

An Introduction to the Gospel of S. Luke

This evening our introduction to the Gospels continues with the Gospel of S. Luke. S. Luke is unique amongst the four evangelists in that we have not one but two books written by him. S. Luke begins his gospel, addressing his patron, in a sentence which we'll have cause to come back to. In a similar way he begins the Acts of the Apostles:

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven. (Acts 1.1-2)

It seems that S. Luke doesn't finish his gospel with the Resurrection appearances or the Ascension. For S. Luke, the story of Jesus continues in to the early Church. However, we have to be a little careful from drawing too much from this. The relationship between the Gospel of S. Luke and Acts is not clear. We have no evidence that they were read together in the ancient world. They seem always to have circulated as separate texts. Whether we think S. Luke wrote the Gospel as a stand-alone text, and whether we think he always intended to write the book of Acts as the conclusion to his story, has implications as to how closely we read the Gospel and Acts as one continuous story.

However, there are a group of passages in Acts which are important for us to consider. These are the so-called "we" passages in chapters 16, 20, 21, 27 and 28. Here we apparently find S. Luke writing in the first person of a series of journeys with Paul. He appears as a witness to these journeys - "we travelled here, and there, and so on". Much scholarly ink has been spilled over whether the use of "we" here really means Luke was an eyewitness to the events with Paul. Some think that the term is a literary convention for the description of sea travel. Whether S. Luke was really present on these journeys cannot be settled here.

We can note, however, that he displays a preference for events which can be verified by eyewitness testimony. A constant favoured phrase of his is 'and behold'. Look what God has done, and we can establish through others eyewitness testimony. This is the grounds for the credibility of his account.

This interest is found also in the first sentence of his Gospel. That sentence we promised we would return to. This sentence tells us more about S. Luke's gospel than perhaps any other. It is also, of the entire New Testament, the sentence which displays the most advanced knowledge of the Greek language. Most of the New Testament is written in common, or '*koine*' Greek. S. Luke meanwhile aims to write in a more classical Greek style. The sentence runs as follows:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1.1-4)

We see here S. Luke's concern for order, authenticity, eyewitness testimony. He is seeking to provide as accurate an account of the life of Jesus and the early Church as his sources will allow him. It is no surprise that this introductory sentence finds very similar parallels in works of ancient history proper contemporary to him.

Apart from being the most classical, S. Luke's Greek also bears most relation to that of most mainstream translation of the Old Testament in his day. Here we see the importance of the phrase at the beginning of his gospel: 'the events that been fulfilled among us'. S. Luke believes that promises of the Old Testament have been fulfilled in Christ. He indicates this by imitating the style of the Old Testament.

Nowhere is this seen more than in our Lady's song – the Magnificat – which we have just sung and sing at each and every Evensong (Luke 1.46-55). The Magnificat is found on the lips of our Lady as a song giving thanks to God for what he is done for humankind through the child in her womb. We note the promises are in the past tense: He hath shewed strength with his arm : scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; put down the mighty from their seat : exalted the humble and meek. filled the hungry with good things : the rich he hath sent empty away. He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel : as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever'. This song sees the fulfilment of Hannah's song in the Old Testament, in the 1st book of Samuel, in which Hannah give thanks for the birth of a son (1 Sam 2.1-10). Hannah give praise to God who raises up the poor, lifts the needy and so on. In S. Luke's Gospel, in Christ, God's activity is brought to completion.

Our Lady's song also reminds us of another prevailing theme of S. Luke's gospel – the poor, the needy, and the outcast. However, S. Luke is not only interested in the poor in themselves, but also the duty of the rich in relation to the poor. The Beatitudes, the blessings which Jesus announced during the sermon on the mount, which we remember from S. Matthew's gospel last week are also found in S. Luke's gospel. However, whilst in S. Matthew' gospel they are spiritualised: 'the poor in spirit', 'those who hunger for righteous', in S. Luke's gospel they refer to the materially poor, the hungry, the weeping.

Moreover, S. Luke balances Christs blessings with a series of woes – to the rich, the well fed, the laughing. He also is the only evangelist to include the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In this parable, the rich man fails to care for the beggar Lazarus at his gates. The rich man dies and finds himself in eternal torment. Meanwhile the beggar, who experienced hell on earth, dies and finds himself in bliss at Abraham's side. Through this parable, Christ urges those who have more in this world to share that wealth with those who have less.

S. Luke's overriding concern is to establish the truth of the events that have been associated with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having established the truth of these events, he draws the consequences of them for our Christian lives today. That which God has done in Christ, that which God has done for the poor, means that the promises of God have been brought to fulfilment. This means that promises which God has made to the poor and the outcast will also be fulfilled, therefore those who find themselves rich in this world ought also share in God's working of raising up the poor.

There will always be those less fortunate than ourselves. S. Luke reminds us it is not enough simply to help the poor when they cross our paths. We must be active in our search to help those less fortunate than ourselves, and to share the little we have, with those who have even less than ourselves.

May S. Luke and all of the Evangelists pray for us now and always. Amen¹.

¹ An address given by Fr Simon Cuff during Evensong and Benediction on the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2014.