

St Luke

Happy New Year everyone! Just in case you think I have finally flipped my top, today is the beginning of the new church year. You probably knew that – but maybe you didn't know that this is now the year of St Luke – most of the Gospel readings over the next twelve months will be from Luke's Gospel. So I thought it might be helpful if I were to give a general introduction to Luke – and suggest some homework for you!

The first thing we like to know about any book is who wrote it, and when, and what was his purpose in writing - in other words what kind of book is it. Let's try applying some of those questions to this Gospel. Ancient books didn't have a title page - largely because they didn't have pages. We don't find anything at all in the book which says 'I, Luke, wrote this'. What do we know about this writer from within the book? Firstly that he was *not an eyewitness*. He says that he received his information from others who were. He says he wanted to write an orderly account. We can tell from the style of writing that he was a cultured man - an eminent Greek scholar has described the first few verses as amongst the best Greek in the whole of the New Testament.

So we have to look for external evidence about the writer (and because the Acts of the Apostles is Part 2 of the same work, we can look for clues there also). The unanimous view of ancient writers was that it was Luke, the companion of St Paul - we can look to people like Irenaeus in 178 or Clement of Alexandria or Tertullian. In those days for a book to be said to be by a particular person cannot always be taken at face value - it was quite acceptable for people to hide behind the name of someone they admired, and write in that person's name. But Luke, to whom these ancient writers attribute the Gospel was not a famous person to whom that might happen. So it looks like they thought really was by someone called Luke.

Because Luke is described by Paul as a physician, scholars used to think they could detect medical language in the Gospel - that has been shown more recently not to be valid - but at least the medical language he uses is not *incorrect*. We know that Luke was a Gentile - and there is plenty of evidence for that in the way he tells stories, his ignorance of some aspects Jewish life, and mistakes about places he doesn't know at first hand.

So that's who. Now as to when it was written: - lots of scholarly disagreements, but the majority suggest that it probably comes from somewhere around 75-85 AD. It can't be much earlier because he uses books that weren't around earlier as sources, and alludes to historical events that took place at AD 70.

Luke is particularly helpful in the question of why he is writing. He wants to get an orderly account - he clearly thinks there is some chaos in what is already available. So he has done some research and come up with this document as an answer. We have to be very cautious about assuming that *anyone* including Luke, would write history in the sense that we understand it in the modern world. It was not about getting the facts clear for people to make up their own minds about,. He was not a chronicler of events. He was writing with a more defined purpose. A clue to that comes in the name of the man for whom he says he is writing. He is

called Theophilus. That is a Greek name, so we assume that the man was a Gentile also, and that he was under instruction in the Christian faith. So it appears to be as it were a baptismal or confirmation textbook, although Luke would not have thought in those terms. Some people have reasonably wondered if Theophilus ever existed. The name means 'God-lover' - so is this a fictitious name to describe the person who might read it? The literary tradition of the day was to ascribe treatises to real people, and to notable ones at that, and Theophilus is called 'Your Excellency'. There is no reason to doubt his existence.

But we mustn't see it as a private document, for Theophilus' eyes only. It was a public document, intended to be read by many people. So can we glean from the way Luke writes who they were? It is fairly clear that they were Gentiles. He does not quote very much from the Old Testament. Whereas Matthew is forever telling us how words of prophets were fulfilled in Jesus' ministry, Luke doesn't find that of interest at all - and of course a Gentile readership would not have that concern either. He uses expressions they would find easier - for example resurrection is described as 'alive'. He avoids the word Christ or Messiah and uses instead the word Saviour, which was known to Greek religion. Writing to people who called the Emperor 'Lord' he is careful to say Jesus is the 'only Lord'. He avoids the word transfiguration (metamorphosis) because that had a different meaning in Greek religion.

At the time this was written, Christianity was a new and emerging religion in the Roman empire, and was considered with some suspicion. Jesus had been executed as a criminal - here Luke shows how Jesus and his disciples were pronounced innocent by Roman legal officials. Christianity is to be seen as a natural extension and development of Judaism, which had an accepted status, but unlike Judaism, was a world faith. Christians were being accused of revolution - here he shows that Jesus turned his back on revolutionary politics. Christians are seen as being anti-social - here he shows the founder of the faith as full of nobility and charm, who cares for all sorts and conditions. In other words, it is a tract for the times, to help the message of Christianity be heard in the Roman world. And it was incidentally an excellent guide for those seeking faith. There has been a tradition that it was written for people in Rome, but we have no proof.

Most scholars think Luke had access to three main sources for his account. One consists of material which only Luke tells. That might have been some document that we no longer have, or maybe was a series of documents, or perhaps was a series of stories handed on orally. The second is a body of material that both he and Matthew use. This has traditionally been called 'Q' material - from the German word Quelle, which means Source. And then lastly, there is St Mark's Gospel. In many places Luke uses it very closely. In others he edits it quite heavily (for example one of the arguments that he was a Doctor stems from the editing of the story of the woman with haemorrhages - Mark says she wasted all her money on Doctors who could do nothing for her. Luke says no doctor had been able to cure her).

Let me try and point up for you some of the characteristics of Luke which have been noted over the years.

