

St Luke the ?

Today we remember the feast of St Luke, (19th October) Luke is known by a number of different titles, as we will see but the feast day is titled 'Luke the Evangelist'. I have often referred to him as Luke the Physician, another one of his titles, and on his feast day in 1995 I attended my Army Medical and informed the Doctors who were prodding me that it was the feast of Luke the Physician a day for them to celebrate their profession. They were both surprised and delighted by this information, as they continued their evaluation...

Luke is the name accredited to the 3rd Gospel and the Book of 'The Acts of the Apostles'. We do not know if that actually was his name, but a very early manuscript dated around the year 200AD has at the end of the text, 'The Gospel according to Luke'. Further weight is given to the inscription by some of the early church Fathers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, who also link this Luke to the Pauline Luke that is mentioned in our New Testament Reading. In this Letter to Timothy he is named as the 'only companion left', but elsewhere he is referred to as a 'fellow labourer' (Philemon 24) and of course physician, (Colossians 4.14)

Paul's use of these descriptors, 'Labourer, Physician and Companion,' help us to add a little flesh to this follower of Jesus, who is accredited with writing an account of the Life of Jesus and the beginnings of the early Church. The prologue of Luke's Gospel tells us clearly what the intent of the gospel is and therefore Luke's intent in writing it. In Luke 1.1-4, we are told that there are lots of accounts of the life of Jesus, and the author has read them, but whilst they are okay they do not give an 'orderly account' (point by point is a better translation of the Greek) of the events. We are also told that he writes for a person, Theophilus... A name translated as 'Lover of God.' Who may be a specific individual or, more likely all individuals who hold this title.

Our Gospel reading today gives a hint at some of the themes that run through the gospel. Jesus appoints and sends out the 70 in pairs to prepare the ground for his coming, to go and be the advanced party. In the sending there is an urgency, pack light, the harvest is ripe for the picking, but if you are not welcome don't waste time, move on. Don't waste time because the cry that needs to be heard is, that despite all the action, which includes healing, what they need to know is that, 'the Kingdom of God has come near to you.' Here is an invitation to join, to enter, an invitation that requires your response. If we were to read on in Luke's Gospel, we would hear that the same message and cry goes out to those who didn't make them welcome, as they wipe their feet and leave the town they are to say, 'The Kingdom of God has come near'. The invitation is still there, even for those who reject the call of salvation.

Luke's Gospel has this thread of Salvation running through it, but also that it will be testing. Those pairs going out will be like lambs among wolves, not everyone will welcome you, the way will be hard at times, but no matter the message remains the same. And the message is not just for the chosen of Israel but for Luke the message is also for those outside.

Only in Luke do we find the Good Samaritan narrative, which is in the same chapter as the reading today. A narrative that starts with a Lawyer wanting to justify his position, a response in a way to that cry, 'the Kingdom has come near', as he asks 'What must I do to inherit eternal life...' with the subsidiary question of who is my neighbour? The parable that follows points to those outside, those beyond the boundaries of Judaism as an example of who your neighbour is, a neighbour who is also welcomed into the kingdom.

Where does all this take us. We have a number of titles and themes for St Luke, but are not the titles attributed to Luke ones that we are called to hold ourselves? Are we not called to be evangelists, to proclaim the Good News? Are we not sent out as those to labour for and proclaim that the Kingdom is near? Are we not, by being those who Luke writes to as 'Lovers of God' also physicians, not medically but spiritually, that by word, deed and prayer, we proclaim the healing of the risen Christ? And perhaps the greatest title, I believe attributed to Luke is 'companion', (I would use the word fellow pilgrim) that by walking with someone on their journey, physically and spiritually, being with them at the lows as well as the highs, being there when others seem to have drifted away, staying .

There is much we can take and learn from Luke, but perhaps the most important is, that despite the titles and the themes, we actually know very little of who he was, because what he does so well is not to tell of himself, but shapes his work to point us firmly in the direction of the one he proclaims, Jesus Christ, because as 'lovers of God' that is our focus, and in turn we proclaim, not pointing to ourselves but to the one who saves.

Philip