

October the eighteenth is the day on which we celebrate St Luke. As far as we can tell, he was initially either a Gentile or a Hellenised Jew, who became a Christian. He was highly educated and could write in a variety of styles. He liked the miraculous, liked detail, liked people, and liked a good story. He was the man who, uniquely, wrote two books of the New Testament – yet he is almost invisible there. He only appears in three places. In two of these, Colossians and Philemon, Paul lists him as one of those ‘sending greetings’. In today’s Epistle, from the second letter to Timothy, he is apparently the only person with Paul, presumably in Rome. But there is considerable dispute as to whether St Paul wrote the epistles to Timothy and Titus, so we can’t be sure exactly what is going on. The only real information we have about Luke is the description of him in Colossians as ‘the beloved physician’. This definitely is Paul writing, and it’s hard to see why he would have said that if it wasn’t true – surely not some sort of allegory – so we can reasonably accept Luke as someone with medical skills. This would also account for his obvious interest in healing miracles, and for his level of education.

There is no direct evidence that Luke was ever one of Jesus’ companions, though some think that he could have been one of ‘the seventy’, which is probably why that excerpt was today’s gospel reading. Luke himself doesn’t say so; he doesn’t write any of his gospel in the first person, whereas there are several places in Acts where he writes this way. ‘We immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia...we set sail’ in today’s first reading. Clearly he did travel with Paul; if he had also accompanied Jesus we would have expected him to give some indication of this, if only to give more authority to his writings.

Luke didn’t write for the same reasons as the other evangelists. Their intention was to encourage, instruct and inspire particular groups of Christians. Luke wrote to explain and justify Christianity to a single person, Theophilus (whose name means ‘lover of God’). We don’t know who this was; the name itself may be a pseudonym, and we have no idea whether Theophilus was a Christian. He held a senior official position in the Roman government, and Luke addressed him as ‘most excellent’, which is not the way in which the Christians wrote to each other. (A typical epistle begins: From Paul, apostle of Jesus, to the holy ones in (a particular town) who also believe: may God give you grace and peace.)

Luke was writing in about 75AD, when Nero’s persecution had died down and the surviving Christians were trying to get on with life while avoiding drawing themselves to the attention of the authorities. Luke wanted to convince Theophilus, who was one of the authorities, that Christianity was not the barbarous, depraved, seditious sect that it was reputed to be. He may well have hoped that his writings would be distributed further – published, one might say – hence the formal, careful, respectful way in which he began his first book. It was to be a serious and accurate account of matters which he had followed closely for some time.

Had Luke not written his gospel we would know very little about the birth and early years of John the Baptist and Jesus. Only Luke and Matthew give any information at all. Matthew starts with a genealogy, rooting Jesus firmly in Jewish scripture and tradition. Luke wants to show that Jesus’ ministry is the culmination of a whole series of marvellous events, which he describes in detail. We hear about Zechariah and Elizabeth, Gabriel’s appearance to Mary, Mary’s visit to Elisabeth, the births of John and Jesus, Jesus’s presentation in the Temple and his recognition by Simeon and Anna, and his visit to Jerusalem when he was twelve. Without Luke we would have no Benedictus,

no Magnificat and no Nunc Dimittis, words which have been at the core of Christian daily worship for two millennia. Luke's purpose in writing may have been to make existence a little less precarious for the fledgling Christian church. What he produced for one high-ranking Roman has become an enduring legacy for generations of Christians.

Legacy – did you see what I did there? This is the Sunday on which we launch our legacy leaflet, part of our plan for the future of St Peter's. It's almost a pity that this is combined with St Luke – had we gone with the twentieth Sunday after Trinity we would have heard the mother of John and James asking for her sons to sit at the right and left of Jesus when they were in heaven. Perhaps I could have suggested that the answer would have been 'Not unless you leave all your worldly goods to St Peter's.' (Now I've said it anyway!) But I'm not going to harangue you about leaving a legacy to St Peter's, though if you are in a position to make gifts to charities in your will this is clearly something to think and pray about very carefully.

I am going to spend a few moments emphasising the importance of making a will. It's the only way to be certain that what you want to happen with your money and possessions after your death actually does happen. It's the only way to make everything straightforward for your family at a really awkward time, and I can vouch for that from first-hand experience. It's so much easier if everything is clearly written down. It's worth spending some time and a little money to get your will properly drawn up by a solicitor, which avoids all sorts of subsequent arguments about what you might have meant. Is this gift before tax or after tax? Did you mean to give the item, or to have it sold and give the value? If you left £500 to your four cousins, what happens if there are five of them by the time you die – or three? And so on. But in general the one organisation no-one wants to leave money to is Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Getting professional advice and leaving legacies to church and charities are the best ways of keeping the taxman at arms' length.

Getting an up-to-date will is a responsible, generous, considerate, mature thing to do. It's hard to think about (and the younger you are, the harder it seems). No-one much likes to contemplate what should happen after they die, because that means having to think about death. But with a will you are one step nearer being able to say, with Luke, 'Lord, now let your servant go in peace.'