

St.Luke's Day 2020 (18.10.2020)

Acts 16: 6 – 12a; Luke 10: 1 – 9

Today is St.Luke's Day –and it really is today: the 18th October. Perhaps the most significant contribution Luke makes to the Christian tradition is that he is usually credited with being the author of St.Luke's gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles. And so we celebrate St.Luke's Day by having a reading from each of them. The reading from the Gospel is a passage that is unique to Luke and illustrates the priority that he distinctively gives to issues of apostleship and evangelism; to the idea that, if you get caught up with Jesus, you end up being sent out, sitting lightly to everything else, and inviting others to the heavenly harvest supper he promises us.

The reading from Acts, though, reads rather more like a boring list of unpronounceable place names in a dusty travel-log. But it contains one very important word which helps us enormously as we try to work out

who Luke was. And the words is: *we*. It says that *we* went here, and then there, and then somewhere else. And that means that the author of the Acts of the Apostles was there, with St.Paul. And if the author of Acts is Luke, that means that Luke was a contemporary and companion of St.Paul. And we might speculate from that, therefore, that he might have shared some of Paul's prejudices and blind-spots.

If I have ever been asked which of the four Gospels in the Bible my favourite is, I have usually said that it's Luke. And that's because it's edgy; it's concerned with concrete issues of the here and now: it champions social justice and it establishes Jesus' preferential option for the poor. In the Sermon on the Mount, Luke has Jesus say 'Blessed are the poor.' He doesn't spiritualise it, and water down its impact, with holy language saying 'Blessed are the poor in Spirit.' With Luke it's gritty and it's real and it challenges the way society is structured: Blessed are the poor.

It's in Luke alone that we get Mary's anthem, the Magnificat, politically provocative to the point of subversiveness, promising the mighty will be put down from their seats, the humble and meek will be exalted, the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent empty away. It's in Luke alone that we get Jesus' manifesto that his mission and ministry is about bringing good news to the poor and bringing oppression and affliction to an end.

A couple of weeks ago I read a book about feminist techniques for interpreting the Bible. And I have to tell you, the author¹ absolutely has it in for Luke. She says his agenda and prejudice is to suppress the liberating urges of the Jesus movement and to make it conform to the patriarchal norms of a society controlled by people like Theophilus, for whom he's writing. Of the Gospel writers, it's Luke who gives least agency to women. Mary Magdalene finds the empty tomb and she has to go and get the men-folk.

¹ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza: *But She Said*

He puts a spin on the contribution of women to make them supporters rather than leaders. The roles of his women are restricted either to being in the kitchen, like Martha, or being dutifully attentive, like Mary. And of course there's that glorious episode of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, which is grist to any feminist's mill, when the poor woman is restored from her death bed and it says "Immediately she got up and began to serve them."!

The other well-known thing about Luke is that he was a doctor. Two or three years ago I stood here, not in this very spot, but up there in the pulpit, six feet above contradiction, and confidently proclaimed that there was no scriptural warrant for this belief: it was just a popular legend. Let me now confess that afterwards Christine had to take me on one side that, actually, I was talking absolute bunkum. The bible does tell us he was a doctor: Colossians, chapter 4, verse 14. It's because of this popular, and perfectly scriptural belief, that today's collect so delightfully describes him as a

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‘physician of the soul.’ That is lovely, but the problem with talk like that is it can end up with us thinking as if faith isn’t concerned with our whole selves, but just with the bit of ourselves we call our soul, which we carry around inside us, as if our bodies are just earthly dross.

As today is the first time we have celebrated the Eucharist with Maxine presiding as Priest, I think it fitting that I pay tribute and say that one of the finest sermons I have heard in the past couple of years is the first sermon Maxine preached here after she was ordained Deacon 16 months or whatever ago. She redeemed a short passage in Luke by instinctive feminist critique; gave agency and personality to a woman whom Luke doesn’t even dignify with a name; and she invited us to consider the link between physical, bodily health and spiritual well-being.

In Luke 13, Luke wheels on ‘the woman bent double’, has Jesus heal her, and then wheels her off again two

verses later so that the men can use her as an issue to be subjected to rational analysis, the issue of lawfulness of healing on a Sabbath. Maxine invited us to imagine what it is like to feel a twisted, knotted body unwind, to stand straight upright, to look anybody in the eye and to feel the sun on your face; and to feel spiritually alive because of your physical improvement.

So as we celebrate St.Luke, the evangelist and physician, whatever his flaws may have been, let us allow the Holy Spirit to mediate God’s truth to us through him that we may worship him in body and mind as well as spirit, and be able to apply our faith to the gritty reality of our lives Monday to Saturday, and not just to the religious bits of them we indulge on a Sunday.

Amen.