It is a world-wide telling of the story. We have already noted how he is careful to use internationally understood language. But his theological purpose is international too. That is flagged up in the introductory

stories he tells about the annunciations to Mary and Elizabeth, and the birth of Jesus. The angels' message of goodwill is for all men. Simeon sees Jesus as a light to lighten the Gentiles. John the Baptist talks of all flesh seeing the salvation of God. We have stories of non-Jews: the Samaritans get much better treatment here - it is Luke alone who tells the story of the Good Samaritan, and tells us the one leper who came back to say thank-you was Samaritan.

But then another description of Luke has been 'the Gospel of the underdog' - not only these racial underdogs, but the poor - which again is flagged up right at the beginning with the story of the poor beginning in Bethlehem, and Mary offering the poor persons' gift in the Temple. In the Beatitudes he changes Matthew's 'the poor *in Spirit*' to simply 'the poor'. He returns time and again to people normally considered outcasts - the prostitute, the criminal and so on. In the male dominated society of Judaism which produced the other Gospels, women are not so important as here. Luke mentions thirteen women not found in the other gospels. It's Luke who tells us about Elizabeth and Anna, the widow of Nain, and the woman who anointed Jesus feet.

We could say that Luke is a very *human* Gospel. Whereas in his parables Matthew focuses on ideas like 'kingdom', Luke focuses on people. That could be said to be a characteristic of the whole Gospel, not just the parables. Luke's description of the characters is much rounder than the other Gospels - you could think for example of the way he describes the sisters Mary and Martha, or Cleopas and his companion on the way to Emmaus. Luke talks about Jesus social life in a way that others do not - his dining with the Pharisees, and domestic scenes at Bethany, Zacchaeus' house. Maybe it is worth my mentioning some of the things that we hear from Luke alone - the things that he particularly wanted to add to the picture his readers had of Jesus. It is Luke alone who tells us the birth stories, who tells us about John the Baptist's moral teaching, about Jesus commissioning 70 disciples, about the lawyer who wants to inherit eternal life, the story of the Good Samaritan, of the man who calls for bread at midnight, the rich man building barns, about the need to count the cost of following Jesus, the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, the prodigal son, the dishonest steward, Dives and Lazarus, the widow and the judge, the Pharisee and the publican in the temple.

The humanity of Luke is also true in his portrayal of Jesus. Compared with the other Gospels, we read about Jesus much more as Jesus the man, rather than Jesus the divine Messiah. Jesus is the friend of sinners, the supporter of the outcast and weak. Dante called Luke 'the evangelist of God's tenderness'.

Luke can be said to be the Gospel of Prayer - he records nine prayers of Jesus for example, only two of which are recorded in the other Gospels. These are associated with the great moments in Jesus ministry - his baptism, before choosing the disciples, at the transfiguration and so on. We read of Jesus praying for Peter, and his asking the disciples to pray in Gethsemane. Jesus is portrayed as a man of prayer here far more fully than in the other Gospels. We can make the assumption that this was because Luke also knew the value of prayer. Allied to this is the greater emphasis Luke has about the Holy Spirit than Mark or Matthew. That may stem from the fact he went on to write about the events that followed from Pentecost in Part 2 of the book - what we call the Acts of the Apostles. There is a far greater literary element to Luke - he constructs his book far more than Matthew and Mark. And one of the ways he does that is to make links. He starts off by looking

back briefly into the time before Jesus. At the end of the Gospel he looks forward to what is to come, and at the beginning of Acts, he links back to the Gospel. He also has quite distinct pauses for thought - what in modern terms we might think of as 'new chapters'. The gift of the Spirit in Acts therefore is prepared for in the way he tells the gospel story. Jesus is described as 'full of the Spirit' and is led into the wilderness by the Spirit, and he tells his friends to wait for the 'power from on high'.

Finally let me say something about Luke's view of the story of Jesus being the fulfilment of a divine plan. That is specifically stated in Acts 2.23 - 'This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.....' but is the thing that undergirds his whole telling of the story. It is very carefully balanced. He is not saying that everyone is acting according to a pre-determined script - each can choose whether they follow the divine plan (and that is supremely so in the story of Gethsemane) but somehow God will use those choices within his overall purpose of delivering mankind. As G.B.Caird said 'the Cross is the final proof that God can turn even the ultimate rejection into victory.' So although unlike Matthew he doesn't constantly produce proof texts, which Gentiles would not have appreciated, nonetheless, you can see how he understands what Jesus did to be the fulfilment of all sorts of Old Testament themes - for example the Exodus - God brings his people to freedom. Luke in the story of transfiguration calls Jesus' coming passion in Jerusalem his 'exodus'. Another example would be Jesus fulfilling the Passover story, which he underlines in the way he tells the story of the Last Supper. Jesus 'must' do lots of things - Luke says that 10 times (Mark only once). Jesus always has the choice of obedience, but there is a demand made on him.

Well, enough by way of Introduction. I hope that will help you as we listen to what he wrote, week by week. I said I would give you some homework. We will be hearing lots of little chunks of Luke. But there is a great deal to be said for reading his Gospel as a whole - its only about 30 pages in most Bibles. That will give you a much better background for what we will hear over the next year than anything I have said this morning. So why don't you curl up with Luke as you have your afternoon tea, and get better acquainted with him!