

HUMAN DIGNITY ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL OF LUKE¹

Johann du Plessis
New Testament
Stellenbosch University

Abstract

Human dignity can be studied from two perspectives: a fundamental approach and also that of existential experience of human dignity and indignity. This study addresses both aspects. Taking into account that the first audience of Luke was mixed, but probably included a significant number of 'haves', a social analysis is done to discern criteria of worthiness in the Early-Mediterranean world that is addressed by the Lucan narrative. Then follows a literary and semantic analysis of relevant passages from Luke, and finally some conclusions are drawn about Lucan perspectives on human dignity. These are: Jesus as the vantage point for bestowing dignity; dignity is assigned through association; one of the main Lucan viewpoints is that dignity involves powerlessness and vulnerability; and finally that dignity does not exclude suffering.

Key Words: Human Dignity, Worthiness, Association, Powerless, Vulnerable, Suffering

Two remarks before I start: Firstly, allow me to share my view about the possible audience of Luke. In many studies Luke is presented as a narrative directed to the marginalised of society; the poor and the destitute and excluded people in the faith community. Although one should probably settle for a rather mixed audience, both in terms of socio-economic levels and nationality and language, the narrative's way of dealing with the matter of possessions and property, implies that the readers were indeed possessors (i.e. 'haves'). This immediately brings power-issues to the fore that need to be kept in mind when these texts are exposed, lest a feeling of romanticism clouds the discussion about dignity.

Secondly, the discussion about human dignity *per se* takes place at two levels: The first is a fundamental approach, seeking to define human dignity as a permanent attribute or inherent quality of the human existence. It is important to note that the current debate is conducted primarily at this level. The theological challenge is to legitimately extract the subject matter from a narrative such as that of Luke, which is focusing primarily on the second level, namely, that of the existential experience of human beings whose dignity is sometimes affirmed, and often violated. The reality is that humans more often than not behave in an indignant way and that prevailing world views are active in shaping society into a hierarchy of strata – some are regarded more worthy, others being unworthy. In this paper I shall attempt to address both of these levels.

Introduction: Defining the Issue

Let me start with a few remarks on human dignity *vis-à-vis* human rights: 'Dignity' (Latin: *dignitas*; Greek: *ζῆα*) can be defined as the state of worthiness of someone or something.

¹ This is a reworking of the paper delivered at a conference on human dignity in Stellenbosch (2009).

Human dignity then, refers to the state of worthiness of any given human being, or in a general sense as the state of worthiness assigned to human beings as such. 'Human rights' would then constitute the demands or claims that can be made as a consequence of being worthy (cf. also Moltmann 1984:ixf.). It can be legalised and protected by a so-called *Bill of Rights* as is currently the case in many modern states. In this paper I concern myself with 'dignity' in the first place. In the closing section some conclusions are drawn that also pertain to human rights.

The origin of human dignity is currently a point of debate in several circles (e.g. judicial, ethical, human rights, etc.).² Broadly speaking dignity can be regarded as an *intrinsic quality* of human beings, or as an *attribute assigned to, or earned by*, someone under certain conditions. Stemming from the doctrine of the total corruption of humanity by sin, reformed theology traditionally had severe reservations about the idea of the intrinsic dignity of human beings and generally opted (if at all) for some kind of supplementary definition of dignity: human dignity which was irrevocably lost because of original sin is restored only by the redemption through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.³ In other contexts dignity may be regarded as something earned through valiant actions or courage, in short on the merit of some or other virtue; it may be regarded as an inherited quality, passed on from one ruling generation to the next; it may be bought or acquired by birth; and it may even be mediated through rituals. The idea of the intrinsic dignity of humanity on the other hand is usually developed from the perspectives of creation⁴ and the providence of God. Man is created in the *image of God*. Bosman in his essay alerts us to the development in the understanding of relationship between humans and the *imago Dei*: it moved from an ontological understanding to a relational view. The image of God is regarded as a permanent attribute to humanity, which is not totally removed by sin, although sin results in the violation of dignity in several ways. So, although the image of God is severely distorted by sin, the intrinsic quality of a human being created in the image of God, is still intact. The incarnation is sometimes regarded as an affirmation of this permanent, intrinsic worthiness of humanity. The reason for this permanent worthiness may also be found in the continuous activity of God that preserves the intrinsic qualities of the original creation, despite the corruption caused by sin. In this (second) instance, the qualification of dignity is not part and parcel of human existence *per se*, but is graciously bestowed upon all human beings. According to both these latter viewpoints human dignity as such is maintained in spite of the reality and the total extent of sin.

