



LUKE THE OX

Lent Course, St Michael's Cornhill,
 1: 45 pm, Wednesday 16th March 2016
 © The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

The longer you work together with others, the more you get to appreciate them, but also the more you begin to take in their mannerisms. I'm something of a 'people watcher' so I particularly enjoy this – and even – very naughtily – sometimes mimicking just a little! So, two of my colleagues, some years ago now, had little phrases which I knew were meant not exactly to reprimand me, but they were certainly aimed at letting me know that I might not have got things quite right.

So there was Richard and dates. Standing before me he'd fan the dates of his fairly dog-eared diary – this was only on about January 10th; he was not good at taking care of that important volume. Fanning the pages, after I'd suggested a time to meet, he'd respond: 'I think you'll find....', implying that that date and time was already booked for something else. Or again there was Freddie, who was far more precise. After I had set out a case for a particular course of action or new policy, Freddie would respond invariably to me: 'If I may say so, I think....' and I knew I was being corrected, put right.

Now, all the evidence indicates that there was something of this sort in the personality of St. Luke. We can see it from the way he begins his gospel. Luke is the one writer who tells you why he is writing. So let me read you the introductory lines, in the words of the Revised Standard Version:

'Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent *Theophilus*, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.'

It does smack entirely of both 'I think you'll find....' and 'If I may say so....' In other words, Luke knows well the work of other evangelists, but he's clear that they just haven't got it right. It is 'an *orderly* account' that he will write. Presumably that implies that those who have gone before need some correction. It's undoubtedly a pre-emptively pompous start. But lest you should think I'm down on Luke, let me correct that perception. Alongside both Mark and Matthew before him, Luke sets before us the richest of diets in his gospel, albeit differently again from the other two.

Of course, what this ponderous beginning does do is to give us a much more measured introduction, and even some reasoning behind why Luke feels he needs to offer another angle. Mark does no such thing – the gospel just starts abruptly and Jesus rockets on to the scene. Matthew does

take us in more gently, with his genealogy and the birth stories, but the reasoning behind his approach is implicit whereas Luke's intentions are explicit. What new materials did Luke have before him?

Well, assuming that Luke was gospel number three, he had both Mark and Matthew as background material. But also, as with his two predecessors, presumably there was still there in the oral tradition, in tales told, liturgies performed and sometimes preached -more material still. So, my assumption – which is not everybody's – is that Luke, like Matthew, used Mark as the skeleton, the framework for his gospel. Mark was the map, the sketch, the outline that gave the structure.

But then, alongside Mark, Luke also had Matthew with a wealth of new material – parables, healings, large slabs of teaching – additional material right, left and centre. All this also lay against a background of the *story* of Jesus and the *impact* of Jesus being told still again and again – by word of mouth. None of this need surprise us. When I was a very young lad, my maternal grandmother, who lived with us, would tell us of her youth and childhood in Pimlico, then a pretty poor part of London. She's been to school at St. Gabriel's, attached to that famous Anglo-Catholic church. The stories were legion and mixed up in them was the fairly simply faith that she'd drunk in from her youth. She told the gospel in her way and with her additions!

So Luke has all of these resources to hand, but he's clear that so far no-one's done a really good job of it. So what will have directed his purpose? Well, first of all, he was the most cosmopolitan, the most imperially fashioned of the three so-called *synoptic* evangelists. Matthew, Mark and Luke are named the *synoptic gospels* because you can place them alongside each other in a synopsis, a book of parallels, and there you see large tracts that are shared by all these.

But Luke's more Roman feel means that he's more *urban* and more *urbane*, more imperial in his perception and more resigned to the Roman presence. Let's look at just one or two clues. Early on in Mark's gospel, we read the account of people bringing a paralysed man to Jesus to be healed. The crowds are so great that they cannot get him in so they lower the paralytic through the roof. Mark tells us that they 'dug out' the roof. It was a humble Palestinian house with an earth/clay roof. Luke tells the very same tale in chapter five of his gospel, but he's clear that Mark's account is far too folksy. Who digs out roofs? So Luke writes: 'They took out the tiles from the roof and lowered the man.'

So, the setting for Luke is that of a city re-styled in the urban patterns of a developed Roman colony. But it's not just geography and architecture that influences Luke's account, history too needs to fashion the account within the universality of the Roman imperium, the Pax Romana. So first the local tenant governor makes an appearance: 'In the days of Herod, King of Judaea ...' But then after that, following the annunciation to Mary, we read: 'In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world shall be taxed, or enrolled.' [It appears to have been a census]...'This was the first enrolment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.' Later still, when Jesus comes for baptism and is taken to John, we read of the setting in still greater detail: 'In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother, Philip, tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias, tetrarch of Abilene...'

