

St Luke

18 10 09

Almighty God,
you called Luke the physician,
whose praise is in the gospel,
to be an evangelist and physician of the soul:
by the grace of the Spirit
and through the wholesome medicine of the gospel,
give your Church the same love and power to heal.

My text may be found in Luke chapter 1 and verse 52:

‘He has put down the mighty from their seat
and has exalted the humble and meek’

At the end of November, with Advent Sunday, the Church begins its new liturgical year, moving smoothly from Year B to Year C and switching seamlessly from Mark to Luke as the principal source of our gospel readings.

I really like Luke. A Greek convert, traditionally believed to be a member of the church at Antioch, Luke was a doctor, a physician by training, who through his Gospel and by the Acts of the Apostles is one of the great doctors or teachers of the Early Church. He was one of Paul’s companions on the Second Missionary Journey. In verse 11, the beginning of this morning’s reading from Acts, the ‘they’ in ‘They moved through the region of Phrygia and Galatia’ by verse 16 has

become 'we' as 'We set sail from Troas'. At this moment, the history of the Early Church becomes a first-hand account as Luke becomes an eye-witness to Paul's mission to bring the Gospel of Christ to the Gentiles.

As a doctor, Luke would have been trained to be observant. He could diagnose what was wrong with a patient by observation: by looking at signs and symptoms, by sight, smell and touch, and by listening to and understanding what was being said to him, Luke had learnt to recognise and identify an illness. His skill as a physician found a new application as the author of two books of the New Testament, both vital for our spiritual health and well-being. They are sharply focused observations, accounts of the life and death of Jesus and how belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, became known throughout the Roman Empire.

Luke offers a distinct gospel. A Greek, he provides a gospel for the Gentiles. Companion to Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, Luke provides an account of Jesus the Jew which would speak to a non-Jewish audience. My text from the Magnificat, the song of Mary, highlights a major theme of his gospel:

'He has put down the mighty from their seat
and has exalted the humble and meek'

Luke is concerned for the poor, the marginalised, those on the edge of society. His gospel shows Jesus reaching out to touch the leper; Jesus who has a Samaritan as the embodiment of the principle of neighbourly love; Jesus who is concerned for women: the restoration to life of the only son of the Widow of Nain and the unnamed prostitute who anoints him with precious perfume and washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair.

It is Luke who gives us the fullest account of the Virgin birth from Mary's perspective. It feels as if Luke knew Mary, that he heard from her own mouth the mystery of the Annunciation and the Incarnation; the wonder and praise of God embodied in the Magnificat. Above all, Luke is an exemplary story teller with two of our best loved parables, that of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, uniquely his. On the way to the Cross we have his words to the women of Jerusalem 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me' (23 v28); hanging from the Cross his words of salvation to the thief in agony besides him, 'Truly I tell you today you will be with me in Paradise (23 v43).

According to legend, Luke was an artist too. He is reputed to have painted an icon of the Virgin Mary and is himself sometimes depicted in the process of painting her. Of course no such icon has been authenticated but this tradition tells us something important about him: that Luke wants to provide us with an authentic picture of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Lord and Saviour. The Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles both succeed in doing just that.

So today on the feast of St Luke, may I commend to you one of my favourite saints: Luke, physician and doctor of the Church, someone who loved people, whose concern was their health and their well-being, both physical and spiritual. May you find what he writes life-giving medicine, a restorative both to the body as well as the soul. May we be inspired by his vision of a faith and a community which reaches out to everyone, where all are welcome and where all are embraced for we are all loved by the God who made himself known in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Barnabas, Colchester

18th October, 2009

H: Sermon 20: St Luke