The quantification of human dignity can be done from at least two perspectives: it can be attempted from 'above' (i.e. from the 'outside'), or from 'below' (i.e. from the 'inside'). At a rhetorical and pragmatic level the set of rules, definitions and outcomes dealt with in paragraphs 2 and 4 of this paper, more or less constitute an approach from 'above'. Most modern documents (e.g. bills of rights, laws, statistical demographic analyses, etc.; but also the greater part of theological reflection) follow this approach. This seems to me a valid way of dealing with the subject, and it gives clear indications of required actions and paradigm changes. The problem with these documents is that it often lacks the emotional appeal necessary to bring someone to a point where paradigms and behaviour are indeed changed in a permanent and meaningful way.

² De Villiers (in du Toit (1984)) and Moltmann (1984) give a short history of the development of human rights in the different professions.

³ Cf. Moltmann (1984:xii) "... human dignity is based in God's redeeming history with the world."

⁴ Cf. also Moltmann (1984:11); du Toit (1984:67); Jordaan (1994:33-34); Jewett (1993:3-10).

The second perspective – from ‘below’ – provides this element. This often comes in the form of a narrative, where victims and perpetrators are allowed to express their own motives and relate their own experiences. Most modern studies on poverty and social justice incorporate storytelling as a powerful tool to change the perspectives of their audiences. The same is true about the narratives of the New Testament gospels. Luke is no exception in this regard and often relates the experiences and feelings of a variety of characters from their own mouths so to speak. The exegetical work in paragraph 3 of this paper takes this as its point of departure.

Whatever the view point on the origin of human dignity, all agree that violations of human dignity have been a sad reality throughout history⁵ and that any discussion on the issue must have this as an entry point. Jesus’ eventual crucifixion is a case study of religiously and politically motivated crime against a person regarded as an opponent by those in power. Luke relates the whole history of the propaganda campaign to vilify an opponent, interspersed with public confrontations and debates. He describes the scene of mob violence against an individual, the fear it instilled in his followers, and how it contaminated judicial procedures. He relates the background history; he identifies the instigators controlling the process, namely people in high places with much ambition and hate; he tells about the use of a paid collaborator to abduct a victim in the night; finally he relates the mustering of the powers of state and religion, first make a public spectacle and then commit murder! In spite of the plot against Him, Jesus dies with his dignity intact. Even from a position without evident power He remains true to his calling, He never loses his self control, He continues to forgive⁶ and to restore the other’s dignity. In the end He dies like a criminal but is unequivocally declared a righteous human being even during the process of distorted justice! It is against the backdrop of the gross violation of dignity that the question arises whether limitations to human dignity should in principle be tolerated at all.

Finally, it is necessary to differentiate between dignity and salvation/conversion. The latter is clearly applicable to followers of Jesus, while the former is understood as a universal element, not restricted to those belonging to the Christian faith community. Luke as a religious text is concerned with the reaction to, and the association of people with Jesus. Deductions about a concept such as dignity from the Lucan narrative therefore need to be done with great circumspection, but the following is clear: All the prevalent differences and discriminations between individuals and groups are transcended in the faith community as such – in the church all are equal before God and among each other. This informs us about salvation. But, and that is applicable to the Lucan understanding of dignity, the offer of the gospel is extended to all people, regardless of generation, gender, socio-economical status and political and religious convictions and affiliation. So that according to Luke, all people are indeed born equal.

Social Analysis: The Expression and Definition of Human Dignity

In a legal document such as the South African Constitution, the dimensions of human dignity give rise to the formulation of different human rights as in the so-called Bill of

⁵ Jewett (1993) lists recurrent violations in the areas of race, gender, and structural violations dealing with the dominion of people restricting their basic freedoms; while Huber (1996) focuses on the assault of acts of violence on human dignity.

⁶ There is some doubt about the integrity of Jesus’ well known words of forgiveness in 23:34.

Rights (chap. 2 of the Constitution).⁷ What are these rights? In a democratic, liberal setting such as the SA Bill of Rights one finds 39 sections listing a wide variety of subjects. In the Early Mediterranean societies with their institution of slavery, authoritarian rule, different classes and groups, etc. it would be very different. In fact, it might not even be possible to speak about the ‘rights’ of certain groups, classes and individuals!

