

# A Sermon in King's College Chapel

## Luke the Evangelist

What would Christianity be like without the contribution of Luke the Evangelist?

The answer is, 'very different indeed'.

The New Testament itself would be much shorter: Luke's two books, the gospel and Acts, supply about a third of the total. The story of Christmas would be very truncated. There would be no annunciation, no visitation, and no shepherds in the field abiding. There would be no Pentecost and no record of the work of the Holy Spirit among the first missionary Christians; no account of their travelling or their capacity to stir people up to faith or to generate controversial opposition; no record of their internal squabbles. We would have to do without some of the greatest stories in the Bible, among them the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, Zacchaeus up a tree, and the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Perhaps most devastating for us and our traditions in this Chapel, there would be no Magnificat, no Benedictus, and no Nunc Dimittis. These so-called canticles, or 'Lukan Psalms' have since time immemorial featured in the daily prayer of the church: Benedictus in the morning, Magnificat in the early evening and Nunc Dimittis late at night.

The Book of Common Prayer put both Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis into Evening Prayer and the development of that service in choral form at cathedrals and college chapels has established them as pillars and props of western spirituality.

Magnificat is the song that Mary sang in the company of her cousin Elisabeth when they were meditating on the significance of their two pregnancies. We might ask whether Mary really sang it, whether Luke actually wrote it or whether it was an already existing Hebrew song: a Psalm that never got into the book of Psalms. But we cannot deny the creativity of Luke in including it where he did or the first liturgists of the church their genius in deciding it was the right thing to recite on a daily basis. And we can say exactly the same for the Nunc Dimittis.

Both 'Mag' and 'Nunc' are intensely personal, and yet something about them makes it possible for us to return to them day after day and make them our own.

While the Magnificat is a forward-looking poem based on the thought of new life, the Nunc Dimittis concerns the end of life. Old Simeon sees the Christ child and, recognising who he is, realises that his time of waiting is at an end and that he can and should depart in peace.

The Magnificat is the longer text and more value-laden. People have rightly seen in it the origins of the left-leaning approach of much Christian politics: 'He hath put down the mighty from their seat and exalted the humble and meek'.

Tradition tells us that Luke the Evangelist was also a physician, and tradition has it that he was an artist. We can see his artist's eye in the quality of his stories and care of a physician in his interest in people.

Luke's is a much less apocalyptic gospel than Mark's. It is much less judgemental than Matthew's and, compared with John's, it is unphilosophical and perhaps not very 'spiritual'. But when it comes to the actual humanity of the people, the credibility of the stories and the presentation of values such as compassion, repentance, forgiveness and honouring the poor, not to mention being alive to the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit, there is nothing to match Luke in the bible or anywhere else.

Our religion, our spirituality, our faith, would be completely different without Luke. So it is an especial joy to give thanks for him this day and to ask God that we might continue to be inspired by his writing.

*The Revd Dr Stephen Cherry*

*Dean, King's College, Cambridge*

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