

Sermon Notes for St Luke

“the labourers are few” (Gospel)

The Orthodox, I think, assert that St. Luke was one of the Seventy, and it seems that the Prayer Book Gospel reading follows this opinion. There is no evidence for it. St. Luke as a human being appears to be a Gentile – perhaps the only one among the New Testament authors – capable of writing competent literary Greek of his period, though also willing to attempt to write the translationese which was the common idiom of the early Church and possibly of many hellenized Jews – or of Gentile converts to either Judaism or Christianity. He points the way to the future – the Gentile church – and I don't find it easy to fit him into the Jewish milieu of our Lord's initial proclamations of the gospel.

But we are not here to do history. As it happens, my own parish is named after St. Luke. It is the Anglican custom (and indeed the custom of the Catholic Church) to give a parish (and only secondarily its parish church) a saint's name, and if we are to have a patron in heaven, we do well to respect the particularity of that patron's faith while he or she was on earth. For though there is only one salvation and one Saviour, yet there are different valid ways of working out that salvation, and we should not neglect the witness so given to us.

Nothing in Acts or St. Paul says that Luke was a minister of religion. I suspect he was one of those useful people without which everything falls apart. At times, useful as a doctor (and there are very few in the early Church whose professions we know) but probably not giving most of his time to that. He had the strange idea of being a recorder and researcher – going on from the earthly Jesus into the experience of the church. Was this useful? Paul did not stop him.

Some modern Christians seem to think we are all called to be (as far as possible) evangelists, and every available moment should be given to that. My impression of St. Paul and his entourage is not like that. Maybe he “whose praise is in the Gospel” should put us in mind not of a street preacher, but of the virtues of the writer of his Gospel – and of Acts. Those who wish may add the long-standing but not very early tradition that he was the first painter in the Church.

But “the labourers are few” - can we spare resources for such purposes? If the early Church had taken that view, we would have no gospels, indeed hardly a single saying of the Lord! Fortunately, it did allow itself gospel writers (more than one), and archivists who preserved the epistles, and St. Luke writing Acts, as well as missionary preachers. Without them, our understanding of the faith would be thin indeed. If you read the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, very early in the second century, there is hardly a quotation from the New Testament. The saving work of Christ, and Christianity, might have survived without the New Testament writers – but thank God other vocations than preacher were honoured in the early Church.

There are many Christian vocations. As we understood it, our own ecclesiastical vocation (not the *whole* of the vocation of any of, us even of a priest) was to preserve what had been a valid way of being Christian – partly by continuing to do it, partly by retaining the books which would otherwise have been pulped, and the learning behind them. Were we wrong? We might draw support from the Epistle “the books, but especially the parchments” as an early hint that it is not wrong to preserve our experience. Will it prove to have been futile? We do not know, but we trust that God does not waste anything that is His. God alone knows what has been achieved in our little Continuing body.

What we sought to preserve will not survive in the Church of England, or among the Confessing Anglicans or the Ordinariates. We are not a preservation society; what we believe to have been the best form of Anglicanism in our earlier years may or may not have place in God's long-term plans. Our task is and always was first to be faithful Christians, both in our corporate worship and in our daily lives, second to make what we had received available to any who might in turn receive it. Some may be called to missionary preaching, others to explanation, others to quiet living out of the particular Christian calling they have. St. Luke was not St. Paul; yet we know how much St. Paul valued St. Luke. “Only Luke is with me” - yet that was enough to make the Church, for “where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them”. Give thanks for what we have received.