

HOLY GHOST, GENOVA – Four Ways to the Cross 3: Luke (18.3. 2020)

Before we look at St Luke's version of the Passion story, it's worth reminding ourselves of four important things about his Gospel.

First: it is the only one that comes in two parts, the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. For Luke the passion and crucifixion are not (as they are for Mark, Matthew, and John) the story's climax. Rather they are the central pivot on which it swings, the vantage point from which we look backward to the ministry of Jesus and forward to the work of the Holy Spirit in the earliest Christian communities.

Second: there is some debate about whether or not Luke was Jewish. He clearly knew and loved the Jewish Scriptures; but there are occasions when Luke stresses the Jewishness of Jesus and his disciples at points where the other Evangelists don't find it necessary. Whether he was Jewish, or whether he was a God-fearer, he almost certainly came from one of the great cities of the Roman Empire. We can see this clearly when he edits stories that he shares with Mark in order to make them understandable to city-dwellers, the classic instance being the healing of the paralysed man (Luke 5:17-26; compare Mark 2:1-12), where Luke has the man's friend's taking the tiles off the roof of a town house. In Mark they dig through the roof of a house topped with the Palestinian equivalent of wattle and daub.

Third: Luke is not writing primarily for Jews or Christians (unlike most other New Testament writers). He writes for the world outside the Church, for educated people like himself. Luke tells the story of Jesus as *history*, not as a challenge, not as a peg to hang teaching, not as a meditation. He tells how Christianity arose out of Judaism to show how the Jews' rejection of Jesus led to the Gentiles (that is *us*) coming to receive God's promises.

He ties the story down to a particular time and place. The kings and governors who appear in some numbers in Luke's writings are people whose names appear in the history books. All of this gives Luke's story a solidity and objectivity, but loses some of the drama and mystery that there is in (say) Mark's Gospel.

Finally: Luke has a strong sense of humanity and an awareness that men and women are a mixture of sin and glory. The people he depicts are not all black, as in Mark, nor are they black and white, like Matthew's. Luke works in shades of grey, giving his Gospel a realism which makes it vivid and attractive. We remember Luke's characters, as we remember his stories.

It is generally accepted that Luke wrote his Gospel after Mark, whose basic story-line he used, and probably after Matthew, with whom he shares a lot of material. He also includes material of his own, stories and sayings which we don't find either in Matthew's Gospel, or in Mark's, and he reshapes the story told by Mark in a way that Matthew doesn't.

The beginning of Luke's version of the Passion story is different from the other three. They begin with the plot against Jesus and lead into the story of his anointing at Bethany. Luke has already used this story, so after mentioning the plot he leads into the preparations for the last supper, and the meal itself. Hospitality, parties and meals are very important for Luke. In his Gospel they often provide the setting for teaching and for healings. Luke's account of the supper concentrates on the breaking of the bread. This is linked to the story of Jesus' suffering and death and is the means by which that suffering and death become effective for us. It links the present to the past, as does the Passover meal (and Luke stresses that this *is* a Passover meal), looking back to historical events and forward to the future. So the meal becomes both a "memorial of his saving passion" and "a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all".

Now, in most Bibles there are lots of footnotes at this point. This is because the Greek text of Luke's account of the last supper is a mess. Not all manuscripts have the cup *after* the breaking of bread as well as before. In some manuscripts it looks as if someone is trying to make Luke's account square with what is written in Mark's Gospel or I Corinthians 11 (the earliest account of the Lord's Supper). Nor do all the ancient manuscripts have sacrificial language attached to the sharing of the bread and the cup. In some of the oldest and best the cup, like the Passover cup, is for sharing and the bread is simply "my body". Neither is "given for you" or "poured out for you".

This would fit with what Luke says elsewhere. He doesn't give Jesus' suffering and death a clear sacrificial or atoning role, perhaps because he is writing for Gentiles, who wouldn't understand Jewish ideas about sacrifice, but who would find the idea of a "fellowship meal" easier to understand. It also fits more easily with Luke's view of Jesus' death as an act of reconciliation and forgiveness, showing God's mercy, and it links with his stress on the breaking of bread as *the* focus of Christian fellowship (Acts 2:42), and as the act in which Jesus is recognized, as he was by Clopas and his companion at Emmaus.

