

Our Dear Friend Luke, The Physician

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[0 : 00] It's a great delight to see you. I wondered whether anybody would turn up today, so I'm encouraged and delighted to see you. That was Lisa Owen who just talked to you and looks after coordinating all this whole operation.

And you will have, as Lisa directed, a card which shows the kind of territory we're going to cover between now and December the 18th in these noon hour series each week.

And what it is basically are characters, both historical and non-historical characters like the Good Samaritan or Demetrius, the shop steward, Stephen and the first city mission.

These are characters portrayed by Luke in the two books of the New Testament which he wrote, Luke and Acts. The introduction to each book was just given to you by Lisa.

Lisa, well, it's been a very interesting summer, hasn't it? And last summer we had the standoff down in Quebec between the Aboriginal people and the province of Quebec and I guess the country.

[1 : 23] This summer there's been this tremendous sort of upheaval in Eastern Europe and in Russia. The consequences of which I don't suppose anybody has any idea where we'll be a year from now.

Except that it's going to be a very different world. And so what I'm trying to do to you today is introduce you to Luke as a background for the kind of thinking that you're going to need to be doing from time to time.

And to try and show you why in the whole history of Christian faith, the gospel written by St. Luke has been so very important.

And to begin with I'll give you this brilliant illustration which goes like this.

And then like this. And then like this. And this is July the 14th, 64 AD, when half of the city of Rome burned.

[2 : 32] And that's a picture of it on fire. That was a momentous occasion which some think may have been in part contributing to the writing of this gospel.

Nero was the Roman emperor at the time. His wife, his mistress was a lady who rather favored Judaism.

Judaism, though she herself was not a Jew, but she was a considerable influence as you might gather. In his reign, both St. Peter, who was reputed to have been crucified upside down in Rome, and Paul, who is reputed to have been beheaded in Rome under Nero.

Both these men were put to death. James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, was put to death. Half the city of Rome was burned in a fire that lasted for a week.

And so, in the last week, there was an attempt made to scapegoat the Christians who were by then sufficiently prominent that that could be done to them.

[3 : 56] And they were accused of being those who caused the fire. And so, they were violently persecuted from that point on.

And so, what happens in this amazing book is you come to that sort of time. And so, if you think of it, it relates sort of to the crucifixion, which would be 25 years or 35 years before.

It would sort of carry us back to the middle 50s. If we try to remember what happened then, then that's what took place here, was that the events of the life and death of Jesus Christ were still very much a part of the living memory of a lot of people, even as the 50s would be part of the living memory of at least a few of you.

So, Luke became very much aware, because he had traveled with Paul, that something needed to be done. And so, he decided that he would do it.

And what you have in these passages that have been read, the story of what Luke determined to do. And what he did was write to someone who we might consider as a kind of patron.

[5 : 31] And he wrote a narrative to him, which is an account in sort of order of time, to try and explain the Christian faith to a senior Roman official who had heard about the faith, who now knew about it because the Christians were the object of persecution due to the fire.

And Luke wanted to explain to him what in fact Christian faith was about on the grounds that he misunderstood it. He had information about it, as you can see in the last verse, that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been informed.

Now, most of us are regularly informed about the Christian faith. That is, we hear about abuses, we hear about television evangelists, we hear about failure.

Most of us have sufficient information that comes to us through the media on a regular basis to have some opinion about the Christian faith, for better or for worse.

And it's not unusual to find the Christian faith condemned in our society once it was honored and respected, but now it's not. And it's considered to be part of the Christian faith in terms of the Christian faith in the Christian faith in the Christian faith.

[6 : 52] And it's considered to be part, a kind of detrimental fact in terms of the progress which is intended for us. So, Theophilus, to whom this letter was written, was a person who was informed about it, but you might even say misinformed.

And so, Luke wanted to go to work and try and correct that. There has been considerable speculation about the person of Theophilus, whom he has mentioned in both these introductions by name, partly because the word, the name means a lover of God, and partly because some think it probably is a pseudonym to cover up somebody who would be embarrassed by the address if he was known to be in any way related to the Christian faith.

And so, Theophilus is, for that reason, thought to be a pseudonym. Another possibility which historians have conjectured, which is at least fascinating to think about, but again for which there is no proof, is that he was in fact the lawyer who had been hired to defend Paul when he came before the emperor.

And that Luke wrote this account to try and explain to the lawyer who it was that was being tried, and why Paul was who he was, and why he stood for what he stood for, and why he was charged. And so, that's just a speculative thing, but I find it helpful to think about it, and to consider the possibility. So, he's writing this at a kind of critical point in history.

[8 : 35] Remember, this happened in 64 AD. Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed as it was in 70 AD.

Masada had not taken place. The Jews were still in good standing in the Roman Empire. Most religions were regarded as acceptable within the Roman Empire on the grounds that they were related to the particular nation in which the people lived.

In other words, if you lived in this country, this religion was appropriate. If you lived in this country, this religion was appropriate. And if you lived in another country, they had their own religion which was appropriate.

