

Feast of Saint Luke

Healing companions

Sirach 38:1-14; 2 Timothy 4:9-17; Luke 10:1-9

We know Luke as the author of the third Gospel. It is the longest of the Gospels and, like all good blockbusters, comes with a sequel, *The Acts of the Apostles*. But what do we know about the man himself?

He was a Gentile, a non-Jew, and evidently well educated. Through his Gospel, Acts, and a few scattered references elsewhere in the New Testament, a picture emerges of a remarkable disciple.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians, Luke is described as "the beloved physician", the dear doctor. That brief description has linked Luke ever since with the Church's ministry of healing. It is why we read that passage from Sirach today. Sirach honours those who practise medicine and recognises their work as a gift from God for the care of humanity.

That is an important reminder. Sometimes people speak as though faith and medicine belong on opposite sides. Scripture suggests otherwise. We pray for healing, and we give thanks for those whose skills relieve suffering. God works through prayer and through medicine. The two belong together.

The faith element emerges in Luke's Gospel. It contains more healing stories than any of the other three Gospels and emphasises qualities like mercy and forgiveness, love, acceptance, and empathy. He shows Jesus' special concern for the poor, the sick, the outsider, and all who live on the margins.

Again and again, Luke shows us that healing is about more than curing disease. It's about restoring people to community, hope, and relationship. It's about knowing that you matter and that you're not forgotten. Reflecting on this emphasis reminds us that like the early Church described in Acts, we are called to share Christ's compassion and healing with others.

Yet healing, for Luke, was about more than medicine. Another glimpse into his life suggests that one of his greatest gifts was faithful companionship.

In Philemon, Paul describes Luke as a "fellow worker", and in today's reading from 2 Timothy we hear a poignant comment from near the end of Paul's life. Others have left, but Paul writes simply: "*Only Luke is with me.*"

Luke was not simply a doctor or an author. He is Paul's companion. This is reinforced by *The Acts of the Apostles*, where the narrative occasionally shifts into the first person: "we did this" and "we did that." These "we passages" most likely indicate that Luke himself travelled alongside Paul.

Their journeys were anything but comfortable. They endured shipwrecks, riots, imprisonment, and constant dangers. Other companions came and went, but through much of it all Luke remained at Paul's side.

We do not know how this friendship began, but it clearly became a strong and faithful bond. Luke stayed when others left.

The description of him as "the beloved physician" also allows us to read between the lines. Paul suffered from a recurring physical affliction and frequently endured beatings, imprisonment, hunger, exhaustion, and hardship. Someone had to patch him up and keep him going. I suspect Paul was not

always the easiest travelling companion and that patience was one of Luke's virtues. By the end, he appears to be the only companion still there.

What emerges is a portrait of loyalty and faithfulness. Proverbs tells us that a true friend may be closer than family. Another writer observed: "Eloquence will be forgotten; mental cleverness may live on the printed page; but kindness lives on enthroned in the hearts of people."

I come back to those words in 2 Timothy: *"Only Luke is with me."*

Yes, we treasure Luke's writings. But there's another gift worth remembering: the gift of companionship.

When I trained as a counsellor thirty-five years ago, a comment from one of our trainers lodged itself in my memory. He said, "The most important thing about your work with someone is the relationship. Your accreditation, skills, and degrees are bonuses. It is the relationship that really matters." Luke would have understood that.

Caring companionship can be profoundly healing. A relationship marked by empathy, acceptance, patience, and genuine regard is a powerful thing. It is about being willing simply to be with another person or, as Paul wrote, to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. It is less about having answers and more about listening with openness and care.

Many of us know this from experience. Looking back over difficult periods in our lives, we remember people who stood beside us. They may not have solved our problems or taken our pain away, but their presence gave courage and hope. Through them, we experienced something of God's care.

It's a gift that people of every age can offer. In that gift, we share God's own healing companionship.

A modern parable captures this beautifully. A mother had a son whose mobility was limited. Realising that she had perhaps been overprotective, she eventually allowed him to walk to the shops alone. When he took longer than expected to return, she became worried and went looking for him. Eventually she found him slowly making his way home.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"I saw Carol," he replied. "She dropped her doll and it broke."

"And you stayed to help her fix it?" his mother asked.

"No, Mum," he said. "I stayed to help her cry."

In many ways, that's exactly the kind of ministry Jesus entrusted to his followers. Not simply solving problems but being present to people in their joy and sorrow, their hopes and fears.

In today's Gospel, Jesus sends out seventy followers in pairs. They are to offer peace, heal the sick, and announce that the kingdom of God has come near. Healing is central to their mission. Before they explain anything, they are called to embody God's loving care.

Perhaps Luke later saw something of his own vocation reflected in that story. He journeyed alongside Paul, crossed cultural boundaries, and used his skills as a physician whenever opportunities for healing arose.

What, then, is our ministry?

Luke reminds us that following Christ is about offering the gifts we have been given. He used his abilities as a writer. He used his skills as a doctor. He offered the gift of faithful companionship. In all these ways, he served Christ.

Most of us will never write a Gospel or become famous saints. But every one of us can become a healing companion. We can listen, encourage, comfort, and walk alongside those who are struggling. Whenever we do so, we continue the ministry Luke describes so beautifully in his Gospel.

People may forget much of what we say. They may forget the advice we offered. But they rarely forget those who stood beside them when life was difficult.

Like Luke, we will not heal every wound or solve every problem. But we can stay. We can be present. We can walk alongside another person in their joy and sorrow, their hope and fear.

And sometimes the most Christlike thing we can do is simply to help someone know that they do not have to carry their burden alone.

Through such acts of faithful presence, the compassion of Christ becomes visible and the kingdom of God comes near.

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