

St Luke and Christian Ideals in an Affluent Society

by Henry Wansbrough, O.S.B.

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The tradition that the third gospel was written by Luke the doctor dies hard. We may realize that the 'Luke the doctor' of Colossians 4, 14 is not necessarily the same Luke as the one to whom the gospel is attributed (just as there is no shadow of an indication that the Mark of the second gospel is any of the Marks mentioned in the Acts and the Epistles). We may know that all attempts to show that the author of the third gospel used medical language collapse, simply because there was no such thing as technical medical language in those days. Yet there remains a sympathy with human suffering and appreciation of the many-sidedness of men's characters, a power to make a penetrating yet kindly assessment which is often—rightly or wrongly—associated with the medical man, the Dr Camerons or even the Dr Findlays of this world. But Luke is no country doctor from the highlands or the valleys, and it is because of this that his special preoccupation with rich and poor is especially significant to Christians of an affluent society brought face to face with poverty.

Luke stands out among the other New Testament writers by a certain grace and dignity. The gospel of Mark, on which a large part of both Matthew's and Luke's gospels is based, is undisguisedly *Kleinliteratur*, stories told uncomplicatedly in simple, popular form, without literary pretension; he writes the sort of Greek which was probably spoken by the lower classes in the cities of the Roman empire. He delights in the turmoil of the thronging crowds who follow Jesus, the sick who come milling round him to be cured. This hubbub tends to be left out by Luke. Mark retains the flavour of the countryside, though perhaps the fact that he has to explain that the mustard-seed is the smallest of all seed, and grows to be the largest of all shrubs, suggests that his readers were less familiar with the country. But Luke has simply no interest and leaves these details out, as he leaves out many of the parables about nature. He 'virtually leaves the countryside behind. . . . Luke's own world is the town: debtors, and builders and robbers and travellers, midnight visitors (friendly and otherwise), the wealthy and their guests . . .' (M. D. Goulder, *JTS* 19 (1968), 53).

But it is not only a change from country to town; it is also a change of social class. The sums of money which they envisage are already indicative: Mark talks of *lepta* (12, 42—the two-hundredth part of the sum given to poor retainers at Rome in lieu of a meal), and considers

three hundred denarii (14, 5—a year's wage for a casual labourer) to be astronomical. Luke, however, speaks easily of ten minas, the equivalent of one thousand denarii (19, 13). It is Luke who shows interest in the well-to-do women who were rich enough so give Jesus and the Twelve financial support (8, 3). In the Acts he is careful to show that Christianity is not confined exclusively to the lower classes, but included in its ranks 'Menaen, who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch' (13, 1) at Antioch, and Denis the Areopagite of Athens (17, 34). In the gospel, too, he makes the rich young man who comes to Jesus a 'ruler' (18, 18). In the Acts he is constantly at pains to point out the good repute of important characters (5, 34; 6, 3; 16, 12, etc.). These are not the preoccupations of members of the slave class from which most of the Christians seem to have been drawn.

Much more significant is the tone and style of the whole of Luke's double work, gospel and Acts. In the gospel he is hampered by the nature of his material, short stories and sayings of an unavoidably popular character. Yet even here he at least frequently corrects Mark's Greek, improving style and inserting words drawn from a far more sophisticated vocabulary. In the Acts, however, he has a freer hand, and writes comfortably in the manner of the contemporary secular historian, planning on a large scale, pointing his lessons by means of speeches, employing many literary devices well known in contemporary educated circles. Most clearly is the tone given by the introductions to each of his two volumes, which contain a claim to rank among historians and a dedication to an exalted personage, real or imaginary. It would never have entered the heads of the other three evangelists to address themselves in this way to a sophisticated literary audience. Thus Luke is writing not only—as might be expected from Paul's companion—for gentiles, but for educated, at least bourgeois, gentiles, a cut above the unpretentious lower classes which form Mark's audience.

This knowledge of Luke's social context gives a quite new perspective to his teaching on riches and poverty. It is easy to encourage people to give up all things if they have next to nothing to give up. It is easy for the prospective beneficiaries of the rich man's largesse to preach the virtues of generosity. But it is much more striking and convincing if the emphasis on total abandonment of property and on generosity to the poor increases precisely as the writer rises higher in the social scale.

