

Lent Course On Luke

A course on the Gospels is always a challenging thing to produce, because the ground we are treading together is so familiar. We run several risks: one, I feel, is that we risk boring people by telling them things they already know. Another is that we upset them by telling things they don't want to know.

I hope to avoid both of these faults in this short visit to Luke, by restricting the ground to be covered: I think we can find plenty to think about in the Passion Narrative itself, and we can learn a lot by comparing what Luke writes with the Gospel he had at his elbow - Mark - and the other two Gospels, written it seems elsewhere and independently (although Matthew also had a copy of Mark to build on).

I'd like to start by pointing out that the Passion Narrative is unlike any other part of the Gospel traditions: first because of its sustained length, it far outlasts any other incident narrated by the evangelists. Secondly, it is the oldest part of the tradition about Jesus. Paul, who shows no awareness of Jesus' birth, or even of his biography as an itinerant preacher and healer, constantly speaks of his death, and also knows and includes the tradition about the Last Supper. The significance of these accounts far outweighs any other detail we know of any other part of Jesus' life.

You might like to know that there isn't a single detail in the sources outside the Canon - apocryphal gospels and the like - which supplements the contents of the Four Gospels. Certainly, however, the evangelists knew more than they included of the traditions about Jesus. Their accounts are therefore selective. We should never assume that the silence of an evangelist must mean ignorance about this or that detail of the tradition. Also, what they do record is consciously put into the classic form of a narrative: for example, consider Matthew's (and to some extent Mark's) observance of the triple form so familiar to us in other narratives, from the Englishman, Irishman and Scotsman to the Three Bears. Jesus in Gethsemane arrives with the Eleven, and addresses them; then takes on Peter/James/John, and addresses them, and finally moves off alone, and addresses the Father. He returns three times to the sleeping disciples. In all Gospels Peter denies him three times. In Mark the crucifixion involves the third, sixth, and ninth hours. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus is mocked three times. In Jn there are three incidents - Pilate and his inscription, the soldiers and their dice, the Beloved Disciple and Jesus' Mother.

It is very unlikely that history so neatly fell into these triple forms. So when Luke reports *only one* return of Jesus to the sleeping disciples, do we decide *that* is history, and the others are elaborating, obeying the principles of storytelling? Or do we say that Luke has simplified in order to take some of the flak away from the disciples? One question is: did people ever hear of this incident at all outside the storytelling setting it now has? Would early Christian preachers have included it in their spiel that "his disciples slept"? What would such a story have contributed to a missionary's message? Or was its first outing in the setting of a discourse about the human inability to accept the Cross - which must have formed part of the response every missionary will have encountered at the beginning of the Church's story?

It is bedrock historical fact that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified at Jerusalem at the end of the first third of the first century AD when Pontius Pilate was governor. When we say that ours is an historical religion, that is, not a myth-based business based on gods who never existed, but on a real life lived in the real world, we aren't at the same time claiming that everything written in the Gospels is historically factual. The Gospels, those NT writings centred on his life, are not historical biography in the modern sense of the word: two of them tell nothing of his birth and next to nothing of his parents, none of them tells us about the many years of his

life before his ministry. We should therefore consider the Gospels as distillations of earlier preaching about Jesus, built up into documents for the purpose of communicating an understanding of Jesus that would ground religious faith in its audience.

So how close are these accounts to what happened in Jesus' lifetime? Well: no evangelist was an eyewitness of the Passion, and the accounts were drawn up between thirty and sixty years afterwards. The reports *cannot have escaped* being reshaped and developed. Yet we know that Jesus was surrounded by a group called the Twelve; they were separated from him in the Passion. It is certain that they took a huge interest in his subsequent fate. They were not present at his trial, but they must have sought and found information about how he was sentenced to die on the Cross. Indeed, the purpose of crucifixion was to publicise the fact that crimes would be punished; pointless, therefore to crucify someone for unspecified crime. His death was public, and so was his burial. So from the beginning it must have been possible to construct at least a basic Passion Narrative from arrest to burial - Gethsemane to the grave. The degree to which we regard anything further as fact or as Christian imagination will depend on our attitude to the veracity of the early Church. Some scholars are obsessed with the early use of Scriptural sources in the composition of the accounts; and certainly many of the details of the Passion can be traced back into Scripture (the dicing for the clothes, the vinegar, the last words of Jesus). We may be certain, on the other hand, that from the beginning there were vast resources of personal memory based on eyewitness - eg what sort of Cross was used. The idea of some scholars, that those close to Jesus suddenly lost interest in what had become of him, holds no water. They are said to have "followed at a distance", and they must certainly have used every means they could to supplement their understanding of what must have been a traumatic moment in their lives. It is true that 1 Cor 15:3-5 makes clear reference to "according to the Scriptures"; but its central point was the *intentionality* of the death - "for our sins" - and the fact of resurrection *on the third day* that are referred to the Scriptures. The rest, as you might say, is history, or is represented as historical.