The way to move forward in this instance might be to enquire about the criteria for worthiness in such societies and compare that with the narratives about Jesus in the Lucan gospel. Several criteria of worthiness⁸ can be identified. The prevalent view of dignity in early Mediterranean societies was that it could be inherited or earned. That means that dignity was also something which could be lost, diminished or enhanced. The net effect thus was:

- A society governed and driven by honour and shame;⁹ steps were taken to avert shame and if it had already been suffered, steps were taken to redress the balance (reciprocally by shaming the opposite party, sometimes even killing him/her). The reverse being attempts to elicit honour to oneself and/or one’s group or family. Jesus used this aversion to ‘shame’ when He urged people to follow Him (Luke 9:26).
- The paradigm of patrons and clients¹⁰ entrenched the differences between the classes of haves and have-nots, valuable and worthless, rich and poor, important and unimportant. Jesus referred to this paradigm in Luke 22:24-30 when He admonished the disciples who were arguing about who being the greatest and deconstructed it by his own model of servitude – note the antithesis between “*the kings of the Gentiles lord over people and have themselves called Benefactors*” and Jesus who “*is among the disciples as the One who serves*”. His new guide-line for dignity becomes: “*the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules, like the one who serves.*”
- Dignity, not inherent to every human being, became part of a power struggle between the different empires¹¹ prevailing in the society. This power struggle created opposing groups (we vs. them) constantly at logger heads with one another.

The instruments and contexts utilised by Jesus to enhance, bestow, or acknowledge someone’s dignity in Luke are primarily meals and physical contact. Meals function as type scenes of inclusion in the narrative. Jesus’ physical contact, i.e. touching, kissing or embracing the ritually unclean and the excluded from society also establishes disciplines of inclusion and togetherness. Jesus’ conduct created liminality in previously fixed (‘hard’) borders dividing society. As mentioned above the faith community’s adherence to this model of inclusive behaviour is one of the primary reasons for the quick expansion of the church. History shows that the opposite is also true: The church’s history of negligence in this regard led to the establishment of their own kind of empire (the now quickly

⁷ Article 10 deals with human dignity and states: “Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected.”

⁸ Cf. Ancestry; Group identity; Religious affiliation; Gender and age; Material possessions (affluence vs. poverty); Physical appearance and health; Education; Ethical and or humanitarian conduct.

⁹ In some cultures the effect of shame is so profound that suicide is preferred above facing disgrace.

¹⁰ Patronage was then and still is a wide spread phenomenon. The primary motive behind such patronage is the enhancement of one’s own dignity by the gratitude and honour bestowed by the receiver/client. Cf. Jesus’ deconstruction of this motivation behind religious and humanitarian actions in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

¹¹ “Empire” is a religious, political, cultural and/or socio-economical construct that seeks to govern and determine the entire life-span of all the inhabitants within that sphere. It is a conspicuous element in the narrative of Luke-Acts.

diminishing Christendom) and the current crisis of divisions and a loss of integrity within the church itself.

Cultural exclusiveness and feelings of superiority can indeed be regarded as contravening human dignity. With reference to Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of human needs it becomes clear that the highest need of self-awareness and self-realization is very difficult, if not impossible, to fulfil when a person's or group's basic human dignity is continuously violated (Jordaan 1989:44-47).¹²

Finally, human dignity is also relational (cf. du Toit (1984:69-70); Jewett (1993:26ff.)). It is generally recognised that dignity is received and bestowed within the space of the fellowship between human beings. Several scholars support the expansion of this relationality: e.g. Moltmann (1984:23ff.) discusses human beings in *all their relationships* in life (that includes the duties and relationship toward future generations), and Kohl (1999:118) suggests that human rights should be expanded in two directions, namely that of the fundamental rights of humanity as such (this includes future generations), and that of the rights of the earth and all living things (i.e. a broader, ecological outlook).

Literary and Semantic Analysis of Passages from Luke

Until this point mainly logical and ethical argumentation were used to persuade the reader. As mentioned above, narratives are good vehicles to transmit the emotive force behind an argument, and we turn now to some aspects of Luke's gospel. (In most instances I'm trying to give a (fairly conservative?) deconstructive reading of the texts.)

Generally speaking naming/name-calling¹³ can also be used as an instrument to bestow value or to vilify. We use it when educating our children. That is because a name gives identity to the one receiving it and it is equally effective with adults. Two very interesting examples from the Lucan gospel come to mind, the first used in a positive sense, the next is an example of vilification.

First the name, 'child of Abraham', as a way of bestowing value to someone: Twice in Luke, Jesus calls someone by this name, the women who had suffered for eighteen years and were healed on a Sabbath (13:16), and Zacchaeus the despised tax collector in (19:9). To be reckoned as a child of Abraham must be one of the greatest honours that a Jewish person can receive; it establishes his/her link with the covenant people and with the God of the covenant; it says something about identity, integrity and value. In the case of the two individuals from Luke's gospel, who had both experienced estrangement over a period of time, unable to recover worthiness, it must have sounded like the dawning of a new age! Jesus used a shorthand version, 'daughter', addressing the woman who had suffered from

¹² Note the negative impact in the RSA "We also should not underestimate the psychological legacy of three centuries of colonial rule followed by apartheid." (Rampel 2008:15). She quotes Frantz Fanon (*Black skin, white masks*) on the "debilitating consequences for oppressed people's personalities and identities" and Steve Biko (*I write what I like*) to show that the violation and disregard of human dignity over a period of time can lead to a loss of self-esteem. It also has an equally devastating effect on the minds of the perpetrators though, because they lose the ability to function properly if no longer from a position of power.

