king, the king of Assyria’.¹⁴ But then, I have seen this same so-called ‘great king’, Sennacherib, forced to return home to his capital of Nineveh, like a dog with his tail between his legs, having suffered the loss of 185,000 warriors – and all courtesy of the efforts of just one angel during a single night. ‘Great king’, indeed!

In terms of His offices then, our Lord Jesus ranks as great prophet, great High Priest and great King.

‘He shall be great’, Gabriel declared. And how right he was!

But our Lord is not only ‘*great*’. Our New Testament insists in more than one place that He is ‘*greater*’!

Think, for instance, of the three-fold greatness which our Lord claimed for Himself in Matthew chapter 12 – all of which we owe to challenges issued to Him by the Pharisees.

It all began when they took exception to His disciples plucking and eating ears of corn on the Sabbath day. In answer to their criticism, having referred first to a relevant incident in the life of David, Jesus asked, ‘Have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? And I say to you that *One greater than the temple* is here’.¹⁵

As the Saviour pointed out, technically speaking, the priests ‘broke’ the Sabbath every week.

For, in the performance of their Sabbath duties in the Temple, the ministering priests needed to kindle the altar fires, slay the sacrificial animals, then lift up the carcasses and place them on the altar. And our Lord’s point was strengthened by the fact that, according to Numbers 28, more sacrifices were offered on the Sabbath than on the other days of the week.¹⁶ On top of which, there were additional priestly duties – such as replacing the shewbread in the holy place – to be performed.¹⁷ So that, in one sense, the priesthood were required to work overtime on the Sabbath!

But, because the Temple was deemed by the Jews to be greater than the Sabbath, the authority of the Temple laws shielded the priests from guilt. How much more then were our Lord’s disciples shielded from guilt by the authority of Him, who, as He declared in verse 6, was ‘greater than the temple’, with all its priestly service.

Then, later in the chapter, in verse 38, some of the scribes joined the Pharisees in demanding some spectacular and heavenly sign from Him.¹⁸ In response to which, He spoke of *the only sign* which that evil generation would be given – that of the three-day-and-three-night ‘entombed’ experience of the prophet Jonah. Following which, our Lord issued the solemn warning, ‘The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at *the preaching of Jonah*; and behold a *greater than Jonah* is here’. And not only greater than Jonah! For our Lord went on to say that ‘The queen of the South (of Sheba in South Arabia, that is) will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear *the wisdom of Solomon*; and behold a *greater than Solomon* is here’.

Not only then a greater Prophet than Jonah, but a greater King than Solomon. For though, in response to his prayer, Solomon received ‘an understanding heart’ and great wisdom from God,¹⁹ our Lord Jesus is, as the apostle Paul would say, ‘the wisdom of God’²⁰ – the One in whom, according to Colossians 2 verse 3, are hid *all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.²¹

So, if Jesus was greater *in His person* than the temple and all its priestly ritual, He was greater *in His preaching* than the prophet Jonah, and *in His wisdom* than King Solomon.

‘He (our Lord Jesus) shall be great’, Gabriel announced. And how right he was!

For his part, the apostle John in his gospel records both the challenge issued to our Lord by the woman from Samaria in chapter 4, ‘Are you greater than our father Jacob?’,²² and the challenge issued to our Lord by the unbelieving Jews in chapter 8, ‘Are you greater than our father Abraham?’²³ Oh, yes, in both cases, He was unquestionably ‘greater’!

According to the opening of chapter 4, Jesus, being wearied from His journey, sat by Jacob’s well at Sychar. ‘If you knew the gift of God’, He said to the woman He met there, ‘and who it is who says to you, “Give me to drink”, you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water’. Clearly understanding the Saviour to refer to natural spring water, the woman queried His offer ... ‘Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his cattle?’²⁴

And, indeed, to obtain fresh, spring water at Sychar, Jacob had needed both to sink a deep well and to provide a means of raising water from it. But our Lord, needing no rope-bucket or the like, offered the woman a far more precious gift than Jacob had ever bestowed. For, as He claimed, He could give both the Holy Spirit and eternal life.²⁵

And so a chapter in which our Lord later speaks to His disciples of ‘meat’ (in the sense of ‘food’) which He enjoyed but which they could never buy in the city of Sychar – namely doing the will of the One who had sent Him ‘and finishing His work’, as verse 34 reads ... a chapter in which our Lord speaks of food which the disciples could never buy in the city of Sychar, first records His words concerning ‘water’ which the woman of Samaria could never draw from the well of Sychar.

So, yes indeed, He *was* greater than the patriarch Jacob.

