

Reflection for 18th October (Luke the Evangelist)

Today we celebrate St Luke as the author of the third Gospel in our Bibles, so this is a time to think especially about his particular contribution to the New Testament. Luke may well have been the only Gospel writer who was not Jewish, and this comes across in the language he uses.

In his account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we find a longer sequence of narratives surrounding the births of both John the Baptist and of Jesus than we find in the other Gospels – those well-known passages that we read in church every year at Christmas. Luke also traces Jesus' descent back to Adam, the first human being, to emphasise that salvation is for everyone.

In St Luke, we find a greater focus on Jesus' concern with women – shown in such stories as Jesus raising the son of the widow of Nain from death out of compassion for her, and in the number of women who followed Jesus and provided for him from their own resources. Luke also gives more prominence to Mary than Matthew does in the events leading up to Jesus' birth.

Luke's style of writing in Greek is distinctive and elegant, and there are times when we can see, even in an English translation, that he has deliberately "smoothed out" the more rough and ready Greek used by Mark. He provides us with passages which became three liturgical hymns – the Magnificat, the Benedictus and the Nunc Dimittis. He also gives us, with the song of the angels at Christmas, the beginning of the Gloria in Excelsis. As a skilled writer, he tells us almost nothing about himself, either in his Gospel or his second book, the Acts of the Apostles.

Luke is, however, remembered as "the beloved physician", and is the patron saint of doctors. He was clearly a significant figure in the early church, and accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys. Although he was not one of the apostles, some have identified him as one of the seventy who were commissioned by Jesus himself, as described in today's Gospel reading.

These seventy were thrown in at the deep end by Jesus, as they went out without even the basic equipment for travelling, "no purse, no bag, no sandals". No doubt they felt very much as Jesus described them, like lambs among wolves. The point of being sent out like this was, you might say, to make them walking advertisements for the truth they were proclaiming. That truth was the presence of the kingdom of God in the world.

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