

Lent Course on Luke: 4 After the Passion

Last week we arrived at the Crucifixion and considered the extraordinarily pacific atmosphere in which Jesus' life ends in Luke. The hugeness of the contrast is accentuated by the fact that Matthew's Passion Narrative makes very little spiritual difference to Mark's presentation, so that we have a two-against-three arrangement of the Synoptic Gospels. When we come to John, we find a totally separate Gospel tradition, and thus we come to *expect* mighty differences between the Fourth Gospel and the other three. In fact it is a commonplace of scriptural scholarship that Luke stands spiritually and theologically at some point midway between the other Synoptics and John.

We noted last week that the dark deed of God in tearing the veil of his own Temple is moved back by Luke, from after Jesus' death into the last moments of his life. In this way not only does this story lose the note of terror and vengeance which it carries in Matthew's constellation of portents, it also leaves the stage after the trustful death of Jesus free for more peaceful happenings. Only grace, and deeds of grace, remain in Luke's mind after this death. So the foreboding words of Jesus to the women of Jerusalem before his death are balanced by the image of the women of Galilee after it: they are standing at a distance, along with his friends, who in this Gospel have not been depicted as fleeing into the darkness or (as in Mark) beating it back to Galilee. Luke keeps them in Jerusalem for a purpose: they are to meet Jesus again in the Holy City, because Luke began his Gospel in the Temple and he wishes to end it in the Temple. No meeting in Galilee can replace this plan in Luke's mind. So, now that the death of Jesus has drawn the poison of the human situation, this little group of disciples and women represents a seed-bed for the coming theme of the Resurrection. The women in particular are to be a bridge: they are going to go home and prepare spices, and then "to rest on the Sabbath day as the law requires". There is an inclusion here with the thrice-repeated phrase from the Purification story in the birth-narratives:

When the day came for them to be purified as laid down by the Law of Moses, the parents of Jesus took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, observing what stands written in the Law of the Lord - Every first-born male must be consecrated to the Lord - and also to offer in sacrifice - in accordance with what is said in the Law of the Lord - a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

The disciples of Jesus observe the Jewish law faithfully to the very end. The points we have been making about obedience to God throughout this Passion story are reinforced by this small note: the day we call Holy Saturday is for the first Christians a full Jewish Sabbath. The perfume of the preparation of spices envelopes them in loyalty both to Jesus and to the Jewish burial custom. The beginning of the Gospel is sprinkled with the same concern for the Law: Elizabeth and Zechariah are "both worthy in God's sight, and scrupulously observed all the commandments and observances of the Lord". Zechariah is in the Holy of Holies to accomplish his priestly office "which fell to him by lot, according to the ritual custom"; Jesus is duly circumcised and named - the first, "on the eighth day" according to the Law, the second, according to the name the angel had given him before his conception; typically Luke combines the *lawful* occasion with the superadded significance of *revelation*, which is God's new deed. The prophetess Anna "never left the Temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayer". Mary and Joseph do not leave Jerusalem until "they had done everything the Law of the Lord required"; Luke sets the story of the finding in the Temple in the context of the prescribed ritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. Luke is telling us that, from the beginning of his life on earth, Jesus had held to the commandments of God; and the end of his life displays no break with the past.

We can't forget that the majority of these dutiful happenings are connected with the Temple, and to some extent (especially for Zechariah) involve priesthood. The very concern to do

what is right will also involve Jerusalem and its Temple, and the priests, in the Passion of Jesus. The way in which the faithfulness of so many is bound up in the fate of Jesus of Nazareth is a major source of wonder in this Gospel: don't forget that the people the Christian Church has stigmatised as enemies of Jesus are also quite often following out the precepts of the Law.

This same complex of loyalties is what brings the women to the tomb early on Sunday morning "at the first sign of dawn". Their early rising emphasises the keenness of the women to give loving service to Jesus, even after the comprehensive defeat of his shameful death. When they arrive they find something they did not expect, and fail to find something they did expect. The first thing is the rolled-back stone.

