

Today we rejoice with St Luke, one of the great cloud of witnesses by whom we are surrounded. We remember him as one within the communion of saints, a fellow servant, one who rejoices and worships and prays with us. In his *History of the Church*, written in the first quarter of the fourth century, Eusebius, an historian and theologian of uncertain orthodoxy, and the bishop of the Palestinian town Ceasarea, writes the following description of the Evangelist St Luke:

*'Luke, by birth an Antiochene, and by profession a physician, was for long periods a companion of Paul and was closely associated with the other apostles as well.'*

*'He has left us example of the art of healing souls in two divinely inspired books, the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>1</sup> The latter, he composed not this time from hearsay but from the evidence of his own eyes. It is actually suggested that Paul was in the habit of referring to Luke's gospel whenever he said, as if writing of some Gospel of his own: "According to my gospel".<sup>2,3</sup>*

Between the third Gospel which bears his name, and the Acts of the Apostles, which describes the birth of the Church and missionary journeys of St Paul,<sup>4</sup> St Luke has written about 28 per cent of the New Testament. We have from him the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimittis, the account of the Shepherds who go to a Manger, and of the Angels with whom we have adored and prayed, Glory be to God on High. Luke tells of the penitent thief to whom our Lord promises Paradise, and of our Lord's appearance to disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke was a companion of St Paul on his missionary journeys.<sup>5</sup> The Apostle speaks of St Luke with affection as his 'fellow-labourer', and 'the brother whose praise is in the Gospel throughout all the churches'. In our epistle for today, St Paul speaks of St Luke's faithfulness to him at a difficult time: "*Only Luke is with me*". In another place [Colossians], St Paul describes Luke as the 'beloved physician',<sup>6</sup> this evidence, the medical character of some of his descriptions, and his sophisticated Greek have been evidence for many of St Luke being a doctor.

Our Collect for today invites us to make a connection between St Luke's ministry as a physician, and how he, by his work as an evangelist, serves as a doctor and physician of our souls. We prayed '*that, by the wholesome medicines of the doctrine delivered by him*' – that is, by his witness to Christ and to the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church, '*all the diseases of our souls may be healed*'.

Week after week, we consider how the Gospels, not just that of Luke, but all the four, serve as medicine for the soul. Is this an obvious connection? There is a view that pastoral care is one thing, has to do with caring attitude, certain kinds of help, and that this is very different from doctrine. Even in church, one sometimes encounters idea that there is a Christian culture or ethos which unites us, and then there is troublesome doctrine on the

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<sup>1</sup> The former, he declares, he wrote in accordance with the information he received from those who from the first had been eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, inform which, he adds, he had followed in its entirety from the first.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. 2.16; 16.25, 2 Tim 2.8

<sup>3</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 3.4, Penguin, rev. & ed., A Louth,

<sup>4</sup> St Luke offers us accounts of our Lord's youth and childhood which we do not have anywhere else. It is St Luke who tells us of the visit of angel Gabriel to BVM, Presentation, and visit of 12-year old boy-Jesus to Jerusalem and temple. Also, birth of Jn Bapt. Familiar canticles from Evensong, Mag and Nunc, Songs of Mary and Simeon, from St Luke. St Luke also offers us precious accounts of our Lord's life which we know only from him.

<sup>5</sup> There is an ancient and widespread tradition that he was an artist, a painter of pictures, but the evidence is uncertain

<sup>6</sup> and for that reason, St Luke has been traditionally regarded as the patron of doctors and nurses, and of the medical profession and the healing ministry generally

other, the source of disputes and nastiness. This is a caricature of course, and a caricature to which Christians have contributed by finding it terribly hard to agree about the doctrinal ingredients which make up wholesome medicine.

I'd like to offer a short sketch by one Oxford divine who makes an argument for doctrine as medicine of the soul, to look at how this view might guide us in the midst of our current crisis, and then to look at how our commemoration of St Luke is a challenge to each of us.

For the sketch, I will turn to Dorothy Sayers. Dorothy Sayers was born here in Oxford in 1893 to the clergyman choirmaster of Christ Church. Growing up on the Fens, she too a first in French at Somerville in 1915. She wrote detective fiction and plays and thought that her best work was her translation of Dante's Divine Comedy on which she was still working when she died in 1957. She was a friend of C. S. Lewis, who said that he read her play 'The Man born to be King' every Easter.

