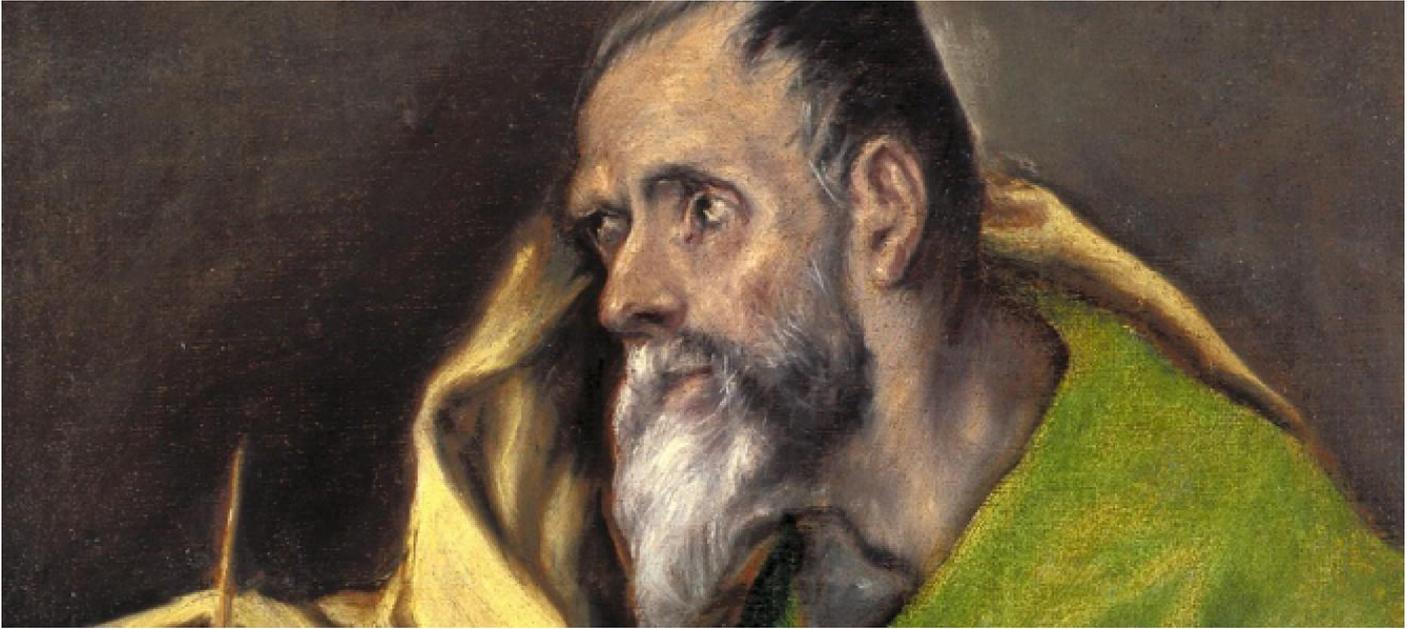


The Year of Luke



Saint Luke – El Greco

Advent Sunday 2018 sees the Western Church move to the third (**Year C**) of its three-year cycle of Sunday Gospel readings, primarily taken from the Gospel according to **Luke**. The three Synoptic Gospels are used for this cyclical pattern – Matthew, Mark and Luke. They are known as ‘synoptic’ from the Greek word *συνοπτικός* meaning ‘seeing all together.’ The reason for this is that many areas of the accounts of the record of the ministry of Jesus in all three Gospels are very similar, sometimes identical. Many Biblical scholars believe that Mark provides the source for Matthew and Luke, who then used or adapted Mark’s account to form their Gospels. In addition, Matthew and Luke may have also drawn from another document known as ‘Q,’ although no fragments of copies of ‘Q’ have ever been uncovered. Indeed, the way in which the Synoptic Gospels were written must be regarded as one of the most fascinating enigmas of literary history. Such conundrums are the joy of Biblical scholars, and theologians will always seek new ways of interpreting and understanding the way in which Holy Scripture came about.

Where is John? Why doesn’t the Church use a four-yearly cycle using all four books? John’s Gospel is so different in style, with vivid accounts and long theological reflections, that it is instead used to provide material throughout the three-yearly cycle, particularly in Passiontide and the Easter Season. Some may remember that in Year B, Chapter 6 is used during a month-long period in the summer to ‘fill in’ because Mark is the shortest of the Gospels!

