

## ACTS: THE YOUNG CHURCH IN ACTION

Chelmsford 4/1/09

That's the title that JB Phillips gave to his translation of the Acts of the Apostles – and it's the title that I have given to the first series of sermons to be preached at this new service of contemporary worship.

### 1. *The author: Doctor Luke*

Acts was written by Luke – or at least that is what the earliest traditions of the church have maintained. Unlike most books today, the name of the author is not on the spine or on the title-page. In fact it is nowhere.

We don't really know much about Luke – in fact we know very little.

There are only three references to him in the NT: Col 4.14; Philem 14; and 2 Tim 4.11.

In Col 4.14 we read: "**Luke, our dear doctor, and Demas send you their greetings**"; in Philem 24 Paul writes: "**my fellow workers, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke**" send you their greetings; in 2 Tim 4.11 "**Only Luke is with me**".

1. From this we see that Luke was *a doctor*. This becomes particular evident in his Gospel, scholars find a whole number of medical words. For instance, all three Synoptic Gospels (i.e. Matt, Mark & Luke) record the saying of Jesus about it being "**much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle**". Matthew & Mark use the Greek word (*raphis*) for a sewing needle (Matt 18.14 & Mk 10.25), but Luke uses the technical word for a surgeon's needled (*belone*).
2. Secondly, we see that Luke was *one of Paul's colleagues*, and was with Paul in his last imprisonment. It would appear from the Acts of the Apostles that Luke had been with Paul from the moment that Paul began to take the Gospel to Europe. How do we know that? Because in Acts 16.1-17 we have the first of the "*we*" passages. Up until that point Luke had always been writing in the third person: 'they did this' and 'they did that'. But in Acts 16.10 we read: "**As soon as Paul had this vision [‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’], we got ready to leave for Macedonia, because we decided that God had calls us to preach the Good News to the people there**".  
There are a number of other "*we*" passages: Acts 20.5-16 (Paul in Ephesus); 21.1-18 (Paul going up to Jerusalem for the last time); 27.1-28.16 (Paul's journey to Rome – including being shipwrecked off the island of Malta). On all these occasions Luke was present. It has been suggested that Luke must have kept a travel diary, and that in these particular chapters of Acts we have excerpts from this travel diary.
3. Thirdly, we see that Luke was *a Gentile*. For as Paul begins to come to the end of his letter to the Colossians, he begins by sending greetings from the three "**Jewish believers**" who were working with him (4.11); only then does he send greetings

from a group of Gentile colleagues, one of whom is Luke (4.14). Interestingly all the other contributors to the NT were Jewish – Luke was the only Gentile to make a contribution to the NT.

4. Fourthly, we know that he was an *educated man*. Luke writes beautiful Greek. The Greek of Mark's Gospel, for instance, was pretty rough and ready, written more in the style of a tabloid, whereas Luke's style is more reminiscent of the Times or the Guardian. Or as Tom Wright put it: "He (Luke) is not, like Mark, aiming for the first-century equivalent of the airport bookstall. He is aiming for what today we call 'the intelligent reader'. One would expect to see a review of this book... in *The Times Literary Supplement* or *The New York Review of Books*".

What else do we know about Luke? According to one ancient source Luke was "*a native of Antioch, a physician, who wrote his Gospel in Achaia, died at the age of 84, and remained unmarried and childless*" (The Anti-Marcionite Prologue to Luke). Whether or not that was true, we don't know.

## 2. *Luke: the principal contributor to the NT*

Luke is the main contributor to the New Testament. For Luke didn't just write the Acts of the Apostles, he also wrote his Gospel.

Luke and Acts belong together. Together they form a two-part work on what might be called '*The Beginnings of Christianity*'.

Listen to the two prefaces or introductions:

- Luke 1.1-4: **Dear Theophilus: Many people have done their best to write a report of the things that have taken place among us. They wrote what we have been told by those who saw these things from the beginning and who proclaimed the message. And so, Your Excellency, because I have carefully studied all these matters from their beginning, I thought it would be good to write an orderly account for you. I do this so that you will know the full truth about everything which you have been taught.**
- Acts 1.1-2a **Dear Theophilus: In my first book I wrote about all the things that Jesus did and taught from the time he began his work until the day he was taken up to heaven.**

Both Luke and Acts are addressed to the same person, **Theophilus**

Vol 1 recounts "**all the things that Jesus did and taught**" (Acts 1.1)

Vol 2 tells of how the Good News was carried from Jerusalem to Rome.

