THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

— A Bible commentary for every day —

Luke

Henry Wansbrough

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15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

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PREFACE

Each of us has a favourite gospel. Mine varies – now one, now another. Augustine was right when he said that looking at Jesus through the gospels is like looking through a prism: you need all four individual angles to gain an adequate picture. Two of the ways in which Luke looks at the good news of Christ are especially important to me.

For Luke Jesus is the Saviour. Yes, of course, Jesus saves in all the gospels; the very name 'Jesus' means 'Saviour'. But it is only in Luke that he is called the Saviour, and that from the very beginning. The angels at Bethlehem bring this news of great joy: 'To you is born this day a Saviour who is Christ the Lord' (see Luke 2:11). In the temple the aged Simeon echoes them, 'My eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every nation' (see v. 30). At the end, too, the passion and death of Jesus are scenes of healing, forgiveness and salvation. Jesus heals the ear of the high priest's servant. He forgives those who are nailing him to the cross. He welcomes the penitent thief into paradise, and all depart from the scene beating their breasts. Throughout the gospel Jesus not merely accepts sinners and forgives the penitent; he goes out to find them. He calls that inquisitive crook Zacchaeus down from his sycamore tree in Jericho to be a disciple. In the parables there is joy in heaven when the man searches and finds the sheep he has lost, and the woman the coin she has lost, not to mention the wholesale celebration when the father finds the prodigal son he has lost. For the great feast the Master positively forces and squeezes the guests into his banquet.

The other aspect is the ever-present Spirit. Luke had experienced the Spirit at work in the churches of Paul, the Spirit-filled chaos at Corinth. In his second volume, Acts, Luke describes the Spirit active in the earliest days of the Christian movement, guiding and gently coaxing the enthusiastic followers in the right direction. Shining his light further back he shows us the Spirit again at beginning and end of Jesus' own story. The whole explosion is ignited when the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary and the power of the Most High covers her with its shadow. Jesus is filled with the Spirit when he goes out into the desert to ponder his mission and confront his demons. When he sets out his programme in the synagogue at Nazareth, the Spirit of the Lord is upon him. When the risen Christ finally departs from his bewildered followers, he sends them back into Jerusalem to await the signal for the start of their own

mission, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Luke reassures us of the presence of the Spirit in Christ's Church to this day.

You must experience the good news of Luke for yourself, and I pray that these pages may help you to appreciate and love it.

Dom Henry Wansbrough OSB

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INTRODUCTION

The evangelist Luke wrote nearly a quarter of the New Testament – one of the longest of the gospels and its companion volume, Acts. So on any count he is an important witness to the Christian message and to its development in the early church. Some scholars think he was responsible also for adding touches to other writings of the New Testament. Who was this important writer? There is no suggestion that he was one of the twelve, the original companions chosen by Jesus, or indeed that he knew Jesus during his lifetime; but tradition has it that he accompanied Paul on some of his journeys, for certain passages in Acts are written in the first person plural: 'We travelled… We embarked…' Tradition also holds that Paul mentioned this Luke, 'the beloved physician', as his only faithful companion in prison (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11). 'Luke' is, of course, one form of 'Lucius', a very common name in the Roman world. So to know that the author was called Luke does not of itself tell us very much.

Luke's world

More important than knowing the identity of the author in the sense of 'Luke Who?' is to know that he received the apostolic tradition about Jesus from the early communities. Not himself an eyewitness of the life of Jesus, he listened to the reports handed down in the Christian communities about the Master. He stresses that he did his research among the previous accounts of the good news. He obviously drew heavily on Mark, the first gospel to be written, and on another source, either Matthew or a collection of the sayings of the Lord commonly known as Q and now lost. He also had his own sources, on which he drew for such events as the stories of Jesus' infancy or the appearances after the resurrection, and especially the parables. The language of these is so thoroughly Lukan that they are most likely to have been received by him in oral form; he was the first to commit them to paper. He himself was thoroughly familiar with Judaism, but he does not expect his readers to know the Jewish tradition too well. From the way he writes, it is clear that he moved in a more sophisticated society than Mark, and a more Gentile society than the very Jewish Matthew. His courtly vocabulary and style (from 'Theophilus, your Excellency' onwards) places him within literary circles. The subtlety and wit of his writing suggest an educated background. The ease with which he handles financial and

economic affairs similarly places him in moderately affluent society. It is all the more remarkable that Luke misses no opportunity to underline the responsibility and danger of being wealthy, and the need for generosity, and to stress that Jesus came to bring the good news first of all to the marginalised and wretched.

Luke the person

In reading a gospel it is a joy to get to know the author. It is, after all, through his (unlikely in that day to be 'her') eyes that we see Jesus and hear his message. Luke is a gentle and sensitive person, very aware of the importance of little touches of affection. He explains the grief of the widow of Nain by telling us that her son was her only son. When Peter denies Jesus, he is brought to repentance because Jesus just turns silently to look at him. Luke has a gentle wit too, and can quietly make fun of the rich fool in the parable, showing the man's self-importance by his repeatedly talking about himself. The characters in his parables are not like those in Matthew's parables, pure villains or pure heroes; they are mixed characters like the rest of us, with good and bad points, often doing the right thing for the wrong reason, so that we can become quite attached to rascals like the crafty steward or the lazy householder. One thing Luke stresses above all is that we are all sinners, in need of repentance on our part and forgiveness on God's. He portrays with particular tenderness the difference between the proud Pharisee and the humble tax-collector at prayer, and with particular warmth the joy at the repentance of a single sinner, or the delicacy of Jesus' silent welcome for the woman who was a sinner. His word-painting, too, is brilliant, so that the stories of the infancy of John the Baptist and Jesus, before their mission begins, breathe the atmosphere of the Old Testament: we are still living in that world and awaiting the coming of the Spirit at the baptism of Jesus.