As Jesus breaks the bread, he prophesies his betrayal. This prophecy comes less starkly than in Mark's Gospel, but it leads to an argument between the disciples about greatness. As he often does, Luke tones down the harshness of what Mark says, especially about the disciples. Perhaps this too is due to the two-part nature of the work. There has to be some continuity between the disciples at the end of the Gospel and the heroic apostles at the beginning of Acts,

As in John's Gospel, Jesus at the last supper teaches his disciples that greatness in the Kingdom of God means service, the basis of all discipleship. The *δίακονος*, the waiter, is the model to be followed. And so today the diaconate is the foundation of all ordained ministry in the Church. Even Popes and archbishops are deacons, before they are anything else. Service is fundamental to the life of the Church.

So is commitment. In Luke, Jesus continues with the words "You are those who have continued with me in my trials..." The code of behaviour, the code of service, laid down for the Church leads us into its setting in a historical framework, looking back into the past ("You have continued with me...") and forward into the future ("my table in my kingdom"), a future which conditions the present. The apostles, by Jesus' appointment, are now, and will continue to be the core of the new Israel which is the Church.

Luke softens Mark's words at the prophecy of Peter's denial, adding a prophecy of his repentance and his later role in strengthening his brothers. Here Luke clearly looks forward to Acts, where the abject coward in the High Priest's courtyard becomes the confident pillar of the

primitive Church. Even Peter's failure is part of God's great plan, and that gives us confidence. Nothing is outside the loving purposes of God. We may fail but "all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well", because Jesus has interceded for us.

The next section occurs only in Luke's Gospel. It recalls the previous mission of the twelve, which had been peaceful and well-received. Now, however, the disciples are to be sent out into a hostile world. Jesus is to be one who is "counted among the lawless" and his followers will find themselves outside the law, with every one's hand against them. The instruction to buy a sword is *not* a justification for Christians to use force in making disciples or to use the power of the state. The true parallel is with those who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah, each one with a sword at his side for self-defence. The last phrase "It is enough" marks the end of the episode (echoing, again, the Old Testament).

The scene changes at this point. Jesus and the disciples go out to the garden. There is not the same sense of separation between Jesus and the disciples, either physically or emotionally, that we noted in Mark. When Jesus finds them asleep, it is because they are worn out by grief, not because they have dozed off. There is none of the repetition that we find in Mark's account, nor his stinging rebuke, "Are you still sleeping?" But the agony is not the less real. Some manuscripts add at this point a detail which reflects Luke's love of physical realism: Jesus' sweat, "like great drops of blood falling down on the ground". The same manuscripts also describe how an angel appears to him, bringing Jesus supernatural strength to enable him to continue his work of healing and reconciliation right to the end, even if that means that there is less sense of the loneliness of his struggle in prayer.

In Luke's account of the betrayal, as in Matthew's, Jesus retains the initiative. He is not the helpless victim we saw in Mark. His question to Judas comes before the betrayal. He heals the servant of the high priest (a detail not in the other Gospels). He remains in command. We might also note the up-grading of the crowd (Luke has the chief priests and the captains come out against Jesus in person), and the omission of any mention of the disciples' flight.

For Luke, Jesus' arrest is an act of voluntary self-surrender, a self-surrender marked by a sombre strength. His words to the crowd, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness", recall the dreadful detail of Judas's departure in John 13 with the note of time: "It was night".

In his account of Jesus' trial Luke is hard at work re-arranging St Mark's story. He may have had access to a different source of information. He may equally have been revising Mark's version in the light of his own knowledge of Roman legal procedure. Luke has a tendency to tidy things up in the light of his knowledge of the wider Roman world. Rowan Williams has described him as having a "pathologically tidy mind". The effect is to turn Mark's swirling nightmare into an orderly legal process.

First, however, Luke gets Peter's denial out of the way. The other three evangelists leave it hanging there as they cross-cut between the courtyard and the interior of the high priest's house. Luke, here as elsewhere, softens the harshness of the judgement on Peter's conduct by the way he tells his story, but he does not remove this blemish altogether. And he adds to the pathos with his glimpse of Jesus, turning to look at Peter. Luke edits Mark's story in other ways. He cuts down the length of the examination before the Sanhedrin and retimes it to the early morning, making it indisputably legal. He also removes the unedifying scene of the chief priests and elders beating up Jesus. More plausibly, perhaps, he assigns this brutality to the Jewish guards on the night of the arrest. But whatever the gain in psychological realism, it is accompanied by a lessening of the horror.

The examination itself is very brief. There are two questions and answers, derived from one question in Mark, but different. The first question leads to an answer which points to the risen, ascended Christ of Acts. The second question is answered, not by the clear statement that we find in Mark but by the ambiguous words "You say that I am". Luke is moving away from Mark's paradox of the suffering God and towards a view of the crucifixion as a terrible miscarriage of justice, for which the resurrection offers the opportunity for repentance and forgiveness – a theme echoed on several occasions in the Acts of the Apostles.

