

Welcome to the year of **Luke**

Each year, on the First Sunday of Advent, the liturgical readings change and we hear a different Gospel. Matthew is assigned to Year A, Mark to Year B, Luke to Year C, while the Gospel of John makes its appearance throughout the three-year cycle. This Advent we begin the year of Luke.

On the night of 18 July in the year 64 AD a fire broke out in Rome that blazed for a week, destroying two-thirds of the imperial city. Rumour spread like the fire itself that the mad emperor, Nero, was to blame. To divert suspicion from himself, Nero looked for a victim. His choice fell on the Christians because their founder had taught that he had come to bring fire on the earth and wished that it was burning already. The Roman authorities learned to distinguish Christianity from Judaism. Before the fire, Christianity was tolerated as a sect of Judaism; after the fire, the Christians suddenly became the terrorist group to blame for the destruction of Rome. The great apostles Peter and Paul died in this persecution.

While the church was adapting to

its illegal status within the Roman Empire, the first great defence of Christianity was written – *the Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles*. They are both dedicated to a high Roman official, his Excellency Theophilus, defending Christianity against the accusations of his governing class.

Luke will show that Jesus was found innocent by the representatives of the Roman power: Pilate declared Jesus innocent as did the Roman centurion overseeing the crucifixion. Jesus was no terrorist, but turned his back on political revolution to accomplish a more profound revolution in the heart of people. Are Christians suspected of anti-social behaviour? Luke will portray the founder of Christianity as a figure of nobility and grace, a man who breathed kindness and graciousness.



The writer Luke

Luke is the only writer in the New Testament who is not a Jew. He was not a disciple of Jesus – he tells us that he gets his information from those who were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word. These are his sources. As a Gentile, he has particular interest in the abiding truth that Jesus is for everyone: he comes not only as the glory of the house of Israel, but as the light to enlighten the Gentiles.

Luke has a particular interest in old people – only in his Gospel do we meet the venerable ancients in Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon and Anna. They are not fascinated by the past, the good old days: what is still to happen dominates their life. They are still excited about tomorrow and what the future holds. For Luke, it is

their faith, the faith of old age that brings in the new age of Gospel. For all their wrinkles, they have never lost the capacity to wonder nor their desire to share their excitement in the midst of a world that has become tired with itself.

It would be impossible to celebrate Christmas as we do without Luke: Matthew and Luke have different birth scenes. Matthew has important people, wise men, coming from afar to the house of Joseph where Jesus is born. By contrast, Luke has Mary and Joseph come down from the hill country of Nazareth to Bethlehem, where the child is born in an animal shelter and local peasants drop in to celebrate with the young peasant couple.

Things to look out for in his Gospel:

- Luke has a special place in his Gospel and Acts for the women of Galilee, the women followers of Jesus who stayed with him right to the end. They represent so many women down the ages: women whose love and loyalty make them strangely unafraid, women whose talent is to be there; women who follow Jesus to the terror of Golgotha, and who stay around to pick up the pieces.
- In Luke's Gospel, the gates of God's kingdom are open to all people of goodwill. For Luke, God has no immigration policy. All Luke's heroes are outsiders and outcasts – the kind of people who are forgettable and overlooked in every other realm, but not in Jesus' kingdom.
- Luke knows about ambiguity in life: he knows that the good people in life are not always the correct people; he knows that decency and courtesy can come from the most unexpected quarter; he knows that kindness can flourish beyond the boundaries of religion.

“ I have come to seek out and to save the lost. ”