Together Luke-Acts account for 27-28% of the NT.

Luke with his 52 chapters of writing was the principal contributor to the NT.

He wrote more of the NT than anyone else. He wrote more than Paul.

This 2 volume work is therefore one of the most important of the NT writings, if not the most important writings of the NT.

### 3. *The Acts – of whom?*

Traditionally we call this book '*The Acts of the Apostles*'.

Actually, this title is not found on the original Greek text. It wasn't until almost the end of the second century that it came to be known as the Acts of the Apostles.

Yet the title is misleading – or at least is not the acts of all the apostles. At the beginning of Acts Matthias is selected to replace Judas, but none of the other apostles are mentioned at that stage. James merits only one reference in Acts 12.2, and John receives little more attention. The only two apostles who really feature are Peter and Paul. Furthermore, some of the most significant breakthroughs for the spread of the Gospel don't involve apostles at all: but rather they were the work of men like Stephen and Philip and the unnamed persons of Cyprus and Cyrene (11.20)

Some scholars suggests a better title would be '*The Acts of the Holy Spirit*'

In the Book of Acts the Spirit is the driving force of mission

- The immediate effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit was the conversion of 3000 on the Day of Pentecost
- It was the Spirit who told Philip to go up and join the Ethiopian official in his chariot
- It was the Spirit who prompted Peter to put to one side his Jewish prejudices and go to the home of Cornelius, a roman centurion
- It was the Spirit who caused the church at Antioch to commission Paul and Barnabas for missionary service

On the other hand, there are great portions of Acts where the Holy Spirit is not mentioned, or if he is mentioned, than he is mentioned only in passing.

Other scholars suggest that we actually call this book '*The Acts of Jesus*'.

Look at Acts 1.1: "Dear Theophilus: In my first book I wrote about all the things that Jesus did and taught" – so GNB. Actually Luke wrote: "**all the things that Jesus began to do and teach**" (so NIV). Tom Wright, the Bishop of Durham, suggests that we entitle the Book of Acts: 'The Deeds and Teaching of King Jesus Part II'. At first sight this is a strange title, since Jesus himself only appears in the first nine verses of the first chapter of Acts. However, Luke is perhaps making a theological point, that Jesus was alive, and was continuing to act through his followers.

### 4. *Luke the historian*

In a way which is true of no other writer of the New Testament, Luke presents himself as a historian. His preface to his Gospel as also his preface to the Acts of the Apostles is deliberately modeled on the writings of the great historians of the ancient world. See for instance: e.g. Dionysius of Halicarnassus: "*Before beginning to write I gathered information, partly from the lips of the most learned men with whom I came into contact, and partly from histories written by the Romans of whom they spoke with praise*"

There was a stage when people questioned the accuracy of the Book of Acts. However, increasingly people are realizing that Luke did a pretty good job.

- Inscriptions found by archaeologists have shown that Luke was always accurate in the matter of titles: Luke speaks of there being ‘proconsuls’ in the senatorial provinces of Cyprus and Achaia (13.7; 18.12), ‘praetors’ in Philippi (16.20); ‘politarchs’ in Thessalonica (17.6), and Asiarchs in Ephesus
- In the accounts of Paul’s trials before Gallio, Felix & Festus, we see that Luke was well-versed in the intricacies of the Roman law.

The fact is that Luke was concerned for truth. As he writes in his Gospel: **“I thought it would be good to write an orderly account for you. I do this so that you will know the full truth about everything which you have been taught.”**

Luke records that when the disciples came to replace Judas & bring apostolic team up to strength, nominations restricted to those **“who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord JX went in & out among us, beginning from the baptism of Jn until the day when he was taken up from among us”** (Acts 1.21,22). I.e. they wanted leaders who had been eye-witnesses – who could testify to the truth of what had happened.

Yes, Luke is selective in his use of material – but then historians have always been selective

Luke sets out to tell the story of the beginnings of Christianity.

