

THE PHYSICIAN'S GOSPEL

INTRODUCTION

When the Chaplaincy sent in the order of service for tonight across to my office, the first thing we had to do was proof read the text and check it for the apostrophe 's'. I am a classicist and members of my team are English graduates, so we are sticklers for correct grammar and punctuation! The title of this sermon – *The Physician's Gospel* – raises questions, not just about the use of the apostrophe 's' (i.e. whether 'physician' is singular or plural) but whether it is a 'subjective' or 'objective genitive'! Is Luke's gospel the gospel *of* a physician, or is it a gospel *for* physicians? As an Anglican priest, I want to have both....

The **context** of this service is the welcoming of the Revd Stephen Stavrou as our Chaplain for the Guy's Campus. Stephen's role is to minister alongside Joan Tierney, our Roman Catholic Lay Chaplain, during a crucial period for our Medical and Dental Schools, for our Health Schools in general and for this Campus. Last year, the Principal instituted a major review of medical education and the medical curriculum at King's and this has led to the arrival of a new Dean of Medical Education, the merger of the School of Medicine with Biomedical Sciences, and the reorganisation of the Institute of Psychiatry and Neuroscience. Underlying all these developments is the question of how we listen to the medical student experience in the light of the National Student Survey. Last week, a gathering of medics, staff, students, doctors and counsellors – those of us concerned with the care of our medical students – raised questions about whether students are being listened to. And, indeed, whether students themselves are learning to listen, and to whom?

I was stunned by some of the information sent out for us to read before this meeting about how best we can support our medical students:

As long ago as 1988, Hawkins¹ stated that about 30% of British medical students were psychologically disturbed with loss of idealism and ability to listen. A systematic review of 18 US and European studies² found that self-reported empathy declined significantly as medical students and residents progressed through training and that their ability to make moral judgements seemed to decrease and cynicism increased. In the February 2012 edition of the journal of Academic Psychiatry, medical student health was highlighted confirming a higher incidence of anxiety and depression in this group compared with age matched peers.³

Burnout, morbidity, and suicide rates have risen among medical students across the country and we know this all too well in our own experience at King's. So what does the Physician's Gospel have to say to all of this – and what is the gospel to the physicians?

1 LUKE THE BELOVED PHYSICIAN

Today is the Eve of St Luke and, in our first reading from the Letter to the Colossians, Paul is describing his team. The passage contains this simple phrase, 'Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you'⁴. Luke and Demas seem to be gentiles because earlier in the list Paul refers to his co-workers 'of the circumcision'⁵ (in other words, his Jewish co-workers). Elsewhere, in Paul's letter to Philemon, when he is returning the runaway slave Onesimus, he again refers to Luke as his 'co-worker'.⁶ And then, in one of the saddest passages, at the end of Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, when Paul himself is experiencing morbidity and depression and no one is listening, he says to Timothy:

¹ Hawkins, J. (1988). 'Surviving medical school.' *Holistic Medicine* 3: 121-128

² Neumann M, Edelhäuser F, Tauschel D, Fischer MR, Wirtz M, Woopen C, et al. 'Empathy decline and its reasons: a systematic review of studies with medical students and residents.' *Acad Med* 2011;86:996-1009

³ Seritan A et al. 'The State of Medical Student Health Wellness: a call for culture change.' *Academic Psychiatry*, 36:1 Jan-Feb 2012 (<http://ap.psychiatryonline.org/issue.aspx?journalid=17>)

⁴ Col 4.14

⁵ Col 4.11

⁶ Phm 1.24

*Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.*⁷

The poor man is all alone with nothing to read, nothing to write on and the only person who is with him is Luke. I think this is an extraordinary depiction of the ‘beloved physician’: a co-worker who remains, sitting with the person who is alone and in distress.