Now we see what Luke means by setting out an *orderly* account. Some of these historical facts we now know are a little awry, but that's not the point. Luke's aim is to show the *cosmic* significance of Jesus. These events are not simply a matter of encouragement to an insecure and tortured community as in Mark. These events are not for the interest of an obscure Jewish sect now paying allegiance to the Lord God in Jesus – as in Matthew. No, these events are placed upon the wider canvas of the ancient world. Jesus is God incarnate, and his birth, ministry, passion, death and resurrection have a revolutionary impact upon the entire known world. All of these world figures – from Caesar downwards – set the scene for this new salvation.

This extraordinary and revolutionary transformation of the world is, however, not some dry legislative shift in the government of the empire. This revolution is not simply about the Jewish law and how it has been radically renewed. This set of changes – alters the very fabric of our being, it re-humanises our existence. It tells of a God who is caught up in every facet of our lives and whose love and care fashions how we are called to relate to each other. For Luke, the poor and outcast now gain equal prominence with the rich and powerful. Perhaps most revolutionary of all, in that patriarchal

society, Luke makes women visible. In both his gospel and in its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles, women feature time and again.

Let's look at just one example of how this affects Luke's fashioning of the narrative. I'll take but one story which in this case appears in all four gospels, but is described in Luke with an emotional power unsurpassed perhaps anywhere in the New Testament. Here it is, again in the Revised Standard Version:

'One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that Jesus was sitting at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him, at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who invited Jesus saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of a woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering, said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "What is it, teacher?" "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then turning towards the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little loves little." And Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

Now I have told the story in its fullness since it touches so many chords. Pre-eminently it tells of God's extraordinary compassion and generosity lived out in Jesus. Judgment is replaced with mercy, a mercy which in itself prompts and completes repentance. There we see the depth of the woman's vulnerability. As the newspapers used to say: 'All human life is there.' In *Superstar* Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Webber portrayed Jesus with real emotion; they even included in Mary Magdalene an element of the *erotic* for which, from time to time, they were criticised. But it was for many a welcome recapturing of the range of human emotion. Luke's worldliness, if you like, makes the gospel a more human story. We feel the sense of grace and mercy – but also the sense of tragedy – including in the passion, played out in Luke as nowhere else.

Luke's Jesus also is still richer than the others, in his series of narrative parables which again display the generosity of God, and the love called out of us all in the life and ministry, passion and death of Jesus. Luke's gospel, rather like the novels of Graham Greene is the gospel of the unlikely hero. In *The Power and The Glory*, it is the whisky priest in that Latin American republic who is the bearer of Christ's compassion. In *An Honorary Consul*, it is the debauched and corrupt part-time diplomat who ultimately delivers the goods of God's generous mercy. In *A Burnt-Out Case*, it is the architect who appears to have lost his faith who outshines the religious in their monastery who are consumed with over much self-righteousness and sanctimonious attitudes.

So too in Luke. Remember the Good Samaritan. Passing down the road are all the professionally religious, the classically orthodox – there's the priest, the Levite and so on. But it is the Samaritan, despised, even hated by many in the religious establishment, who comes to help. Then there's the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. I'll never forget that story as I recall a clergy conference when I was a young priest. In the final eucharist, the penitential rite was an acted parable. Instead of using a standard confession, one priest stood up and said: 'I am glad I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even like that tax collector.' Then another priest hesitantly stood and said simply: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'. Another stood and said the same, then others, until the entire gathering murmured the same 'God have mercy on me a sinner', at which point the bishop stood in our midst and pronounced the absolution.' It was very powerful indeed.

But perhaps the most moving of all is the story of the prodigal son, or perhaps better labelled, the *forgiving father*. It is the dénouement which catches you every time. You all know the story off by heart. A friend of mine, now a most venerable Franciscan friar always says he cannot hear the story without weeping. Here's a reminder:

‘But while he was still at a distance, his father saw the young son and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son,” But the father said to his servants: ‘ Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’

The echoes and resonances are legion. We can all empathise with the older son and his irritation but hopefully not with his bitterness. For this is all free grace and mercy. Every one of these parables is in Luke's gospel alone. As with the story of the woman anointing Jesus' feet they capture perfectly the picture of Jesus which lies at the heart of Luke's Gospel. Such is his ability to capture Jesus' humanity that we too can believe that we share that same humanity that God deigns to enter in Jesus. On the cross, Jesus turns to the robber hanging beside him and declares: ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

So, then, we reach the conclusion of the gospel as narrated by Luke. The passion is told with Luke's consistent emotional depth. It is a human tragedy, except that God himself is on the cross. Then to the resurrection, the sequel. Here there's no chance of us being left in that extraordinary mysterious uncertainty of Mark. Here there can be no abrupt ending. But here too Luke has no time for a didactic conclusion with Jesus standing on a mountain dictating to his followers the rules for missionary endeavour. Instead we are taken back into Christ's company, both immediately before he's taken from the disciples, but perhaps most memorably of all in another beautiful piece of narrative as the disciples talk with Jesus on the Emmaus road and then recognise him in what is clearly the eucharist: ‘Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?’ ’