

The Feast of St Luke the Evangelist

Today we celebrate the feast of our Patron Saint Luke. He is called an evangelist because he wrote the third of the four New Testament gospels. It also appears that St Luke also wrote the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, which comes directly after the Gospels in the New Testament's table of contents. Taken together, St. Luke's Gospel and the acts form a continuous story of the birth of Christianity from the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, in about 5 BC to St Paul's imprisonment in Rome, in about 60 AD.

There are two things which most set apart St. Luke's Gospel from the other three. St. Luke has detailed information about the conceptions and births and childhoods of Jesus and his cousin St. John the Baptist. The familiar and wonderful stories of Gabriel's annunciation to the Virgin Mary, Christ's birth in a stable at Bethlehem, the adoration of the shepherds and the circumcision of John the Baptist are found only in St. Luke. There has been legitimate speculation from the church's earliest days that St. Luke got his information on these matters from the person who would have known about them best—the Virgin Mary herself.

St Luke also stands out from St. Matthew, St. Mark, and St. John in regard to the parables. If I asked you to tell me what the two most famous parables are, I would hope that you would respond with “the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan.” I have given sermons on both of these subjects, but I'm sure that you remembered that. Both of those parables appear only in St. Luke.—two other parables, less familiar but just as important, the Pharisee and the publican and the Conniving Steward also appear only in St. Luke. We know of no theory which explains why he has all the best of these stories, but it may be because he was able to have long conversations with St. Peter in the years of Peter's life.

The writing of the Books of the Acts makes St. Luke the first historian of the church. He tells us what happened to the new church in Jerusalem in the weeks after Jesus' ascension into heaven—taking us through the first Christian Pentecost, the establishment of apostolic orders, and the martyrdom of St. Stephen, one of the first Deacons of the Church—and then he focuses most of the rest of his attention on the most important New Testament character after Jesus himself, who is St. Paul the apostle. We don't need to speculate about where St. Luke got his information about St. Paul, because Luke appears in the story of acts as one of Paul's closest associates and missionary partners.

This evening epistle is the end of a letter St. Paul wrote from prison in Rome to one of his most trusted lieutenants—St. Timothy, who is the Bishop of Ephesus in what is now southwest Turkey. It is impossible to use this excerpt to defend the idea that Christians should never say anything negative about anyone else. St. Paul says some quite unpleasant things about two of the people he mentions.

A man named Demas has run out on Paul, who describes him as “having loved this present world”—not, quite obviously, taking the same long-term view of things that Paul thinks is proper. He also mentions “Alexander the coppersmith who did me much evil.” He prays that God will pay Alexander back for what he has done, saying “the Lord reward him according to his works.” We don't know what the coppersmith did but I'm sure Paul wasn't suggesting anything that the coppersmith would find rewarding. Paul also warns Timothy against having any dealings with the disobedient Alexander, saying, “Of who thou ware also, for he hath greatly withstood our words.” St Paul was not at all mealy-mouthed.

That makes it all the more remarkable that his friendship with St. Luke was able to withstand arrest and shipwreck and imprisonment. I can not think of too many people who I admire as I do St. Paul. But I would guess that he would be a very difficult person to get along with. We would probably have many conflicts. Yet in this same epistle, he contrasts St. Luke with Demas, Alexander and all the other difficult characters he knew by the simple and touching sentence “ONLY LUKE IS WITH ME.”

Remembering that St. Luke was a doctor, today's collect asks God to show Jesus' healing power forth in the church—the healing of our bodies by the power of his spirit; the healing of our minds and hearts by the power of his love. We are grateful to St. Luke for making this healing known to us through the power of his Word—but you cannot know what I mean unless you read what he wrote.