

Sermon on Sunday 18 October 2020

(on Zoom) by Rev. Bill Church

Readings: 2 Timothy 3. 14-17; Luke 1. 1-4

St Luke

When St Paul is telling the young Timothy that all scripture is inspired by God for our benefit, he is referring to what we call the Old Testament, because the New Testament had not been written. But Christians ever since have read it also to include the New Testament, and rightly so, because scripture is the engine and anchor of our faith.

Engine because knowing Christ through the accounts of his birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection, drives our faith; and anchor because the text of the New Testament is remarkably secure and has stood as a foundation unshaken by the fashions and vagaries, and indeed heresies, of the centuries. Scripture has been a benchmark.

That is not to say the text must always be read in the same way. Over time, our technical and linguistic understanding has been advanced by archaeology and by discovery of other writings from the same period (including vast numbers of papyrus documents from Egypt, most of which deal with humdrum subjects like merchants' bills of lading but which give further insight into the common Greek in which the New Testament was written.)

And, even more importantly, each generation can read scripture and hear it speaking to the world in which they live.

So in scripture, Puritans, Liberation theologians, feminist Christians, Conservative Evangelicals, farmers and philanthropists, monks and managers, can all hear God speaking to them and to their situation in life. And the same applies, in a way, to the writers of the four Gospels.

All are telling the same story and all had access to some of the same sources, yet they were written for different congregations and have different flavours. All include or leave out different elements.

For instance, Luke, whom we celebrate today, is the only Evangelist to include:

- the linked birth stories of Jesus and John Baptist
- much-loved details of Jesus' birth, the inn, stable, angels and shepherds
- the parables of the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son, Dives and Lazarus and the two Debtors (told after the 'sinful woman' had anointed his feet).

Those parables all point to Jesus showing a special care for people whom society would disdain; and Luke's Gospel shows a greater recognition than the others of the role of women in Jesus' ministry.

The Collect reminds us that Luke was a doctor, and so a person of some education and standing. He was also most probably himself a gentile, which would make him the only non-Jewish writer in the whole Bible; and his writing is in the wider Greek tradition.

The opening of the Gospel echoes the opening of the great history of Herodotus, often called 'the father of history'. But there

was one great difference. Herodotus included stories which were interesting but which he did not believe were true.

By contrast, Luke never included anything he did not believe to be true. Andrew Rixon reminded me that Herodotus told of Phoenician sailors who claimed to have circumnavigated Africa, and that at the halfway point, the sun stood in the north. Herodotus wrote that this meant the story could not be true, but we now know it is the detail that shows it WAS true! And in Acts, Luke uses the device found in Greek histories of speeches (by Peter, Stephen and Paul), which are not so much a tape recording of the words as an opportunity to set out the Christian argument.

In an age of fake news, Luke gives us an example of investigating what he hears, rather than rushing to endorse and pass on anything that anybody tells him.

In an increasingly intolerant atmosphere, Luke shows us in the parables a Jesus urging his hearers to see that God is more forgiving than humankind often is.

In a time when some insist there can only be one right way to see the world, Luke's parables offer many layers of meaning.

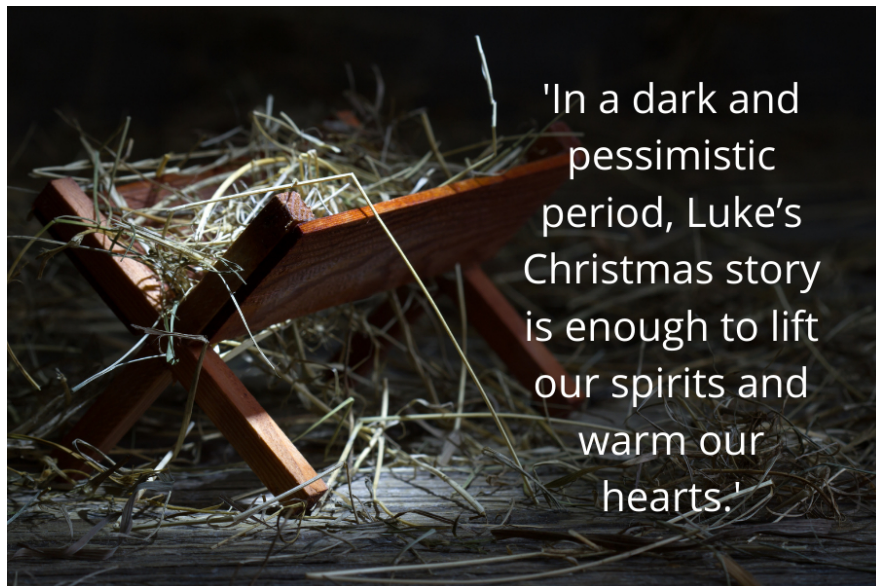
In a dark and pessimistic period, Luke's Christmas story is enough to lift our spirits and warm our hearts.

In an atmosphere where bad news and news of human failings are the daily diet, Luke in Acts introduces us to a cast of little-known heroes: Ananias of Damascus, who took into his house the stunned and blinded Saul/Paul who had so lately been breathing threats and murder against Christians; Tabitha of Joppa, the

original knitting granny; Lydia of Thyatira, a successful businesswoman who gave Paul a base at Philippi; The Town Clerk of Ephesus, who saved Paul from a lynching; Julius the centurion, who spared the prisoners in the shipwreck on Malta; and many others.

Luke's writing, his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, are a treasure house of inspiration.

Thank God for them and for Luke who wrote them.



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