

SUNDAY 17 OCTOBER 2021 – St Luke and Trinity 20

Isaiah 35. 3-6

Luke 10. 1-9

Today we are celebrating St Luke. What do we know about him ? Almost all that is known comes from the New Testament. He was a Greek physician, a disciple of St Paul, and his companion on some of his missionary journeys. He is the author of the Gospel from which we have heard read this morning, and also of the Acts of the Apostles.

We can glean quite a bit about Luke's character from his writings. In his Gospel we have the account of the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ, some of the most moving parables, such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, and the words of Christ at the Passion to the women of Jerusalem. All these elements underline the compassion of Christ, which along with Luke's emphasis on poverty, prayer, and purity of heart make up his appeal to the non-Jews, for whom he wrote his Gospel. A main theme of the Acts of the Apostles is the movement of Christianity away from Jerusalem into the pagan world and especially to Rome. In today's reading from Luke's Gospel we hear of Jesus's gentle instructions to the seventy disciples who are being sent out to all the villages and towns in advance of Jesus himself, and making it clear it will not be plain sailing for them and there will be setbacks and rejection.

In recent weeks we have been hearing of various stories and healings and teachings of Jesus, following some of which he makes it clear how his earthly life is to end. Let's call them Passion Predictions, in which Jesus is foretelling his death and resurrection.

What is fascinating is that after each prediction comes the lack of understanding by the disciples of what Jesus is getting at: after the first one it is Peter who remonstrates with Jesus that this terrible prediction must not happen and is promptly rebuked by Jesus for allowing his mind to be guided by human rather than by divine considerations. After the second prediction we read that the disciples did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him, and later we learn that they had been arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest. Then, after the third prediction, we find James and John, sons of Zebedee, having a quiet word with Jesus to ask a special favour of him in terms of where they might be seated when their time comes.

This leads to further teaching by Jesus on what following him really signifies: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with ?” which refers not just to the intense suffering and death to be undergone by Jesus on behalf of us all, but also to the calling to serve.

It is this failure of the disciples to grasp what Christian service is all about which both amazes us and also reminds us of the passage of our own lives. I’m sure I am not being presumptuous in saying that probably everyone here in St Mary’s this morning will have experienced a painful situation, at some stage in their lives, perhaps during the past 18 months, when, like me, they said or prayed to God that they simply did not understand what was happening to them or what God was intending for them. It is a sort of bereavement or even crucifixion. This is exactly what Jesus is referring to when he asks that question of James and John. Our calling lies in service, not in any kind of self-aggrandisement, not in selfish introspection, but in selfless service.

I have been reading a new book called *The Crossway* (spelt in one word), written by a young man who says he lost his faith in his teenage years and some time later suffered a nervous breakdown, from which he only slowly recovered. After a period of hospitalisation and rehabilitation, and with the support of his family, he decides to walk on a long pilgrimage from Canterbury to Jerusalem, passing through Rome and Istanbul and a number of other significant cathedral cities on the way, over the course of almost a year, in the hope of re-igniting his Christian faith by visiting these places and attending their liturgies. Needless to say, his journey is full of adventures which are not all pleasant: for example, in midwinter he decides to cross a bridge in the Alps which has been wrecked by an avalanche, but the remaining wooden planks give way and he finds himself dangling from underneath the bridge, saved only by the straps of his back pack. As his journey proceeds, his mood veers from optimism to pessimism and back again. But as he completes the Italian part of his pilgrimage, and after having fled in panic from the Easter Day ceremonies outside St Peter's, the crowds being simply too much for him, he comes gradually to realise what the journey is about and what he is being given on the way.

Before leaving Canterbury he has done a lot of research into where he will be able to stay, and these places are exclusively church presbyteries or monasteries with guest rooms. Inevitably he finds himself involved in conversations with the people there, who want to know why he is walking. He is tongue-tied in his responses, and leaves them feeling he has not been honest with them. In reality he doesn't know exactly why he is doing it, but in fact the journey itself is providing the answer, because he is being shown by his many hosts, through the work they do and the hospitality they offer, what

it is to be an everyday Christian. This is the gift God is giving him through the journey, and which he has written very honestly about in the book. It is like the gift which God is giving the disciples, the journey with Jesus over three years, which will lead them and us too eventually to great joy after teaching them, as we read in Luke 14: “whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple”. We all have our cross to carry.

Let me finish by quoting the last few words from the book:

“Midmorning I will catch sight of a stranger, pacing forwards out of the sun. He will greet me, welcome me, wonder how far I have come. He will ask about my route, ask who gave me shelter. He will want to know why I am walking. I will look away, telling him it is a long story. He will turn his face towards mine, and say “Speak””.

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