The tradition that Luke is a physician, as mentioned in Colossians and developed in the Early Church, is held alongside the tradition that Luke is an artist. If you look at the window of St Luke in the College Chapel at the Strand, you will see various medical instruments as well as a palette, paint and a paintbrush: Luke is depicted as both physician and an artist and I find this combination of roles fascinating, as we at King’s develop closer links between Medicine and the Arts. The idea that Luke was a physician was the kind of thing which used to get the biblical commentators of the late 19th and early 20th centuries really excited! These commentators worked through Luke’s gospel attempting to find evidence to prove that Luke was really a physician. The best example is where Luke recounts the story of the women with the haemorrhage: Luke omits Mark’s cutting remark that the woman ‘had suffered much under many physicians and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse’!⁸ Some scholars also searched Luke’s gospel for medical vocabulary and compared Luke’s technical language with language which appeared in the early work of Galen and the Hippocratic tradition. Increasingly today, however, scholars have discovered the same terminology in large numbers of similar texts to the gospels, and not just medical treatises.

As to the question of whether Luke was an artist, the introduction to this order of service refers to the tradition that Luke painted the first icon of Mary as the Mother of God. We have no idea if this is true or not, but we do know that Luke is skilled at painting pictures with words: he is a consummate artist of

⁷ 2 Tim 4.9

⁸ Compare Mark 5.26 with Luke 8.43

words. Luke is one of the best stylists in the New Testament and it is not for nothing that, during Choral Evensong, we have these extraordinary songs from the beginning of Luke's gospel: the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis*, sung for us tonight by the Guy's Chapel Choir. On a daily basis, beautiful singing in cathedrals across the country is combined with an apparently socialist demand that systems be overturned, the rich sent away empty and the poor be fed with words taken from Luke.⁹

The picture of Jesus in Luke's gospel is one of caring for the poor, for women, for children, for the untouchables. Just look around this Chapel. We have the statue of Thomas Guy, the founder of Guy's hospital for the incurables which St Thomas' Hospital could not help. We have the pictures of women: of Phoebe and Jesus' mother Mary, on the walls, and of course, the pictures of Mary and Martha who appeared in our second reading. We have the nurses' plaques and this hospital is a place where women and children have been taken seriously, especially in the Evelina Children's Hospital (now located at St Thomas').

Luke's gospel is full of incredible stories of people who seem so real: the unique parables of Dives, the rich man, and Lazarus, the Prodigal Son and his Elder Brother, and the Good Samaritan.¹⁰ The parable of the Good Samaritan is, of course, forever etched on the memory of any biblical scholar or healthcare professional ever since Mrs Thatcher's exposition of this parable to the Assembly of the Church of Scotland where she suggested that this parable (where the Good Samaritan gives coins to the inn-keeper to care for the wounded man) demonstrated why people *should* pay for private health care costs! Luke's gospel is also full of unique characters such as Zacchaeus, the very short tax collector who climbs up a tree expecting to be hidden – only to find Jesus inviting himself over for tea!¹¹ Luke's eye for detail is indeed that of an artist and that of a physician and he cares for those who are uncared for, and this leads us into our reading from Luke's gospel this evening.

⁹ Luke 1.46-55 and 2.29-32.

¹⁰ Luke 16.19-31; 15.11-32; 10.29-37.

¹¹ Luke 19.1-10.

2 MARY AND MARTHA

Stephen chose the story of Mary and Martha for this service as a story which encompasses something of what he hopes to do as a Chaplain on this Campus. We encounter Mary and Martha in John Chapter 11 where their brother Lazarus dies. Martha is the activist, rushing out to berate Jesus when she hears that he is coming, 'If you had been here, my brother would not have died.'¹² Mary sits, praying the prayers of Jewish lament, and then goes and falls weeping at Jesus' feet leading to the shortest verse in the Holy Scriptures: 'Jesus wept'.¹³ This picture of Jesus is one of empathy and sympathy.

The pattern of the two sisters is exactly the same here in Luke's gospel. When Jesus arrives with his disciples, Mary and Martha are true to type. Mary goes and sits at Jesus' feet, but in doing so, she is doing what you would do when you went through the Jewish higher education application process! The equivalent of their UCAS was that you went to each Rabbi's 'Open Day' and then you sat at the feet of the Rabbi under whom you were going to study for the next three or four years. To sit at the feet is to sign up to study under that Rabbi and, normally, this was only open to men. Mary takes the male disciples' part and sits at Jesus' feet to listen to what he is saying (v.39).

