

**St Luke the Evangelist – Acts 16: 6-12 Luke 10: 1-9**  
**A Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton for Sunday 18/10/20**

According to the Wikipedia, St Luke is patron saint of artists, physicians, bachelors, surgeons, students and butchers. The only Biblical basis for any of these is in Colossians 4: 14 where St Paul refers to 'Luke the beloved physician', which gives us, 'doctor Luke'. It's no bad thing, on St Luke's Day, to be reminded to pray for the medical profession, in which we include surgeons, but whether we extend this to butchers I'll leave you to decide.

Luke's association with art first appeared in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. In the tradition of the Orthodox Churches, Luke the artist is supposed to have painted the first Madonna and Child, the infant Christ on his mother's knee. The now lost work called the *Hodegetria*, was for centuries on view in Constantinople. Icons since then follow the same tradition.

It is as Evangelist – that is, writer of the Evangel, the Good News or Gospel – that we remember Luke today (not forgetting his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, narrating how the Good News was taken into the wider world after Jesus returned to heaven). For me, one of the most helpful approaches to Bible study is to look for the distinguishing features of each of the four Gospels, not seeing these as disagreements, but rather each writer calling attention to their own interests. And to help me remember their distinctiveness, I like to think of the four traditional emblems of the Evangelists. You often see them in stained glass windows or in illustrated Bibles like the Lindisfarne Gospels – the man for Matthew, Mark's lion, Luke's ox and John's eagle. Now, I admit I find the ox less helpful than, say, the bounding lion of Mark (whose Gospel runs at breathless pace) or the soaring eagle of John (a Gospel of vision and insight beyond any other).

The ox is often said to be associated with sacrifice, pointing to Christ's death. But, to my mind, Luke's Gospel does not make more of Christ's sacrificial death than the other three. More helpful is to remember the ox as a beast of burden, pulling the plough through the fields, creating orderly rows for sowing seed. For Luke makes the point right from the start that his will be an orderly account to give certainty to things passed down by word of mouth. He presents himself as a historian, not an eye-witness. He has heard and read many accounts of the extraordinary life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His job is to check them out, test their reliability, and make a clear narrative whole. His hand as compiler and editor may well be apparent. We trust that God the Holy Spirit has guided that hand in the writing, and will guide us as we read.

So, what is distinctive about Luke's Gospel? Many of the best-known Bible stories only appear in Luke – someone calculated it as 6 miracles and 18 parables are 'his' alone. The Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, for example, only appear in this Gospel. If it wasn't for Luke, we wouldn't have most of the Christmas story, nor would we have the Emmaus Road at the Resurrection. Luke's selection of material suggests a big vision of what the Good News is all about. Just think, right near the beginning, Mary's Song (the Magnificat) gives the promise of rulers downed and the poor and humble raised high. Think of Jesus in

the synagogue at Nazareth spelling out his programme by quoting Isaiah: good news for the poor, liberation for the captive, sight to the blind. Luke draws attention to meeting material needs. Whereas in Matthew Jesus says 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', in Luke it's simply 'Blessed are the poor.' It's often noted Luke makes a point of including women in his account, from the Annunciation to Mary, and her subsequent visit to Elizabeth, to the wailing of the 'women of Jerusalem' as Jesus carried his cross through the streets. Luke also shows particular interest in prayer ('While he was praying...' is regularly slipped into Luke's account) and in the Holy Spirit, which becomes a dominant theme in volume two, the Acts of the Apostles, where the Holy Spirit really takes charge, and the narrative goes forward, not with the plodding gate of the ox, but with wind and fire.

Today's short extract from Acts gives one of these great leaps forward. We may find the place names a struggle, but they tell something very significant. This is the moment the Gospel jumps from Asia and enters Europe for the first time. I've been re-watching some of Michael Palin's early adventures – Round the World and Pole to Pole – and each time he enters a new continent there's a sense of excitement and of trepidation: each continent has its own reputation: will experience live up to it? You feel it's a bit the same for Paul and his companions.

It hadn't crossed their minds to depart from the Middle East. There were still so many un-evangelised towns and cities. But in Acts Luke records that it was the Holy Spirit that stopped them entering other provinces. I remember someone from the Church Missionary Society speaking on that verse, and saying we know all about that. It means they couldn't get the visa! Today's missionaries, as in New Testament times, know that God the Holy Spirit uses all sorts of blockages and stoppages that frustrate us enormously, to open up new possibilities we've never even imagined. Thwarted vocation is really tough to take, but I do find here encouragement: God can do something bigger!

The Gospel reading is about more localised mission – Jesus sending out the 72 in pairs (or possibly couples, husband and wife together; that would help them relate with the households they'd go to). They have to travel light, being ready to adapt (something we have to keep learning). Listen to the message Jesus tells them to take: 'Peace to this house.' They're tasked to come with blessing. Peace, or 'shalom' is not simply absence of conflict (although there's plenty of conflict that needs pacifying in many homes) but is about healing and wholeness, renewal and flourishing. Luke the physician picks up the significance. The Good News is not so much about winning converts but converting lives with the power of God's love, meeting people at whatever point they most need it and offering transformation.

Patron saint of artists, doctors and a whole lot else, Luke's true contribution is as Evangelist, writer of the Gospel, sharer of the good news, and communicator of a vision of God's reign in human lives and society. His work is worth reading time and again. The Good News that inspired him is what the world so desperately needs today. Let us be ready to share it too.