

# LUKE

Henry Wansbrough

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

A devotional commentary for study and preaching

## PREFACE

Each of us has a favourite Gospel. Mine varies—now one, now another. St Augustine was right when he said that looking at Jesus through the Gospels is like looking through a prism: you need all four individual angles to gain an adequate picture. Two of the ways in which Luke looks at the Good News of Christ are especially important to me.

For Luke Jesus is the Saviour. Yes, of course, Jesus saves in all the Gospels; the very name 'Jesus' means 'Saviour'. But it is only in Luke that he is called the Saviour, and that from the very beginning. The angels at Bethlehem bring this news of great joy: 'To you is born this day a Saviour who is Christ the Lord' (see Luke 2:11). In the temple the aged Simeon echoes them, 'My eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every nation' (see v. 30). At the end, too, the passion and death of Jesus are scenes of healing, forgiveness and salvation. Jesus heals the ear of the high priest's servant. He forgives those who are nailing him to the cross. He welcomes the penitent thief into paradise, and all depart from the scene beating their breasts. Throughout the Gospel Jesus not merely accepts sinners and forgives the penitent; he goes out to find them. He calls that inquisitive crook Zacchaeus down from his sycamore tree in Jericho to be a disciple. In the parables there is joy in heaven when the man searches and finds the sheep he has lost, and the woman the coin she has lost, not to mention the wholesale celebration when the father finds the prodigal son he has lost. For the great feast the Master positively forces and squeezes the guests into his banquet.

The other aspect is the ever-present Spirit. Luke had experienced the Spirit at work in the churches of Paul, the Spirit-filled chaos at Corinth. In his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke describes the Spirit active in the earliest days of the Christian movement, guiding and gently coaxing the enthusiastic followers in the right direction. Shining his light further back he shows us the Spirit again at beginning and end of Jesus' own story. The whole explosion is ignited when the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary and the power of the Most High covers her with its shadow. Jesus is filled with the Spirit when he goes out into the desert to ponder his mission and confront his demons. When he sets out his programme in the synagogue at Nazareth, the Spirit of the Lord is upon him. When the risen

Christ finally departs from his bewildered followers, he sends them back into Jerusalem to await the signal for the start of their own mission, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Luke reassures us of the presence of the Spirit in Christ's Church to this day.

You must experience the Good News of Luke for yourself, and I pray that these pages may help you to appreciate and love it.

*Dom Henry Wansbrough OSB*

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## LUKE: INTRODUCTION

The evangelist Luke wrote nearly a quarter of the New Testament—one of the longest of the Gospels and its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles. So on any count he is an important witness to the Christian message and to its development in the early Church. Some scholars think he was responsible also for adding touches to other writings of the New Testament. Who was this important writer? There is no suggestion that he was one of the Twelve, the original companions chosen by Jesus, or indeed that he knew Jesus during his lifetime; but tradition has it that he accompanied Paul on some of his journeys, for certain passages in the Acts are written in the first person plural: ‘we travelled... , we embarked...’ Tradition also holds that Paul mentioned this Luke, ‘the beloved physician’, as his only faithful companion in prison (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11). ‘Luke’ is, of course, one form of ‘Lucius’, a very common name in the Roman world. So to know that the author was called Luke does not of itself tell us very much.

### Luke’s world

More important than knowing the identity of the author in the sense of ‘Luke Who?’ is to know that he received the apostolic tradition about Jesus from the early communities. Not himself an eyewitness of the life of Jesus, he listened to the reports handed down in the Christian communities about the Master. He stresses that he did his research among the previous accounts of the good news. He obviously drew heavily on Mark, the first Gospel to be written, and on another source, either Matthew or a collection of the sayings of the Lord commonly known as Q, and now lost. He also had his own sources, on which he drew for such events as the stories of Jesus’ infancy, or the appearances after the resurrection, and especially the parables. The language of these is so thoroughly Lukan that they are most likely to have been received by him in oral form; he was the first to commit them to paper. He himself was thoroughly familiar with Judaism, but he does not expect his readers to know the Jewish tradition too well. From the way he writes, it is clear that he moved in a more sophisticated society than Mark, and a more gentile society than the very Jewish Matthew. His courtly vocabulary and style (from ‘Theophilus, your Excellency’ onwards) places him within literary

circles. The subtlety and wit of his writing suggest an educated background. The ease with which he handles financial and economic affairs similarly places him in moderately affluent society. It is all the more remarkable that Luke misses no opportunity to underline the responsibility and danger of being wealthy, and the need for generosity, and to stress that Jesus came to bring the good news first of all to the marginalized and wretched.