Four faces of a prism

One of the most enriching advantages of studying the gospels is the possibility of seeing Jesus through the eyes of the four different gospel writers. Each is different, each puts the message differently, each stresses different aspects of Jesus. Down the ages, writers have likened the aspects portrayed by the four gospels to four different portraits of the same person. Augustine of Hippo called them four facets of the same prism. They complement one another and, through this

interplay, all together add up to a richer and more profound picture of the Master than each separately could provide. From the earliest time they were all accepted by Christians as a valid record of what Jesus did, taught and suffered. Other versions of the Jesus story were rejected by Christians. Such versions have survived in a few copies, or been recently rediscovered in single copies by researchers, after being lost or hidden for centuries. Others presumably – perhaps including some of the accounts mentioned by Luke in his preface – are still lost. Obviously they were not felt by the first Christian generations to render an acceptable or reliable picture of their Lord and Master, or – as other theological traditions have it – to be inspired. The Christian community did not recognise in them the face of Jesus.

How to read this book

Like the other books in this series, this book is not meant to be a technical commentary, discussing the views of scholars, putting forward many possibilities and assessing them all. In most cases I have simply chosen the interpretation which seemed to me best. All reading should, of course, be done with a critical mind, but criticism is not the purpose of this reading. The purpose of reading the gospel is to come closer to the Lord, the Lord God in the Lord Jesus. I suggest that you read the passage given, slowly and prayerfully, then read the comment (or part of it) till you have enough thoughts for reflection. There is no need to read a whole section at one sitting. If part of a comment provides you with enough material for thought, stop; then start again on another occasion. It may be useful to have a gospel text beside you, so that you can refer to it while you read the comment. The comment is only a means to an end, and the end is a loving understanding of the gospel itself. While I have been writing this commentary, Luke has become a gentle friend. Let him lead you to the Lord and Saviour he portrays.

58 Luke 15:11–32

The prodigal son

This third parable of repentance and forgiveness has had difficulty finding a title. Should it be 'the prodigal son', 'the forgiving father' or even 'the powerless father' (because he is so helplessly affectionate)? Luke's story is told with all the delicacy and character of his artistry. The story is told with a fine balance, the geographical movements away and back neatly parallel to each other, and symbolising the breaking and mending of the relationship. The son is lost – the son is found. The son loses everything – the son receives everything. In the centre of all is the son's repentance.

The younger son

The audacity of the younger son is breathtaking. He treats his father as virtually dead already. Not only the insult, but the financial loss: presumably the father has to sell up half his property to provide the wastrel with his cash. The lowest point to which he sinks is of course tending unclean animals and even envying them. Luke is a realist and knows the usefulness of some such jolt towards repentance. This is a classic case of the Lukan anti-hero doing the right thing for the wrong reason. It is then that he is forced to take stock, and breaks out into that feature of so many of Luke's parables, a little puzzled speech to himself about what he should do (just like the rich fool, the crafty steward or the unjust judge).

The elder son

The portrait of the elder son is also masterly. His resentment after all his years of loyal labour is utterly justified on any ordinary human level. No doubt he had had to work all the harder both for lack of his brother's labour and to make up for the sale of half the property. And, after all, the calf *we* had been fattening (yes, I've been working at that too) was part of his own share of the property. So he refuses even to acknowledge his brother; he calls him 'this son of yours'. Quite without justification he introduces 'loose women' into the equation, though there has been no indication that they were among the wastrel's excesses. This detail is due entirely to the elder brother's own malice and jealousy. But then

his anger is so well justified that the slight exaggeration of a carelessly chosen word is not surprising.

The father

Well, perhaps he was a bit too indulgent at the beginning. He accepts the insult and the impoverishment – but then most parents and superiors have to learn when to bite their tongues. It is not always helpful to tell home truths to the young. (Paul agreed: 'Everything is permissible, but not everything builds people up' – 1 Corinthians 10:23.) When the first dust of the son's arrival appears on the horizon, the father *runs* to meet him, affection overcoming the demands of dignity in an oriental gentleman who is no longer young. He embraces the son and will not even listen to the nice little prepared speech, which is interrupted in the middle, no doubt smothered in the embrace. He reassures the wastrel that all is forgiven and that trust is restored by even giving him the authority of a ring, so that he can sign away the rest of the property if he likes.

Nor is the resentful elder brother neglected: the celebration has begun when the father even leaves his place at the head of the table, deserting his guests and new-found son, to go out and try to coax away his resentment. He has the generosity to acknowledge (and it takes courage to give ground to an angry man) that 'all I have is yours'. To the hurtful gibe 'this son of yours' he replies gently with 'your brother'. A less generous story would have finished with a sharp contrast in the father's attitude to the two brothers and would have left the self-righteous elder brother to swelter in his own resentment. But this father's affection is so limitless that even such behaviour must be drawn back into love.

Prayer

Father, I have the faults of both the brothers. Coax me always back into your love.

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Writing with a historian's eye for narrative detail, Luke stresses how acceptance of Jesus' message means a complete reversal of worldly standards of success, and that we need to share God's passion for the poor and excluded. Throughout his gospel he also drops hints to remind his readers how the message of salvation will spread beyond the people of Israel, as he shows in his second volume, Acts.

Dom Henry Wansbrough OSB is a monk of Ampleforth in Yorkshire. He is executive secretary of the International Commission for Preparing an English-language Lectionary (ICPEL).

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