- Unlike Mark, who described Joseph of Arimathea moving a stone across the rock tomb, in the sight of the women, and
- unlike Matthew, who introduced a whole intrigue between the high-priests, the Governor, and the soldiers to seal and guard the tomb until after the third day, to ensure that no hand should interfere with the security of it,
- Luke has forgotten to mention the stone until now.

Mark takes this chance to inform us that the stone was very great, increasing the surprise of the women, who had been wondering who could move it for them. Matthew decides to enhance the whole presentation of the scene by a reprise of the apocalyptic signs with which he had earlier surrounded the death of Jesus. There is another earthquake, there is a descent from heaven of the angel of the Lord, garbed in snowy white and with a face like lightning, and this august figure is said to roll away the stone and sit on it. We are left to conjecture what effect this had on the women: the guards were so convulsed with terror that they were like dead men.

Luke's presentation is altogether quieter than Matthew's; the women find the tomb opened, and the body is absent. This results in complete stasis. They stand there, with their spices useless in their baskets, and their funeral frame of mind completely disrupted; Luke says they "didn't know what to think", they were perplexed. Then comes the revelatory encounter: two men in shining garments stand beside them. Perplexity is seconded by fear.

Terrified, the women lowered their eyes. But the two men said to them....

We immediately recall from the beginning of the Gospel

The angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone round them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them: Do not be afraid.

Suddenly the Galilean women are being bracketed with the Judaeian shepherds, who *came to see this thing that the Lord has made known to us*. Those who see the empty tomb - even those who see the stone rolled back - are looking at something the Lord has done: *Why do you seek among the dead one who is alive? He is not here, but has been raised*. The verb is in the divine passive: *God has raised him*. We should also see the divine passive in relation to the stone: *it had been rolled away* means *God had rolled it away*.

There is an implied rebuke in what the angels say next: the women might have expected what was going to happen if they had listened to his words properly.

Remember what he told you when he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, to be crucified, and on the third day to rise again. And *they remembered his words*.

Now, here is a tremendous Lukan theme making its entrance: *they remembered his words* - the act which is characteristic of the Church is a special kind of remembrance. Here we need a bit of word-study.

Mimneskomai is the Greek verb for remembering. The word Luke uses for the Holy Sepulchre is *mnemeion*, which means not only "grave" but "memorial". Let us watch the use of these words in the Bible.

Mimneskomai is what God does in the Old Testament, in grace and in mercy: when God remembers you, you are changed: it is a creative event, an event which involves the Creator. God remembers the Covenant when he sees the rainbow in the Noah story, and we are told in Ex 2:24 that

The Israelites groaning in their slavery, cried out for help; and from the depths of their slavery their cry came up to God. God heard their groaning. God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: God saw the Israelites and took note.

Conversely Israel remembers the deeds of God; Moses is told that they must put a tassel on the corner of their clothing with a violet thread in it.

The sight of it will remind you of all God's orders and how you are to put them into practice, and not follow the dictates of your own heart and eyes, which have led you to be unfaithful. This will remind you of all my orders: put them into practice, and you will be consecrated to your God. I, the Lord your God, have brought you out of Egypt, to be your God. I, the Lord your God.

God remembers Israel but also remembers her foes and punishes them. Israel is often challenged by the prophets to remember and repent. This is the heart of what Luke's disciples are to do after the Resurrection.

In the New Testament remembering is not a merely mental act. It happens in response to a word or an action. It may strike suddenly (*You are before the altar, and there remember that your brother has a quarrel with you*); or it may be continually present (*I congratulate you on remembering me so consistently, and for maintaining the traditions exactly as I passed them on to you* - 1Cor 11:2). God's memory is far his saving acts (*He has come to the help of Israel his servant, remembering his mercy promised to Abraham and his descendants for ever*) and God's forgiveness takes the form of forgetfulness of sin (*I shall forgive their guilt, and never bring their sins to mind* - Heb 8:12). Judgment is bound up with memory: for God, who does not forget the sins of Babylon in Rev 16:19: *Babylon the Great was not forgotten, God made her drink the full wine-cup of his retribution*; and for man: Abraham tells the rich man (Lk 16:25) *My son, remember that during your life you had plenty of good things, just as Lazarus had plenty of evil*. The dying criminal asks Jesus to *Remember me when you enter into your Kingdom*.