Cultural snobbishness can be a two-edged sword as shown by Diamond (*Collapse* 2006) in his discussion about the reasons for the eventual collapse of the Norse community in Greenland. In that case, the feeling of superiority prevented the Norse to accept better suited customs and behaviour from the indigenous population and in the end by failing to do so, contributed to the collapse of their own society.

¹³ Note the positive reaction to someone knowing your name; also refer to the use of the plural (attached to the surname) as a respectful way of addressing people in African societies.

bleeding for twelve years (therefore ritually unclean and excluded from contact with the worship community), thus restoring her dignity.

Secondly, note that the vilification of the opponents by attributing negative traits to their person occurs regularly in the gospels. This is true of the depiction of Judas as the traitor among the disciples, of the slandering of the Pharisees and the scribes as ‘fools’ and as hypocrites (11:39-52; 20:45-47), and of calling Herod a ‘jackal’ (13:32). All these names or attributes have very negative ethical connotations and are addressed in most cases to elite members of society who would be considered as having special dignity – more than the rest.

Let me now look at the use of the adjective ξῖος, -α, -ov in Luke.¹⁴ For the issue of human dignity in this paper I concern myself with the two passages referring to the worthiness of people.

Luke 7:1-10

The narrative framework of the episode is the plight of a servant, but the story is actually about the officer and the peasant: it is a lovely little story and might be described as light-hearted if the slave’s sickness wasn’t so serious. This is also a story about patrons and clients and the paradigm seems to be reversely at work here: It is time for pay-back; an opportunity to become a patron for a change; a change to cease to be the eternal client. No wonder there is so much urgency in the leaders’ request to Jesus... Is this request then also a case of serving your own interests? There is none of the usual animosity between Jesus and his opponents; they in fact urge Him to comply with the request of the Roman officer. The characters are generally without sharp edges. The officer is a non-Jew, but he loves the people and even built a synagogue at his own cost; we read about a slave who is worth a lot to his owner. So, Jesus obliges: He willingly accompanies the delegation to do what is asked and they set off for the house... Near their destination the procession is stopped by another delegation. This second scene is even more comforting: This officer is truly worthy – even Jesus agrees that his faith is unique! The request is miraculously granted and the servant is healed completely.

One can easily be deceived not to look further, to miss the interplay between worthiness and unworthiness, dignity and indignity... What is the real outcome? That real worthy people in the end are rewarded? Is value the key to reward? There can be no deduction of inherent dignity from the story. It seems as if dignity is ultimately earned and that the ultimate measuring stick would be this steadfast faith in the ability of Jesus... Was it not for the strange interplay between worthy and unworthy; because the officer is very sure of his total unworthiness! Everyone might be worthy apart from himself... So, what is the real outcome? Might it be that the starting point of all dignity is the acknowledgement of one’s total indignity..? That value does not come from the inside, or earned, but is somehow bestowed upon..? Like the God Jesus taught people about, who allowed his rain to fall upon all, upon the righteous and the sinner, the valuable and the worthless?

¹⁴ I took ξῖα as the Greek rendering of Latin *dignitas* and English *dignity*. The author of Luke uses the adjective instead of the noun. An overview of the use of ξῖος in Luke shows the following results: In 3:8 it refers to fruit; in 7:4,7 it refers to an officer; in 10:7 it is used in a proverb: a worker deserves his wages; in 12:48 it refers to punishment; in 15:19, 21 it is a rendering of the words of the lost son; in 23:15,41 it typifies Jesus Himself as not deserving punishment.

From the above it becomes clear that attitudes and acts should also derive from a deeply intimate experience of Jesus' or God's presence... In terms of dignity: Who God/Jesus is, and not only the awareness of a fellow human being's plight, should motivate actions.

I would like to make an excursion at this point: 'Serving your own interests' is not totally absent from Luke's narrative. In fact it is sometimes regarded as shrewd pragmatism (cf. the parable of the dishonest steward (16:1-9) and that of the judge and the widow (18:1-8)). These two parables are unique to Luke's gospel. Close reading, however, shows that the characters' selfish motives are not approved – both are regarded as negative, the one as a 'dishonest' steward, the other as a judge who 'doesn't fear God' – but that a specific trait is recommended to the faith community. Generally in Luke-Acts though, serving one's own interests in dealing with fellow human beings, is discredited (cf. Jesus in his sermon about love, Luke 6:32-36; the fate of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5:1-11).

