

Jesus in Luke

In Colossians 4.14, Saint Paul refers to a Luke as his 'beloved physician', and it has mostly been thought that this physician was the author of what we know as the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles – a sort of history of Jesus and his followers. He writes in elegant Greek, and he shows the sort of eye for detail that a good doctor would need in his profession. He is also interested in the healing aspects of the life of Jesus and the faith of his followers, and that is why this address could be entitled 'Jesus in Luke – the Healing God'.

Reading about Jesus in Luke is more like reading a good story than it is in any of the other gospels. It has a certain human interest, because of Luke's fascination with the incarnation – the way that God became human in Jesus. This is probably the reason why Luke takes the trouble to tell us all the narratives that surround the birth of Jesus, and to tell us the human story of joy and sorrow that surrounds the birth of the Saviour. For Luke, Jesus does not suddenly appear out of nowhere: he has a history that matters. We know where Jesus comes from, and how he got here. This is important for Luke, who points out to us again and again how the teaching of Jesus has an effect on those around him.

For Luke the doctor, healing is also an important theme in his gospel. This too is part of Luke's reflection on the incarnation. Where God and humankind are at one, then all is well. When we are in harmony with God, we are at harmony with ourselves, and this brings to us healing both of body and spirit.

We first come to know Jesus in Luke as an infant, through the extraordinary events surrounding his annunciation and birth. For both of these events – the annunciation and the birth – Luke tells us the stories both of John the Baptist and of Jesus. In this way he shows Jesus's real human link with the prophets of the Old Testament, but he also shows how the birth of Jesus – however special – is a real human event, like the birth of any human being. Of course, you and I were not born as the result of an angel's message or worshipped by shepherds and angels (unless perhaps you were!), but the point here is for us to look at what is wonderful and miraculous in the simple straightforward human events of our lives, and to see God at work in them just as God was at work in Jesus.

I have always found the story of the boy Jesus in the Temple to be quite fascinating. At twelve years old, he was found to be *sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them*

questions. *And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers (2.46b-47)*. There were more than four gospels in circulation in the early days of the Church, and those that were not accepted into the Bible were full of tall stories about the childhood of Jesus – miraculous knowledge and other unusual things. But here we have a picture of Jesus simply using his brain.

Between 3.1 and 4.13 Luke tells us of the events that prepare Jesus for his ministry in public. John preaches repentance; Jesus is baptised; Luke tells us the presumed ancestors of Jesus; Jesus is driven into the desert to be tempted by Satan.

And only then does Luke tell us how Jesus appears on the scene of Galilee. In 4.14-44, he tells us two typical appearances of this teacher, preaching in synagogues. He proclaims to his home town that he has been anointed of the Spirit to bring good news to those who need to hear it – the poor; the captives; the blind; the oppressed – and to proclaim the favour of God. In Capernaum he speaks with authority and heals the sick, especially in that wonderful passage where so many sick are brought to him *as the sun was setting (4.40)*. It is so noticeable that, while John the Baptist is telling all and sundry to repent, Jesus is proclaiming Jubilee – God's favour. This makes it so important that the heralds of Jesus today should proclaim God's favour too. I'm not sure whose message the Church thinks it's preaching when we make people feel guilty or believe that God is condemning them, but I am sure it is not the message of Jesus!

Indeed Jesus reserves some of his strongest words for religious authorities later on in Luke's gospel (11.37-52), for it is these people who are actually turning God's Good News into Bad News, and God's favour into disfavour and condemnation: *You have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who entering (11.52b)*.

And what about the work of healing that is so prominent in Luke's gospel? Jesus heals quite simply because God is in him. And when God is present, then things that are wrong about the world begin to be put right. It isn't a matter, as some people seem to think, of sickness and sin going together, so that always the sin needs forgiving for the sickness to be healed. It is a matter of seeking where God wants to be in our lives. Perhaps God is being kept out. Maybe God is waiting for us to bring God near to other people. Perhaps the thing that makes someone sick is not the obvious illness but a lack of faith or a broken relationship.

To people who take Luke's Gospel seriously, it becomes essential to preach good news, and God's favour and healing. But first God must become Good News to us, and our lives must show the favour and healing of God.

The rest of Luke's gospel continues to tell the story of Jesus's ministry in Galilee, followed by a lengthy journey to Jerusalem, with a ministry in Jerusalem, coming to a climax in the Passion and Glorification of Jesus.

I don't want to present an extensive study of the well-known events of the ministry of Jesus, but I would like to focus on the journey to Jerusalem. This is something that appears in all three so-called 'Synoptic' gospels, but in Luke it takes on a special significance. It is important for Jesus not to be seen to be standing still. He has a purpose in life, and that purpose will be accomplished in Jerusalem.

Remember the childhood of Jesus – how Luke shows us the purpose set out for the life of Jesus, and how Jesus uses his gifts in discussion with the teachers. For Luke, Jesus comes to the stage where he is clear in his mind what he is called to do, and the understanding that he will accomplish his greatest acts in Jerusalem. He starts off in the countryside, where maybe he would otherwise have been quite happy to stay, but God has called him to other things, and so *when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem (9.51).*

There are times when we need to be thinking about the purpose God has for us – where God wants us to be. Jesus says to the one who announces *I will follow you wherever you go – Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (9.58).* But he also tells his disciples who ask him how to pray: *Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened (11.9b-10).*

Jesus's journey has plenty to teach us on our own life's journey. Interestingly, his teaching becomes more concentrated and clear while he is on the journey. It is as if Jesus has begun by proclaiming the Kingdom on his travels around Galilee, but now he realises what he has to do to bring about the Kingdom. Jesus speaks the parable of the unjust judge to those who wonder how they can persevere in following the way of the Kingdom. Luke writes that this parable is *about the need to pray always and not to lose heart (18.1b).* The judge neither fears God nor

respects people, yet he grants justice to the widow who comes persistently with her claim for justice, just because she keeps pestering him. Jesus comments: *Will God not grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? (18.7).*

When Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the tone of his teaching changes again. He is very clearly aware that the future depends on him. He sees all the things that seem so grand and permanent to the pilgrims, and tells them *as for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down (21.6).* I think that this teaching is desperately important for the Church everywhere, for we can imagine that as soon as we get our buildings and organisation in order, we will have done what God wants of us. In many ways we would be better off without those things, even though they do help us, because it's so easy for them to become the end purpose instead of being instruments of the Kingdom. So many people in the Church are worshipping buildings, riches and heritage, and not God. When we come together, we must make sure that we are here to worship God and not something else – or indeed someone else, for Jesus also warns: *Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. (21.8)*

To give a closing thought on Luke's gospel, I'd like to move on to the end – after the Resurrection – where Jesus appears to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Every appearance of the risen Jesus in Luke is related in order to remind us that Jesus is with us now just as he was in his ministry and teaching so many years ago. For the disciples who are talking and discussing all that has taken place, and are wondering, and probably sad and despondent, he says to them: *Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! (24.25b)* Yet Jesus stays with them on their journey, and in the most intimate part of the day, when they are sharing bread and wine, it becomes clear to them who he really is, and how much their hearts have burned within them as he spoke to them on the way.

It is in the quiet hours of the day, and when we are most open just to being with Jesus, that we recognise Jesus most, and this is where we find the answers to all the challenges that come up as we read Luke's gospel. For Jesus heals our blindness and the limits we place on our own lives before God. Jesus shows us the way to be Good News, to heal, and to share our journeys and our vocations with him.

PC, 19th March 2023