And religion was essentially a means of ordering the lives of people around certain ideas. And the Jews, who didn't relate to that process, still because of the high ethical standard of the religion which they taught, they had gained acceptance throughout the Roman Empire.

And as I say, not in the least because they were favored in some way by the lady who was the mistress to the emperor Nero. And so it was when this happened that the Christians and Jews had the big split.

[9 : 56] Because the Jews were careful to say when the persecution happened, we are not Christians. And the Christians were careful to say, we are Jews.

In the sense that their faith had come out of the same matrix. And for the most part had been identified with just a part of Judaism.

But now the cleavage came, the Christians were persecuted, and Theophilus was there in order that he could, this letter, this book is written to him, written to him, to explain to him who the Christians are, and why they behave the way they do.

And this seems to me to be a singularly appropriate way to begin this fall series in a city where it needs to happen that people have the Christian faith explained to them, because most people have some information about it.

And the necessity of working through that information is why Luke wrote this gospel.

[11 : 09] And why he, in a sense, addressed it to Theophilus, because he wanted to address it to somebody who was not, as far as we know, a Christian.

And he said, we're not going to be a Christian. And he said, we're not going to be a Christian. We're not going to be a Christian. So it's probably important for you to understand that. And when you go through the book and see the references to the Roman authorities, the Roman governors, to Pontius Pilate, to King Agrippa, all the things in which, in a sense, there is an implicit defense of the Christian faith for the Roman Empire, which runs all the way through the two books of Luke, which are Luke and Acts, demonstrating that the Christian faith is not opposed to the Roman Empire, that it is part of that, that there are Christians who are living orderly lives within the Empire, that their cause is not political revolution, as a lot of people thought then and tend to think now, but that the Christian faith, like the Roman Empire, was a universal faith.

It didn't belong to the Jews. It didn't belong to the people of this country. It didn't belong to the people of this country. It belonged to everybody everywhere.

And that you could make no ethnic distinctions about who Christians were, because they crossed all the boundaries, all the cultures, all the language groups.

That Christianity was a universal faith. And so when you're talking to an empire which aspired to be the empire which ruled the world, the world, and told them about another kingdom which claims to be the truth for all time and all history, then there seems to be some common ground.

[13 : 10] And that's why Luke addressed this gospel to Theophilus. Christians were thought of as being antisocial and anti-human, and that's in the same way that whenever we tend to err in the indulgence in the sins of the flesh, one of the general excuses is, well, after all, I'm only human.

And that was what the Romans thought too, was that the demands of Christian faith were beyond anything that ought to be imposed on me.

and imposed on mere human beings. So that's what happens to Theophilus as he has this gospel written to him.

The author of the gospel is a Greek, a Gentile, a physician, a man who apparently never married and therefore never had children, who died at 84 years of age.

And it's intriguing to me because there are several references to him as a physician. There are many references to him as a companion of St. Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, so that he traveled with Paul and knew a lot about Paul.

[14 : 41] And the stature of Paul in the New Testament is in no small measure the result of the fact that Luke knew him and Luke wrote about him in the Acts of the Apostles.

So that the stature of the man in our society is attributed in no small measure to what Luke wrote about him. And Luke was a very keen observer of human nature.

And I hope that will unfold from week to week as we look at the various ten portraits that we have from the gospel and from the book of Acts of the people that Luke encountered.

So you have this man. You may be surprised to know, but in my experience, a lot of doctors go to church. I would just say without any facts to back it up, that more doctors go to church than lawyers. Now the significance of that, I will leave for you to meditate on. But doctors are really very closely in touch with the human problem, the limitations of human life, the circumstances and the suffering that's involved in human existence.

[16 : 03] They tend to be very closely in touch with it. And there's a kind of fascinating book that has been written, oh, it's probably written 30 years ago now, called The Letters of Luke the Physician.

And it tries, it's purely, I mean, it's fantasy. There's no historical basis. But the way he brings Luke to the faith is Luke has to minister to people, and Luke has to minister to him from his own resources. And he feels about the people to whom he's ministering, is that these people need more resources than I can supply for them. And he couldn't find those resources until he himself came to faith in Christ.

And then he found the resources which he thought were complementary to his practice of medicine. And I'm sure that a lot of you are in that kind of situation, where in dealing with people and ministering to people, you know the limitations of your own ability to help them and recognize that they need resources beyond you.

And in that situation, Luke is presumed to have come to faith in Christ, and that that was behind part of his argument that he presented to Theophilus.

[17 : 28] So you have this unique gentleman, scholar, physician, companion of Paul, a prominent citizen of the city of Antioch, where the first Christian church was established outside of Jerusalem. And you find him watching and putting together this narrative in order to explain what the Christian faith is all about.

And I would commend to you this narrative as being better than the job the media does on the Christian faith most of the time. So what Luke did then was he wrote this book.

And here you have a book written for a non-Christian. It's reckoned to be made up of, I don't know whether this will help you or confuse you, but it's reckoned to be made up of these strands.

And if you see what happens when you get to sort of 65 AD, you have this and you have this and you have the birth narratives.