Luke 15:11-24

The second story about an individual's $\xi\tau\alpha$ in Luke also comes from the lips of someone doing a bit of introspection, this time from a spoilt brat in the gutter. Don't miss the introduction to the three parables about lost and found in 15:1-2.¹⁵ It shows the operating system of a society in which dignity was considered just about everything and therefore... every cock on his own dunghill: dignified this side, scoundrels to the left; valuable up here, useless down under... and beware the man who challenges this system!¹⁶

The episode actually contains two short biographies about two brothers and it reads something like a family feud. First the younger brat: He is the black sheep of the family. He demands his share, but he does so prematurely. The father complies just to see him leave and eventually squander everything. Finally he comes to his senses ($\epsilon\varsigma$ αυτον δ λθv) – how catching! But does this mean that he is rediscovering his true (inherent) greatness? It might seem so at first glance, but closer inspection provides another picture: he is nothing anymore! He has no special value; he is actually in debt. The best he can be is a servant... and with that he returns to the father. There the astonishing happens: his father does not even let him finish; he receives unexpected and undeserved honour! It reads like a chapter from the TRC memoirs... is the father weak? Was he weak in the first place? Again: may it be that the starting point of all dignity is the acknowledgement of one's total indignity?

But listen up! There is another twist in the tale. The older brother enters the scene and he is furious! Here he was, the paragon of virtue, the guardian of the inheritance... but treated unfairly. Actually he never really thought about it, but the way his scoundrel brother was welcomed back, emphasises the injustice he is suffering! One's sympathy lies with him... but then: his attitude and action did not correspond with that of his father; he did not understand that dignity cannot be earned, only received and celebrated in a context of love and caring; he did not change his paradigm of dignity.

¹⁵ It might be that the introductory verses also apply to the following episodes dealing with attitudes toward possessions (16:1-31) and even up to Jesus' words on sin, faith and duty (17:1-10) – an interesting theses but outside the scope of this paper.

¹⁶ Jesus' fate as someone who challenged the system is not unique. Those who followed Christ "*whose entrance into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey stood in stark contrast with all human grasping of power, discovered that the greatest power consists therein to say 'no' to power. And isn't it striking that such people often had to pay with their lives for this selfless service?*" (Olivier, 2005:56).

The Law in Luke

Before we come to the Lucan rendering of the Greatest Commandment, note that the narrative of Luke is framed by references to the law-abiding people following Jesus. These references are concentrated in the so-called Childhood narratives and at the end of the Passion narrative.¹⁷

▪ *Luke 10:25-37*

This is Luke's rendering of the Law and the author's characteristic preference for ring structures in the narrative is clearly illustrated in this episode. One might easily miss the real issue. It is indeed a question of ultimate dignity, that of eternal life. How does one reach this final attestation of value? Two opposing programmes are at logger heads here: The one departing from a position of self evident worthiness for some and uselessness for the rest, with the implication that it is imperative not to become bogged down with the unworthy. This is the operational starting point for the scribe and also of the first two by passers in the parable (the priest and the Levite). Jesus Himself has another way of dealing with the same issue, namely that of assigning value to the other irrespective of his/her perceived value. This is done by serving/caring for the other.

There is a double twist in the tale, namely that of an unlikely hero and an unexpected outcome. Longenecker (2009:422-447) emphasises this aspect in agreement with Crossan. In his exposition he also analyses the character of the inn-keeper. The character is usually absent from expositions although Augustine (354-430 CE) allegorised the inn-keeper on several occasions as Paul, depicting him as a figure of integrity. Longenecker suggests on the other hand that he is also a devious character, but not as a counter-balance enhancing the Samaritan's virtues (Donahue). He suggests that Jesus indeed made a pact with two unlikely characters to care for the injured man.

We most probably know the story of the Good Samaritan too well to still be baffled by it, so let's try another angle: *There were once four students at a South-African university. As it happened they made a sickening DVD-recording about the initiation of black cleaning staff at their residence that by the way received an accolade from their fellow students. There was a huge outcry, and rightly so. Student bodies organised strikes and marches. Political parties hurled accusations at each other (there was an upcoming election, you know), articles were written, in short: the ideal of a rainbow nation was teetering on the brink. Eventually the four leaders were suspended. The rector retired and the particular residence was earmarked for a monument, but the wound was still festering. As it happened a new rector was appointed and for some reason this man decided that it was time to move on. The question was how to really heal a wound that was in the making long before the four students were even born; how to give direction to all those young leaders studying at that university; how to deal with the four perpetrators... and most important how to respect those who were wronged in the first place.*¹⁸ What do you say? Jesus once put the same

¹⁷ In Luke 1-2 Zachariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna are all clearly devout Jews. Jesus' parents also followed the prescribed customs although they were poor, e.g. at the circumcision (the offering mentioned in 2:24 was designated to poor people) and their annual attendance of the Feast of the Passover. The same theme – that everything was done according to the commandments – is again taken up in 23:54-56 in the episode about the burial of Jesus. Apart from Zachariah and Elizabeth perhaps, these individuals were not leading dignitaries of society but their devout lifestyle is nevertheless clearly indicated to the reader.

