

Luke 1 Sermon

1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first,[a] to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

At times like this I always think a little historical perspective is helpful. Seemingly unprecedented as this seems, we have survived worse times than this.

In 410AD the wolves were at the door. Literally, these barbarian germanic tribes from the wild forests north of the Danube stood at the gates of Rome, the eternal city. And the unthinkable happened. Rome fell, it was invaded and ransacked by the Visigoths. Rome which had stood for almost 1000 years Rome. As Jerome said “the city which had conquered the whole world was itself conquered.”

Civilisation itself shook on its foundations. And people asked profound questions. Why did God allow this? Has God abandoned us? And some of the old guard said this is the punishment for abandoning the old pagan Gods and adopting this new Christian God.

It was a philosophical as well as political crisis which needed a response, and they were fortunate to have one of the finest minds in christendom, the Bishop of Hippo St Augustine. His response was a magnificent work called the City of God, written in instalments over 13 years which argued that we should never mistake the city of men for the city of God. In fact if we take Christianity seriously we say that empires of men will absolutely fall, do not put your trust in them. But the city of God, the true eternal city, the heavenly Jerusalem will never fail.

When the things we trust in are shaken, we return to the foundation. This singular life has shaped western civilisation and we need to come back to it.

Lukes Gospel

It was another time of turmoil. In the late 60's AD deepening conflict between the Jewish nation and the Roman occupiers which would come to a head in AD70 with the destruction of Jerusalem. Once again the Jews were becoming an exile people, the world that Jesus had inhabited was changing fast. The stable traditional communities that had been witness to Jesus life & teaching threatened were being dispersed or destroyed. One of the implications of this, was that the oral tradition of storytelling was being lost. And so these things began to be written down.

And so Luke says v1 “*many have undertaken to set down an orderly account*” There were many witnesses and many accounts. Many portraits of this singular life. Each of the apostles who v2 “*were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word*”

But these witnesses were coming to the end of their life , and so Luke sets out v3 *after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us*

Luke's style of writing is distinct. It is a contrast to Mark which is populist - more in common from a literary perspective with Roman historian like Josephus than the other books of the NT. It is a sophisticated document.

We don't know for sure who it was written by. The author never gives his name. Not an eyewitness v2 - but associated with the apostles.

The early church (Both Justin Martyr and Ignatius of Antioch) was confident that it was Luke- the associate of Paul, a physician, and a gentile convert to Judaism referred to in Colossians.

One thing about Luke that is particularly significant is if he was a gentile that would make this and Acts the only parts of the Bible written by a non Jew. And that would make sense of one of the particular emphasis.

The intended audience

It is addressed to v3 Most excellent Theophilus

‘Most excellent’ Greek/Roman, influential, educated, status, wealthy & powerful. Theophilus - the focus of this book. ‘Lover of God’ A pseudonym? But a focus on the wider Roman World, a sophisticated gospel for a cosmopolitan world.

The purpose of the Gospel.

v4 is pretty clear about what Luke has in mind. “*so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.*”

To know the truth is a very significant phrase. Not simply to learn facts, but to be confronted with a life extraordinary. I'm reading the new Biography of Thomas Cromwell at the moment - biography is a very powerful medium. How much more this biography of Jesus.

And there is something revelatory about reading the gospels. Albert Einstein “*I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene....No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life.*”

And that word ‘truth’ in v4 is ‘Logos’ as in ‘in the beginning was the word/ logos.

The job of the gospel is for you to know the word made flesh. To convert us - not just once, but to keep evangelising us. It is not simply information, it is formational - it is intended to shape us, to form us in the likeness of Christ.

So as we face the great unknowns of our time we can do so set firm on the foundations of our faith and so stand with courage and hope.

Did Jesus exist?

Is this still a question?

"Scholarship, like everything else, is subject to fashion, and it was the fashion, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for some to deny that Jesus existed. No serious scholar holds that view now, and it is hard to see how it ever took hold, for the evidence of Jesus's existence is abundant."

Paul Johnson, Jesus: A 21st Century Biography

Richard Dawkins begrudgingly acknowledges the historical of Jesus. *"I think we owe Jesus the honour of separating his genuinely original and radical ethics from the supernatural nonsense which he inevitably espoused as a man of his time"*

Significant for he acknowledges his teaching and "genuinely original and radical ethics"

Let me go further. The historical figure of Jesus is one of the most astonishing figures in human history.

This child of a peasant woman, born in an obscure village, never formally educated, who never wrote a book and never held a political office, who commanded an army yet none shaped human history as much as that one solitary life

And that life is so immaculate, so gentle, sophisticated that it is unmatched.

Dostoevsky - Even those who have renounced Christianity still follow the Christian ideal, for no-one has been able to imagine a higher ideal of humanity and virtue than that given by Christ.

The Jesus of the Gospels is a character so compelling, his embrace of the outcast and his refusal judge the sinner, the courage and insight of his teaching demand our attention

I think the character and teaching of Jesus take this beyond a religious question. He is arguably the greatest figures in human history. To ignore him is to make a fool of yourself. As Philip Pullman did in 'His dark materials' trilogy - trying to be a C.S. Lewis for atheists. But is his damning indictment of the church, he simply ignored Jesus. And he did that for a reason. Without Jesus the church is a creaking institution. But with him, it is a promised of great hope.

That is the need both for the church and the world - to be confronted by this luminous, radical, figure to remind us of our own humanity and the truth about God.

Because God has not given up on his people, despite their shaky faith. Does God care about cities and Empire? Not really.

But Luke will tell a difference story, a God who cares about ordinary people. Who grant dignity to the despised, raise up the humble, blesses the poor, sets the captive free and gives us a future and an inheritance.

And as for the fall of Rome?

Was in fact the fault of Christianity? Augustine said no. Of course Rome didn't fall because the pagan Gods were angry that they had been rejected. But is it possible that a global empire which for all its remarkable achievements was founded on brutality, ambition and greed, might not actually be sustainable under the influence of Christianity. It's hard to believe in the values of Rome when you are worshipping a God who died on a Roman cross.

The city of men will fall. Do not allow yourself to be shaken for you are citizens of another city. Know the truth, the logos, the Christ, and the Christ will set you free.