## **Luke the person**

In reading a Gospel it is a joy to get to know the author of the Gospel. It is, after all, through his (unlikely in that day and age to be 'her') eyes that we see Jesus and hear his message. Luke is a gentle and sensitive person, very aware of the importance of little touches of affection. He explains the grief of the widow of Nain by telling us that her son was her only son. When Peter denies Jesus, he is brought to repentance because Jesus just turns silently to look at him. Luke has a gentle wit too, and can quietly make fun of the rich fool in the parable, showing the man's self-importance by his repeatedly talking about himself. The characters in his parables are not like those in Matthew's parables, pure villains or pure heroes; they are mixed characters like the rest of us, with good and bad points, often doing the right thing for the wrong reason, so that we can become quite attached to rascals like the crafty steward or the lazy householder. One thing Luke stresses above all is that we are all sinners, in need of repentance on our part and forgiveness on God's. He portrays with particular tenderness the difference between the proud Pharisee and the humble tax-collector at prayer, and with particular warmth the joy at the repentance of a single sinner, or the delicacy of Jesus' silent welcome for the woman who was a sinner. His word-painting, too, is brilliant, so that the stories of the infancy of John the Baptist and Jesus, before their mission begins, breathe the atmosphere of the Old Testament: we are still living in that world and awaiting the coming of the Spirit at the baptism of Jesus.

## **Four faces of a prism**

One of the most enriching advantages of studying the Gospels is the possibility of seeing Jesus through the eyes of the four different Gospel writers. Each is different, each puts the message differently, each stresses different aspects of Jesus. Down the ages, writers have

likened the aspects portrayed by the four Gospels to four different portraits of the same person. Augustine of Hippo called them four facets of the same prism. They complement one another and, through this interplay, all together add up to a richer and more profound picture of the Master than each separately could provide. From the earliest time they were all accepted by Christians as a valid record of what Jesus did, taught and suffered. Other versions of the Jesus story were rejected by Christians. Such versions have survived in a few copies, or been recently rediscovered in single copies by researchers, after being lost or hidden for centuries. Others presumably—perhaps including some of the accounts mentioned by Luke in his preface—are still lost. Obviously they were not felt by the first Christian generations to render an acceptable or reliable picture of their Lord and Master, or—as other theological traditions have it—to be inspired. The Christian community did not recognize in them the face of Jesus.

### **How to read this book**

Like the other books in this series, this book is not meant to be a technical commentary, discussing the views of scholars, putting forward many possibilities and assessing them all. In most cases I have simply chosen the interpretation which seemed to me best. All reading should, of course, be done with a critical mind, but criticism is not the purpose of this reading. The purpose of reading the Gospel is to come closer to the Lord, the Lord God in the Lord Jesus. I suggest that you read the passage given, slowly and prayerfully, then read the comment (or part of it) till you have enough thoughts for reflection. There is no need to read a whole section at one sitting. If part of a comment provides you with enough material for thought, stop; then start again on another occasion. It may be useful to have a Gospel text beside you, so that you can refer to it while you read the comment. The comment is only a means to an end, and the end is a loving understanding of the Gospel itself. While I have been writing this commentary, Luke has become a gentle friend. Let him lead you to the Lord and Saviour he portrays.

## *The PROLOGUE*

### **The good news of salvation**

There is always an excitement in starting to read a Gospel. This is the good news of salvation! Even those last four familiar words introduce a couple of concepts which seemed special for Luke, ‘good news’ and ‘salvation’.

The Greek word translated ‘good news’ was familiar round the Mediterranean world, which was all part of the Roman empire. The expression was used of special items of good news about the Emperor and his family, such as a victory or the birth of an heir. This ‘good news’ was flashed round the world (it took about four days from Rome to Alexandria by ship), and the different communities sent back congratulatory gifts to the Emperor. Luke does not use the noun ‘good news’, but only the verb ‘proclaim the good news’. This has a link to the fine passage in Isaiah 61, ‘He has sent me to bring the news to the afflicted, to soothe the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives.’ And indeed Luke is always mindful of Jesus’ announcement precisely to such underprivileged people.

### **The preface to the Gospel**

Many short scientific treatises have survived from the first century, works on astronomy, medicine, arms-manufacture, navigation, as well as little historical booklets, of about the same size as Luke’s work. This formal preface—and Luke is the only Gospel to have such a preface—identifies his work as a short scientific monograph. He clearly wants to introduce his two-volume work (the Acts of the Apostles is the second volume) as just such a scientific historical treatise.

Both volumes are addressed to Theophilus, with the complimentary title (‘your Excellency’) which suggests that he was a high-ranking official. This again adds dignity to the work, though we can never know whether Theophilus was a real person. His name means ‘Friend of God’. Whether he was a real person or not, the name suggests the attitude needed for reading the Gospel. It is no use reading the Gospel as simply a scientific or historical work. It must be

approached with prayer and openness to God, a willingness to listen to a friend, to accept the message and respond to it.

## **Luke the historian**

Luke stresses that the teaching he conveys is ‘well-founded’ or ‘safe’. He has checked it carefully with eye-witnesses and ministers of the word. He does not want to leave his readers in any doubt about the reliability of his message. Yet there are ways in which his Gospel differs from the Gospels of Mark and Matthew which came before him. What about these differences? When the evangelists differ from one another, is one right and the other wrong?

