

PREACHING LUKE----YEAR C

Luke's gospel is long and so the lectionary has omitted much of the gospel for the Sunday readings. That's a shame since Luke writes so carefully and structures the sequence of the story in such a way that one narrative flows into the next. With such omissions it is hard for the preacher who preaches regularly to build one preaching on another from Sunday to Sunday.

As we prepare our preaching we must reflect on the context of a story so that we capture Luke's intention and the development of his message. Jean La Verdiere ("Preaching 86: the Gospel of Luke," CHURCH, Winter 1985, pgs. 3-7) points to another difficulty with the Lectionary's omissions. When a Sunday reading has a discourse by Jesus, the Lectionary often omits the introduction and we lose the context and reason that prompted Jesus' words. So, the preacher must note these introductions in the work of interpretation. Luke's narrative isn't meant to be a history. Rather, it is a theological interpretation of Jesus's life. He wants to show how, through the story of Jesus' life and ministry, the biblical promises are being fulfilled. When the preacher approaches these Sunday readings we will want to study each in the context in which they appear. Avoid trying to blend them with their parallels in the other gospels, except perhaps to compare similar texts to learn what makes a Lucan passage unique.

La Verdiere also recommends the need to be aware of Luke's major themes and how they color each passage. We should also note how a particular passage contributes to the development of the theme in the full gospel. He says that once Luke has introduced a theme, he does not let it drop away, but develops it throughout his whole gospel. While more than one of these themes appears in individual passages, we need not feel obliged to preach on all of them, lest we produce "biblical indigestion" in our hearers. Rather, while being aware of the flow of Luke's gospel, the preacher should focus on one theme as it appears in a passage, paying special attention to how the passage develops and nuances the theme.

Each gospel writer has a unique way of presenting the good news, each a unique style and different purpose or goal. It is obvious that Luke wrote for a rather sophisticated Greek-speaking community. His readers were familiar with Greek and Roman literary styles, as well as with the Hebrew scriptures. Luke starts immediately by spelling out his intentions (1: 1-4). He says he has "carefully traced the whole sequence of events from the beginning" and intends to write it

out. Speaking to one he addresses as “Your Excellency,” Luke says he wants his reader to see “how reliable the instruction was that you received.” Then he sets out his narrative. Luke’s gospel is just the first of a two volume work and so what he writes in his gospel anticipates what will later appear in Acts and some details in the gospel become clearer when seen in the light of Acts. While both the Gospel and Acts are addressed to the unknown Theophilus (Lk 1:3; Acts 1:1), it is clear from the beginning that Luke is writing for a wider audience, since the name means “beloved of God.” He intends the gospel to be a guide to believers and a consolation that will encourage their faith journey. As the church grows in numbers and expands into diverse regions of the world, this gospel is intended to help the community face new challenges and address questions about the faith that will inevitably arise.

Luke shows the hand of an educated and cultured writer. He writes for a church needing to adapt to the delay of the Lord’s return. His introduction shows he wants to provide a defense for the Christian faith. With few exceptions, Christians were meant to live in the world and Luke is sensitive to the Hellenistic world the church was encountering as it spread. He also has an appreciation for the roots of the faith in Judaism. His Jewish readers would notice in the gospel evidence of their liturgical celebrations; while his Hellenistic readers would appreciate the gospel’s journey narrative, a literary device found in classic Greek narratives such as the Odyssey. Believers needed to be conscious of this larger world into which the faith had grown.

As the Sundays proceed the preacher will detect Luke’s artistic gifts and characteristics. For example, in the beginning he builds a sense of dramatic expectancy that is satisfied with the birth of Christ. Jesus will draw followers as he travels, preaches and performs miracles. As the initial stories occur in the Sunday cycles the preacher can emphasize the way these followers receive the mystery of God in their presence. The evangelist shows Jesus praying at key moments in his ministry. From the beginning, Jesus’ journey is made in prayer. For example, Luke tells us that at his baptism the Spirit of God descended on Jesus while he was at prayer. Luke teaches us a lot about prayer, but not just in the specific prayer sections. The narratives call believers to reverence and awe for what God is doing in Jesus. Thus, the preacher has an opportunity to preach to modern believers about prayer in a hectic world; not just how to pray, but about the spirit of prayer for people, who like Jesus and his disciples, are “on the move.”

The gospel was written in a time of transition, as the church looked outward to

expansion into the wider world. Initially the early believers were filled with the creativity and enthusiasm of a new faith community. But by the time Luke wrote, the danger for the believers was compromise and comfort. There were problems in the community as well as discouragement and a loss of the earlier missionary zeal and fire that characterized the first generation of believers. The first Christians expected a speedy return of the Lord. Mark, an earlier gospel, stirred up Christian anticipation of the Second Coming. But Luke admits we do not know when the end will come (19:11). So he has to deal with the delay and the issue of Christians who are tiring and being distracted by the world around them. This gospel is for us while we wait, share in our church life, and strive to respond to the needs of the world around us.

Luke was a second or third generation Christian. He had not seen Jesus or witnessed the marvels about which he writes. Like us he had to make a decision to follow Christ and to be faithful to a community of prayer and service. Disciples in this gospel are asked to live totally dedicated lives— as are we modern believers. When stories of the demands of discipleship appear in the Sunday sequence of readings, the preacher, while enumerating what following Christ in our modern world requires, will be sure to emphasize God's presence with us in our struggles and our need to express our dependence on God through trusting prayer. It is in praying at these difficult moments that we are reminded what Luke stresses, that we are not left alone as we wait for the Lord's return.

Luke's parables stir up a particular kind of prayer. Many are about losing and finding (the coins, sheep, prodigal son, etc.); they announce God's mercy. These parables encourage prayers of contrition for they assure forgiveness. With this assurance of mercy the penitent responds with joy and gratitude, two strong themes that are woven throughout this gospel. Such prayer is appropriately on the lips of those who are outcast and on the fringes of society, for they are assured in this gospel that they are important—women, the poor, gentiles and the sick. (One response Luke stresses is an appreciation and acceptance of minorities and the poor. His gospel calls for justice for all people.) While society may treat them as less, Luke's Jesus includes them and assures them that before God they are noticed, even esteemed and that their prayers are heard. This Lucan message of God's embrace of the outcast is a good summary of Luke's gospel and one that preachers should stress in this "Year of Luke."

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