At first sight Luke seems to suggest that in Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom it was only the poor who were to be allowed a place; this would amount to an absolute condemnation of wealth. In this he reflects the theme which becomes so prominent in the later prophets, and generally in late pre-Christian Palestinian Judaism, that the poor are the chosen ones of God. In sharp opposition to pre-exilic writings, in which it is assumed that wealth is a blessing

from Yahweh and poverty a punishment, when Israel returned from the exile, oppressed and struggling to maintain its existence in the teeth of opposition from neighbours who were anxious to rid themselves of this stubborn, tenacious and non-conformist community, they became ever more conscious of the religious benefits which may be drawn from poverty. This consciousness never amounted to a romantic idealization of poverty, such as is found in some more sophisticated (and richer) cultures, but did show awareness that the poor man is blessed in so far as he is forced to turn away from his own resources to find his help in God. Poverty is not in itself a blessed state, but is a means to acquiring an attitude towards God: 'In your midst I will leave a humble and lowly people, and those who are left in Israel will seek refuge in the name of Yahweh' (Zephaniah 3, 12).

This 'poverty of spirit' is of course one thing, and an aspect which Matthew especially stresses—no doubt in opposition to Pharisaic self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction—in his version of the beatitudes. The Pharisees were by no means all rich men, being drawn also from the artisan and shop-keeper classes; it is their contentment with their own spiritual resources and power to win 'justice' by themselves to which Matthew objects. But Luke's message is not this; he proclaims the gospel to the real poor. Whereas Matthew's beatitudes are concerned with spiritual attitudes, 'poor *in spirit*', 'hunger and thirst *for justice*', 'clean *of heart*', Luke's lacked these qualifications. Of his four beatitudes three concern those who are actually afflicted, without any reference to their religious attitude, the poor, the hungry, and those who weep. It is to these that the Kingdom belongs, and will bring relief. Only in the last of Luke's beatitudes does any specifically religious note enter, to those who are outcasts 'for the sake of the son of man'. Till then Luke has been pointing to a social not a religious class. This lesson is reinforced by the four 'woes' with which Luke balances these beatitudes; here again it is a social class which is envisaged, or at least those who enjoy the pleasures and good repute of the world, without any clause excusing those who do so innocently: 'Alas for you who are rich . . . who have your fill now . . . who laugh now . . . when the world speaks well of you' (6, 24-26).

Such is the lesson also of the parable of Dives and Lazarus. This is taken from a favourite Palestinian story about a poor scholar and a rich tax-gatherer whose situations are reversed in heaven. But when Luke adopts the story he not only refrains from saying anything about the merits of Lazarus and demerits of Dives; he positively removes the built-in good qualities of the poor man (a scholar of the Law) and the bad qualities of the rich man (an unclean tax-collector). It seems that it is the position itself of being rich or poor which gains happiness or unhappiness in the next world, without any regard to action. In teaching in this way he is no more than following

out the programme with which Jesus' proclamation opens in his gospel. For Luke the scene in the synagogue at Nazareth corresponds to the sermon on the mount for Matthew, as being a 'programme-speech' or manifesto, giving the kernel of Jesus' message at his first major public pronouncement. Matthew shows by the sermon on the mount that for him the central point of Jesus' message is the perfecting and fulfilment of the old Law. But for Luke it is the rehabilitation of the poor and underprivileged, since Jesus takes as his opening theme the passage of Isaiah, 'He has anointed me (made me Messiah) to bring the good news to the poor . . . to set the downtrodden free.' There must be real significance in the prominence which Luke here gives to the recipients of the gospel. The message is not in itself new, for it is probably Luke's version of the beatitudes not Matthew's which is original; but the emphasis placed on the teaching that the proper beneficiaries of the gospel are the poor cannot be disregarded, especially when placed against Luke's social background.

In the same line of the absolute priority of the poor in God's Kingdom and the consequent rejection of wealth is the stress given by Luke to the necessity for Christ's followers to give up all they have. In Mark and Matthew, when the first four apostles follow Jesus' call, they leave behind their nets or their boat and their father; but in Luke (5, 11) they give up or 'put off' everything. Similarly at the call of Levi, Mark and Matthew do indeed suggest that the tax-collector left everything behind when he 'got up and followed him', but Luke (5, 28) is careful to state this explicitly. Just so with the ruler who wants to follow Jesus (Matthew's rich young man), it is Luke who makes explicit that he must sell *all* he has (18, 22). Finally, it is Luke alone who has the long passage about counting the cost of discipleship, culminating in the verse, 'None of you can be my disciple unless he renounces all his possessions' (14, 33—here the verb does not necessarily mean 'gets rid of', but is more subtle: 'says good-bye to' perhaps).