The closeness of these themes of remembering to the tomb of Jesus makes of the opening of the tomb a kind of conversion-point - a conversion that is precisely one of memory. The women went to watch the burial of Jesus, in which they could take no part owing to the lack of the spices which would have been their contribution to the process. Luke therefore allots them the favourite word for discipleship: *they followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid*. This fidelity is an essential condition for their discipleship on Easter morning.

The angels remind them, and the Galilean women are said to remember his words in Galilee, and unlike Mark, Luke gives them the virtue to respond immediately and to be obedient to the vision they have seen and the message they have heard: their response is to go back whence they came: to return from the tomb and tell it all to the Eleven and to all the others -

presumably including two who would later go to Emmaus. Luke now identifies the women: Mary of Magdala, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and others; but

These words seemed like foolishness in their eyes, and they did not believe them.

The obduracy of this disbelief is emphasised by Luke - unusually, for he tempers the wind to the Eleven so comprehensively elsewhere - by the fact that the women are said to insist on their story, but without making inroads on the response it is given. There is a single verse, 24:12, given to a journey to the tomb, running, by Peter. It is frequently omitted by modern Greek versions of the Gospel, simply because of its similarity to the much more crucial account in John; but most scholars believe it is truly Lukan and should be retained. Peter arrives at the tomb and sees the grave-cloths, and the emptiness of the tomb; but he comes away not joyful but amazed; he does not seem to conclude that if the first part of the women's testimony is true - *the tomb is empty* - perhaps the second must be also - *he has been raised*.

Now comes the great Lukan set-piece at the end of the Gospel, the turning of the tide for the apostolic community: the road to Emmaus. This famous story is a magisterial work by the greatest storyteller of the Gospels. It is by far the longest of any post-resurrection incident in any Gospel, and it is undeniably heavily dramatised by Luke. What is the Lukan intention in presenting it as he does?

First of all, the stranger they meet on the road asks them to open their minds, no longer to each other, but to him. The two have been identified as arguing, and they turn faces of dismay on their interrogator. It is a plot already full of powerful feelings, and they are not shared ones. He asks them to come to some explanation of their contention and of their distress. Cleopas then appears to insult him for his ignorance, a rebuke which he receives equably, and he encourages further communication.

Cleopas then spells out the rudiments of the Kerygma, the early Christian proclamation, in terms identical to those which will become standard in the many sermons in the Acts of the Apostles, and eventually form the heart of the Christian Creed. For our story, the recital of Cleopas is an account full of regret and disappointment; there had been power and glory and expectation of deliverance, but the Cross put an end to all of it. The speaker goes on even to recount what we already know of the events of Easter morning, which are described with exactly the puzzlement they have elicited from Peter and the Eleven.

The conversion, the great change of mind and heart, begins at this moment. The placid listener suddenly speaks out with an insult - *Fools* - followed by a rebuke of his own: *slow to believe the prophets!* Then he repeats to them the story they already know. Beginning with Moses - that is to say, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy - and going through all the prophets - he explained to them in all the Scriptures the things that concerned himself. A perceptive reader will immediately do a bit of remembering: *Moses and Elijah, Law and Prophets, speaking with him of his Exodus, to be accomplished at Jerusalem.*

The two disciples are still not enlightened, but they have not forgotten their instincts as disciples. They ask him to stay with them as evening is coming on; they go in to the inn, and there comes the moment of disclosure - which takes place, predictably, in the Eucharistic setting, echoed precisely from the Lukan account of the Last Supper. The lesson could not be clearer, or more precisely directed: there will have been many in Luke's church who would envy those who had been in a position to see the risen Christ. Here Luke assures them that even those who spent the day listening to his teaching did not recognise him - until they *knew him in the breaking of the bread*. And the revisiting of the Scriptures, followed by the breaking of the bread, is the common Christian experience of the Church, then and now, the classical

shape of the Mass. In this way we are being told that the Christians who were contemporaries of Jesus had no advantage over those who followed them in history.

