

Who can we trust? This is a question we hear more and more often as increasingly we lose faith in our institutions, our leaders to tell us the truth, to govern for the good of all, not for their own self-interest. Of course there has always been cynicism about those in authority, people who have been prepared to challenge the status quo and to call out our leaders when they have been seen to be doing wrong. On the whole, though, we have accepted those in authority to be genuine, honestly working for the good of society, and if there is a breakdown of trust we can use our vote to bring in new leaders. I do feel that we are less accepting of our leaders. Or has this always been the case and it is me who has become more cynical, less accepting of what we are being told?

Our lack of respect for our political leaders is growing as more and more we see through the smoke and mirrors they put up to stop us from seeing things as they really are. And it's not just in the area of government. All institutions are being held up to scrutiny. Only the other week a damning report was produced showing how the Church of England has covered up sexual abuse for decades. How can we respect an organisation that is supposed to be there to teach us the right way to live our lives, to be there for the weak and vulnerable, when it has failed to protect those people in their care? And it is the same for sporting bodies, the scouting movement, schools, any institution where the young and vulnerable are involved. It might only be a small number of individuals carrying out these appalling acts, but the whole organisation is tarnished by the behaviour of the few, more so because the leaders have so often covered up the abuse in an attempt to retain their positions of authority and status.

Lord Acton, the British historian at the turn of the 19th – 20th. Centuries said this: “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. How true this statement is.

The beginning of the gospel according to Saint Luke begins in this way. ‘To Theophilus; many writers have undertaken to draw up an account of the events that have taken place among us, following the traditions handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses and servants of the gospel. So I, in my turn, as one who has investigated the whole course of these events in detail, have decided to write an orderly narrative for you, your excellency, so as to give you authentic knowledge about the matters of which you have been informed.’

We don't know who the author of Saint Luke's gospel was, we call him Luke because that's who the early Church attributed this gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to. He may well have been the Luke who Paul mentions as his companion in Colossians, Philemon and 2 Timothy. Again, we don't know when it was written, any time between AD 50 – AD 90. A fair guess as to its authorship and date is that it was indeed

written by Paul's companion Luke, the beloved physician, sometime in the AD 60s to 70s.

The main reason he is writing this gospel is that Christianity has, by this time, spread across the Roman Empire. Perhaps the stories about Jesus had got garbled and muddled, there were varying reports about who Jesus was, what he did and said and what had happened to him. Luke wants to set the record straight. Other writers were also undertaking this task, Luke has a wider audience in mind. Theophilus may have been a real person, perhaps a leader in the Roman community, someone Luke had got to know. Or it could just be a literary device, a way of addressing anyone who has heard about Jesus and the movement that had developed around his story. Theophilus means 'a lover of God', so maybe Luke is writing for those new to faith who want to know more.

The opening to Luke's gospel states what the author is trying to do, to get the record straight, we can trust what he is saying. Luke has done the research. This is a not uncommon way for writers of this time to open their work, a way to emphasise that it was a scholarly, factual book they were about to begin reading.

Cynics will point out immediately, 'Well he would say that, wouldn't he? He's a believer who wants others to come to faith in Jesus. But that response is too dismissive, Luke has done his homework, he doesn't want his readers to just take what he says on trust. Others have written about these events, he has been in touch with eyewitnesses who have told him about what they saw and experienced. He has listened to those who are teachers within the Christian community, people of standing, the accredited storytellers or as Luke calls them, 'the stewards of the Word.' Luke has researched well and when it comes to the Acts of the Apostles we know how accurate he can be as many of his details have been confirmed by archaeology.

If we put to one side those cynical voices who would want us to dismiss Luke's writings as those of a biased believer in Jesus, we can find a picture of Jesus in this gospel that speaks to us across the centuries and can help us to live our lives today. And the way Luke writes the events of Jesus' life must somehow reflect what Luke was like himself.

Firstly, Luke emphasises the compassion of Christ. From the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, to Christ's words to the women of Jerusalem as he made his way to the Cross, and then his words to the Good Thief who was crucified with him:

'Jesus, remember me in your kingdom.'

'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

These passages can only be found in Luke, added together with the emphasis across the gospel on poverty, prayer and purity of heart, all this shows that Luke wanted to make a point about what sort of person Jesus was, the Jesus who, he, Luke had found and believed in. This Jesus spoke to Luke, he resonated with him, and this is someone who can still speak to us, today.

Another thing that Luke highlights, something we don't find in the other gospels, is the role of women, they certainly figure more prominently in Luke. Take, for example, the story leading up to the birth of Jesus. Only in Luke will you find this, the angel Gabriel coming to the young girl, Mary, telling her that she is about to become a mother, that her child is destined for great things, he will be God's own Son. No wonder she is greatly troubled. 'how shall this be, since I have no husband?'

Only in Luke do we read of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, who, in her old age, has become pregnant with her son, John, who will become known as the Baptist, the one who prepared the way for Jesus. Only in Luke do we have Mary's song, the Magnificat, much of which will be echoed by her son in his ministry. Warning the rich not to trust in their wealth, promising God's kingdom to the poor. Matthew is the only other gospel writer to detail the events around Jesus' birth, but here we find them written from Joseph's perspective, Mary's role is downplayed.

So in Luke we find a writer whose emphasis on women and on Christ's care and love for those on the margins, can speak to us today, speak to a Church facing so many difficulties. From being at the heart of our society, an institution of power for so long, the Church is no longer seen by the majority of people as having anything important to say to them or to guide them in the way they live their lives. The way the Church used its power and influence hasn't helped in this decline, especially when the abuse of power has been so damningly highlighted.

On this Saint Luke's day we give thanks for his gospel, for all that he teaches us about the truth of who Jesus was, and to pray that we and the whole Church can be transformed, through the power of the Holy Spirit, into the likeness of Christ, that we become a source of hope, of love, joy and peace, in our troubled world.