From the passages so far discussed it might seem that Luke condemns wealth and all possessions, that total destitution is the precondition for membership of God's Kingdom. Monastic poverty, indeed the poverty of St Francis, would be not merely an evangelical counsel but an absolute necessity. But on the other side it is clear that riches do not always exclude their owners from the Kingdom. There is no indication that the women who gave financial support to Jesus abandoned all their possessions. Zacchaeus gave only half his possessions to the poor. A man who has two tunics must give only a share, not both tunics, to the man who has none (3, 11). In the Acts the crime of Ananias and Sapphira was not to keep back the money—this they were perfectly at liberty to do (5, 4)—but to pretend falsely that they were giving it all. Paradoxically after the passages we mentioned earlier, it is Luke who more than any other evangelist shows that the Kingdom contains wealthy members, too. When an

appeal is made to Jesus to adjudicate in the case of a disputed inheritance he does not take the occasion to condemn even unearned possessions; he merely indicates that haggling over possessions is not the business of the Kingdom. Luke carries on this lesson with the parable of the rich fool—one of the most drastic and sternest vignettes in the whole gospel—where a rich man plans to extend his barns to accommodate all his farm produce, whereupon God checks him with the uncompromising: ‘Fool, this very night I shall demand your life from you, and then whose will be the store you were preparing?’ (12, 20). The moral is ‘life is not to be found in abundance of possessions’. In the lilies-of-the-field passage which follows, Luke is more absolute than Matthew, for, while Matthew advises to ‘seek *first* the Kingdom . . . and all these things will be given to you in addition’, Luke may be translated ‘seek *only* the Kingdom . . .’.

The only way to avoid the danger of riches is to use them well, as Luke points out especially in two of the parables. The central point of the lesson is already given by 12, 33, where he corrects his source, writing ‘sell all you have *and give alms*’, where Matthew has only ‘sell all you have’. The same point is taught by the story of Zacchaeus’ conversion. Of the parables those of the good Samaritan and of the unjust steward drive home the lesson. The former is clear enough, for the Samaritan shares his own resources to help the wounded man, his own mule, and perhaps his own clothes to make the bandages, as well as giving quite a decent sum—perhaps enough for three weeks’ lodging—to the innkeeper. The unjust steward is more complicated, for the story has been handed down without a context, and with several other sayings added at the end, connected only by the fact that they all refer to ‘unjust mammon’ or ‘ill-gotten gains’. It is difficult to evaluate the exact point stressed by Luke, but it does not seem to be the fact that the wealth is ill-gotten, since at the end he merely says that the parable was addressed to the Pharisees ‘who loved money’, not that they acquired it by dubious means. But if one may judge which point is central to Luke by the saying which he puts first after the parable itself (16, 9—subsequent ones being alternative morals which are, in fact, not illustrated nearly so well by the story), it is that one should use what wealth one has to procure friends for eternity; this can only be by giving to those in need. Wealth is not, then, necessarily a handicap on the way to the Kingdom, but can be a positive advantage if properly used.

In the Acts Luke goes further. To his ideal picture of the Christian community belongs complete community of goods. This is stressed vehemently: ‘All the believers (in Jerusalem) together owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared them out to all according to what each needed’ (2, 44-45). The slightly fuller summary in 4, 32-35 adds two elements which show why this community of goods was important to Luke: ‘the whole group of

believers was united, heart and soul . . . none of their members was ever in want.' We may perhaps doubt whether the ideal of community of goods was ever so perfectly realised as these summary passages composed by Luke would lead us to suppose. The story of Ananias and Sapphira, and the detailed instructions for Paul's great collection among the Greek Churches for the community of Jerusalem would suggest that a considerable measure of private ownership remained. But it is also less important to know whether this ideal was actually realized; the important thing is that it was regarded by Luke as the ideal, and chiefly as an expression of unity, the theme which runs through all the descriptions of the primitive community in Acts.

There are, then, several attitudes towards material possessions and towards property to be found in Luke, between which a certain tension exists. This tension itself suggests that, writing as he was for a comparatively well-to-do community, Luke could produce no black-and-white solution. There is a series of sayings—perhaps the most primitive layer—which shows Jesus proclaiming the gospel to the real poor and real underprivileged, not just to the poor in spirit. To these passages Luke has added his own stress on the necessity of total renunciation. But also—and here the tension begins—he shows that rich people do belong to Christ's community both in the gospel and in the Acts. It is primarily a matter of good use of wealth, for the sake of those in need. At the other end of the scale, the left wing, comes what must be regarded as Luke's own theology, shown in the summaries of the Acts (which sum up also so well the spirit of the Acts) that community of good corresponds to the perfection of the Christian ideal. It is this unresolved tension which is in many ways the most interesting result of our enquiry. Luke was not a radical, insisting that the only way to salvation was through total destitution; with the social and educational background which shows itself in his writing, and in view of the community which glimmers through his two books, he could hardly do this. Yet he is aware that there is a strain in Christ's teaching which would point in this direction. In the gospel his comment on this is seen in the many minor additions and parables inserted which stress the extreme danger of riches, and the need to use them for the sake of the Kingdom in almsgiving. We may not perhaps be wrong in seeing in the summaries of the Acts his own solution, his own ideal of the Christian attitude to possessions, but a solution which he does not insist on imposing on all alike.