Sayers gave her most famous address on doctrine as a wholesome medicine, 'Creed or Chaos', in the dark days of May 1940. She described the war raging in Europe as an argument about doctrine: *'We are waging a war of religion. Not a civil war between adherents of the same religion, but a life and death struggle between Christian and pagan'*. For Sayers, Nazism was an anti-Christian form of paganism, however many Christians were hood-winked or confused into following Hitler. The followers of Hitler, she argued, *'have adopted an entirely different dogma, whose ethical scheme has no value for peace or truth, mercy or justice, faith or freedom, and they see no reason why they should practice a set of virtues incompatible with their dogma'*.<sup>7</sup> To avoid the temptation to nationalism or self-righteousness, she added: *'The Christians are, it must be confessed, not very good Christians'*.<sup>8</sup>

'Creed or Chaos' is a fascinating address. Sayers shows how what one thinks about the unity and distinction of the humanity and divinity in the God-man Jesus Christ shapes how 'Tommy Aitkins' and 'John Brown' act in ordinary circumstances, how we experience suffering, or what we hope for. She makes doctrine come alive like the living creature of the winged ox which is the emblem for St Luke. Her conclusion is direct and challenging:

*'It is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality, unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is vitally necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe. It is hopeless to offer Christianity as a vaguely idealistic aspiration of a simple and consoling kind; it is, on the contrary, a hard, tough, exacting, and complex doctrine, steeped in a drastic and uncompromising realism.'*<sup>9</sup>

She does not speak in shades of grey, but the crisis of the day did not leave much space for uncertainty, and if we don't share this certainty, her claims might at least prod us into thoughtfulness:

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<sup>7</sup> p. 26

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Sayers, 'Creed or Chaos', p 25 in *Creed or Chaos?: And other essays in popular theology*, London: Methuen & Co, 1947. very good Christians'

<sup>9</sup> pp. 28. And it is fatal to imagine that everybody knows quite well what Christianity is and needs only a little encouragement to practice it. The brutal fact is that in this Christian country not one person in a hundred has the faintest notion what the Church teaches about God or man or society or the person of Jesus Christ ... Theologically this country is at present in a state of utter chaos established in the name of religious toleration and rapidly degenerating into flight from reason and the death of hope.' 28-9.

*'it seems to me quite disastrous that the idea should have gotten about that Christianity is an other-worldly, unreal, idealistic kind of religion that suggest that if we are good we shall be happy – or if not, it will all be made up to us in the next existence. On the contrary, it is fiercely and even harshly realistic, insisting that the kingdom of heaven can never be attained in this world except by unceasing toil and struggle and vigilance: that, in fact, we cannot be good and cannot be happy, but that there are certain eternal achievements that make even happiness look like trash.'*<sup>10</sup>

What does he mean by saying that we cannot be good or happy? Is this a theological statement about the origin of good or the divine gift of blessedness, or something else?

Here perhaps we might consider what the wholesome medicine of St Luke offers in the light of the current crisis. In the debates about how to respond to the COVID threat and how to protect what we value most, there is also a debate about what human beings are meant for. In the early days of the Church, the way in which Christians cared for the sick and needy was one of the things which led to more conversions and the growth of the Church. Through history, the building of hospitals and institutions for the sick has been one of the better fruits of Christian life. At the same time, the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his followers is that we are meant for more than the best that life in this world can give—we have an eternal destiny. We are not beasts who only need certain kinds of material comfort (this is unfair to beasts of course). Human beings are satisfied with nothing less than sharing in the life of God. In negative terms, our Lord teaches this in the form of a warning:

*'And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.'* (Matt. 10.28).