So what of Luke? The important thing is to remember that this is the first book in a duology, the Acts of the Apostles forming the second part. They are almost certainly by the same writer and commissioned by a Christian called Theophilus. Between them, Luke and Acts make up over a quarter of the New Testament. If you have time, try to read them right through, perhaps with a nice cup or glass of something to hand. We tend to only hear

segments for our Gospel readings and this hardly does the writer justice. Luke writes in a vivid way which we shall explore a little later.

Traditionally both books are attributed to a companion of Paul called Luke, who is first mentioned in Paul's letter to Philemon and identified as 'the beloved physician.' (*Colossians 4:14* 'Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you.'). He might possibly have been born in Antioch as a Hellenistic Jew or a Gentile 'god-fearer' – someone who observed Jewish religious rites. There are numerous puzzles about Luke within Paul's letters and Acts. In the final chapters of Acts, the account becomes about 'us' rather than 'they,' and some scholars see this as the vivid eye-witness account of Luke. However, the Gospel and the rest of Acts are certainly laid out as works of someone who has examined the facts about Jesus and the early history of the Church and who has constructed a coherent and compelling narrative. Both books are also complex and very sophisticated in nature. The writings are traditionally dated at about 80 AD but could be earlier.

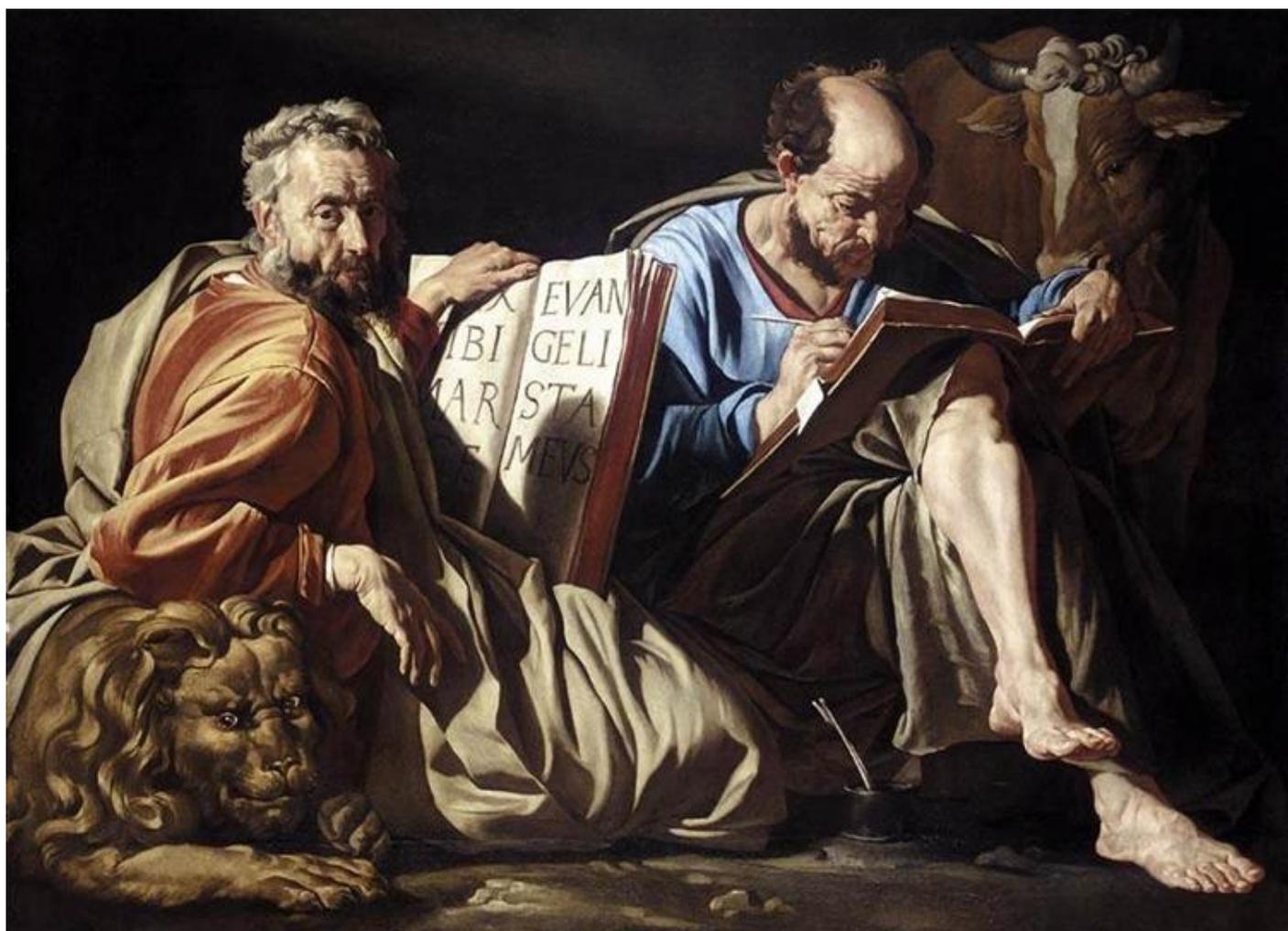
Luke's Gospel is vivid - the work of someone with a great gift of storytelling. It follows the conventions of rhetorical writing in the Greek style, but also observes elements of Old Testament writing. It richly draws on Luke's knowledge of the writings of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) together with the books of the Prophets, yet never gets bogged down. We are drawn into the account and led on a journey. Bearing in mind its dedication to someone with a Greek name (Theophilus) it was probably written with a Greek audience in mind yet has such a quality that the fundamental understanding of the breadth of Old Testament writings and Jewish religious history are never forgotten.

