Out of Hours

Saint Luke:

chronicler of the first Christmas and most published of any doctor

The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are attributed to a first-century physician known to us now simply as Saint Luke. Forming over a quarter of the New Testament they are the most widely published of the writings of any doctor, now translated into over 400 languages.

They make intriguing reading. Without Luke's Gospel our knowledge of the first Christmas would be halved: no journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem; no 'shepherds abiding in the fields'; no inn; no manger. The Nativity Story as told by Luke starts the theme that runs through his writing: vulnerability. He had a particular concern for the poor and marginalised, especially women, to whom he gave a more prominent place than other gospel writers.

Two of Jesus' parables appear in Luke's Gospel alone, and these stories remain in our culture, provoking both thought and action. *The Prodigal Son* is a story about a deliberately broken relationship, and its restoration through contrition, forgiveness, and warm acceptance. *The Good Samaritan* tells of someone prepared to take considerable trouble for a critically-injured stranger irrespective of personal risk.

Luke faced great personal risk shortly after he first appeared in history about 57 AD when he joined Saint Paul on his missionary journey through Turkey and

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Greece. Shortly afterwards he witnessed the healing of a troubled slave girl which led to two of his companions being severely flogged, a punishment he narrowly escaped and which could have killed him.

Paul wrote that he received the 39 lashes five times. These punishments doubtless caused residual muscle damage, chronic pain, and disability. Luke's professional care is implied in Paul's writing from prison some 5 years later when he is described as the 'beloved physician'.

Also unique to Luke's writings is this intriguing appreciation by Jesus of his friends at the end of his life and facing death by torture:

'You are those who have stood by me in my trials.'

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Time and again in general practice we see the value of people standing by others when their difficulties seem insurmountable. It is a guiding principle in my palliative care.

The Christmas Story as told by Luke warrants reading or re-reading for an account of vulnerability, greatness in ordinariness, dignity, insight in old age, and glimpses of the divine. He is less well-known than he deserves, although I am confident this would not bother him in the slightest. He set out to do a job thoroughly, consult others (including probably a brother of Jesus himself), and fill a gap in our understanding of the whole of life: physical, mental, social, and spiritual.

Christmas is a good time to remember the debt we owe him, and perhaps consider what unique opportunities we have in 2016.

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Credit: Wellcome Library, London. Armenian miniature of St Luke, patron saint of medicine, and the beginning of the third Gospel. Transcribed by Shmawon the scribe and illuminated by Abraham for the sponsor Lady Nenay.