

Friends of the Diocese St. Luke

I am delighted to have the privilege of addressing you at this annual Friends of the Diocese service. Friends are surely a very good thing, especially if you are a diocese. A diocese is a unit of church administration. I might love my historic parish church, I surely love my local vicar; but units of church administration - they easily feel unloved. Having said that, our diocese is special. As Bishop Geoffrey Rowell was proud to say, and with only slight poetic licence: no other diocese stretches from Reykjavic to Casablanca from the Canary Islands to Vladivostock. And Geoffrey had travelled around more of it than practically anyone else. So thank you, dear friends, for being a Friend of the Diocese in Europe: for your support, your prayers and your interest. And I hope that you find your friendship of the diocese is returned by those of us actually serving in it.

We are invited tonight to celebrate St. Luke. You can construct quite a plausible account of the Lucas whom St. Paul refers to in Colossians as 'the beloved physician'. We can imagine that if Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' was a physical ailment then it would have been useful for him to have the periodic companionship of a medical doctor. According to our reading from Acts, it looks as if the author of Acts joins Paul and his companions for the sea crossing from Troas in Asia Minor to Philippi in Macedonia on his second missionary journey. And it could be that this same Lucas is persuaded to join Paul for much more of his third missionary journey, eventually staying with him in prison in Rome as indicated by our second reading from Timothy. None of that convinced my liberally inclined New Testament tutor at Durham, Stephen Barton, whom I recall saying with some amusement: "Luke a doctor? A doctor of theology maybe!" Because the books of Luke and Acts are in fact anonymous, and the inscription 'according to Luke' was added decades after they were written. But maybe, and for the purposes of our celebration tonight it would be nice to suppose, Paul's beloved physician did write two of the most read books in New Testament.

What we do know about the author of Luke and Acts is that he had a powerful message to tell. He was concerned with salvation and with announcing Jesus as the saviour. Luke Chapter 1: The Benedictus: 'He has raised up a mighty Saviour for us, born of the house of his servant David.' And the Magnificat: 'He has shown strength with his arm. He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent empty away.' For Luke salvation restores the integrity of human life; it revitalises human community; it sets the cosmos in order; and it commissions God's people to put this grace into practice among ever-widening circles of others.

It is evident from what he writes that the author of Luke and Acts is a highly educated Greek speaker, someone deeply concerned about religious matters, but not a prisoner of a Jewish sub-culture. He is, rather, a cosmopolitan person with a universal vision of the scope and impact of his faith, up and down the social ladder and across geographical, ethnic and social boundaries. To borrow David Goodhart's take on British social divisions, St Luke is an 'everywhere, not a somewhere.'

Luke appears in a typically boundary crossing scene in our second reading. I love the picture of the Man of Macedonia appearing in a vision to Paul and calling out: 'come over to Macedonia and help us'. So Paul together with Luke and others set sail from

Troas in Asia Minor to Neapolis, the port of Philippi in what today we would call Europe. Of course in those days they were just crossing a Roman Provincial boundary, but for us that's a continental boundary between modern Turkey and Greece: and it is the start of Christian mission in Europe.

Tradition has it that St. Luke was one of the 72 commissioned by Jesus in our gospel reading. That's just a legend, but that gospel passage is nonetheless a key moment in Luke's story of salvation. 72 in biblical tradition represents the numbers of countries in the world. So the sending out of 72 missionaries to the Jews anticipates the later commissioning of the disciples to the whole world at Jesus's ascension. And reading this passage again, I'm struck by the sense of urgency. 'The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few'. Crops once they are ripe need to be harvested within weeks or even days else they will simply rot. The disciples are to travel light. And they are to be ready for opposition. Some will accept the message of peace and salvation. Others will not. They go out like lambs amongst wolves. Their circumstances were challenging.

We today continue that mission, as the successors of Paul and of Luke, in circumstances that are not as physically demanding as they were for them, but which face major challenges nonetheless. I want therefore now to say something about our own European context as I see it, and the nature of the challenges which the church and indeed European societies more widely are facing.