The point is that this whole literary construction is a complex business of remembering: and it is crucial for the Christian Church that is about to be founded in Pentecostal fire. For this reason they say, *Did not our hearts burn within us as he spoke to us on the road, and opened to us the Scriptures?* Like the women at the tomb, their first instinct is to turn back - a full, 180 degree conversion - and to return at once to Jerusalem, to the Eleven. They now belong to the Church heart and soul, and nothing less than a physical gathering with the Church can do justice to what they have experienced. The story opened with the disciples in the process of dispersing, in the reversal of the ascent to Jerusalem, the abandonment of the place called in the Psalter "Jerusalem, City of our Feasts". It closes with their convergence on the upper room, to reconstitute that community which seemed doomed after the Last Supper, but which is now regenerated in a renewed life which will not suffer from the weakness and misunderstanding which marked its former discipleship.

The opening of the tomb itself - the turning-point - is thus very precisely described: it is the *turning of the memorial*, the re-vision of memory, the re-telling of the old story in a new light of faith (*so slow to believe the full message*) which reveals the fulness of what they already know. This discovery is brilliantly identified by Luke, in that the excuse for dissension and grief, and the eventual proclamation of the good news, are one and the same. What is the difference between Cleopas' diagnosis of their state of disharmony, and the words of Jesus that made their hearts burn within them? The events he described are exactly the same. It is a matter of how these facts are remembered. Notice how the fulness of the message lies before them in the words of the prophets; and Cleopas cuts the ground from beneath his own feet, by describing the course of Jesus' ministry in these words:

He showed himself a prophet powerful in action and speech before God and the whole people

Instead of reading the life of Jesus against that prophetic background, they had accepted the view of the priests and the Governor, that his death had thrown their hopes into the past. We who have read the Gospel know that he began his ministry with the words of the prophets ringing in his ears at his Baptism:

- The psalm (2:7) of messianic exaltation: *You are my Son, today I have become your Father*
- The prophecy (Is 42:1): *My chosen One, in whom my soul delights* - from the Suffering Servant songs.

So his question to the two disciples: *Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer all these things before entering into his glory?* is entirely to the point. If they had had the insight of the Evangelist they would have connected the realities of the Crucifixion to the hopes of Israel and the words of the Prophets. As it is, they need a process of catechesis - or of evangelisation (delivery of the Good News) - before they can confront the reality they have seen and heard.

The road to Emmaus, despite its total sacramental revelation, is only part of the confrontation between the Church and its Gospel. It is necessary that the official Church be confronted with its mandate, to proclaim the Resurrection to the whole world. This is the reason for the return to Jerusalem, which is now to become the terminus of the Gospel, as it was its genesis. The second volume, Acts, will begin in Jerusalem and end in Rome; the Gospel's progress demands a first section confined to the Holy Land, and a second which narrates the mission to the Gentile West and the empire. The encounter with the risen Christ which stands at the junction of the two books is therefore crucial to the whole enterprise.

The duty of sharing the good news reassembles the new Church: for on their arrival the two from Emmaus (and the readers!) are disconcerted to find that, whilst we were away, so to speak, there has been an encounter between Jesus and Peter which has not been described in the Gospel. This remarkable lacuna is to some extent illuminated by a reading of the very old formula in 1Cor 15, which says:

Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures, he was buried, on the third day he was raised to life, in accordance with the Scriptures, he appeared to Cephas (Peter), and later to the Twelve; and next to....five hundred...then he appeared to James, and then to all the apostles; and last of all he appeared to me too

It reads at first as if all the events described in chapter 24 occur on the same day. In fact Luke must be concertinaing many traditions, omitting any description of the alleged meeting with Peter, which must on any account be considered a pretty vital one, if it has grounded a complete change of mind in the noble company of the apostles.

Luke, however, will put all these uncertainties into the shade by narrating the appearance of Jesus to all the apostles and others who are gathered in one place. The setting has been aggregated in Christian minds to being in the large room with couches where the Last Supper had been celebrated: surely quite capriciously, if one remembers the way in which that chamber had been hired by Jesus on a strictly one-off basis. It is simply that we have no alternative place to imagine them, and therefore the general assumption has been that they meet the risen Lord where the Eucharist had been instituted; there is little wrong with that notion, so it has been allowed to endure. Jesus' greeting, *Peace be with you*, is a recognised Christian greeting, and evokes one arriving at an early Christian house-meeting.

