

Luke: The Gospel of Compromise?

Luke, I should say, is the most Anglican of the evangelists. 'The gentleman evangelist' Austin Farrer called him. An establishment man, a middle class professional, probably a doctor.

It is Paul who refers to Luke as 'the beloved physician' in Colossians, as we heard in tonight's second lesson – though to my mind the strongest evidence for this is in Luke's version of the story of Jesus healing the woman with a haemorrhage. Not only does Luke use more medical vocabulary than Mark and Matthew, but whereas Mark and Matthew mention that the poor woman had used up all her money on loads of useless doctors, Luke very noticeably leaves that bit out.

Luke was well educated. He writes the best Greek in the New Testament; he is cultured, cosmopolitan, and familiar with the powers that be. The Gospel and the Book of Acts are addressed to *kratiste Theophile* – your Excellency Theophilus – evidently a high-up imperial official whom Luke addresses at his own level. So literally an establishment man - one of the main reasons Luke wrote was to get the Church established as a friend of the state, not a threat.

All through the Gospel and Acts Luke bends over backwards to show the Roman Empire in the most positive light possible. Pilate, the Roman Governor who was clearly responsible for killing Jesus, is almost completely whitewashed, and the blame shifted squarely to the Jews (though unlike Matthew and John, but like Paul, Luke leaves room for the ultimate inclusion of Jews in salvation). Paul, especially after he declares himself to be a Roman citizen, is shown being treated by the Roman civic and legal authorities with meticulous fairness. When Jesus dies, it's a Roman centurion who declares him innocent.

By the time Luke was writing – probably around 90 AD – the expectation that Jesus would come back had faded, and the Church was adapting itself to being an institution in the world. You can see signs of this adaptation all through Luke's writing. For example, in all three synoptic gospels, when Jesus first sends out his disciples he tells them, 'Don't take a purse, nor a bag, nor sandals'. In other words, don't rely on human support; be radically poor; be radically dependent on God. But at the end of Luke's Gospel, and only in Luke's Gospel, that command is actually reversed. In Luke's version of the Last Supper, Jesus says to the disciples: 'Now then. You remember I

said at the start, 'Don't take a purse or a bag or a tunic? Well, now I'm telling you, take a purse and a bag and a cloak and a sword as well'. Luke's Jesus seems to be saying: You are about to go out on your own into the real world now, and you have to survive. Hold on to your ideals, yes. But also be realistic. You're going to have to compromise. Being radically poor and being radically pacifist won't work. So take a purse. You'll need to deal with money. Take a sword. You'll have to deal with violence. You'll have to get your hands dirty.

Or take another story that again you only find in Luke, the parable of the Dishonest Steward. He is the one who fiddles the books when he loses his job, so that can get in with his master's creditors by cutting the amount they owe. The steward is dishonest, and yet at the end of the story the master praises him, because he's been shrewd, and realistic. The punchline is, 'Make friends with unrighteous Mammon while you are on earth, so that in the end they will let you into heaven'. In other words the moral is, if you can call it a moral: yes, money is dirty stuff, it is 'unrighteous'; but in this life you can't avoid dealing with it. So use it for a good purpose, even if to some degree you are bound to be tainted with it.

I don't mean – let me emphasise – that Luke has simply lost or softened the radical ideal. It is, after all, Luke who gives us the Magnificat, which says that God will put down the mighty and exalt the humble, feed the hungry and send the rich empty away. It's Luke's Jesus who says 'Blessed are the poor' (not 'blessed are the poor in spirit', as in Matthew's version, but blessed are the poor, full stop) and Luke adds for good measure 'Woe to you who are rich'. It is Luke who gives us the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, with its plain threat that the rich are going to hell. And it's Luke who tells us in Acts that the early church was a communist institution, holding all things in common; and he reinforces it with the bracing story of Ananias and Sapphira who are struck dead on the spot when they try to keep some money for themselves.

Luke isn't just radical about money either. He is radically inclusive too. He is much more pro-women than the other Gospels. It's Luke who gives us the story of Mary and Martha, with its inescapable conclusion that a woman's place is not in the kitchen but doing theology. Luke's stories about Gentiles and Samaritans attack Jewish racial and religious prejudices, and he carefully omits the remarks that Jesus makes in the other Gospels about Gentile 'dogs'. Luke is even arguably pro-gay, especially in the story of the

centurion and his beloved servant, who, at that time and in that context, would probably have been taken to be lovers.

So if you want inclusion and political correctness – economic, racial, religious and sexual - Luke is your man.

And yet, for all this radical, right-on stuff, you can feel the strain of Luke having to face facts. He has to get Theophilus and the powers that be on his side. This radical Gospel can only be spread by an institutional Church, and the two don't go happily together. How can you have poverty and a purse? How can you be a pacifist with a sword? Luke seems to me a bit like the ageing hippy who at last has to come to terms with a job and a semi-detached and a pension. Or like the radical slum priest who's eventually neutralised with a cathedral canonry. Luke is a Tony Benn turning into a Tony Blair.

St Luke, I suspect, was anguished about these things, and funnily enough, the tension seems to continue to the end, because there are two traditions about his death which seem to reflect the two sides of him. One tradition says that Luke died peacefully, unmarried, at a ripe old age at the seaside – which makes him sound like a comfortable clerical bachelor in Brighton. But the other tradition says he was beheaded as a martyr when persecution flared up again under Domitian. That of course would be better, because it would show that Luke never did really lose his principles, and was willing to stick his neck out when the crunch came. But, alas, we'll never know which is true.

Meanwhile we have to get on with the same dilemma ourselves. Which bit of Luke are we most like? The radical Christian wanting to change the world, putting down the mighty from thrones, championing the poor and the people on the margins? Or the conventional, establishment Christian, cheerfully compromising with the status quo?

Perhaps like Luke we are a bit of both. But which will we be when the crunch comes for us?