

The Gospel of Luke

A sermon preached at Christ Church, Chelsea, 27 January 2013.

There's one difference between the Gospels that anyone can see quite easily without even reading very much of them: each of them starts in a quite different way. And you can tell quite a lot about a Gospel by thinking a bit about how it begins. In Luke's case, the Gospel starts with a dedication and a preface. That immediately makes it look a lot more like a work of Greek literature than the other Gospels do. And that, I'm sure, was Luke's intention. He's a man who knows, not just Jewish literature, but the wider cultural world of his day, and he wants to place his work on a higher literary level than, say, Mark's Gospel. Of the four Gospel writers, Luke writes much the most accomplished Greek. He dedicates his work to a man called Theophilus, evidently a man of some social importance, and probably his idea is that Theophilus will not just read it himself, but promote it. Theophilus would probably hold a book launch: he would invite some of his friends to dinner and give the Gospel a first reading.

Luke's preface is the sort of preface a historian in Luke's day would have written. It talks about his sources and how he went about using them. Like other ancient historians, the sources he really valued were eyewitnesses: those, he says, who were 'eyewitnesses from the beginning', people who had been disciples of Jesus from early on in his ministry. He claims to have investigated everything carefully – which suggests he may have actually interviewed disciples of Jesus – and he compiled his sources into what he calls an 'orderly account' of the events. This is what a good historian was supposed to do.

So he was clearly not a disciple of Jesus himself, but someone who had good access to eyewitness sources. Traditionally he has been identified with the Luke who was a companion of Paul and I think there's a lot to be said for that view. It would mean he would have travelled around the eastern Mediterranean with Paul, spent quite a lot of time in Jerusalem, and accompanied Paul to Rome, at a time when lots of people who had known Jesus were around. If Luke was already planning to write a Gospel he would have had a lot of opportunities to gather material. He did use at least one, very important written source, which was Mark's Gospel. Whenever you find that Luke tells a story you can also read in Mark, that's because he got it from Mark, though he has often abbreviated Mark's version and rewritten it a bit. About a third of Luke's content has come from Mark.

Luke, I'm sure, knew that Mark's Gospel embodied Peter's accounts of Jesus and he would have valued it highly for that reason. But Mark's Gospel was also particularly useful to Luke for another reason. It was probably the only source from which he could get an overall narrative framework, a consecutive story running from the preaching of John the Baptist through the course of Jesus' ministry up to his death and then his resurrection. His other sources gave him parables of Jesus, other sayings of Jesus, stories about Jesus, but they didn't give him a connected story. So what Luke has done is: he's taken over Mark's

narrative as an overall framework for his Gospel story and placed the rest of his material, 70% of his Gospel, at appropriate places in Mark's narrative framework. Where did the rest of Luke's material come from? I suspect it came from a number of different sources (not just two, as a lot of scholars suggest). These may well have included some of the women disciples of Jesus (Luke is the only Gospel writer to make it clear that Jesus had women disciples who travelled around with him all the time and two of those he names are only in Luke). In general what Luke is trying to do is to write a much more comprehensive Gospel than Mark's, a considerably longer work than Mark's, drawing together material from written and oral sources, and especially including a whole lot more of Jesus' teaching than Mark had done.

So, for example, it's to Luke that we owe many of the most memorable parables of Jesus: the Prodigal Son is only in Luke's Gospel, the Good Samaritan is only in Luke, the Pharisee and the Taxcollector is only in Luke, the Rich Man and Lazarus is only in Luke, the Rich Fool is only in Luke, and there are quite a few others.

Well, I've said that Luke presented his work as history and went about it in the way that historians of his time would have done, but of course it is very special history: it's Gospel. It's the story (to put it in a Lukan way) of how God visited his people Israel, fulfilling what the prophets had hoped for, providing for them a Saviour who was also the Saviour for all the nations. People have often thought of Luke's Gospel as a Gentile Gospel, in contrast to, say, Matthew's much more Jewish Gospel. Now it's probably true that Luke is the only major New Testament author who was not himself Jewish. But if Luke was not born Jewish, he had certainly immersed himself deeply in the Hebrew Bible and the traditions of Judaism. His story starts in the Temple in Jerusalem and the story he tells in the Gospel actually also ends in the Temple in Jerusalem, though of course, in his second volume, the Acts, he tells how early Christianity spread from Jerusalem to the rest of the Roman world. In Luke's story of Jesus he makes it very clear that Jesus lives out the plan of God for him that God had already set out in the Jewish scriptures. The continuity of Jesus with the Old Testament is very important for Luke, but of course that is not at all in contradiction to the fact that Luke's Gospel, his good news, is for non-Jews as well as for Jews, because that is what the prophets of Israel themselves had expected. As aged Simeon, who's been waiting all his life for the Messiah to come, says when Joseph and Mary bring Jesus to the Temple: Jesus is 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

