

Sermon for Sunday 18th October

OLD TESTAMENT READING [Isaiah 35:3-6](#)

NEW TESTAMENT READING [Acts 16:6-12a](#)

GOSPEL READING [Luke 10:1-9](#)

Today, 18th October, is the day when the church, traditionally remembers St. Luke, author of the third gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, missionary for the early church.

So, readings which focus us on the life and witness of St Luke take the place of our regular sequence of Sunday readings.

Why remember Saints? Because in them we see the power of God's Holy Spirit, clearly alive in people in the past. The same Spirit waiting to be more fully alive in us today.

So who was Luke? Probably originally a citizen of Antioch, a major sea-port city in northern Syria; a Gentile, a Greek, someone whom the Jews regarded as outside the community of God's chosen people. But Antioch, St. Luke himself tells us in the Acts of the Apostles, was the first place that a significant number of Gentile Greeks joined the community of believers in Jesus, which up until then was just a Jewish sect. Probably Luke was already one of those Gentiles who studied the Jewish scriptures and was interested in the Jewish understanding of God. He would have been excited to discover that the message of Jesus was God's equal love for all people, and that he too could become a full member of the community of followers of Jesus, who knew themselves to be blessed and chosen by God.

Barnabas and Paul were sent to nurture the new believers in this mixed-race congregation in Antioch, in the Way of Jesus. And so Luke eventually became a colleague of Paul in his missionary journeys through the Roman Empire. That passage we heard read from the Acts of the Apostles records how Paul received a vision, whilst sharing his faith in modern day Turkey, to go over to Macedonia, to the European mainland, to share the faith there. Luke was with Paul there. In the Acts at this point, Luke writes 'We set sail from Troas'. And in all Paul's adventures in Greece and beyond, his successes and his trials, Luke seems to have accompanied Paul – 'We' keeps occurring in the descriptions in Acts.

And when Paul was arrested and in prison, Luke seems to have been alongside him again. Writing from prison, in his epistle to the Colossians, Paul writes warmly of his companion Luke, 'the beloved Physician' and again in 2 Timothy, Paul bemoans 'Luke alone is with me'.

In my opinion, Luke's faithfulness to Paul is one of his claims to sainthood! We owe much to the teaching of Paul, but I do not think he would have been an easy man to live with. Driven, determined, single-minded, the New Testament indicates that several fellow Christians found Paul difficult. And

following Paul in his adventures included facing the hostility of crowds; shipwrecks, flogging, imprisonment.

But of course, Luke's main gift to us is his writing of his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

Imagine the situation of the first Christian believers: the shock for the disciples when Jesus was crucified, the joy of seeing Jesus risen from the dead.

Then, discovering the power of God's Spirit alive in them.

That prophecy we heard read from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:-

'Your God will come to save you....The eyes of the blind will be opened, the

ears of the deaf unstopped.....waters shall break forth in the desert.'

A vision of heaven on earth.

They recognised this prophecy beginning to be fulfilled in Jesus; it was being fulfilled in their own lives. Forgiveness of sins, healing of illnesses and inner trauma, an end to feelings of loneliness and alienation, abundant new life for all who put their faith in the Risen Jesus and found a new relationship with their Creator God.

This was the faith they shared with all who would listen.

In the beginning, they believed that this God, who was transforming their lives, would soon come again in the person of Jesus to judge and transform the whole world, to establish God's kingdom on earth.

But as time went on, these first Christians realised that they had to live their God-transformed lives in an untransformed world.

The eye-witnesses were dying off. New believers needed a faithful record of the life and teaching of Jesus.

Mark, we reckon, was the first to write his Gospel.

Certainly, Luke seems to have used Mark's gospel as one of the sources for his own, alongside what he learned from St Paul and other witnesses and teachers in the growing church.

The Gospels are written by men of faith with a burning desire to share their faith with others. The Holy Spirit is in the writing. But also each gospel reflects the character and interest of the writer. They reveal to us different aspects of Jesus and our faith.

Matthew, Mark and John, all seem to have been Jews and saw Jesus as Saviour of the world from a Jewish-Christian context.

Luke was a Gentile Greek, and a missionary with Paul to the wider non-Jewish world.

The love of God in Jesus for all people, and his radical forgiveness is strongly represented in Luke's gospel, and God's justice, which breaks down barriers and upturns the narrow values of the world.

