St Luke, physician and evangelist
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2020

Isaiah 35:3-6

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Because the calendar of saints, what the church refers to as the Sanctorale, is all organised by fixed dates, whereas the Sunday calendar, the Temporale, depends on Easter for its organisation, every now and then we get a day like today where a big feast day of the church intersects with a Sunday, and we get to celebrate the feast with a bit more pizzazz than would happen at a simple 8 o’clock morning prayer. This year the feast of St Luke the evangelist and physician lands on the 19th Sunday after Trinity. Today.

And there are a whole bunch of themes associated with St Luke. He is of course one of the four evangelists: one of the four whose names are ascribed to the four Gospels that made it into the canon of Scripture. There is an animal associated with him: the ox. You sometimes see on the lectern or book of the gospels the images of the four evangelists: the lion, the human, the ox and the Eagle. These animals themselves come from visions in the books of Ezekiel, and the book of Revelation. The ox, or the bull, is an animal associated very much in the Bible with sacrifice, and so we’ve got this interesting strand running through our celebration of St Luke, about sacrifice, about the way in which suffering and glory are held together. It’s interesting to hold together the image of the ox, one of the key sacrificial animals of the Jewish Temple system, with the image of the Paschal Lamb, the great sacrificial symbol which of course we associate with Jesus, and the language of which comes up again and again during the communion service.

Suffering and glory. Sacrifice. Atonement. Reconciliation. These are words that we use a lot in Christian theology when we try to understand how it is that we are saved. How it is that we can come home.

And another word that often crops up, and that I would like to encourage you to lock away in your minds as you mull over these themes in the coming week is healing. Or you might prefer to use the word wholeness. One of the titles that we also use for our Lord is the Great Physician. It’s used in a number of places [including the intercessions that we will be using a moment or two]. Jesus as the healer. Jesus as the doctor.

And history records of course that Luke was also a doctor. I remember when I was just beginning to discover Christianity that a priest pointed out to me that you get the story of Jesus being arrested in all of the gospels, and there are several accounts of one of the disciples cutting off the ear of one of the high priests soldiers in the Garden of Gethsemane, but that it is only Luke who records that Jesus heals that man’s ear. Perhaps a doctor notices those kinds of things?

There is something about the sort of salvation that Jesus proclaims, there was something about the sort of kingdom that we understand God to have prepared for us, which has healing, wholeness, reconciliation at the heart of it. When we read today’s gospel reading, which is the sending out of 70 disciples to prepare various towns and villages for the preaching tour which Jesus is about to undertake, we find that he commands these 70 to do two things: cure the sick, and proclaim that the kingdom has come near.
Now we can wonder, as enlightened children of the 21st-century, children of medicine and science, about how physical that gift of healing might have been. And we can wonder, now, about what we might make of stories of miraculous healing in the world today. I know that there are people in Salisbury and further abroad who pray that I would be healed from my Multiple Sclerosis. Some of them pray for that every day. And so far God does not heal me. So it’s a mystery, and it’s complicated, and we need to carry on thinking about exactly what we mean by healing or wholeness.

But what is crystal-clear is that Christ says that one of the markers of the kingdom coming is healing. Is a restoring of wholeness. Of balance. Of integrity. Of unity. Whether that be physical, emotional, spiritual, social.

In most years in many churches this service would be a service with the laying on of hands and anointing with oil. We are in a peculiar situation where our own church forbids us from touching one another at the moment, because we are beset with a pandemic. And any ministry of healing is currently restricted to the very sick at the end of their lives in hospital, and that within a setting of stringent PPE.

But actually if we look back a few verses in today’s gospel, we hear a command to “carry no purse, no bag, no sandals.” We hear that the proclamation of the Kingdom began with no stuff. No books of prayers, no bottles of holy oil. It began in absolute simplicity, dependent on the kindness and hospitality of strangers. Travelling light is not new to the church. It is, in fact, where we began. Neither is our message anything new. I am always deeply suspicious of people who talk about needing to reinvent the church. In fact I think that is almost certainly heresy.

Why would we need to reinvent the message: “cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “the kingdom of God has come near to you.”

In St Luke we find someone who holds absolutely together the disciplines of evangelism and healing. Someone who reminds us that the kingdom of God that we have been privileged to peek into is a kingdom where, above all else, wholeness, unity, reconciliation is at hand.

Amen.