And then, according to the close of John 8, in response to our Lord’s declaration, ‘if anyone keeps my word, he will never see (or taste) death’, the Jews had challenged Him, ‘Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead?’ To which He responded, not only that Abraham had rejoiced to see His (that is, our Lord’s) day – a reference perhaps to the blessing which would come to all families of the earth through Him, the seed of Abraham²⁶ ... not only that, but ‘before Abraham was, I am’.²⁷ That is, *before* Abraham had *even begun to exist* some two thousand years before, He, the Lord Jesus, had been, still was, and would ever be, the Self-existing One who had made Himself known to Moses at the burning bush in the wilderness of Horeb.

Yes indeed, He was greater – immeasurably greater! – than the patriarch Abraham.

O yes, John would have us know, the Lord Jesus was greater than both the Jewish fathers, Abraham and Jacob.

‘He shall be great’, Gabriel announced. And how right he was!

I referred earlier to the title ‘great high priest’ given to our Lord by the writer to the Hebrews. And I am sure many of you know well that he, the writer to the Hebrews, has much to teach us indeed about our Saviour’s greatness.

That we learn from him, in the very first words of his epistle, of our Lord’s superiority over the prophets – from Abel²⁸ and Enoch²⁹ right through to Malachi and John the Baptist – in that the revelation of God which our Lord imparts is no longer, as theirs, piecemeal and progressive, but full and final. In the writer’s own words, ‘God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by *the prophets*, has in these last days spoken to us by *His Son*’.³⁰

In the same chapter, Hebrews 1, we learn also of our Lord’s superiority over the angels, which point the writer backs up by seven quotations from the Old Testament scriptures, ranging *from* the book of Deuteronomy *to* Psalm 110. These seven quotes begin and end with rhetorical questions. First, ‘to which of the angels said He (God) at any time, You are my Son’, and then, ‘to which of the angels said He at any time, Sit at my right hand’.³¹ The answer to both questions is, of course, ‘to none’! For our Lord Jesus is unique both in His relationship to God and in His position of supreme honour and dignity.

From the same epistle we learn of our Lord’s superiority over Moses in chapter 3 – who was, as the writer picked up from Numbers 12, ‘faithful in all God’s house’ ...serving faithfully in *that* system of worship which the tabernacle represented – whereas the Lord Jesus is, as he says, ‘counted worthy of more glory than Moses’, as being, *not* a *servant in God’s house*, but a *Son over His own house* – in practice, I suggest, over the church, Israel, and the heavenly tabernacle.³²

Again we learn in chapter 4 of our Lord's superiority over Joshua – who, although he could bring the nation of Israel into the land of Canaan, could *not* bring God's people into *their spiritual rest and their eternal inheritance* – which our Lord Jesus most certainly can – and does.³³

And in later chapters of the letter we learn of our Lord's superiority over Aaron – in that He, our Lord Jesus, is called to be a high priest after a more ancient and higher order – namely, that of Melchizedek – and that, unlike Aaron, He is made high priest by God's own oath.³⁴

Further, the writer emphasises our Lord's superiority over the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament. For whereas, as the writer makes clear, the rivers of animal blood shed by the Jewish priesthood sufficed to make the worshipper *externally and ceremonially* clean, only the blood of Jesus can cleanse *the conscience*.³⁵ And even the annually-repeated sacrifices of the great Day of Atonement proved that (in the sight of God) the blood of the sacrificial victims, though able to *cover sins*,³⁶ could '*never take away sins*'³⁷ – and 'never' is a long time! Indeed, as he says in chapter 10 verse 4, it was '*not possible*' for them to remove sins. They only settled the account for the past twelve months.³⁸

But, if in the Day of Atonement sacrifices, under the Old Covenant, there was 'a remembrance of sins made every year', our Lord's sacrificial death dealt with sins finally and conclusively. So that, under the terms of the New Covenant, God now says of all who trust in the Lord Jesus alone, 'Their sins and their iniquities I will remember (remember against them, that is) no more'.³⁹

And I cannot help noting that the word 'remembrance' in that expression 'remembrance of sins' is found in only one other context in the New Testament. And this expression comes from our Lord's own lips at the institution of what the apostle Paul calls 'the Lord's Supper'. The Lord Jesus, Paul says in that well known section towards the close of 1 Corinthians 11, 'took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is my body which is broken for you; do this *in remembrance of me*". In the same manner, He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. This do, as often as you drink it, *in remembrance of me*".⁴⁰

And so, whereas the animal sacrifices of the Day of Atonement served to bring *sins* to remembrance, the bread and wine we take each Lord's day serve to bring to remembrance – *not sins* – but *Him* who, by His infinitely better and greater sacrifice – by His once-for-all and perfect sacrifice – has put *sins* away for ever.⁴¹

And finally, the letter to the Hebrews draws our attention to our Lord's superiority over *the great worthies of faith of Old Testament days and later* listed for us in chapter 11. For, although, as (if we are real Christians) we run the race set before us, we take encouragement from those remarkable men and women whose lives bear eloquent witness to the power and effectiveness of faith, *ultimately* our eyes rise to the Lord Jesus ... 'looking away' to the One who carried faith to its *loftiest* triumph – to the One 'who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God'.⁴²

'He shall be great', Gabriel announced. And how right he was!

