

2015-10-18 Barbara Mitchell

St Luke the Healer – Luke 10:1-9 & 2 Timothy 4:5-17

Gospels are a bit like your children or the pupils that you teach – you aren't supposed to have favourites. But I will make a confession to you – I do have a favourite, and it is Luke, the evangelist who we are celebrating today. That may be because it was the only Gospel that I didn't have to study in Greek at university, so I don't read it with painful memories of struggling with syntax, grammar and vocabulary in the final run-up to final examinations. Or it could be because it is the Gospel I have taught the most for GCSE and A level exams, so I know it really well. But actually I think it is because I just like Luke – I like his style of writing (and yes, I have read him in Greek without the pressure of an exam to pass) and I also like the things which interested him about the life of Jesus.

As we heard in today's Epistle reading, Luke was a travelling companion of St Paul – a Gentile from the Greek speaking world introduced to Christianity by an early missionary. He would never have met Jesus, but while Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea he would have had the opportunity to meet Christians from Galilee and Judea who would have been witnesses to what Jesus said and did. I like to imagine Luke, wax tablet and stylus in hand, scribbling down the stories told to him, like the best of investigative journalists. He tells us more about Mary than any of the other evangelists, so perhaps he had several interviews with Jesus' mum herself!

Luke was an educated man – the style of his Greek would show that even if Paul hadn't referred to him as 'the beloved physician' in his letter to the Colossians. Luke may not have had the modern surgical skill to perform heart transplants, but even in the ancient world medical men would have needed to read widely and be adept at problem solving, building on the ideas of early scientists such as Aristotle and Hippocrates. Luke was also cultured – he wrote poems such as the Song of Mary and the Song of Zachariah which are still used in daily worship as the Magnificat and the Benedictus. Tradition also says he was an artist who painted the first Christian icons.

So, the man who wrote today's Gospel reading was a good all-rounder, a Renaissance man, who could embrace both science and the Arts and a New Man of the modern world, being in touch with his feminine side in the compassion he showed to the people he describes in his writings. If Luke were alive today I could see him being a contestant on 'The Great British Bake Off' – not just because of all these attributes, but because his Gospel, more than any of the others, talks about food and eating. And maybe that's another reason why his is my favourite Gospel!

In today's Gospel we heard about Jesus sending out seventy two men to spread his teachings more widely through the country. There was an urgency to their mission, so they had to travel light and not be over-burdened with superfluous luggage. In order to do that

they needed to depend on the hospitality of the local people to provide them with a bed for the night and, most importantly for Luke, food and drink. This is emphasised by the way Luke mentions the food and drink that they should expect twice in two short verses!

So why should Luke be so interested in food? There have been many answers given by scholars to this question – is it a reference to the Messianic Banquet or is it a pre-figuring of the Last Supper and the Christian communion service? Those ideas may be right, but I also think that it is tied up with Luke writing as a doctor. In the Graeco-Roman world doctors were well aware that once a person became ill it was very difficult, if not impossible, to cure them. So, as with medicine today, the emphasis was on keeping people fit so they were less likely to become sick in the first place. Food was an important part of this view and there still exist writings by ancient physicians outlining the best foods to eat – barley soup being one of the ‘super foods’ recommended for a healthy life by one Roman doctor. That being the case, it is not surprising that Luke stresses the importance of the missionaries spreading the teachings of Christianity needing enough to eat and drink. It is like the orders of Mother Teresa to her Missionaries of Charity. In the early days of the order the sisters felt that their vow to serve the ‘poorest of the poor’ meant they should eat the same diet as those who lived on the margins. As a result many of them became ill because they were trying to do energy consuming work on too few nutrients. So Mother Teresa made it an act of obedience that they should eat a good diet in order to be able to serve those in need more effectively.

But I think that Luke’s interest in food goes beyond showing his care for people’s bodies. Our well-being is not just about our physical needs, but our mental health as well. Eating is often a social event and particularly so in the ancient world, where you couldn’t just nip around the supermarket and pick up a ready-meal for one to pop in the microwave and eat in front of the TV (Steve has been away for the past week so guess what I have been doing!). Food had to be prepared at home from basic ingredients for the extended families which lived under one roof. This was precious stuff, the result of long hours of toil in stony fields by subsistence farmers. It needed to be celebrated and enjoyed in company – the kind of meal which Jewish families still enjoy on Shabbat when they spend the whole of Friday evening praying, eating and chatting. No mobile phone Facebooking or TV watching for them as the use of electricity and work is banned! This kind of interaction with **real** humans, as opposed to digital friends on social media, is essential for our mental well-being as it allows us to build up and maintain those important relationships and I think that Luke, as a doctor, was well aware of that.

The image of Jesus we get from Luke’s Gospel is a man who enjoyed human society, who shared meals with tax collectors like Levi and Zacchaeus, with religious teachers like Simon and other Pharisees and with his closest friends, like Mary and Martha and the Twelve disciples, relishing the opportunities it gave him to talk freely to people.

So, maybe on this festival of St Luke the Healer we need to celebrate the healing which can be brought about by sharing food together. In this parish people are particularly good at that form of ministry – some of my happiest memories of Crockham Hill are of Hot Pot Suppers in the old WI hall, Harvest lunches and parties in the Village hall, coffee mornings, Sunday Club picnics the list could go ever onwards events at which everyone is made to feel welcome, churchgoer, Christian or not, where new friendships are forged and old ones sustained. I think St Luke would be very proud of you and don't forget..... coffee and biscuits will be served after the service!