

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. LUKE: INTRODUCTION

With the beginning of the Church's liturgical year on the first Sunday of Advent, the Sunday gospel readings are taken from the gospel account of St. Luke, continuing until Advent of 2019. Early in the history of Christianity, the Church came to recognize in four written renderings of the life and words of Jesus, an authenticity which was in accord with the message being preached and taught throughout the Christian communities. These soon came to be recognized as worthy of being called the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and equal in that way to the books of the Jewish scriptures of the Old Testament. These gospels became the highlight of the body of literature that forms the New Testament.

The four versions of the gospel narrative manifest God's desire that the perspective of different writers would give a breadth of understanding of the richness that was revealed in the coming of Jesus among us. And so we are invited to see the impact of the same story of salvation on these inspired authors, each of whom has in mind a particular need to tell/re-tell the gospel message, according to the conditions of the of Christians he is familiar with. Luke alone speaks explicitly of his involvement in composing the text.(Lk 1,1-4) He tells of many other written accounts of all that happened in the coming of Jesus, and how he takes that material, adding to it stories from actual witnesses to these events as well as from those who over the period of time had been verbally passing on the narrative. According what most biblical scholarship tells us, St. Luke takes as his point of reference the gospel of St. Mark, repeating precisely in many passages the exact words of Mark's account, while making some modifications and changes to further elucidate the passage for the person (or persons) he has in mind.

With what is recognized as the high literary quality in the Greek language used in this gospel, Luke would be a credible source, as he invites persons of cultured society to come to believe in the message he offers them. St. Luke addresses one individual in the gospel prologue--Theophilus; and he uses a title, "Your Excellency." This title is given with no more specific clarification in the gospel account, but we could well draw the conclusion Theophilus would seem to have some special position and rank in public society, probably with some responsibility for civic order. In the world of the Roman Empire, the great world power of its time, its development of civilization, its efficient administration and a highly developed system of law, was a point of pride for the citizenry. Even now we admire their achievements. For a member of that society and culture, accepting the task of spreading the Christian message was a daunting challenge. This was the message of a savior, indeed, the very Son of God, who has come into this world, and had his life ended by being executed as a criminal, publicly crucified under the rule of the Roman Empire. Paul speaks of this same difficulty in his mission: "...we preach Christ crucified, ...an absurdity to the Gentiles." (ICor 1,23)

And so it is that in this gospel Luke addresses Theophilus with some significant attention paid to what Roman citizens of high standing would have problems with. As we look closely at the gospel narrative, especially at the climactic events surrounding his passion and death, we find specific details concerning legal issues not brought up by the other evangelists. Could we not then surmise that Theophilus was a magistrate, with responsibility for public order under the law? Let us examine some passages where the accusations were made about the criminal acts of Jesus, an issue of interest to many at that time.

As the drama of the passion opens, a group led by Judas the apostle approaches Jesus in the garden of Gethsemani. Jesus directly challenges the delegation of Jewish officials who have come to arrest him: "Am I a criminal (the word "brigand" is used in Matthew/Mark) that you come out after me armed with swords and clubs?". Jesus states, defending himself, that in all the time he has been preaching in the temple, no public disturbance occurred. (Lk 22,52) The guardians of the temple had no grounds for penalizing him.

We move to issues of the civil law. Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate, the local Roman authority. Shouts by the crowd accuse him of opposing Caesar. Pilate dismisses the charges as insufficient for what constitutes a crime. Hearing that Jesus is a Galilean, Pilate sends him to Herod, present at the time in Jerusalem, but legally having jurisdiction over Jesus. After lengthy questioning, Herod renders his judgment that no case can be brought against Jesus. (This episode is not recorded in Matthew/Mark.) Agreeing with Herod, Pilate reiterates his own decision: "Obviously this man has done nothing that deserves death".

As the scene moves to the crucifixion of Jesus on Calvary, the theme of judicial procedures continues. The words of Jesus in this passion account show him, with not a trace of resentment towards those who brought him there, taking the role of a defense attorney for the Jewish people before the throne of God: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing". Jesus addresses the self-acknowledged criminal on the cross beside him, who himself had just spoken of the innocent state of Jesus to the other crucified criminal. At his request, Jesus graciously grants him pardon and freedom on that very day, true to the mission given to him: "... to proclaim liberty to captives". (Lk 4,18) Remarkably, with a final stroke, Luke presents the statement of the centurion, present as Rome's official witness of the accomplished execution of criminals, pronouncing "This indeed was an innocent man." The case is closed.