

Sermon for St Luke's Day, The Rev'd Emma Dinwiddy Smith

Readings: 2 Timothy 4:5-17, Luke 10:1-9

“Only Luke is with me.”

At the end of his life, under house arrest in Rome and awaiting probable execution, St Paul in 2 Timothy, lists those who have deserted him or let him down, and acknowledges others who are continuing his life's work, spreading the Christian Gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

But only one of his followers has apparently stayed with him in Rome, in spite of the danger - someone called Luke, generally taken to be the Gospel-writer whose feast-day we celebrate today.

So what do we actually know about the Luke the Church remembers?

We all know **of** Luke as the named author of the Third Gospel.

Many of us will also remember being taught that Luke is also thought to have written the Acts of the Apostles – the story of the earliest Church, which culminates with Paul's final journey to Rome.

In Acts, the author often writes in the first person plural, “we”, suggesting that he shared in at least some of Paul's more dramatic experiences and journeys, including the last journey to plead his case before the Emperor in Rome, which would corroborate the statement that Luke was with him at this point.

The four Gospel-writers all drew on shared material and eye-witness reports, and many incidents are repeated in each Gospel.

Yet each one also has his own perspective on the teachings of Jesus, and the incidents or stories which they record of course reflect their own preoccupations, experiences and priorities.

Luke is a beautiful and evocative writer, and I think if I ask you now which bits of the New Testament you most clearly remember, there is a good chance many of these would come from the Gospel of Luke...

Perhaps you thought of the parables of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son; the Nativity images of the stable, the angels and the shepherds, or the beautiful canticles, the Magnificat, Benedictus and Nunc Dimittis, all of which are found only in the pages of Luke's Gospel.

But what was Luke himself like?

Of course, much of what we know is either supposition or extrapolation from the few facts we can glean from his writing.

Luke introduces both the Gospel and Acts in the form of a letter to an unknown person, apparently of rank, whom he addresses as “most excellent Theophilus”.

He explains, "I ... decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you ... so that you may know the truth..."

Orderliness does indeed shine through much of Luke's writing.

He is keen to place the events of Jesus' life within a chronological, historical setting.

Even those familiar words from the start of every Carol Service do precisely that: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was Governor of Syria."

Although this statement has provided Biblical scholars with various headaches over the centuries, as they try to align these dates with Roman history recorded elsewhere, it does set the Christian narrative against a realistic and recognisable backdrop, and also places the story in a particular **political** setting: the people of Palestine were firmly under Roman occupation and subject to the demands of their Roman rulers.

Luke writes in Greek, and the Greek of someone familiar with Classical learning.

It seems that he expects his readers to be from Greek-speaking, rather than Hebrew backgrounds, and so presumably newer converts of the kind Paul addressed, but he is not writing for the wider Graeco-Roman world, rather for those within some kind of Christian circle.

Yet he also has deep respect for those who work with their hands: farmers, fishermen, shepherds all feature in the stories he has chosen to immortalise, as does his loyalty to Paul, the tentmaker.

Luke is concerned with the political world and the balance of power; the stark contrasts between urban and rural life; issues of social class and polarisation; the powerful, centralised role of the Temple within Jewish religion and the coming of the end of the world.

All these were live issues within first-century Judaea, but it is hard not to see in this list many echoes of the society we live in today; the anxieties and concerns especially of younger people, and the subjects of political and economic debate.

Perhaps it is the timeless aspect of many of Luke's concerns which keeps his Gospel fresh and poignant for modern readers, and his stories and powerful songs so memorable.

As our Gospel showed us, Luke was also committed to the task of mission and creating disciples.

Perhaps his travels with Paul had shown him the power of the personal sharing of one's faith in Christ, as Paul created and built up Christian churches in so many of the cities of Asia Minor.

As Luke recounts the stories of Jesus, he also includes Jesus' instructions to his disciples to do precisely what Paul himself did later: Go out like labourers into a potentially rich harvest, spreading the Gospel of Christ, reflecting God's love and healing power and reminding them of the coming of his Kingdom.

They were to be single-minded, faithful and committed, not being distracted on the way to their destinations, and perhaps this reflects something of Luke's admiration for Paul as well as Jesus himself.

I wonder if this single-mindedness also helped Luke himself to remain with Paul in spite of all the risks this must have entailed.

Luke sheds light on Jesus' care and concern for the suffering, the needy, the downtrodden and those who are victims of prejudice and hostility.

But he also encourages us: the harvest is as plentiful as ever.

We too can see around us, especially in present circumstances, people in need of comfort and peace and justice; people for whom the message of God's love and Christ's redemption could bring hope and reassurance.

Luke's transmission of Jesus' words is clear: go out, taking nothing with you, but bringing peace and healing to ALL whom you meet and telling them of the joy experienced in following Christ.

Amen.