But her sister, Martha is out in the kitchen doing the serving. The word used in Greek is *diakonia* which gives us the English word 'deacon' for one who serves. This is a good thing, what we might call in health care terms, 'providing a service', so Martha comes to Jesus and asks him to get her sister to help her do the women's work in the kitchen (v. 40). However, Jesus affirms Mary as a disciple and as a listener and says Mary has chosen the best 'portion' which will not be taken away from her. The Greek word used for 'portion' or 'part'—*meris*—is one that you can use for a slice of cake or pie. In saying this about Mary sitting at his feet, Jesus affirms the ministry and the place of women which is why there is no place in our work in the Health Schools or in the Church for discrimination: there is no scope for discrimination in medicine or in the Christian ministry. Martha is doing a good thing in 'providing a service'—but she misses out on the best thing of listening.

¹² Jn 11.20

¹³ Jn 11.35

3 APPLICATION

The temptation for clergy is to allow ourselves to be distracted with many tasks, with being a deacon and ‘providing a service’ and yet missing out on listening. Indeed, I was writing this sermon this morning when I should have been at prayers in Chapel this morning! ‘Physician, heal thyself.’¹⁴ We need to learn to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen. We need to learn to sit at the feet of others in the Medical School and around the Guy’s Campus, staff and students alike – and to listen. This listening is Stephen’s particular task, alongside his Chaplaincy colleagues. For example, one of the things Joan is careful to do is to go to the dissection rooms and be alongside students as they make their first cut and to listen as they make sense of that experience.

There is a temptation for physicians to be distracted with the many tasks, with all the good aspects of providing an important service. There is a temptation for staff involved in medical research, with the REF deadline looming and the need to ensure that our research submissions are all set up, as well as preparing our classes and preparing our teaching: where is there time to listen to students or patients? There is pressure on students with essays to write, classes to attend, ward rounds to complete: where is the time to listen to one another, and to patients?

My hope, my prayer at this very significant time for our Health Schools here on the Guy’s Campus, is that at this time of new initiatives and the reorganization we might find ways of learning empathy and listening, and developing greater ethical awareness. After all, it was one of the reasons Sir Cyril Chantler was keen to merge the United Medical and Dental Schools (UMDS) of Guy’s and St Thomas’ was so that his medical students could benefit from taking the Associateship of King’s College (AKC) with its course on ethics, theology and philosophy, alongside the King’s medics.

¹⁴ Lk 4.23

CONCLUSION – WHAT IS DR LUKE’S PRESCRIPTION?

For Stephen, for those of us involved in medical education, for us all, we need to follow the example of Jesus in Luke, or of Luke himself, or of Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet: with a concern for marginalised, the incurables, the untouchables and not being so distracted by the many tasks of providing service, no matter how good, that we forget to stop and listen.

In this week’s AKC lecture, the Revd Professor Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields and Visiting Professor at King’s College London, referred to the film *The English Patient*. Lazlo leaves his wife in a cave, even though she is very seriously injured, and walks for three days to Cairo to get help because he feels he has to ‘do something’. By the time he gets back, his wife is long dead – and he was not there, sitting with her, when it happened.

Luke, the beloved physician and co-worker, is the only one left to sit with Paul when he is alone in his distress, to listen as Mary did sitting at the feet of Jesus, as Stephen in this new ministry and calling and all of us, staff and students, medics and others are all called to do.

READINGS:

Luke 10. 38-42

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Colossians 4. 7 Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; 9 he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here. 10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions-if he comes to you, welcome him. 11 And Jesus who is called Justus greets you. These are the *only ones of the circumcision among my co-workers for the kingdom of God*, and they have been a comfort to me. 12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. 13 For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. **14 Luke, the beloved physician**, and Demas greet you. 15 Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 16 And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea. 17 And say to Archippus, "See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord." 18 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.