[18 : 54] And you have the Gospel of Mark in its some kind of rudimentary form. So that when you read this account, if you look at it right here, it says, The things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely, for some time past, to write an orderly account for you.

So in some way, I think Luke considered this to be a disorderly account. And he was going to take it and put it together in some form which would be comprehensible.

Proto-Luke is considered those parts of the Gospel of Luke, which were part of the oral tradition which led to the writing of the New Testament. This is the source book, which is always called Q for some reason.

And there is a reason. And it again was a source book. You have this strange account, with which most of us are very familiar, of the birth narratives.

You know, the story of Zacchaeus, the story of the shepherds, the story of Bethlehem, the story of the Magnificat, the story of the Annunciation. All those stories are preserved for us by Luke, the physician.

[20 : 17] And all of this is put, taken, all these threads are taken together by St. Luke, who was not himself an eyewitness, but was in personal touch with eyewitnesses and with these accounts.

And he puts the whole thing together in what has been called, get this, the most beautiful book ever written, which is the Gospel according to St. Luke.

Now I run into that about Bible books all the time. This is the most that has ever been written. And of course that's always, I think, a matter of personal judgment. But if you were to take a contemporary translation of the Gospel of Luke and sit down and read it just as narrative, I think you might conclude that it would be difficult to find something so succinct and so significant and so meaningful and so profound as the Gospel of Luke.

It's a tremendous book. And Luke put it together from all these resources, having followed them out and traced them down.

So that you get this beautiful book. In it you meet giant characters, without whom it would be very difficult for you to live your lives with any sense of meaning.

[21 : 47] Margaret Atwood wrote about Peter. Who do I mean? You know the fellow who writes the books about Canadian history. Peter Burton, not Peter, said that we wouldn't know who we are without Pierre Burton in Canada.

And that may well be true. What Luke did was to say, you don't know who you are until you have met these people. And he introduces you to them.

People like the Pharisee, of the Pharisee and the publican, the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the man who introduces us to St. Paul.

These and many others are giants that we need to know about, and through whom we come to know what Christian faith is actually all about. Well, that's the book that was written by Luke to Theophilus.

And the reason that he wrote it, if you look in the last line, is that you may know the truth. We live in the information age, which means that we are constantly processing information, but very rarely encountering the truth.

[23 : 01] In other words, we have an awful lot of information thrown at us, which we never have time to consolidate. I read a little snippet from Henry Nouwen this summer, in which he said, words are like fish traps.

You set them and they catch the fish, but then you're interested in the fish. You're no longer interested in the trap. So, St. Luke takes the words out of which he builds the Gospel according to St. Luke, and those words bring you to the person of Christ.

And then those words fall away because you have encountered that person. So that information, ordered, leads you to truth, and the truth leads you to trust.

Trust is that relationship to God through Christ into which we are called. We are living in a trusting relationship.

And if you look your life over very carefully and examine most of your relationships, you will find that there are limits to the trust you will invest in any relationship.

[24 : 16] And what happens when you become a Christian is you discover, as you read the Gospel of Luke, as Theophilus must have read it, that he had at least the potential in encountering the person of Christ through the information that Luke gave him to put his trust in him and to put his whole trust in him, so that he would, in a sense, give his life for this one whom he trusted, give his life to this one whom he trusted.

The thing that I want to conclude with is this. Nobody knows whether Theophilus became a Christian or not, even though the letter was written to him. And there is a sense that nobody knows who you are in terms of the trusting relationship to which you are called in Christ.

Nobody really knows. And Luke, in his portraits of personalities, makes you aware that nobody knows.

And yet, God presumably does know, and you do know, whether the information which has been conveyed to you about the person of Christ through the Gospel of Luke leads you to the place of putting your faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Now, I can tell you that there is lots of information that's out there. And that information is for everybody, I think, in this town.

[25 : 53] It's one of two things. It's either, as Peter describes it, a stumbling block which offends you, and you say, I mean, I ran into a person this morning who said, I went to church last Sunday and there's two lawyers in the congregation who are total hypocrites and I don't know what they're doing at church.

He went to church and all the information he got was for him a stumbling block to his faith. And people pick that kind of information up all the time.

And they have something that stumbles them in terms of coming to a relationship to Christ. But what Peter goes on to say is that what needs to happen, and the reason Luke wrote this letter is that this information about Christ, having been tested and examined and researched and carefully recorded, is to take the information that you have, to refine it, to direct it, to focus it, and instead of it being a stumbling block to your faith, it becomes a foundation stone for your faith.

And that's what the Gospel of Luke is about. And shaping that foundation stone is what this series is about. Let me pray. Our God, we praise and thank you for the Gospel of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, for the miracle that produced this book, which for every generation since, has been a unique testimony to you as our Father, and Jesus as your Son, and us as your people.

Our God, give us a hunger for this Word, that swamped as we are by information and misinformation, swamped as we are by much that is a stumbling block to us, that we may have found the foundation for faith and trust, which has been laid for us in the careful composition of this Gospel.

[27 : 59] We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.