¹⁸ This is a case of Restorative judgement. Bishop Desmond Tutu argues in this regard: "... retributive justice... is not the only kind of justice. I contend that there is another kind of justice, restorative justice, which is characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence. Here the central concern is not retribution or punishment,

question to an opponent and received this answer: “The one who had mercy was in the right...” He responded: “Go do likewise!” At stake is the ultimate dignity, everlasting life. Luke did not relate the outcome of the story but *in South Africa all hell broke loose: new protests, threats and demands. Thinking back on Longenecker’s exposition I had this fleeting notion: Wouldn’t it be nice if Julius Malema came out in support of Jonathan Jansen?* Then we might also have seen a “momentary glimpse of the embodied reign of God” (Longenecker, 2009:447).¹⁹

The repetitive message of the passages discussed above should be seen in the light of Jesus’ deliberate reversal of fortunes and his nullifying of the prevalent criteria for worthiness in his society, which is a central feature of Lucan theology.

But there is more to it than a mere willingness to be touched by the wretchedness of fellow human beings. Dignity cannot be grounded in sympathy. For the fundamental discussion of human dignity, one’s relationship with Jesus becomes the crucial factor. The paramount position of Jesus is clear from the outset of the narrative (cf. the prologue, 1:1-4). As the plot unfolds Jesus is constantly elevated in the estimation of his followers. Jesus’ position as the Son of God, the *kurios*, the leader of his followers, gives authority to his exhortation to them to be his followers, i.e. to act and to do like-wise. Our views on dignity then, have primarily to do with our experience of Jesus-God and our perception of and identifying with his programme. This brings me to the last role player in Luke’s gospel that I wish to discuss, namely the hero of the story, Jesus of Nazareth Himself.

Jesus... the Son of God (Luke 3:23-38; 23:15, 41)

What about the dignity of Jesus Himself? I first look at passages from Luke that give an assessment of Jesus’ dignity from ‘above’.

▪ *Genealogy (3:23-38)*

Let me start with the genealogy although it follows the baptism scene in the narrative. It is actually one long sentence tracing Jesus’ origin to God Himself, “*Jesus, who, so they thought was the son of Josef, of Eli ... of Adam of God.*” The genealogy is in line with the earlier pronouncements about the extraordinary origin and status of Jesus as being the Son of God and ruler-descendant of David. This is also echoed in Jesus’ titles and his claims to a special relationship with God (i.e. his ‘Father’). Jesus, according to Luke, has an extraordinary origin, which gives Him a unique *dignity unlike anybody else*.

▪ *Baptism (3:22-22)*

At the baptism there are at least three indications of Jesus’ special worthiness: He has the Holy Spirit, He is God’s Son, and God is very pleased with Him. The use of the term ‘baptism’ in connection with Jesus in Luke usually denotes some kind of suffering (Du Plessis, 1996:148-149) and it may also be the case here if one considers the broader picture.

but... the healing of breaches, the redressing of balances, the restoration of broken relationships. This kind of justice seeks to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he or she has injured by his or her offence... Thus we would claim that justice, restorative justice, is being served when efforts are being made to work for healing, for forgiveness and for reconciliation.” (Brümmer 2005:47). He was in fact one of those who supported Jonathan Jansen’s actions.

¹⁹ We actually saw that “glimpse” the day after the original paper was read at the conference, because after mutual discussion on the issue, Mr Malema indeed came out in support of Prof Jansen.

This *link between dignity and suffering* will become very clear in the following passages and is a feature of Lucan Christology.

▪ *Temptation (4:1-13)*

At the temptation Jesus' special relationship (His origin) with God is on trial 'If you are the Son of God...' (these words are later echoed in the crucifixion scene (23:35-39)). Elsewhere (Du Plessis, 1996:152-154; 304-305) I argued that the Lucan temptation scene finds its climax in the discrediting of the passion, which is a central part of God's plan for salvation. This is a remarkable confirmation that Jesus' special dignity in fact presupposes his passion. *Jesus' dignity as such does not imply affluence, power or prosperity on earth that is. To the contrary it probably leads to his suffering!*

▪ *Transfiguration (9:28-36)*

The scene is reminiscent of the baptism. Again there is an extraordinary confirmation of Jesus' special worthiness: He is the chosen Son of God. The two eminent guests serve to elaborate on this... but Moses and Elijah speak to Jesus about his 'exodus' that will be fulfilled in Jerusalem. 'Exodus' clearly is a reference to the coming passion, Jesus' death in Jerusalem. Again this is a remarkable *confirmation of Jesus' special (inherent) dignity, as well as of the link between his dignity and his suffering.*