In more positive terms, our Lord invites us to a share in his life: *'Come unto me all ye who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'*. This is such a powerful invitation because our Lord speaks in a double register. His words speak to our longing for earthly rest, peace from struggle, but his words also carry the intimation that all our rest and refreshment is already a participation in the peace which breaks into this world, but also surpasses both the world and our understanding. Our Lord invites us to find our rest in him, to delight in his countenance, to come into his house, to eat his bread, to feed on the wholesome medicine of his teaching. So, for Dorothy Sayers, sharing in divine creativity was even more important than happiness. This might explain why so many students choose creative hardship and tuition fees over comfort or ease: *'nothing can prevent the human soul from preferring creativeness to happiness,'* says Sayers. *'In this lies man's substantial likeness to the Divine Christ, who in this world suffers and creates continually, being incarnate in the bonds of matter'*.<sup>11</sup>

In the debates about lock-down, some invoke principles of freedom, and ask that we balance care for the vulnerable and the needy with the liberty which makes life worth living. How could freedom even belong on the scales alongside life? Part of this is a calculation about the economic or medical consequences of lockdowns. But there is more than a calculation about a balance of economic or health costs. We have a notion of liberty as belonging to human flourishing, not just a freedom which is a choice between options, or a choice between different kinds of comfort. When John Locke argued for liberty as a fundamental right at end of 17<sup>th</sup>-century, he did this not on the basis of an independent

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<sup>10</sup> pp 40-1, 'It has been said, I think by Berdyaev, that nothing can prevent the human soul from preferring creativeness to happiness. In this lies man's substantial likeness to the Divine Christ, who in this world suffers and creates continually, being incarnate in the bonds of matter' p. 41

<sup>11</sup> p. 41

human claim, but on the basis of doctrine. Human beings have a right to liberty for John Locke and for the theorists who followed him because this freedom serves God's purposes for us.

This doesn't give an answer to debates about lockdowns, about the best way to care for the vulnerable, or to protect the future of the young. Perhaps I'm stating the obvious, the decisions our leaders make are never just a question of statistics, they also reflect what we think human life is for and what makes a life worth living. How we respond, our concerns, our hopes, our fears, reflect what we believe and think. Doctrine matters, and there are kinds of doctrine which are wholesome medicine, and kinds of doctrine which can make both a person and a society sick.

Speaking more directly about the life of the Church, it's hard to see how one could take the collect for St Luke seriously, how one could really believe that doctrine is a wholesome medicine, and be at peace if the doors of churches are closed. The doctrine of Christ which St Luke offers either matters or it doesn't; it's not a lifestyle choice, but wholesome medicine which gives life.

In epistle, St Paul tells St Timothy and us that he is '*ready to be offered*'. We read this as a description of the life of Christ bearing fruit in him. His being offered is not so much his dying as his living, and his gift of life to others. How can we tell the difference between offering ourselves in Christ, a gift of life and light, a costly gift of self-sacrifice, and a kind of burning out running after false gods? This is a question of doctrine.

(Oh dear, this does not leave much time to think about St Luke's challenge to us.) If doctrine matters, if there are kinds of doctrine which are wholesome medicine, and kinds of doctrine which can make us sick, how do we choose wisely? St Paul writes his second letter to Timothy when he is in prison in Rome near the end of his life, probably between AD 65-67. He speaks in hope because he knows something of what it means to know that Christ lives in him, and that this living has given him more, not less. St Luke, the beloved physician has been faithful. But many have not. After more than 25 years of discipleship, St Paul sees how many who knew something about wholesome medicine have gone looking for something better. Alexander the coppersmith did him much evil. Demas loved this present world the wrong way, and too much. There is a loneliness here. How did it happen? How did Alexander and Demas lose their way? It probably happened over time, a series of little choices that hardly seemed to matter, and then the wholesome medicine no longer tasted like honey for sweetness, but first bland, then distasteful. We may be naïve or unwise about how our habits our choices both reflect what we believe and mould what we believe. St Paul's description of what has happened to some of his fellow-workers in the vineyard paints a sad picture, and one that is presented to us a warning. Our Lord respects us, he invites us, he does not compel us. We are invited to wholesome doctrine, or to choose something else. In the picture which St Paul paints, what we come to believe and choose does not just happen to us, but it does happen in us, it's real.

St Luke describes our Lord sending out the seventy or the seventy-two disciples. the harvest truly is great. Some receive the gift of peace, some do not. I almost feel like I should apologize for stating things in such a simplistic way, it's not very fashionable, and it can seem naïve. And yet, we are invited to come as those who know that we need wholesome doctrine, the medicine of the gospel. We come with confidence, and we come expecting to be fed and to be changed.