

Sermon on Sunday 18 October 2020

by Rev. Wendy Sellers

Luke the Evangelist

Readings: 2 Timothy 4.5-17; Luke 10.1-9

Most churches in England are named after a saint. Someone with too much time on their hands has counted up the number of churches in England bearing each saint's name. You may be glad to hear that St Mary comes in at Number One on the list with a whopping 2,368 churches named St Mary's, while St Andrew's is a respectable 5th with 801.

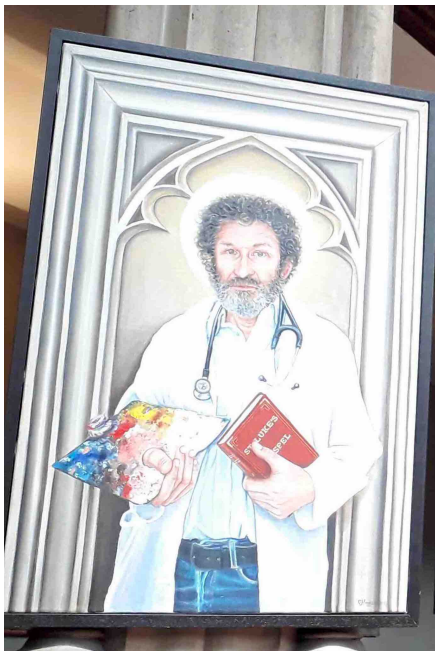
If we use the number of churches named after them as a guide, then the most popular Gospel writer would be St John, with 351 churches named St John the Evangelist and another 288 confusingly just named St John.

St Luke, whose festival we are marking today, comes in second with 242 churches. So, 242 churches will today be marking their patronal festival.

I remember when I first found out that the four Gospels were written decades after the resurrection of Jesus, and that therefore the Gospels were not necessarily first-hand witness accounts, and I was quite shocked, because I'd always presumed the Gospel writers knew Christ.

But, of course, what we need to understand is that the stories of Jesus and the early church were originally highly crafted and accurate oral accounts. As those who knew of Jesus died, and as Christianity spread, this ceased to be the most effective way of spreading the message. At that point, someone had to write things down instead.

This means there's some ambiguity about who the Gospel writers were and when the books were written.



In Luke's case, we do know that Luke was a real person; he was mentioned in today's first reading from Paul's second letter to Timothy (as was Mark, actually). So, Luke was a companion of Paul. We also know he was a doctor, a physician, because Paul tells us so in the letter to the Colossians.

We also know, because clever academics have worked it out, that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts have the same writer. Which means

that Luke is responsible for a quarter of the New Testament. So, he's pretty important. Generally, it is thought a fair assumption that Luke, companion of Paul and Luke the Gospel writer are the same person.

Chances are that Luke will originally have retold the stories of Jesus and the early church orally, and that he would have heard those stories from people who actually knew Jesus. He also witnessed first-hand some of the events of Acts. Indeed, that book's author sometimes writes in the third person as 'they' and sometimes in the first as 'we' so we can even work out which bits Luke was present at and which bits he was told about later.

What Luke seems to have done is gathered up those stories about Jesus and Paul and sorted them into a recorded form; and, again, clever academics have worked out that he was probably a gentile, a non-Jew, writing for a gentile readership. He sets out, as a man of science, to write an

orderly account written to Theophilus which means 'friend of God' – so almost certainly not an individual, but groups of disciples or potential disciples.

The reason we have four Gospels is, of course, because they were written for four different communities and purposes. There is much overlap between them; indeed, it seems likely that Luke had seen at least some of the manuscripts of the Gospels of Mark and possibly Matthew. Indeed, he probably knew Mark.

Yet, Luke's Gospel also has a specific focus which marks it out from the others. This might be termed its humanity. For while Luke's Gospel clearly paints a picture of Jesus as the Divine Saviour, it also shows us Jesus the man, as he interacts with the individuals he meets.

In Luke, we have Jesus mixing with women – and not just women, but ones who are poor, outcast or sick. We have Jesus mixing with outsiders and slaves. It is from Luke we learn more of Jesus' human origins, because only this Gospel tells us much of the Christmas story – of the census, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus himself and the adoration of the shepherds. It is Luke that tells us of Jesus being taken to the temple as a baby and recognised as the Messiah, and then again as a 12-year-old.

It is also only in Luke's account where Jesus tell us the stories of the prodigal son and the good Samaritan; two stories which, for most of us, sum up the basis of our faith in a loving, waiting, forgiving God who wants us to 'love our neighbour', whoever that might be.

Yet, Luke's account also moves us beyond the individual and the human, to sweeping history. He gives us an account which is largely chronological. The Gospel and Acts

take us through the life of Christ, his death and resurrection and ascension (again an event only included in this Gospel). In Acts, Luke proceeds to recount the establishment of the early church and the accompanying development of much of the doctrine we hold to today. He saw the events he witnessed and recorded as altering the course of world history on a monumental scale. And he wanted everyone to know about this. Because he truly believed that the Gospel message was for everyone. As a physician, he saw Jesus as the Saviour, the healer, of the world.

Many of you will have visited St Paul's Cathedral (in the days when we were allowed out for fun!). It contains an epitaph to its architect, Sir Christopher Wren, which reads: 'If you seek his monument, look around you'. St Paul's is an impressive building built to the glory of God.

If you seek an epitaph to St Luke, physician and evangelist, you must look to the Gospel which bears his name. Like St Paul's Cathedral, it is a great work of art, yet it is also living.

It offers us a human and intimate picture of the Saviour of the World and, nearly two millennia after being written, it offers the disciples of Christ the opportunity to get to know him personally. What a glorious gift.

So, let's give thanks to God for the life, the skill and the faith of St Luke, and for his desire to let anyone and everyone enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ the Saviour of the World.

***IMAGE:** The Icon of St Luke at St Luke's & Christ Church, Chelsea, painted by Richard Bagguley (2010). Luke is the patron saint of physicians, and Richard drew on images of doctors at the Royal Brompton in his painting.*