At this stage it is clear that Jesus has a special kind of dignity according to Luke. It stems from his relationship with God and the Holy Spirit. It is inherent to Him, but it also has a bearing upon his suffering: *Suffering in his case is a confirmation of his dignity.* What seemed to be the ultimate violation to his dignity – in fact the end to dignity *per se* – is according to Luke part of God's mysterious plan to reveal the unsurpassed greatness of his dignity! This, however, does not mean that He suffers no violation of his dignity or that injustice and violence have no bearing on ethics! Jesus becomes the beacon of hope to all those individuals and groups who suffered and is still suffering both overt and/or covert violations of their own human dignity. Jesus remains a just person even if He stands condemned and is crucified as a criminal (i.e. according to his enemies: someone without dignity).

The attribute *δικαιος* is repeatedly assigned to supporters and to Jesus Himself.²⁰

▪ *Luke 18:9-14*

This is a parable on righteousness, again presenting the typical ring structure providing an interpretative framework for the story about a Pharisee and a tax collector who were both praying in the temple. The reason for the parable is given as the confidence of some about their own righteousness and their arrogance (18:9). The same theme is again picked up in Jesus' application at the end, namely that precisely the one who was justified by God (passive voice), not the one who trusted in himself, is righteous.

²⁰ Cf. Zachariah & Elizabeth (1:6); Simeon (2:25); Jesus' ministry (5:32, see also the variant reading at 9:56 cf. 19:10); correct actions (12:57; 14:14; 15:7); to deem yourself righteous (18:9); agents presenting themselves as righteous (20:20); about Jesus (23:47); about Joseph (23:50). In 23:15,41 Jesus' righteousness becomes clear in the repeated assertion that He did not deserve punishment.

▪ *The Theme for the Travel Narrative*

There have been many attempts to formulate a theme for this special feature of the Lucan gospel. One of the threads that can be followed throughout the narrative woven in the Travel section is Jesus' growing awareness of his imminent suffering in Jerusalem. How does Jesus apply his righteousness? In the course of the Travel narrative Jesus identifies and deals with many people considered as 'sinners' and with the marginalisation of society. So, clearly his dignity did not result in aloofness but involvement with those who are deemed unworthy, even to the point of suffering the violation of his own dignity. The implications for a fundamental assessment of human dignity must, to my mind, take its cue from who Jesus is.

Some Conclusions for an Interpretative Model

Apart from Jesus Himself, Luke does not imply inherent, natural, inborn dignity for human beings. From the Lucan perspective one should rather speak of worthiness or value that is assigned to people from the outside. God and Jesus regard people as valuable irrespective of the assessment of society and irrespective of their own special abilities or history, or even disqualifications. So, dignity is not an attribute that can be earned in some or other way, it can only be received from God – in fact the claim to be worthy, is in itself alienating someone from God's gift. Dignity, as bestowed by God and by Jesus, should be bestowed upon others irrespective of their value or perceived value. In relation to other human beings everybody is called to treat the other as being dignified, as someone worthwhile, because God and Jesus do exactly that. The well-established notion of an 'alien dignity' assigned to all human beings seems to accommodate the perspectives above. There are at least four implications usually drawn from this notion of alien dignity:

- The alien dignity assigned to all human beings by God, may never be alienated or disregarded. This implies that justice, fairness and respect should always be sought, and it is also applicable in borderline situations.
- In terms of the position of humans before God – a preference for receiving rather than earning.
- In terms of the position of humans with each other – a preference for 'bestowing upon' rather than 'demanding from'.
- Without any restriction upon God, one can then move from 'dignity' to 'rights' by defining the set of expectations/demands within the realm of inter human relations.

What Then is Specifically Lucan Regarding Human Dignity?

God and Jesus are the Vantage Points

It means to be aware of the dignity of humans, to regard them as valuable because they are valuable to God and to Jesus. In terms of the gospel of Luke one can speak of human dignity only in the light of who God is and how He regards human beings... as valuable. Not because of some inborn dignity – people often invoke reactions of rejection and anger (as rightly shown by Punt in his article) – but only because of God's actions, his programme, and who He is. Not only because of one's sympathy with any human being's wretchedness (sympathy definitely present in Luke: Jesus is often moved by pity, but the pity of the crowds is often short-lived and labile, and their allegiances are in constant flux) but because Jesus' programme bestows dignity on all human beings.