There are some quite good principles for detecting the historically reliable material underlying the Gospels.

- Multiple attestation: where many sources agree. The value of this is limited; for instance, agreement between Mark and other synoptics is obvious, as is agreement between Mt/Lk (possible "Q"). Agreement between any Synoptic and John is eloquent. Outside the Scriptures, there is, however, scarcely anything attested by all witnesses except the fact of the crucifixion itself (Paul and the Babylonian Talmud do not mention the involvement of Pilate, and Tacitus and the first letter to Timothy make no mention of the Jewish rôle in the death of Jesus).
- Coherence: where an incident matches something we have been told elsewhere: for instance John alone identifies Peter as the ear-pruning disciple with a sword. It matches his turbulent and impulsive character as depicted elsewhere in the tradition that it should be him. But this may be a motive for modifying the story in his direction. On the other hand the allegation in the Gospels that part of the reason for Jesus' condemnation was his threatening the Temple in various ways is coherent with the fact that the single most frequent bone of contention between first-century Jews was precisely over the correct understanding of the Temple.
- Embarrassment: if something in the tradition is scandalous or hard to explain, it is extremely unlikely to have been invented by the Church. Jesus' baptism amongst repentant sinners, Jesus' habit of not fasting, the reputation of Jesus as "a glutton and drunkard, friend of tax-collectors and sinners", the weakness of the disciples who would later have to be accepted as the foundation-stones of the faith, etc. In our part of the Gospel the most embarrassing factor is that Jesus prayed with his whole heart *not to be crucified*, on the very threshold of the Passion.
- Discontinuity: if something about Jesus is discontinuous with the Judaism surrounding him, it has good claim to be historical. The "Son of Man" sayings of

Jesus have no background in Jewish expectancy that we can identify from other sources. It is therefore likely that the Gospel is absolutely awash with them for the simple reason that Jesus actually did refer to himself by this particular title. It may be true that the early Church was very creative, but such a consistent and frequent phenomenon implies that it rests on something more than a theological rationalisation.

Having said all of the above, there is a huge content in the Passion Narratives of the Church's reflection on Scripture, the Church's Gospel proclamation, and a theological organisation and marshalling of the details of the story which comes partly from the Church's tradition, and partly from the skill and inspiration of the evangelists themselves. The Church's tradition gives us what the evangelist or apostle received, but that is not to say that it was history. Paul speaks of having received a tradition about the Lord's Supper. That doesn't mean an accurate historical account of the Lord's Supper, which may no longer be available to us. The skill of the evangelist is very much in the field when we come to St Luke, because he is the most sophisticated of the four Evangelists as a writer of Greek prose. Just as the parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan are incredible as reportage, and reek of the library of a literary gentleman rather than the market-place storytelling of a mendicant rabbi, so in the Gospel at large we can expect to think highly of the contribution of the Evangelist.