He is great in all His offices ... the great prophet, the great priest and the great king ... He is greater than John the Baptist ... greater than the temple, greater than Jonah, and greater than Solomon ... greater than Jacob and greater than Abraham ... greater than all the prophets and greater than the angels, greater than Moses, greater than Joshua and greater than Aaron, greater than all the ritual and sacrifices of the Old Testament economy, and greater than all the men and women of faith of old.

Some time ago, I was speaking in an assembly – not in either the UK or the States ... and I happened to spot that the notice board outside the front of their building announced – under the heading 'Sunday' – '11 am', and, *not* 'The Lord's *Supper*', but, on account of a missing letter, 'The Lord's Super'.

I can tell you I raced back to the apartment where I was staying to consult the well-worn dictionary on the bookshelf there, and was greatly relieved to discover the word '*super*' defined there as '*exceptional*'. Well, I could hardly disagree with being told that my Lord was exceptional. He is certainly that!

Well might we exclaim in the words of Psalm 145, headed 'David's psalm of Praise', '*Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised ... His greatness is unsearchable*'.⁴³

Let's hear you say it one last time, Gabriel ... 'He shall be great'. How right you were!

And how foolish we would be if we 'neglect so great salvation', secured for us and offered to us by so great a Saviour.

Footnotes

¹ Luke 1. 3.

² '*Historiae Alexandri Magni*, a biography of Alexander in ten books, of which the last eight survive, by the Roman historian Quintus Curtius Rufus, written in the 1st century AD'. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_the_Great).

³ John would be born to Elizabeth *after it seemed humanly possible*, and Jesus would be born to Mary *before it seemed humanly possible*. Zacharias failed to believe that God could do again what He had done in the past, whereas Mary readily believed that He could do what He had never done before.

⁴ John 1. 15, 27, 30.

⁵ John 1. 33.

⁶ John 5. 35.

⁷ John 1. 9.

⁸ Luke 7. 16.

⁹ Luke 7. 47-50.

¹⁰ Heb. 4. 16.

¹¹ Five had been appointed by Greek kings, eight by popular decree, 22 by Herod and his family, and the remaining seven by Roman governors (procurators or prefects).

¹² Heb. 5. 1, 4.

¹³ Matt. 5. 35; cf. Psa. 47. 2 and 48. 2. For the identity of the 'King', see Matt. 25. 31-34.

¹⁴ 2 Kings 18. 19, 28; Isa. 36. 4, 13.

¹⁵ Matt. 12. 1-6.

¹⁶ Num. 28. 9-10.

¹⁷ Lev. 24. 8-9.

¹⁸ Matt. 12. 38; cf. Matt. 16. 1.

¹⁹ 2 Chron. 1. 11-12.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 1. 24.

²¹ Col. 2. 3.

²² John 4. 12.

²³ John 8. 53.

²⁴ John 4. 5-12.

²⁵ John 4. 10-14.

²⁶ See Gal. 3. 8-16.

²⁷ John 8. 58.

²⁸ Luke 11. 50-51.

²⁹ Jude 14.

³⁰ Heb. 1. 1-2.

³¹ Heb. 1. 3-2. 18.

³² Heb. 3. 1-19 – especially verses 5 and 6.

³³ Heb. 4. 1-13 – especially verse 8.

³⁴ Heb. 4. 14-8. 2.

³⁵ Heb. 9. 13-14.

³⁶ There is much scholarly debate over the underlying meaning of the Hebrew word 'atonement'. As far as I can tell, the latest scholarly opinion favours – not 'cover' – but rather either the meaning 'ransom' or 'wipe away, wipe clean'. See TWOT, number 1023; NIDOTTE, number 4105/4106. See too TDNT, volume III, pages 302 etc. For my part, I am not convinced, and still incline towards the root meaning of 'to cover'. (In spite of the dismissive comments of Richard Averbeck in NIDOTTE, I still consider Gen. 6. 14 as a respectable argument.)

³⁷ Heb. 10. 11.

³⁸ Heb. 10. 3.

³⁹ Heb. 10. 17.

⁴⁰ 1 Cor. 11. 24-25; cf. Luke 22. 19.

⁴¹ Heb. 8. 3-10. 25.

⁴² Heb. 11. 1-12. 3.

⁴³ Psa. 145. 3. Literally, 'His greatness cannot be numbered'; in today's parlance, 'His greatness cannot be computed'.