

SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF SAINT LUKE, EVANGELIST AND MARTYR

18 OCTOBER 2020

THE VERY REV'D KEN GOODGER

If you were to guess who of the New Testament writers wrote the greatest proportion, I wonder who you would say? I imagine most people would say St. Paul, who is traditionally attributed with writing 13 letters. But even if you accept Paul's authorship of all 13 letters, if you go by the total number of verses or words, then the saint we celebrate today, St. Luke wrote more of the New Testament than any other writer.

Luke is the author of two writings in the New Testament, the gospel that bears his name, and the Acts of the Apostles. Many scholars consider the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles to be a two volume work, as his gospel begins with the story of Jesus' genealogy and birth and then in the second volume tells the story of the early church, up until the point where St. Paul reaches Rome.

Luke was thus an important figure both in the development of the New Testament and in the life of the early church and so it is right that today we should celebrate and give thanks for the legacy he left to the Christian faith.

And yet, as with so many people who appear in the Bible, and who were important for the proclamation of the Christian faith, we know relatively little about him.

Luke is believed to have come from Antioch, which in the first century was a Greek city, but which today would be in the southern part of Turkey. Those who know more about first-century Greek would suggest that the style of Luke's writing and the vocabulary he uses suggest he was a well-educated person. It is unclear though whether he was a Jewish or Gentile convert to Christianity. Apart from being an Evangelist, Luke is also referred to as the "Beloved Physician" in the letter to the Colossians. He was a companion of St. Paul on several of his missionary journeys as well as attending to Paul and his companions' medical needs. Luke was part of Paul's second missionary journey which took them to Philippi and then on his third mission which ended in Jerusalem. Luke also seems to have been part of Paul's final journey, to Rome. Paul laments in his second letter to Timothy that "I have no-one with me but Luke", which shows that Luke was also a reliable and trustworthy companion and supporter.

Later church traditions hold that Luke was one of the 70 disciples who were sent on a missionary journey by Jesus in Luke's gospel, and also that he was the companion of Cleopas when the two disciples were met by the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus. It is thought that this was Luke because this resurrection appearance is mentioned only in Luke's account. Tradition also holds that Luke was martyred at the age of 84 in Greece.

While Luke is best known as the patron saint of doctors, he is also the patron saint of artists, as he is traditionally believed to have been an artist himself. He is often depicted in medieval art as a painter and is even believed to have painted the first ever icon of the Virgin Mary.

Even if this is only a legendary tale, Luke's connection with the Virgin Mary is clear. Luke writes more about the Virgin Mary than any of the other gospel writers. While the nativity in Matthew's gospel is told from Joseph's standpoint, in Luke it is told from Mary's. And Luke strongly emphasises Mary's witness in a time when women were considered not be reliable witnesses. And this emphasis on the role of women as witnesses is also seen more widely in Luke's gospel, as Luke gives special prominence to the value and standing of women amongst those who follow Jesus.

Luke also emphasises in both his gospel and Acts the all-encompassing nature of the compassion and love of God for all people. This is especially true for those who would have been considered outsiders in their communities and even in the Kingdom of God. There is special emphasis in Luke on Jesus' ministry and in Acts, of the apostles mission with the lost and the poor; with the sick and those on the fringes of society, including lepers, tax-collectors and other 'sinners'. Throughout both volumes of his writings, Luke tells stories of barriers between people and people, and between God and people being broken down.

This is also seen through the parables which are unique to Luke's gospel. I said last week that Matthew has nine parables which are only found in his gospel. Luke has 13 parables of Jesus which only appear in his account. And some of those are the best known of all Jesus' parables.

Only in Luke do we find the parable of a foreign stranger who helps and cares for an injured Jewish traveller left at the side of the road. Only in Luke do we hear the parable of a father who runs down the road to greet his long lost and wayward son. And only in Luke do we hear of a poor widow who searches diligently for one lost coin and then throws a party for her friends and neighbours when she finds it, a party that would have cost far more than the value of the coin she had lost in the first place.

All these parables highlight the extraordinary lengths that God will go to find us, to be with us, to embrace and hold us as God's children, welcoming us home without our doing anything or even deserving it.

And we remember too that Luke was a wonderful hymn writer. It is in Luke's gospel that we find the texts of some the earliest Christian hymns: the Magnificat, the Benedictus, and the Nunc dimittis, hymns which we still sing today, and which musicians still write new musical settings for to this day.

So today, we give thanks for Saint Luke, who was a highly influential figure in the development of the early Christian church and whose writings and influence are still significant for the church 2000 years later. May the church, inspired by the example of St. Luke, proclaim the Good News wherever we may be, bring healing to our communities and to the world and illustrate by our life together the depth of God's love for all people, as we see in Jesus Christ our Lord.