When we have done all the research we can into the Gospels we shall be left with contradictions between them which are historically incapable of resolution. Of the trial of Jesus, for instance, the Fourth Gospel describes an interrogation by the high-priest Annas alone. Mk & Mt have a full session of the Sanhedrin at night - involving in Mt's account alone Caiaphas - where Luke has a Sanhedrin trial or interrogation in the morning. Loss adjusters try to patch them together, but only two will fit, unless you include a Sanhedrin which does things twice. What we say is that multiple attestation tells of a Jewish legal inquiry involving Temple priesthood between the arrest and his delivery to Pilate. All four agree that a Sanhedrin was involved in his death; but John places this deed of the Sanhedrin many days before his arrest, in his absence, at the end of Jn 11. The possibility is that the legal proceedings described by Mark represent a pasting-together into one scene of all the legal moves against Jesus, including charges brought in the more turbulent moments of his ministry, but that this pastiche does not convey verbatim history of the trial to us, any more than does the heavily theological picture of Jesus' interrogation by Annas in John 18.

Finally, we are not going about the business of discovering history when we read Luke's Passion; we are trying to discover what Luke wanted to convey to his audience about the Passion and Death of Jesus. To that, considerations of history, whilst significant, must always be secondary.

Luke's Passion (22:39ff)

The journey to Gethsemane is marked by our first specially Lukan decision about the presentation of the Passion. It relates to a well-established change to the basic Gospel of Mark which lies behind Matthew and Luke.

Mark has a set purpose of portraying the disciples in a curiously negative light. Trying to decipher the reason for this is very difficult indeed. Following the principle of embarrassment we might conclude that Mark was simply telling the hard truth: that *he represents the disciples as stupid and craven because unfortunately that is what they were*. After all, would a man whose Gospel were handed down to him by these very people paint them so deficient in admirable qualities, and so frequently and sternly berated by the star of his picture?

My own theory is that Mark wished to present Jesus as a figure so totally given to the mystery of God's will that he found himself unable to communicate the fulness of his mystery to the all-too-human people he recruited. So their reaching the point of recognising him as Messiah is also the point at which he silences them, forbidding them to tell others about him. Their inability to cope with the Cross when he first reveals it to them is not the only sign that they are not yet ready for the truth: they are deficient in understanding his miracles, deficient in carrying out the mission he gives them for the sick and the possessed, and their deserting him at the arrest is symbolised as uniquely complete: the young man who runs away in the garden, leaving his clothes in the hands of the soldier who tried to arrest him, represents the complete withdrawal of the disciples who were summoned at the beginning of the story to "leave all and follow" Jesus; he "leaves all" to get away from him.

From the beginning Luke is kinder to the disciples. He softens the rebukes and chiding of Jesus at every point. We must remember that in his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke will be representing the disciples as Christ's faithful representatives. We should pay a short visit to the Last Supper, and examine the way in which Luke treats the tradition about the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. First let us see what Jesus says in Mark as they go out to the Mount of Olives. (Mk 14: 26) :

Jesus said to them: You will all fall away; for the Scripture says: *I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered*. However, after my resurrection I shall go before you into Galilee. Peter said, Even if all fall away I will not. And Jesus said to him, In truth I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows thrice, you will have disowned me three times. But he repeated still more earnestly: If I have to die with you, I will never disown you. And they all said the same.

In Luke this is missing from the journey to the mount; it is replaced by a passage in the far more benevolent atmosphere of the Last Supper (Lk 22: 29ff):

You are the men who have stood by me faithfully in my trials: and now I confer a kingdom on you, just as my Father conferred one on me; you will eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom, and you will sit on thrones to judge the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Simon, Simon! Satan has got his wish to sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail; and once you have recovered, you must strengthen your brothers. He answered, Lord I would be ready to go to prison with you, and to death. Jesus replied, I tell you, Peter, by the time the cock crows today you will have denied three times that you know me.

Rather than seeing the disciples set up for their great defection, we actually see Jesus congratulating them for their fidelity - the very opposite quality from that presented by Mark.

In particular the forthcoming treachery of Peter is robed in the prayer of Jesus for his recovery, and even a mention of his eventual ministry in the future Church.

The Lukan account avoids both the (Hebrew) naming of the place, and the (Aramaic) *Abba* of Jesus' prayer in Mark; nor does Luke mention Jesus' sorrow "to the point of death"; but still Luke will include a depth of pain the other evangelists will not reach. Yet at the beginning of the agony he does not display the perturbation, the *struggle*, which Mark had not hesitated to show; he announces the theme for their prayer: *Pray not to be put to the test*. This *testing* is a key concept for the Lukan Gospel as a whole and for the Passion account in particular. We meditated a little on it on the first Sunday of Lent, in the Gospel of Jesus' being tested in the desert.