In particular, in Acts, he sets out to tell the story of *‘How they brought the Good News from Jerusalem to Rome’* (AM Hunter)

The key to Acts is found in Acts 1.8: **“When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”**

- Jerusalem: The stories in Acts 1-7 are all based in Jerusalem
- Judea and Samaria: in Acts 8 the Gospel is preached in Samaria and then on the desert road down to Gaza
- From then on, there is no stopping. Syria, Turkey, Greece, Rome

Luke only tells the story of the beginnings of Christianity. Needless to say, this is an ongoing history. Acts 28 is not the end of the story. Acts 28 simply ends with Paul arriving in Rome – it doesn’t even tell of the outcome of his trial, let alone of his eventual death. Acts 28 is just the end of the beginning.

Or to change the metaphor, in the words of Tom Wright: “This is a play in which we are invited to become actors ourselves. The stage opens up and we discover that we’re in the middle of the action. That is part of the point of the ‘ending’ which isn’t really an ending: the story continues and we are part of it!” (Acts I p3)

## 5. *Luke ‘defender of the faith’*

But Luke was more than a historian. He was an apologist – he was in the business of defending the Christian faith.

You have to remember the time when Luke was written – possibly the late 60s, alternatively the early 70s – it was a time when Christians had been having a bad press. For on the night of 18 July AD 64 a fire had broken out in Rome, which burnt for a week and destroyed half the city. Rumour, spreading like the fire itself, laid the blame at the door of the Emperor Nero. Nero, to divert suspicion from himself looked for a scapegoat – and decided to blame the Christians, because, as Tacitus tells us in his account of the fire (Annals 15.44) the Christians were already ‘*detested for their outrageous practices*’

This is the one part of the context in which Luke was writing his Gospel.

The other part of the context is that when Luke wrote Acts, the Apostle Paul was facing trial before the Emperor in Rome.

In his twin-volume work Luke sets out to show that neither Jesus nor Paul were trouble-makers: although Jesus had died on a cross as criminal, he had in fact been pronounced by Pilate, the representative of Roman law.

Luke then was in the business of defending the Christian faith – and in particular defending the faith to his “**Excellency**”, Theophilus, the man to whom both parts of his two-volumed work were dedicated.

Who was this man? The name ‘Theophilus’ which means ‘lover of God’ – alternatively it can mean ‘loved of God’.

- Some have suggested that he wasn’t an actual person, but rather a was a ‘representative of all those ‘God-fearers’, who wanted to know more about this new Christian religion. Alternatively, it he was a representative of the middle class public in Rome whom Luke wanted to win over to a more favourable view of Christianity. However, the title “his excellency” suggests that Theophilus was probably a real person.
- The suggestion has been made that he was Luke’s sponsor (his ‘patron’). Alternatively, it has been suggested that he was the Roman magistrate before whom Paul was due to appear in Rome.

### ***The relevance of Luke to today?***

In the first place, the Acts of the Apostles communicates the Good News of Jesus. It is a great book for any evangelist to preach from. My mind, for instance, goes to the Day of Pentecost, where Peter’s hearers are convicted of their sin: “**What shall we do brothers?**” Peter replies: “**Each one of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven, and you will receive God’s gift, the HS**” (Acts 2.37-38). Similarly, there was the occasion in Philippi, when a panic-struck jailer said to Paul & Silas: “**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**”. Luke tells us that they answered “**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your family**” (Acts 16.30,31). In particular it speaks of the new life that is ours in Jesus. The Book of Acts is a key witness to the resurrection of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles is a challenging book for a non-Christian to read. I love to preach from the book.

The Acts of the Apostles is also a challenging book for Christians to read. It provides “a model of what God can do with a Spirit-filled people who are completely devoted to him” (William J. Larkin). Sometimes we wonder whether there is any hope for the church here in Britain today. Every year is a year of decline. Read to read the Acts of the Apostles is to realize that there is hope – in the words of the Apostle Paul: “God “by means of his power working in us is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for, of even think of” (Eph 3.20). But if God’s people are to impact the world, then they must be a missionary people. Acts 1.8: **“When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”**. Acts more than any other NT book speaks about mission – and the importance of the Spirit in that mission.

In particular the Acts of the Apostles addresses issues which are of particular interest to the church today: these include the role of preaching today; the place of possessions in the lives of believers; conflict resolution and decision-making within a healthy congregation; the challenge of change in the church; the Gospel in a multi-cultural world; and the marks of Christian leadership. I believe that as we study together this book, we shall discover it to be a remarkably relevant to many of the issues we face as a church.