It is Luke who gives us the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the selfish wastrel who is wonderfully embraced in his father's love when he returns home; and

the Parable of the Good Samaritan, when the despised outsider is shown to be the one who pleases God by caring for the man who fell amongst thieves. Luke especially notices Jesus' love for the outsider and his valuing of people whom others ignore – like the despised tax-collector, Zacchaeus, who climbed a tree to see Jesus; and the woman, branded a sinner, who anoints his feet with her tears and oil, disturbing the Pharisee's feast.

Luke notices women in a way that Matthew and Mark do not.

Think how many Christians have cherished the memory of Mary, the Mother of God, over the centuries. Only Luke records the story of the Angel appearing to Mary, and Mary's role in the conception, birth and nurture of the infant Jesus. Matthew tells the story from Joseph's point of view, and Mark and John omit it altogether.

In the patriarchal society of 1st Century Palestine it was easy for women to get overlooked, but Luke has something of the eyes of God, which value and notice all people. It was not just the twelve male apostles who accompanied Jesus in his earthly ministry (and they had to be male in this role in that culture). Luke alone in Chapter 8 tells us of the women who accompanied them, including the wealthy wife of Herod's steward, providing for them, not just mending tunics and cooking food, but bailing out financially this group of wandering men who could not provide for themselves.

Then in the Acts of the Apostles Luke records the 12 male apostles waiting in Jerusalem before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in constant prayer, alongside Mary, the mother of Jesus and other key women. And later in Acts, Luke also notes the role of women, like Lydia and Priscilla at the heart of new Christian churches in Gentile lands.

Luke was not content just to write the story of Jesus in Palestine. He continues with the Acts of the Apostles, because to him it is all part of the same story.

The Spirit of God is revealed in Jesus, and then in Peter and Paul, and all disciples who put their faith in Jesus.

Our gospel reading is about Jesus sending out ahead of him seventy followers to share Jesus' message, to build relationships, then heal the sick and proclaim 'The Kingdom of God is near for you' – Luke has already recorded how Jesus sent out the 12 with the commission to preach, to drive out demons and cure diseases; Matthew and Mark include that, but only Luke records the sending out of the 70, noting Jesus say, 'The harvest is plenty but the labourers are few.....ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.'

For Luke, it is a central message: the followers of Jesus are equipped to continue his work, taking his Good News to all the world. So, in the Acts we see the Apostles Peter, Paul and others, cast out demons and heal the sick,

as Jesus did. And the Spirit of God is with them, giving them insight into events and the minds of others, and sometimes performing miracles, like the way Peter and Paul were freed from prison.

Acts finishes with Paul eventually taken to Rome – the centre of the known world in Jesus' and Luke's day. There, though in detention, Paul is free to share his faith.

Later we understand Paul was executed, but the church in Rome continued to flourish and the message of Jesus spread throughout the Roman Empire. Which brings the story to us. However weak our faith and inadequate our lives, we are called to let the Spirit of God work in and through us, that the healing love of Jesus expand in our world.

So what message for us do I draw from the Spirit-filled life and teaching of Luke?

It is this message of the strength of the love of God in Jesus for all people, which can bring healing and wholeness into our lives: a compassionate, accepting, forgiving love, which breaks through our natural human valuing and judging of ourselves and others.

God loves us more than we love ourselves. If in any area of your lives, at any time, you feel inadequate or a failure, that is not the way God judges you. He encourages us to recognise our weaknesses, but then invites us to accept how much he loves and forgives us, and from that self-acceptance to find the spirit to be loving, forgiving and accepting to others.

Note how often in the Gospel story Jesus reaches out to the marginalised, undervalued, despised people, affirms their value as human beings, affirms their goodness, meets their need.

Contrast the way we operate in our society; we judge people, we assess, grade and evaluate people all the time, subtly affirming some and dismissing others. The recent Black Lives Matter movement was one protest against this.

We are called to see people the way God sees them, to ask his Holy Spirit to help us to recognise everyone's dignity in God, to love, forgive where necessary and to help where we can. In this way we share in the healing mission of Christ and his church.

At this difficult time, when the Coronavirus is dominating our lives, with extra stresses in all sorts of ways, it is good to reassure ourselves that God is with us; the eternal love of God is there to encourage and help us when we ask, and He also gives us grace to encourage and help others.