

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.

THE MESSAGE REACHES OUT INTO THE WORLD

The Gospel of St. Luke ends with the words of Jesus to the apostles explaining how the ancient scriptures had prophesied the death and resurrection of the Messiah, and how this message is now to be preached to all nations. The ascent of Jesus to heaven finishes his work, and another era begins. The gospel account is now picked up again by a second book written by Luke to continue the story. The Acts of the Apostles begins, addressing the same person, Theophilus, who will hear of the dynamic event that began this new era for those believing in Christ who will be "clothed with power from on high." (Lk 24.49)

This individual Theophilus represents a large number of Christians who with questions similar to his, need to hear Luke's retelling of the gospel story. We have heard of the major issue pressing upon a man such as Theophilus, mentioned in our first article of this bible study series: that of the challenge of believing that God implemented his work of salvation through a public execution being thrust upon Jesus as if he were guilty of a criminal act against the Roman Empire. Additional questions have apparently arisen among the Christians that Luke is addressing, people who live now forty some years since these things happened. They are feeling very distant from the Savior who walked on this earth. Christianity had reached many throughout the world already. Especially in the Roman Empire, we know of Christian communities that have sprung up in large population centers: Rome, Ephesus and Antioch. Luke brings to these believers an awareness of the broad scope of time in the plan of God for their salvation, continuing up to their own time. He seeks to bridge the gap created by space and time between them and Jesus.

The Acts of the Apostles opens with events in Jerusalem as he tells the story of the Church beginning there and reaching eventually to Rome where the account ends, with Paul preaching the gospel message. All this has been done under the impetus of the Holy Spirit, bringing the gospel word to Rome, the hub of a huge empire covering a large portion of the world. It was the center of travel and transportation that reach into vast territories, a system making possible the rapid spread of this new hope for humanity.

These later Christians had to be reminded that it was God's plan that Jesus the Messiah would no longer to be visibly present. Rather, as Jesus had said, "I send down upon you the promise of the Father. (Lk 24,49) Powerfully present to the apostles and disciples on the feast of Pentecost, the sound of a mighty wind, and flames of fire appeared over them empowering them to proclaim the message, and wondrously having their speech understood by people speaking a large variety of languages, The apostles show signs of this power, moving many people to believe in their testimony. Miracles begin to take place with the apostles acting "in the name of Jesus Christ." (Acts 3,6) In the book of Acts several accounts are told of powerful experiences taking place as people began to hear and believe. The visibility of God begins again, continuing and expanding what Jesus had done in his earthly mission.

In the gospel passages, Luke was intent on speaking of the action of the Holy Spirit, specifically associating this divine power with Jesus and his mission. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove appeared over Jesus at his baptism as he began his public ministry. After the baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert for a time of testing; following this, the Spirit leads him to his ministry in Galilee. (Lk 4, 1, 14) Jesus appears in the synagogue of Nazareth, announcing the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has...anointed me and sent me...to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives...."(Lk 4,18) He moves out into the world as we are told "...the power of the

Lord made him heal.” (Lk 5,17) And that Spirit was active even before the birth of Jesus, as Luke points out in those other holy figures who were involved at the time of the birth of Jesus: Mary, Elizabeth, Zachary, Simeon and Anna. The Spirit was present in many hearts and minds. Voices begin to speak of a new force coming upon the earth: John the Baptist prophesized, as he introduced Jesus to the people: “He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire.” (Lk2,16) In his teaching, Jesus himself speaks of this gift that will come upon those who appeal to the Father in prayer: “...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.”(Lk 11,13)

In the Acts of the Apostles, the believers gather together in prayer, intent on the words Jesus to the apostles before he departed: “Wait for the fulfillment of my Father’s promise....Within a few days you will be baptized by the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1,4-5) Luke the evangelist is most anxious to have the Christians he is addressing understand this profound connection with the previous teaching of Jesus that now has had such an impact among them.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter, under the inspiration of the Spirit, speaks to the people urging them to believe in their message. He voices the words of the prophet Joel about what God would be doing: “In those days I will pour out a portion of my spirit on all mankind: your sons and daughter shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.” (Acts 2,17) 5) All Christians will share this presence of the Holy Spirit, as Peter had preached: “...be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ.... Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2,38)

Very evident in Luke’s writings is the attention he gives to prayer in the Christian life. He stands out among all the evangelists in his frequent references to this. Jesus is shown to us as an example of a life of prayer. At his baptism, Jesus is at prayer when the Holy Spirit descends upon him (Lk 3,21-22) He frequently retires to a time of prayer, alone with his Father (Lk 5,16); on the mountain of the transfiguration: “While he was praying his face changed in appearance....” (Lk 9,29) Following the success of the mission of the seventy-two disciples, “Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said: I offer you praise, O Father....” (Lk 10,21) In choosing the twelve apostles, Jesus first spends a whole night in prayer on the mountain, “in communion with God.” (Lk 6,12ff) As Luke brings us along in these two books, he connects us to the deep significance and unity of these elements. While recounting the departure of Jesus “...having first instructed the apostles he had chosen through the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 1,2)

In all of this, Luke masterfully brings to Christians an understanding of the connection between Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the role of the apostles in bringing about among them a share in all that is occurring when they come to believe and respond to this message. Their sharing in these blessings should bring about continued prayers of wonder and thanks. The gospel account has shown for them impact made upon the many people witnessing the workings of God in the life of Jesus: the shepherds leaving the scene of the birth of a savior, “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen (Lk 2,20); those who had witnessed the cure of the paralytic, “Full of awe they gave praise to God, saying ‘we have seen incredible things today (Lk 5,26); at the messianic entry of Jesus into Jerusalem acclamations are heard: “...the entire crowd of disciples began to rejoice and praise God loudly for the display of power they had seen,...saying ‘Blessed is he who comes as king in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.’”(Lk 19,37-38) The event of Pentecost brought about a new community of believers, notable for their common activities. “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.” (Acts, 2,42)

In the gospel account, Luke, as the teacher of prayer, draws our attention to Jesus in his passion and crucifixion. The intensity of his prayer in the garden is truly an agony: even his body reacts, sweating in the struggle between his physical instincts for survival and the obedience of his spirit to the Father whose will it is for him to suffer and die. As he hung on the cross his first and last words were spoken in prayer: a prayer asking for forgiveness for those responsible for his execution, with pleading words offering a reason for this pardoning; his last words being a tender commendation of his spirit to the loving Father. We can be rightly grateful for the treasures revealed for us in these inspired passages of this evangelist. God invites to respond with our own renewed desire to enter into this living union with him in our own life of prayer.