

There is nothing in St Mark or St Matthew's gospels that could be called *literary style*. But we discover exquisite writing in St Luke's:

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou has prepared before the face of all people to be a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent...

This man went unto Pilate and begged the body of Jesus. And he took it down and wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a sepulchre that was hewn in stone wherein never man before was laid.

So what do we know about the author of the gospel which has St Luke's name on it? There is an early 2nd century manuscript called *The Anti-Marcionite Prologue* which says:

Luke is a Syrian of Antioch, a doctor by profession, who was a disciple of the apostles and later followed St Paul until his martyrdom. He served the Lord without distraction, unmarried, childless, and fell asleep at the age of eighty-four in Boeotia, full of the Holy Spirit.

When we say he was a doctor, we mustn't think of gentlemanly GP with his surgery in a nice part of town. Under Roman rule, doctors were slaves, sent for training by rich families to learn to look after them and their close relations and friends.

We know that St Luke went with St Paul on one of his missionary journeys. He wrote about this memorably and set it down in his other book which we know as *The Acts of the Apostles* – in which he describes a storm at sea and how they were

shipwrecked. This lesson is read here at the Annual Service of the Honourable Company of master Mariners and it is utterly brilliant: you sit there, feeling the wind and the waves, feeling definitely queasy:

Then, fearing lest we should have fallen among rocks, they cast four anchors out of the stern and wished for the day...and when they had taken up the anchors, they committed themselves unto the sea and loosed the rudder bands, and hoisted up the mainsail to the wind and made toward shore...

St Luke was the companion, friend and doctor to St Paul. He attends St Paul in prison in Rome under Nero's persecution. St Paul expresses his affection for him in his *Epistle to the Colossians*:

Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you...

And again in his *Second Letter to Timothy* St Paul, again from jail, says:

Only Luke is with me.

St Matthew and St Mark's gospels are material for reading aloud in church services in private houses under persecution. St Luke's gospel is much more like our modern notion of a book. It has the author's name on it and it is addressed to a reader. The language is magnificent:

It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightiest know the certainty of those things wherein thou hast been instructed.

Theophilus was perhaps some high-ranking official. He also represents that most modern thing, the general reader. *Theophilus* means *one who is loved by God*. . This means everyone. St Luke's Gospel is addressed to the world.

What then are the contents and characteristics of St Luke's Gospel? It is St Luke alone among the gospel-writers who mentions the census:

And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed...

St Luke does not have the wise men, but the shepherds instead. The Annunciation is not, as in St Matthew, to Joseph, but to Mary who answers it sublimely:

Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

St Luke alone has the story of the twelve year old Jesus in the Temple with the Chief Priests and Doctors of the Law: *Both hearing them and asking them questions.*

St Luke gives us two original stories: The Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. It is Luke alone who gives us the penitent thief of the cross and Christ's infinitely tender love for him:

Lord, remember me, when thou comest into thy kingdom! And Jesus said unto him, verily, I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise.

St Luke is extremely compassionate towards human suffering. Where St Matthew says, *Blessed are the poor in spirit*, St Luke says simply, *Blessed are the poor.*

He can write high rhetoric, exquisite poetry and realistic dialogue. Everything is loaded with tenderness, love and compassion, a direct and profound sympathy with the human condition, an utterly undeceived understanding of human frailty and of the limitless mercy of God in Christ. All this comes together in verses such as:

And he turned to the woman and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet.

St Luke's Gospel is the great love story in which Christ is the lover and we poor sinners, perverse, inadequate and pathetic, are the beloved.

But St Luke has no illusions. Christ the lover is also Christ the judge. And he provokes violence and division:

I am come to send fire on the earth: and what will I if it be already kindled? Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay, but rather division: for from henceforth there shall be five in one house divided three against two, and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother; the mother-in-law against her daughter and the daughter-in-law against her mother...

There is an arrogant and barmy idea that scepticism about miracles and the resurrection is a modern thing. The modern mind regards itself as liberated from the primitive superstitions of earlier ages. The modern mind thinks that people were stupid just because they lived a long time ago. St Luke shows that scepticism and unbelief was just as rife in New Testament times as it is today. Remember that walk to Emmaus on the first Easter Day, all in the April evening. Here are the mocking, sceptical disciples:

Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished which were early at the sepulchre. And when they found not his body, they came also saying that they had seen a vision of angels which said that he was alive... and their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not.

Now who was St Luke? There is a tradition that he a friend of Joseph and Mary, and there is a lot to be said for this. For it is Luke alone among the gospel-writers who tells the intimate story of the Annunciation in detail and from Mary's point of view. And of Elizabeth and Zacharias and the infant John the Baptist and of Simeon. Of the boy Jesus in the temple. There is a legend that Luke painted a picture of the Holy Family. St Luke's symbol is an ox. And in the Middle Ages the oxen were given the day of on St Luke's Day. The rhyme has it:

On St Luke's Day the oxen do play...

All four gospels are glorious in their own way, but St Luke's is the most human and humane, the most intimate: the language is ravishing. I can read it only in small doses. When you feel cast down, anxious, fearful, sceptical and uncertain of God's love, turn to St Luke's Gospel and read a few verses. And the love of God

comes rushing in like the warm west wind. He achieves so much, but I will end with what I think is the pinnacle of his achievement.

St Luke features women prominently throughout his gospel. He makes women the witnesses to the resurrection. Now, in those times in the Middle East the witness of women counted for next to nothing. In fact, if someone cited the evidence of women, it was regarded as a reason for not believing whatever they asserted.

The resurrection took place let's say about AD 33. St Luke's Gospel appeared about AD 85. So that gave him fifty years – plenty of time to rub out the unbelievable evidence of the women at the tomb and make the witnesses to the resurrection some stout and reliable chaps. But St Luke doesn't. He leaves the women as the first witnesses. This is counter-cultural, counter-intuitive. He must have left the women as the first witnesses because he knew this was the truth:

And the women also...were afraid and bowed down their faces to the earth...two men stood by them in shining garments and said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, he is risen...