

**For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10)**

It seems to be almost another age ago that every Thursday at 7 pm we stood on our doorsteps and clapped the doctors and nurses of the NHS. There are of course many others we should be clapping at this difficult time, but it is only right and proper to thank those who care for our health even at the best of times.

Today we are clapping for one particular doctor, the physician Luke. Had it not been for Luke we would not have his two-volume Gospel and Acts of the Apostles. Our knowledge of the very early church and growth of Christianity would be very sparse and other than his letters the life of St Paul would be very sketchy. Thank you, Dr Luke.

But that's not the sole reason why we are applauding Luke today. Our applause is directed to a man who probably more than any other New Testament writer understood that healing the body is insufficient unless the mind and spirit are healed as well. But there's more to it than this because for Luke healing also meant healing the deeper social wounds of society – of class division, racial prejudice, gender discrimination, religious intolerance and so on.

Luke, the physician, has a mission to stir us up to action. In our Gospel reading today Luke's account of Jesus' instructions to his disciples fuelled by the crucial idea that as 'the Kingdom of God is near you!' then the social revolution must begin, and begin now! The missionaries are to bring the shalom or the healing peace of the Kingdom into people's homes and that means breaking almost every social and religious rule under the sun. The model we have is Jesus' table fellowship with tax collectors, his treatment of women as equals, his great respect for the religiously despised Samaritans. By providing more examples to illustrate these than any of the other three gospels, Luke is in effect saying to us, 'Don't just listen, do likewise!'

It is not surprising, therefore, that we first meet Luke on the road where he appears to have joined St Paul for a while on one of Paul's hectic missionary journeys. We can't know for certain that he is the man from Macedonia whom Paul sees in his vision (Acts 16:9), but it would make sense that Paul has somehow sensed that Luke is a particularly significant person – even though Luke had never met Jesus in his life time. Furthermore, Luke's account of their itinerary from Troas to Samothrace to Neapolis and finally to Philippi (the capital city of Macedonia), appears to be a first-hand account from his journal – he uses 'we' not 'they'. The meeting must have made a deep impression on them both. Luke only uses his journal entries a few times in Acts of the Apostles, but Paul is clearly his hero. And likewise in one of his letters Paul refers to this Greek trained doctor and Christian convert with the greatest respect calling him 'the beloved physician' (Colossians 4:14).

We can only but speculate what led Luke, a Greek physician maybe from Macedonia, to have embraced Christianity in its early days with such passion. But a clue may come in a passage from his Gospel which only he relates and that is Jesus' very first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth.

It is sabbath and Jesus reads the portion from the Torah set for that day, from Isaiah 61:

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free. (Luke 4:17-18)

Isaiah’s mission statement was Jesus’ mission statement, and now it is Luke’s mission statement. But the difference is that Luke having researched Jesus’ life knows that it is not just an idea but a reality. Jesus says after reading Isaiah, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ (Luke 4:21). For Luke The Kingdom of God is not a future reality, it is the now!

That is probably why for him as a physician the key word of Jesus’ manifesto is the word ‘release’. What do doctors want most for their patients but to relieve them of their pain, their anxiety, their suffering.

Luke had only to look at Jesus’ life and the work of the early Christians to see the powerful signs of ‘release’ taking place of all those held captive by society’s prejudices and social structures.

But Luke has a particular place in his mission for the release of the poor. The poor are not just those who are economically poor but all those who are excluded from society, those who lack power or privilege and those whose lives lack spiritual meaning. He calls them the lost. As a Christian doctor Luke also knows that being poor or lost is not just a physical state but a mental and spiritual condition which can afflict us all.

It is not coincidental that some of the most memorable of Jesus’ parables which only Luke relates are about the restoration of the lost – the lost younger son, the lost sheep and the lost coin.

But probably the greatest example of the transformation of the lost for Luke is the conversion of Paul. For it is the lost Saul who is held spiritually captive by his hatred of the early Christians only to find sudden and life-changing release in the vision of the risen Christ on his way to Damascus. Luke recounts the story three times in Acts of the Apostles. I can imagine Dr Luke using ‘The Paul Damascus Case’ in his own preaching surgery. ‘Look’, he says to one his patients, ‘If Christ’s Kingdom can transform a man like Paul, think what it can do for you.’

So, we have a very great deal to thank that man from Macedonia, the Greek physician and inspired disciple of Christ. We don’t applaud him every day, but today on his feast day, we do.