At the top of the list is the ecological threat: rising carbon emissions; global warming; changing patterns of weather and climate; the pollution of the seas and of the land. Significantly, the Ecumenical Patriarch has defined misuse of the environment as a sin. Previously, sin had been a category used only about wrong actions towards God and other people. Misuse of the environment has emerged as probably the biggest moral issue of our times. Secondly, and not unrelated, is the ongoing refugee and migration crisis. Europe is still receiving many thousands of migrants fleeing war, or encroaching deserts or simply in search of a decent life. And the biggest numbers of migrants arrive in the countries least able to cope.

Along with big movements of people are a set of concerns around security. Terrorism and the measures needed to counter terrorism have become routine parts of daily life for many. In my own city of Brussels, it's simply routine for us to see on the streets soldiers with automatic weapons. I was very struck by an incident earlier this month on a London commuter train. Passengers become alarmed by the behaviour of a man in their carriage – so alarmed that they forced their way out on to the rail tracks at Wimbledon. The man in question had been reading aloud, not though from the Koran but from the Bible. Religious people have become potentially dangerous people.

Economic injustice is a serious issue in Europe. A large proportion of total wealth is in the hands of a very small number of people. And the gap between northern and southern Europe is big. I was talking to our chaplains in Greece recently who are worried that their young people are leaving, the cost of repaying debt is crushing and increasing proportions of national assets and land are being bought by the Chinese. They feel their country's patrimony being expropriated.

Along with fears about physical security and economic security come existential worries about cultural change. Changing social attitudes and changing demography lead to a loss of identity. I'm told that a survey in Britain showed that 65% of people say 'my country doesn't feel like Britain anymore.' One of the big issues in the French presidential election was: 'Does France still feel like France?' So we are seeing the rise of political groupings across Europe that emphasise regional or national identities, sometimes in xenophobic ways.

And lastly, or perhaps fundamentally, we live with continuing secularisation. This is more obvious in the north of Europe than in the South. It takes different forms in Protestant Countries from Catholic countries from the countries of the old soviet east. Secularisation is particularly striking amongst the young. A social attitudes survey published in the UK last month showed that only 3% of people aged 18-24 described themselves as Anglican. That compares with 40% of people aged over 75.

It is a very challenging context and time. But there is nothing new in that. Christian mission has always been challenging. As I often say, I would still much rather being living in Europe in 2017 than in 1917. Understanding and facing our contemporary challenges is my job and the job of our diocesan clergy: and we love what we do.

This act of worship is an opportunity for those who have gone before us in mission. St Luke was one of the first missionaries to Europe, an evangelist whose passionate commitment and vivid communication of the gospel of salvation have had immense impact over the centuries. And we look back in thanksgiving for all who have served in our Diocese in Europe, giving thanks tonight especially for Bishop Geoffrey Rowell.

But this service also looks forward, with the commissioning of a new partner in the gospel in Europe, a new assistant bishop. It was only just over three years ago that Bishop Richard was one of the three principal bishops ordaining me in Canterbury Cathedral. Today, as an expression of the mutuality of ministry, I have the privilege of welcoming him as an assistant bishop in our diocese. Bishop Richard brings vast experience. I want to mention just two things. He was for many years the leader of our church's 'Shrinking the Footprint' campaign. For his negative comments about air travel he has had the privilege of being singled out for particular criticism by Michael O'Leary, the boss of Ryan Air. Bishop Richard also led the Church of England's relations with Orthodoxy. He attended the funeral of Patriarch Alexy II and the enthronement of Patriarch Kirill in Moscow. I was privileged to be at a lunch at Lambeth Palace where Kirill spoke very movingly of a personal friendship which they had sustained over many years. It is an immense pleasure to be welcoming someone with such broad sympathies, wide experience and personal charisma to our diocese.

So as I draw this sermon to a close, I commend us all to follow in the footsteps of those who have inaugurated and sustained Christian mission in Europe, from St. Luke onwards and through 20 succeeding centuries. And now I welcome most warmly Bishop Richard to join us in a new way in partnership in our European endeavour.

