

A Reflection for the Commemoration of St Luke

In Luke's account of the way Jesus sends his friends into the world to bear witness to the coming of the kingdom of God – the text read in our annual commemoration of St Luke 'the Evangelist' on October 18th – Jesus exhorts us to *travel light* in so far as we relate to 'the world'; to carry a message of *peace*; and to let our neighbours know that God's kingdom has *come near to them*. That is to say, we must try not to get sucked into the 'ways of the world' – including its distorted patterns of thought and of longing; we must be *peace-bearers* (especially in a world of impatience, selfishness, and conflict); and we must live lives which genuinely reflect something of the *alternative values* of the kingdom of God. Here is Luke's own text:

The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."'" Luke 10.1-9

As bearers of *peace* (in the face of anger, violence, and conflict) and as witnesses to the 'kingdom of God' (of *justice* and *goodness* and *kindness* and *mercy*), we embody and proclaim the *same message* as had been spoken long before by the Prophet Isaiah, of the strengthening of those who feel weak and the renewal of those who are oppressed. The prophet draws out, in particular, an emphasis on *compassion* and on *healing* and *reconciliation* – unsurprisingly themes which appeal to Luke, the *doctor* (cf Colossians 4.14, where he is described as 'the beloved physician'):

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.' Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the

deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.

Isaiah 35.3-6

Put together, this 'vision' speaks not only of *comfort* in the place of distress, but of *liberation* in the place of oppression. It is about *justice* as well as *mercy* – and in Luke's account of the kingdom of God there is always a focus on the *relief of the poor*. That does not mean that we have to interpret Luke as 'left wing' rather than 'right wing' (the 'kingdom of God' brings into question the distortions of *all* political opinion): but Luke's understanding of the 'Gospel' – of 'religious life' in its very nature – is supremely *practical*. It has nothing to do with *piety* or *wishful thinking*. It is about attitudes and actions as they have effect in the *real world*.

At the same time, there is a *sacred* quality to this vision of our potential renewal, hinted at in the prophet's description of waters breaking forth in the wilderness. The 'water of life' is one of the primary images in the Bible as a whole, from its appearance in Genesis as the source from which life emerges, to its place at the centre of Blessed John's vision of the Holy City at the end of the Book of Revelation – where the River of the Water of Life continues to bring healing and renewal.



In our churches we keep vials of the Holy Oils for use in Baptism, in the anointing of the Sick, and for the chrismation of those being consecrated to God. Combined with the image of water, these oils speak – like the Prophet Isaiah and the Evangelist Luke – of the *mercy* of God, the *healing* of God, and the *blessing* of God. As we give thanks for Luke the Evangelist and Physician, may we find ever more effective ways to draw forth from our own faith the *living signs* – represented in the waters of Baptism and the Holy Oils – by which our *vision* of the kingdom of God may overflow continually into practical expressions of mercy, of kindness, and of peace – that our neighbours, even today, may know that the kingdom of God has come near to them too.

The image shows the Holy Oils as they are reserved in the Metropolitan Cathedral in Liverpool