



St Anne's Church Wandsworth

READING ST LUKE

The readings we hear each Sunday in church follow a three year cycle. In 2015/16 the gospel readings are mainly from St Luke.

Who was Luke?

We know very little about the author. His name appears in the title of the gospel, but that might have been added later by an editor. Traditionally he is identified with Luke, a doctor, one of St Paul's companions and mentioned in his letters. We learn more about the man from his writings. First he wrote two books in the New Testament: the third gospel, and the Acts of the Apostles which gives us the history of the Church after Jesus. The two books belong together like a two volume set. In the Acts there are parts about Paul's travels when he talks about "we", so there he is as Paul's companion! It is possible that Luke was the only non-Jewish writer in the New Testament. Most scholars guess that Luke wrote in around 80-85AD.

What is special about Luke's gospel?



*And was moved to pity at the sight.
He approached him and dressed his wounds*

Some of the most famous and important passages of scripture are to be found in Luke's gospel. The traditional Christmas story of Jesus' birth follows Luke's account more than Matthew's. (Mark and John miss it altogether.)

Among the parables of Jesus which are to be found only in Luke, the Good Samaritan (10.25-37), the story of the stranger who proves to be the

neighbour, the potential enemy who is my friend, has been described as "embodying the deepest meanings in our culture: in learning it we define what it means to be compassionate". The parable of the Prodigal Son (15.11-32) is another defining story where we discover the true nature of God in forgiveness and the need to forgive and be forgiven. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16.19-31) teaches about the blindness of selfish wealth. There are lots of individual little details in every Gospel: only in

Luke do we hear of Jesus praying for those who crucify him: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing".

Luke obviously loved journeys. The gospel is largely a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, and Acts a journey from Jerusalem to Rome. His account of the shipwreck in Acts 27 is one of the most graphic pieces of writing from the ancient world. And only Luke has the risen Jesus appear to the disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus .



*This son of mine was dead
and has come back to
life. He was lost and is
found*

What does Luke tell us about Jesus?

Every gospel writer has his own slant. None gives us a photograph, as it were, but each is trying to paint his own portrait. Matthew shows Jesus as Jewish Christians would have wanted to know about him – how he fulfilled the Old Testament promises, and challenged and reshaped the Law. Mark was writing for people who had not much interest in the Old Testament and the Law, and so gives a different portrait. Luke presents Jesus as someone who is peaceful and serene. (Mark gives us a picture of Jesus as a confrontational figure, a man in a hurry and easily angered.) He pacifies Martha and forgives his executioners, but he is no wimp either – he is not going to be tangled up by family expectations in Nazareth but recognises his calling to preach and heal more widely (4.16-30). By putting God first, by forgiving and reconciling, Jesus remains in control of events.

Luke and the marginalised

Luke is always aware of the outsider and the poor. Mary sings of the exaltation of the lowly and the debasement of the rich. The angels announce the birth of Jesus to shepherds – the lowest of the low. The parables of the rich man and Lazarus and of the rich fool (12.16-21) teach the perils of selfish use of money. Lepers are prominent in the gospel story, and there is a real positive interest in women (who had a low status in ancient society). The birth of Jesus is told from Mary's standpoint (Matthew tells it through Joseph!) Martha and Mary battle it out between working



*Lazarus longed to eat
the scraps that fell
from the rich man's
table*

and listening to Jesus (10.38-42). In Acts 9.36-42 Peter raises from the dead Tabitha, a woman noted for her charitable work.

Luke the dramatist

In later tradition Luke was meant to have been an artist. (Some Greek monasteries will even show you pictures he painted of the Virgin Mary...) There is certainly something graphic in his narratives. The parables and stories mentioned earlier appeal to our imagination more than most. And we have stories like that of Zacchaeus who climbed the tree to see Jesus (19.1-10).

Luke the historian

Luke uses his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to set Jesus in the middle of a larger story of God's dealings with his people. The Holy Spirit who had inspired the Old Testament prophets brings about Jesus' birth, and later inspires the leaders of the infant Church.



All who heard him were amazed at his intelligence and his answers.

- There is a feeling of almost a seamless flow from the Old Testament to Jesus and the early Church. Luke has Mary and Joseph – and the child Jesus – being faithful observers of the Law. In Acts, Paul and other Christian leaders are represented as going to the synagogue and Temple.
- That “seamless flow” then spreads through the Roman Empire. In the Acts, the action flows from Jerusalem to Rome, the capital city of the Empire.

Finally Paul arrives in Rome, ready to appear before the Emperor himself. (Strangely, we are not told what happens next! Was there to have been a book three which was never written, or lost?) The basic idea is clear enough: the message of Jesus has flowed out of the Jewish cradle in which it is born and now is filling the whole civilised world. An ambitious idea for the first generation after Jesus, and not fulfilled until the time of the Emperor Constantine 250 years later!

- All nations are going to be caught up in this new Christian movement. So in the Acts of the Apostles the Day of Pentecost has the disciples speaking in many different languages. In the Gospels and the early chapters of Acts Luke often mentions the Samaritans (a community similar to mainstream Judaism, and often their bitter rivals!) as early followers of Jesus and converts to infant Christianity. They become symbolic of different cultures reconciled.
- Good people of whatever background are portrayed as converting to Christianity. In Acts 10 a Roman convert, the centurion Cornelius, is a good man earnestly looking for God. In Acts 8 we hear of the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch. For ancient Greeks and Romans, Ethiopians lived on the edge of the known world and were regarded as somewhat mysterious and virtuous. The gospel reaches good people everywhere and they find their true home within it.

Luke the educated writer

The writer may or may not have been a trained doctor, but he was certainly well educated. The New Testament was written in ancient Greek. Some books, like the Gospel of Mark, are written in a very awkward style as if the writer was struggling, possibly even not in his first language. But Luke has a very polished style. Most of that is lost in translation but if you look at the beginning of the gospel you can see a rather ornate opening, with even an address to a dedicatee (a man called Theophilus of whom we know nothing). It is all slightly self-conscious. In those days, as now, a book had to be well produced if its contents were to be taken seriously.

Luke followed the norms of his day for good history writing. It was standard to put speeches into the mouths of the important characters, not to claim what they actually did say on a particular occasion, but to represent their position and motives at the time. Luke has Jesus make a speech in the synagogue at Nazareth (4.16-30), and each stage of Acts is marked by a speech (e.g. Pentecost, Acts 2; Gentiles admitted to the Church, Acts 11; Paul comes to Athens, Acts 17.16-34).

Elsewhere Luke has a close eye for detail, especially for the cities of the Mediterranean through which he passed. (He is a bit vague and even confused about the Holy Land of Jesus' day.) He is good on the developing views and self-image of the infant Church. His picture of Paul is slightly different from the one we see in Paul's own letters – perhaps he only agreed with Paul up to a point! But throughout his work his first priority is to present a portrait of Jesus and God's work through him and in the Church.