Here's something people don't often notice about Luke: he has an enormous cast of characters. There are over a hundred individuals who appear in Luke's Gospel – and I'm not counting indefinite groups of people like 'some Pharisees' or 'the chief priests' or 'all the tax collectors' and I'm not counting the seventy disciples of Jesus who appear as a group only in Luke. None of the other Gospels have as many characters as Luke. In Luke Jesus is always surrounded by crowds of disciples (far more than just the Twelve) and crowds of people who come for healing or to hear him. But he's also constantly meeting individuals: he heals them or they become his disciples or they ask him questions or give him hospitality or become his enemies. They include top people like the Herods (it's

only in Luke that Jesus actually meets Herod the tetrarch), the high priests, aristocrats like Joanna, Pharisees (not all of them hostile), Roman centurions. The crowds and Jesus' disciples are mostly of the common people: farmers and fishermen. But disproportionately numerous among the individuals who meet Jesus are two sorts of people who would never figure at all in stories that were not about Jesus. One of these categories are the people the Gospels call 'the poor' – which doesn't mean ordinary people living at subsistence level; it means the destitute, people with no secure means of support. Disabled people usually had to live by begging. Widows often had few means of support. And as well as the poor there were the outcasts: people excluded from society like the lepers and the demon-possessed, people who regarded as notorious sinners like the taxcollectors and the prostitutes, people despised by the Jews, like Samaritans.

So Luke's Jesus mixes with everybody, right across the social world of his day, women as well as men, but he seems to go out of his way to reach out to those who were left aside, who for one reason or another found themselves on the margins of society, and even in many cases were excluded from the presence of God in the Temple. This is the case in all the Gospels, but it's especially clear in Luke, and that's partly because Luke draws attention to it in the passage that was our Gospel reading today. Jesus goes back to the synagogue in Nazareth, and it's only Luke who makes this the first story he tells about Jesus' ministry. For Luke this is programmatic for what Jesus is about in his ministry. He reads from the prophet Isaiah:

the Spirit of the Lord has anointed me
(that means God has appointed me as the Messiah)
to bring good news (Gospel) to the poor.
He has sent me to bring release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
and to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Jesus reads that passage, and he says: This is being fulfilled now before you as I speak. That's what I'm doing, that's my mission.

So Jesus' Gospel, Luke's Gospel is good news for the poor and the outcasts. It's good news for everyone, of course, but it's only good news for everyone else if they really take on board that it's good news for the poor and the outcasts. Pharisees who complain that Jesus mixes with taxcollectors and sinners cannot hear the good news for themselves until they hear it for taxcollectors and sinners.

Finally, there's something else that Luke makes a special point of saying about the Gospel. You'll remember it, I'm sure, because it's in Luke's Christmas story. When the angel announces the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, he says: I am bringing you good news (Gospel) of great joy for all the people. There's more joy in Luke's Gospel than any of the others. The Gospel brings joy especially because, to put it in a way that Luke is very fond of, the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost. Luke has that set of three lovely parables about the finding of the lost: the shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep, the woman who searches for her lost coin, and the father whose lost son returns. In each case the story

ends with a party. The shepherd asks everyone to come and rejoice with him. So does the woman when she finds her coin. And the father says they must celebrate and rejoice, because the son he had lost has been found. All that joy in the parables represents, says Jesus, not only joy on earth but joy in heaven. God and his angels rejoice more over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who do not need to repent. There's also a lot of pain in Luke's Gospel: not only must Jesus die but his disciples, he tells them, have to take up their cross daily and follow him on his way to the cross. I haven't time to take up that theme. But in the end, beyond the pain, it's a Gospel of joy. Luke's last sentence portrays the disciples after Jesus has ascended to heaven: they 'returned to Jerusalem with great joy and they were continually in the Temple blessing God.'