After this short hearing, Jesus is brought before Pilate. Luke transfers the weight from the Jewish court to the Roman, because that is where the power in this case lies. Three points are worth noting:

First: the Jewish authorities bring charges of anti-Roman sedition which are specific and plausible. They point back to Jesus' words and actions during his ministry. They are clearly a malicious perversion of his teaching, but they are just the sort of charge, with a solid political base, to get a Roman governor agitated.

Second: Pilate declares his conviction that Jesus is innocent, like the Roman authorities in Acts, who are always shown as favourable to Christianity. Luke is using this attitude to reinforce the message that hostility to Christians on political grounds is mistaken and that Christians are good citizens, not dangerous subversives. It is malice and misunderstanding that leads to their condemnation. Pilate three times declares that Jesus is not guilty as charged. By this means Luke, following Matthew perhaps, reduces Roman responsibility for the crucifixion.

Finally: the trial before Pilate is interrupted by a hearing before the Romans' puppet ruler in Galilee, Herod Antipas – the man who had had John the Baptist executed to please his stepdaughter. This odd episode, found only in Luke, has a doubtful legal basis and no effect on the outcome of events. But again it shows Jesus as a healing, reconciling presence, wiping away the enmity between Herod and Pilate even when he is a helpless prisoner. It also provides further testimony from a pro-Roman source to the innocence of Jesus.

After the examination before Herod, Jesus is sent back to Pilate, who for a second and a third time declares that Jesus is innocent. Luke then adds a rather muddled and elliptical note about the release of Barabbas. Pilate gives way. Luke again emphasises, as he does in Acts, that while the Romans were the agents who carried out the crucifixion, responsibility rests with the Jewish authorities.

The procession to Calvary begins with Simon of Cyrene and continues with the meeting with the women of Jerusalem – another episode found only in Luke. This encounter has many echoes of the Hebrew Scriptures. The phrase “daughters of Jerusalem” is lifted from the Greek version of those scriptures, and the words of Jesus, echoing Hosea and Ezekiel, make this a very solemn moment.

Luke’s account of the actual crucifixion differs from Mark’s and Matthew’s in order and in points of detail. His concerns are shown in the prayer “Father, forgive them” (another of those episodes where the manuscript tradition is less than firmly unanimous) and in the story of the penitent criminal. Both are about reconciliation and salvation – even for the total outcast. The criminal being executed and his executioners are both beneficiaries of the infinite mercy of God. The crucifixion in Luke’s Gospel is also a public business. “The people” watch and mourn (in contrast to their rulers), reinforcing another of Luke’s great claims, that salvation is for the humble and meek. The powerful, like the Jewish authorities, are dispossessed. The presence of the people as witnesses also points forward to Acts, where great stress is laid on the crucifixion of Jesus as a public act, as something “not done in a corner”.

The general effect of Luke’s re-working of the story is to soften the starkness and the horror of Mark’s account. Jesus moves serenely towards death, expressing forgiveness to men and total trust in God. Mark’s “loud cry” becomes the prayer “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!” words from Psalm 31, a psalm of hope and trust. They point us towards, and are picked up by, the words of the dying Stephen in Acts 7. The crucifixion becomes a martyrdom, witnessing to the boundless love of God, rather than Mark’s great mystery of a suffering God. The centurion’s last words reflect this. Not “Truly this man was God’s Son!”, but “Certainly this man was innocent”. Here we have God’s righteous prophet done to death by God’s rebellious people, not an “inexplicable and divine revelation of Jesus’ identity.”

So, what are we left with after Luke's slow fade on the crowds and the women? His account of the passion contrasts with Mark's, even more than Matthew's, as teaching against proclamation. In Luke's account the cross becomes a pulpit from which Jesus preaches his last sermon, expanding – and living to the end – the teaching of Luke 6:27ff: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." In contrast to Mark, Luke shows Jesus as still carrying out his work of healing and reconciliation, continuing the activity of his ministry.

As one of the great New Testament scholars of the last century, the late Christopher Evans, has put it: "In Mark the passion is something awesome and paradoxical, and bids men keep their distance in the presence of a sacrificial obedience to which they make no contribution. In Luke it has become in a Christian sense natural, and invites men to draw near, to embrace it as the love of God for sinners, and to imitate it."

"[Jesus] said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.'

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