Dignity is Bestowed Through Association

The way Jesus bestowed dignity was through association. He ate with all people; he embraced and touched the outcasts of society... and through that transformed them. He identified with those considered useless and spoke for those without a voice. Someone said "He was crucified for the way He ate." The Travel narrative confirms that the dignified Son of God was never aloof, but became involved with the daily plights of the poor and the destitute and through his association and identification changed them and their status. Luke has the same agenda for the followers of Jesus: i.e. to become part of life, not from a distance, but by becoming involved in the misery and the joy of small people; to identify purposefully with the marginalised; to seek ways in which they can become a church for the poor; to be witnesses (models) for the new paradigm; and to proclaim the God-and-kurios whose plan is this new, strange paradigm.

Powerlessness and Vulnerability are also Contexts Wherein Dignity Operates

The gospel of Luke portrays Jesus as the one constantly turning the tables on the current social paradigms of the time. His concern is for the marginalised of society, the weak, the sick and the excluded – women and children, tax-collectors and prostitutes, poor and homeless, the non-Jews and the despised Samaritans... all found refuge with this a-typical male. He did that, not from a position of power. He was but the son of a poor family, hailing from Galilee of the Gentiles; a travelling preacher and healer; He was considered a fanatic by many of his peers and a threat by those in power. So, without self-evident ways to force anyone to accept his paradigm, He nevertheless carried the flame. There was even more: Jesus consequently steered away from power. In the end his dignity is kept intact, although he died as a worthless criminal. His followers are called to do the same; to be aware of their alien dignity in all possible contexts; to likewise assign value to those considered worthless; to keep on making strategically 'dumb' investments in people. This alien dignity provides inner strength that endures all hardship. The vulnerability becomes the power that convinces. The starting point of Jesus' embracing of powerlessness should impact our understanding of and expectations from God. The way we pray and the way we worship comes under the spotlight. We became used to powerful churches with spectacular programmes. These are the churches considered worthwhile; the churches people flock to; the models that are followed... but they all purport to follow a homeless man on Sunday.

Dignity and Suffering Might be Linked

According to Luke Jesus' programme made his suffering unavoidable. He was enabled but also willing to pay the price asked by this programme of God, i.e. to suffer with dignity. The temptation to choose another paradigm that avoids suffering is always present. It is 'offered' to Jesus in the temptation scene as well as on the cross, "if you are the Son... then..." But it is also a real possibility that Jesus' followers might strive after the non-suffering brand of dignity and the Lucan narrative often warns against it. To allude to Bonhoeffer's words on grace, "dignity is indeed free – it is something alien, something received – but is also very expensive, because it involves a changed paradigm."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Apart from general commentaries on Luke-Acts the following:

Brümmer, V 2005. *Atonement, Christology and the Trinity. Making sense of Christian doctrine*. Hampshire: Ashgate.

Diamond, J2006. *Collapse. How societies choose to fail or to survive*. London: Penguin.

Du Plessis, J 1996. *Die plek van Jesus se lyding in die Lukasevangelie*. (Unpublished DD thesis, University of Pretoria).

Du Toit, DA (ed.) 1984. *Menseregte*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

The essays by:

De Villiers, DE. "Die geskiedenis van menseregte" (9-38).

Jonker, WD. "Christelike geloof en menseregte" (47-59).

Du Toit, DA. "Teologie, kerk en menseregte" (60-75).

Huber, W 1996. *Violence. The unrelenting assault on human dignity*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Jansen, JD 2009. Inauguration speech as the rector of the University of the Free State. Published in *Rapport* 18 October 2009.

Jewett, PK 1993. *Who we are: Our dignity as human. A Neo-Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans.

Kohl, M 1999. *God for a secular society. The public relevance of theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Landman, C 2009. "Mede-menswaardig en medemenswaardig" a contribution on Psalm 8 on the blog of *Communitas* (Stellenbosch University).

Longenecker, BW 2009. "The story of the Samaritan and the Innkeeper (Luke 10:30-35): A study in character rehabilitation" in *Biblical Interpretation 17 (2009)* pp.422-447.

Moltmann, J 1984. *On human dignity. Political theology and ethics*. (trans. MD Meeks). London: SCM.

Olivier, B 2005. "Wanneer die tyd uit lit is: Aktiwisme of apatie?" in *Fragmente. Tydskrif vir filosofie en kultuurkritiek* No. 14/15.

Rampele, M 2008. *Laying ghosts to rest. Dilemmas for the transformation in South Africa*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Thielicke, H 1979 (reprinted from 1966 (ed.) Fortress). *Theological ethics. Volume I. Foundations*. Grand rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans.

Vos, CJA. & Müller, JC (ed.) 1994. *Menswaardig. God, mens en wêreld*. Johannesburg: Orion.

The essays by:

König, A. "Die waarde van die mens" (7-15).

Jordaan, WJ. "Menseregte: 'n sielkundige perspektief" (33-55).