The Gospel features several vivid parables which appear nowhere else - Dives and Lazarus, The Good Samaritan and The Prodigal Son among them. Luke also writes in different styles to lead the reader on a journey to explore their own response to Faith. This can be seen most particularly in the infancy narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus, the Resurrection accounts and Peter and Paul's respective speeches in Acts. All are masterpieces of construction, and it is worth reading just these sections and pondering to see where you are led in response to them. The infancy narratives are what I tend to refer to as radiant pieces of writing, full of many allusions to the Old Testament, and far richer than they seem at face value. Indeed, it would be a mistake to merely understand them in such a simplistic way. Allow yourself to be led on a journey of exploring the place Jesus has within your own life when you read them.

The Roman Catholic theologian Brendan Byrne titles his commentary on Luke, 'The Hospitality of God,' and writes that the whole purpose of the book is to enable people to understand the extravagance of God's love for them. This doesn't mean that Jesus is meek and mild throughout. Quite the opposite, in fact! I recently found myself reflecting on a short Gospel reading which made both the congregation and me feel very uncomfortable. However, this displays the use of exaggeration and challenge to get us thinking – to see this sense of extravagant love most patently in the way in which Jesus gives himself on the cross to lead all to lives which reflect Resurrection. This encounter of all Christians with the Risen Jesus colours both Luke and Acts – it is the food for our spiritual journey and growth.

The other thing to note is the way in which food plays a running theme throughout the book. Robert Karris has written a short book called, *'Eating your way through Luke's Gospel.'* It is worth reading. Karris points out that there are over sixty passages mentioning or alluding to food within the Gospel. Much of the discussion and action surrounds mealtimes, talks of banquets or the grumbling of the authorities that Jesus eats with sinners. If you read through the Gospel it is instructive just noting when these occur. Thinking about this myself, it can't be chance that the new-born Jesus is laid in a manger, or that the Last Supper sees him offering himself in the Eucharistic 'elements' of bread and wine. After the Resurrection, Cleopas and his friend recognise Jesus when he breaks bread with them at Emmaus.

The important thing to remember is that this is a Gospel for here and now and for you and me. We each take the place of Theophilus as we read and reflect on Luke's vivid account. 'Theophilus' means 'beloved of God,' and St Ambrose says this to all of us: *'So the Gospel was written for Theophilus, that is, the one loved by God. If you love God, it was written for you. If it was written for you, discharge the duty of an evangelist.'* In other words, we should all seek to make the Good News of Jesus Christ known in whatever way we can. Amen to that.



St Mark and St Luke with their symbols – the lion and the ox – two of the mystical creatures mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel (and Revelation) and applied in Christian art to the Four Evangelists. Matthias Stom c.1665