The aim of the description seems cambered in a typically Lucan way towards realism of an almost crass type. At the beginning of the Gospel tradition, Mark wrote the story of the Baptism of Jesus in such a way that the whole experience could have been interior to himself: He saw the heavens open, he saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, a voice says *You are my beloved Son*, and so on. Matthew changed the verbs, so that the heavens actually did open, and he saw the Spirit of God descend like a dove: but the voice says *This is my Son, the Beloved: my favour rests on him*, which is clearly demonstrative and addressed to others. Luke makes the point that heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him *in a physical form*, like a dove. This description is uniquely and strangely physical in import. It is entirely in keeping with the description of the risen Christ in 24:36ff. Here, the disciples are terrified by the thought that they are being spectrally visited; Jesus first identifies himself as the crucified one by displaying his wounds. He invites them to touch him, and asks them to explore the texture of flesh and bones. They are convinced but silenced. He then asks for food, and is given a piece of grilled fish and a honeycomb, which has vanished without trace in the NJB. These things he takes and eats before their eyes.

Jesus is then depicted as repeating for the Eleven the exegesis of the Scriptures which had made the hearts of the men at Emmaus burn within them. Note that the order - Scripture followed by realisation - has been reversed: now it is realisation, followed by Scripture.

If one reads the Pauline analysis of the risen body in 1Cor 6:12

Food is for the stomach, and the stomach for food: and God will destroy them both.

and 15:42

What is sown is perishable, but what is raised is imperishable: what is sown is contemptible, what is raised is glorious; what is sown is weak, but what is raised is powerful; what is sown is a natural body, and what is raised is a spiritual body....mere

human nature cannot inherit the kingdom of God. What is perishable cannot inherit what is imperishable.

This would seem to rule out the idea of anything so vitally bound in to temporality as eating and drinking in the world of the Resurrection. A risen body could not eat or grow without being bound in to the world of perishability. What would a risen body do with food?

People suggest that Jesus only pretended to eat - thus behaving meretriciously; or that he exercised an unnecessary option "in order to put his disciples at ease" - making him into a rather banal "resurrected gentleman".

Luke mentions the incident twice in the Acts: at 1:4 he refers to Jesus "being at table with them"; this would appear to refer to what Jewish thinkers referred to as "table fellowship". In fact only Jesus eats in the Gospel incident, so it is not strictly a shared table. In 10:41 Luke does not speak of Jesus eating, but of the disciples eating and drinking in his company. This commentary by Luke himself mitigates the crude realism of the fish and honey incident.

It seems that Luke's intention was to issue a definitive broadside against those who denied flatly that Jesus was risen in the body. That is the clear intention of the touching and of the eating. This resolution of doubt, secondly, establishes the credentials of the apostles, who can thus testify to his reality, as opposed to his being merely spiritually present. Thirdly, the incident serves to remind us of the feeding of the multitude, which also involved fish. Because of the link between this feeding and the Eucharist, it seems important to acknowledge a link with the Eucharist in this Resurrection setting. Specifically, although this is a light theme in Luke, there is a sense in which Jesus' return to share food with his own can hint at a sort of pardon for their weakness during the Passion; sharing tables always expresses reconciliation in Biblical tradition.

It is an elegant and integrated hand that frames the opening of the Scriptures which follows. In a beautifully inclusive move, Jesus assures them that the Exodus he has accomplished is "according to the Scriptures": and he continues seamlessly to commission the apostolic company to take the Gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

With the tremendous words "You are witnesses to this!" Jesus identifies them as his ministers of the Word to all the world. Then he gathers together all the functions of this chapter. He refers to the coming gift of the Father, the Spirit whose descent will begin the second book of his work; and then he raises his hands in blessing, the blessing which supplies what Zechariah at the start of the Gospel could not give, and is taken up to heaven like the Moses and Elijah who spoke of his exodus, which is now completed. The disciples worship him, for they are now the Church; and then they return to Jerusalem filled with joy, and are back in the Temple praising God daily, thus bringing the Gospel full circle to its completion.