Luke's refusal of the motif of disturbance in Jesus is interesting, particularly in view of the fact that John's Gospel, which sees Jesus in a far more exalted light than Luke's, is not afraid to record his words, *Now is my soul disturbed* (John 12:27). But Luke shows Jesus preparing to pray about the cup in an atmosphere of undisturbed peace. Luke 9:22, 44 show Jesus as suffering, but his inner experience of it is not mentioned at this point. We are to think of him as being so at peace with the Father that his personal equilibrium is not damaged by the thought of the suffering that will be inflicted on him. He weeps over Jerusalem, and warns the women of Jerusalem to weep for the punishment his rejection will bring on them.

It seems certain that part of this stoicism was to encourage and comfort those in Luke's church who would be summoned to martyrdom and persecution. Mt/Mk's extreme picture of Jesus in agony was not understood in the Roman world, which had the stoical story of the deaths of Socrates and if Cicero to teach them how courageously a dignified pagan could face extinction, even an unfair execution. Maybe Luke himself found the agony undignified by comparison. He presents Paul in exactly the same way as Jesus in Acts 20:22; on his way to prison and affliction, surrounded by devastated disciples, Paul kneels down and prays.

Luke's Gospel has an incident which is unique to him, the incident where the disciples come to Jesus and ask to be taught how to pray. The prayer he teaches them includes the petition, *Do not lead us into testing*. Testing here is the final testing, the moment when the universe will be tested by fire. When Jesus in Mk tells them "Keep on watching," he is using a similar concept about the end of time; watchfulness is the quality which displays the Christian's eschatological faith, a faith that awaits the second coming at all times. Luke's Jesus warns them to pray, not to be delivered during the time of testing, but to avoid it altogether, as if it has the power to trap them.

Peirasmos means temptation, and trial, and affliction, even a very specific one. God is sometimes referred to as the tester: but later usages refer to human beings testing, and even Satan. Something more dangerous than these testings seems to be envisaged here. This is a scale of conflict that is ordered to the end of the world and the last judgment, the final conflict between good and evil towards which all the ages are pointing (Rev 3:10). This is no ordinary moment, but *the* moment - *kairos*. Without doubt the moment has come referred to at the end of the testing in the wilderness, when Satan, having withdrawn for the time being, has appeared for a final frontal attack "at the appointed time". When Jesus prays about the cup, he is pleading for the time of testing not to be visited on him. It is in this light that we can understand the arrival of an angel to strengthen him. His prayer to be released from the final test is refused; but he is given the power to endure it, unlike his disciples, those who will only see the Passion "from afar" - from a safe distance. In the Lukan version of the explanation of the parable of the sower, we hear (8:13) *Those on the rock are people who, when they first hear it, welcome the word with joy; but they have no roots; they have faith for a while, and in time of peirasmos they give up*. Mark 13:19-20 describes the unbearable nature of the testing as something which would carry away the strongest, if God had not shortened the time.

We recall the cup/baptism which Jesus is already drinking/undergoing in Mk 10:38, and also that Paul refers to baptism as “baptism in his death” (Rom 6:3). Mark has Jesus challenging James and John to the cup he is now begging to be excused. He is not afraid to depict Jesus as prostrate on the earth before the prospect of it. At the last supper he took the cup and gave thanks for it. Then he said, *This is my blood of the covenant that is poured out for many.* Here surely the words of Hebrews 5: 8 are coming true; the Jesus who *learns to obey through suffering* is being made perfect in this moment. These are the classic texts in theology for proving that Jesus had a human will - one which needed educating through *peirasmos* - as well as a divine will. In the prayer in the garden, the expression of humanity is educated by the expression of obedience: *thy will be done.*

John (12: 27) does not display any distance between the two. And in 18: 11 Jesus sternly says to Peter, *Put away the sword into its scabbard; am I not to drink the cup the Father has given me?* Furthermore, this passage leads us away from *take the cup away* to *Glorify your name* - or, synoptically, from *Deliver us from evil* to *Hallowed be thy name.*