

August 31, 2003

Last Day of the Liturgical Year

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

On the testimony of Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Luke's authorship of one of the canonical gospels and of that other work known as The Acts of the Apostles is part of the unbroken, never seriously challenged tradition of the Church. But just who was Luke? Answering this question is more complicated.

Were Ephrem of Edessa and other Church Fathers correct in identifying Luke with Lucius of Cyrene in Acts 13:1? If so, then perhaps there is merit in thinking Luke to be the companion of Cleopas in the Emmaus story in Luke 24, as we find in Theophylact and some liturgical texts. Similarly, Epiphanius of Cyprus lists Luke among the "seventy" that Jesus sent out in Luke 10:1. This last theory, however, is impossible, because Luke's own words (1:2) imply that he was not an immediate witness of Jesus' ministry.

In fact, all of the foregoing identifications are shaky at best, inasmuch as they contradict the more common patristic opinion that Luke was a Gentile, not a Jew. Indeed, this latter judgment seems better supported by Holy Scripture. For example, when Luke is mentioned in Colossians 4:14, he is clearly not included among those of Paul's companions who are of the circumcision in 4:10-11.

Apparently in accord with an opinion common in the fourth century, Eusebius and Jerome both say that Luke was a native of Antioch. This view would explain how the word "we" found its way into some manuscripts of Acts 11:28.

Indeed, from earliest times the Church Fathers, educated to a great sensitivity toward literary and historical details, presumed that whenever Luke used the word "we" in the Book of Acts, he was describing events of which he was an eye-witness. Following their insight on this point, I have long thought Luke to come from Troas, near the site of the ancient Troy, because the first "we" text (16:10-11) speaks of the voyage from Troas to Macedonia.

Thus, Luke was with Paul during the mission to Philippi (16:12-16). When the citizens of this city, opposed to anything that could be called "Jewish" (16:20-21), made life rough for Paul (16:22-24), he left the place (16:40), but he

was careful to leave Luke, a Gentile, as the pastor of the new congregation there. The "we" sections stop abruptly at Philippi, indicating that Luke was not a companion of Paul's travels in Acts 17-19. Indeed, when the word "we" next appears, it is nearly nine years later, again at Philippi (20:6).

Thus, it appears that Luke pastored the congregation at Philippi from the summer of A.D. 49 to the spring of 58. This reasonable hypothesis clarifies the identity of the "true companion" (literally "loyal yoke-fellow) whom Paul address in the Epistle to the Philippians (4:3). (For various reasons that I will not elaborate here, I believe Philippians was written from Ephesus sometime in the early 50's.)

Beginning in the spring of 58, Luke was Paul's more-or-less constant companion (Acts 20:13-21:17). He was sufficiently near him during the two years imprisonment at Caesarea (24:27) to be mentioned in the epistles to Philemon (24) and the Colossians (4:14). He shared Paul's arduous voyage to Rome (Acts 27-28) and was with him when Paul wrote his final epistle from that city (2 Timothy 4:11).

From these epistolary references we know that Luke was a physician. Perhaps it was in prison at Caesarea, during long talks with Luke that Paul became familiar with the recent medical theory about the head as the governing part of the body (a theory so recent that it will not appear in our extant medical literature until Galen, more than a century later). As early as the spring of 55, Paul had referred to the Church as "the body of Christ" (I Corinthians 10:16f.;12:12-27), a theme that he took up again in the Epistle to the Romans (12:1-5), early in the year 58. In the letters that he wrote from Caesarea, however, during a time that we know Luke was with him, Paul began to speak, not only of the Church as Christ's body (Colossians 3:15; Ephesians (2:16;4:4,12;5:30), but of Christ as "head" (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22f.; 5:23), "from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God gives it to grow" (Colossians 2:19). Since this idea represents a clear development of Paul's earlier imagery, it is legitimate to inquire where Paul might have derived this idea. It seems reasonable to suppose that he learned it from the physician Luke.

Commentators have long remarked on Paul's influence on the theology of Luke, but perhaps the influence went both ways. Humanly speaking, we may wonder whether Paul, apart from what

he discovered from conversations with his friend, physician and fellow-missionary Luke, would ever have written, "Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow unto him who is the head, that is, Christ. For in him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each member does it work" (Ephesians 4:15f.).

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