Luke certainly rearranges his material to make it an attractive and well-told story. Matthew collected together much of the teaching of Jesus and presents it as the Sermon on the Mount; Jesus is teaching on a mountain, as Moses did, giving his new law as Moses gave the old Law. Luke has a similar collection, but it is a Sermon on the Plain, and much shorter, as though Luke thought there was too much to digest at one sitting. Some of the same sayings of Jesus are placed by Luke in Jesus’ great final journey to Jerusalem. Jesus is going up to Jerusalem to die—as all prophets must die at Jerusalem—and gives much of his most important teaching in the course of that journey.

The Sermon anyway occurs later in Luke. Instead, Luke puts early in Jesus’ ministry the incident when Jesus’ own townfolk try to throw him off the cliff. It looks in Mark and Matthew as though this incident happened later, after the call of the first disciples. But Luke brings it in at the beginning and makes it the occasion when Jesus gives his important opening proclamation, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me’ and he will bring healing not to his own compatriots but to the Gentiles, beyond the frontiers of his people.

## **PRAYER**

*Open my eyes and ears, Lord, to your good news of salvation. Help me to listen to your historian, Luke, as he tells the story of how you save the world through your Son, Jesus Christ.*

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## ZECHARIAH & ELIZABETH

Luke's story begins in Jerusalem, in the temple, and this is no accident. We are being told that God's promises were first and foremost to Israel, and that they were fulfilled in Jesus. So the story starts in an atmosphere of the best piety of the Old Testament. Zechariah was a priest, and his wife too was of the line of Aaron; so they both belonged to the most sacred part of the sacred people. Both, also, were 'upright in the sight of God', observing the Law in all its details.

The Law was no tiresome, restricting force, but a liberating, joyful gift. 'Your Law, O God, is my life,' cries the psalmist so often; 'Your Law is a light to my eyes.' Its detailed prescriptions helped to bring every moment of life into conscious association with the Lord. I remember an Israeli Jew picking me a banana from a tree in the Plain of Sharon. Before he ate his own banana, he blessed God for it, and explained to me the joy of thanking God for even such a little gift. The Law was the proof of God's special love for Israel, God's special closeness to his people that he should want their life to accord with his, their life to be lived according to his principles. It was also the Law which made sure that every individual was kept free to serve God, could stand tall and proud before God, dependent only on God rather than on any human master.

### The temple of Jerusalem

Jerusalem plays an important part in Luke's story. The Gospel begins and ends there. The second half of the Gospel consists of Jesus' great journey to Jerusalem, where he takes possession of the temple and uses it as his own platform for his teaching. It is at Jerusalem that the great events of the Passion are played out, and in Luke's account Jesus appears after his resurrection in and around Jerusalem. The first Christian community, which Luke paints in such inspiring colours in the Acts of the Apostles, is at Jerusalem. It is from Jerusalem that the gospel spreads to the nations.

The centre of Jerusalem was the temple. It was this that made Jerusalem, says the Roman author Pliny, 'far the most distinguished city of the East'. The temple itself was an amazing building, as one can still today guess from the huge esplanade on which it stood, the

size of twelve football fields. There were ten gilded gates, each of which was closed every evening (on rollers) by a team of 20 men. The biggest of the great stones which the disciples admired ('Master, look at the size of these stones!') is the size of a modern motor-coach and weighs 400 tons. Salisbury Cathedral would fit comfortably twice into one of the colonnaded porticoes round the perimeter. It was thronged by Jewish pilgrims who came gratefully from their exile in the Diaspora, especially at the great feasts such as Passover or Pentecost, for this was the place of God's presence on earth, the meeting-place between God and his people, gathered from all over the world. One can understand why love for the temple played such a part in every Jewish heart.

## **Barrenness**

Devoted to the temple and the service of God though they were, this old couple seemed condemned to be childless. God seemed to have neglected their dogged fidelity to him. On every level this was a disaster. No lively family to keep them young. No grandchildren to spoil. No support in old age, in an era when only children could be expected to provide support for the elderly. No hope for the future. And especially for a Jewish couple a full family was (and is) the sign of a special blessing. Most of all in such an age of expectation, no possibility that their child would be the promised Messiah, the hope of every Jewish mother. 'Elizabeth was barren and they were both advanced in years.' It seemed like the end. No one familiar with the Old Testament could fail to think of Abraham and his wife Sarah, who were nomads without hope in their childless old age when Abraham received the promise of God. So the stage is set for the loving and merciful intervention of God to save his faithful servants.

## **PRAYER**

*Lord, you leave me sometimes in a situation where I can see no way out. Keep me trusting in your love, however dark the horizon. Help me to know that I am always in your presence, and that you prepare for me greater blessings than I could ever hope.*

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