

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 20th Sunday after Trinity

17th October 2021

Feast of St Luke

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Have you noticed how the weather is often beautiful at this time of year? My grandmother used to call it 'St Luke's little summer'. Tomorrow is the Feast-day of St Luke, and this morning we are using the readings and Collect set for that day.

Tradition has it that Luke was a doctor, a physician (mentioned by Paul in his Letter to the Colossians)¹, who became a follower of Christ. It's unclear whether this so-called 'beloved physician', was also the author of the Gospel that bears his name. But it's why today (the Sunday nearest St Luke's Day) is also kept as Healthcare Sunday. It's a day on which we give thanks for all who work in the healing professions – hospitals, doctors' and consultants' surgeries, community healthcare, EHPADs and many others. We have often been reminded of their dedication during the pandemic. Today we give thanks to God for their care for us all.

There's a striking phrase in the Collect for St Luke's Day which refers to 'the wholesome medicine of the Gospel'. What does it mean? One of the themes

¹ Colossians 4.14.

prominent in Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles - the two-part story by the same author that accounts for about a quarter of the New Testament - is the notion of salvation being for the whole world. Whereas Matthew's account focuses on Jesus as the Messiah who had been promised of old to Israel, Luke's emphasis is on how the salvation offered by Jesus spreads out from Israel to 'all the nations'. Near the beginning of his Gospel we hear Simeon speak of the infant Jesus, in the words of the Nunc Dimittis:

'for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.' (Luke 2.29-32)

The Acts of the Apostles shows that happening, as the Gospel spreads out from Jerusalem across the Mediterranean world.

The word 'salvation' in the first century was a concept broader than the meaning sometimes attributed to it nowadays. 'Salvation', as well as embracing the idea of redemption from sinfulness, suffering and death, included everything from healing of body, mind and spirit to a notion of life lived to the full, life in the presence of God, now and for eternity.

This is what the author of Luke's Gospel sees in the effects Jesus had upon people. How he brought them relief not only from physical suffering but also from mental distress, along with reintegration into the community from which they had been excluded by their afflictions. For disease, then as now, brought fear of contagion (the pandemic has brought that into focus for us). Disease and disability were also understood by some to be caused by sin, and people could be excluded from the faith community as a result. That notion, too, is still

around – ‘I must have done something wrong to deserve this’ still haunts people in hospital waiting rooms. But notice how Jesus answers that question when it is put to him. When he is asked: ‘Was this man born blind because *he* sinned, or his parents?’, Jesus replies: ‘Neither. That’s not how it works.’ The Gospel also highlights ways in which as humans we sometimes take refuge in our health problems. Jesus asks one of those he cures: ‘Do you *want* to be made well?’ If Luke was a physician, he would have found the nature of Jesus’s healing ministry intriguing.

Perhaps there’s another dimension to the ‘wholesome medicine’ of the Gospel. Maybe it’s partly about those sayings of Jesus we heard at our Harvest Thanksgiving a couple of weeks ago, about considering the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Two of the most radical things about the message of Christ are the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. Forgiveness of sins, if we accept it, frees us from regret about the past. The promise of eternal life, if we accept it, can free us from anxiety about the future. That’s an incredible blessing. For it just leaves the present, in which we can start to live fully. We can take time to ‘consider the lilies of the field’ and wonder at their beauty. During the lockdown the British naturalist Sir David Attenborough recommended that everyone should spend ten minutes a day in front of the world of nature – a tree, a plant, a landscape – for it would bring healing to their stressed minds. Try it for a week and you will see what he means. It’s a similar process with the Gospel. If we can allow its message to sink into us, if we can learn to inhabit its promises, it will do that for us too. Jesus said, ‘I am come that they may have life, and have it abundantly’ (John 10.10). That’s ‘wholesome medicine’.

Abundant life. Life lived fully in the present, not racked by guilt or resentment about the past or anxiety about the future. I once knew a woman who taught me vividly how it works. She had led a privileged but complicated life (including a recent divorce about which she felt bitter and angry), with a hectic lifestyle that meant she was always rushing from one thing to the next. One day she was told, without warning, that she only had a few months to live. I met her a few weeks later. To my surprise, she told me she had never felt happier. She had stopped feeling bitter about the past, because there wasn't any point, and the future was now so uncertain that there wasn't any point worrying about that either. She was just living in the present, and it was liberating.

Living more fully in the present also helps us to live thankfully. Let's try that too. Find one thing today to give thanks for. And find another tomorrow, and the day after that. See if we can do it every day. It's amazing what it does - living with gratitude, not guilt or resentment or anxiety. 'Wholesome medicine.'

The Gospel also shows us something else, something Jesus was particularly good at: the impact of listening well to others. We practised it in the first session of the *Living in Love and Faith* course last Tuesday. All of us can learn how to listen well to our friends and acquaintances. To be alert to the gaps in a conversation when we wonder: 'What's on their mind? What have they *not* just said that they may be longing to say but don't want to burden me, or because they might think I will judge them for it?' It's only then that we can really engage with that person and begin to offer them the support they need as friends, acquaintances or even strangers.

Later in this service we will pray for those who are suffering at the moment, for whom we have been asked to pray on this Healthcare Sunday. It's a long list, but each is an individual known and loved by members of our congregation in Marseille, Aix, the Luberon or Manosque, as well as our online community that developed during the pandemic. The very length of the list shows us how the things that trouble us are shared by others in need of healing, comfort, encouragement and prayer. It's what Jesus told his seventy followers to go out and do in our Gospel this morning as recorded by Luke, the 'beloved physician': 'Cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you".' (Luke 10.9).

Let us go out and do just that. Most of us are not qualified to offer healing like those who work in our healthcare system, for whom we give thanks today. But Luke, the patron saint of physicians, understood that the notion of healing was a wide one. And that we *can* bring healing to others, sometimes even to ourselves, in many different ways. Let's do it, for the sake of the one who suffered, died and rose for us, bringing healing to all.

Amen.