

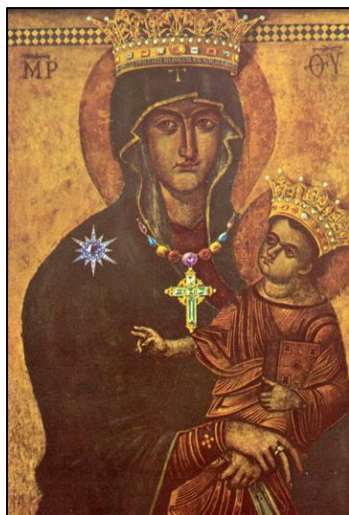
OPEN MINDS, BURNING HEARTS

Journeying through Luke's Gospel: I. The Temple

Text: Luke 1:5-25

Introduction

Below is an image of Our Lady, attributed to St Luke, held to have averted the plague in Rome during 6th c. papacy of Gregory the Great (tradition of Luke as artist).



*“The plague was still ravaging in Rome, and Gregory ordered the procession to continue to make the circuit of the city, the marchers chanting the litanies. An image of the blessed Mary ever Virgin was carried in the procession. It is said that this image is still in the church of Saint Mary Major in Rome, that it was painted by Saint Luke, who was not only a physician but a distinguished painter, and that it was a perfect likeness of the Virgin. And lo and behold! The poisonous uncleanness of the air yielded to the image as if fleeing from it and being unable to withstand its presence: the passage of the picture brought about a wonderful serenity and purity in the air ... Then the pope saw an angel of the Lord standing atop the castle of Crescentius, wiping a bloody sword and sheathing it. Gregory understood that that put an end to the plague, as, indeed, it happened. Thereafter the castle was called the Castle of the Holy Angel [i.e. Castel Sant’Angelo]” (Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* [trans. W. G. Ryan; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993], 1:174).*

Modern scholars describe Luke as a literary artist, who ‘paints pictures with words’.

1. Setting the Scene: *Dei Verbum* and Reading the Gospels

“In composing the four Gospels, the sacred writers selected certain of the many traditions that had been handed on either orally or in written form; others they summarized or explicated with an eye to the situation of the churches. Moreover, they retained the form and style of proclamation but always in such a fashion that they related to us an honest and true account [vera et sincera] of Jesus.” (Dei Verbum 19).

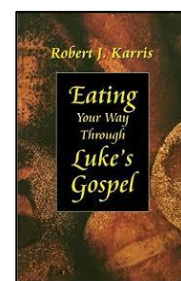
Dei Verbum 19 re-supposes ‘three-stage’ account of composition of Gospels (see 1964 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission ‘On the Historical Truth of the Gospels’, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*):

- ☉ **Stage 1:** life, death and resurrection of Christ;
- ☉ **Stage 2:** period of formation of traditions ‘either orally or in written form’;
- ☉ **Stage 3** (our main focus): Gospel writers selecting, explicating and adapting for catechetical and pastoral needs; shaping narratives. Each evangelist paints a distinctive portrait.

Implicit in *Dei Verbum* is also what we might call a **Stage 4**: the 'afterlife' of Luke's Gospel, read, studied, preached, painted, dramatized and lived out in very different cultures and by different communities across the centuries. Luke's narrative contains meanings and possibilities of which not even Luke may have been aware (because these human words are also divine words, 'the word of God in the words of humans' as *Dei Verbum* puts it); Luke's story has become sacred scripture. So NT scholarship, as well as paying carefully attention to 'the world behind the text' (how Luke worked, what Luke intended and for what kind of audiences), is also interested in 'the world within the text' (how does the narrative work? what does it do to the attentive reader?), and 'the world in front of the text' (what do different readers and audiences do when they read?).

2. Why Places on the Journey? Different Approaches to Luke

Thematic approach might have led us to focus on other Lucan motifs: e.g. salvation; meals and Jesus as 'party animal', and marginality. (see - Robert Karris OFM, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel*).



Choice for this conference: motif of the journey (transformative journey is a common motif in literature, e.g. Homer's *Odyssey*; Virgil's *Aeneid*, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, or *There and Back Again*); we shall be journeying through Luke's Gospel.

Primary focus: specific locations on the journey, not least because we live our lives, and encounter God, in specific places, and attach meaning to significant places. As we journey through Luke's Gospel together, and stop at particular places on the journey, our main question will be: **what does this place mean?** Or perhaps to put it somewhat different: **what does this place do for us?**

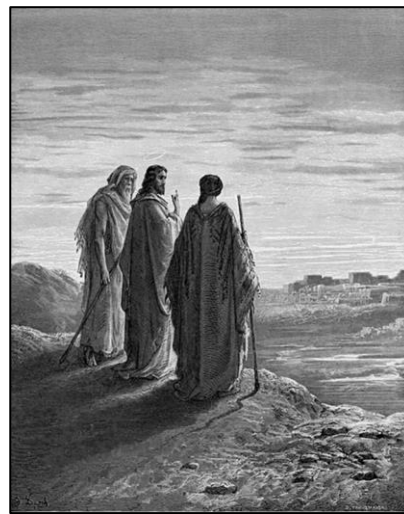
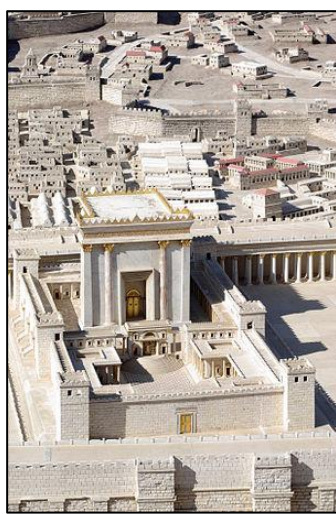


3. Zechariah in the Temple: Exploring the Meaning

Location: second holiest place on earth (the porch of the Holy Place, outside the Holy of Holies, where the elderly priest Zechariah prepares to offer incense (perhaps for the very first time in his long life).



Annunciation to Zacharias (Italian; c. 1400)
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, open access image.



Gustav Doré, *On the Road to Emmaus*
from *The Illustrated Bible* (1866)

Nostalgia: (here meaning 'a longing or yearning to return home'): Luke's story is nostalgic for two reasons:

- 1) Luke uses old-fashioned style of biblical Greek to evoke the ancient biblical world (thus investing the recent events of the births of Jesus and John the Baptist with the same significance);
- 2) By the time Luke writes, the Holy Place and the Temple are in ruins (pain of that tragedy, longing for that spiritual home, felt by Jews, including Christian Jews).

Promise: at heart of potentially tragic story (Luke's story modelled on OT annunciation stories in which an angel of the Lord, or the Lord himself, makes a promise which will eventually be fulfilled in the lives of God's people). Zechariah and Elizabeth are like Abraham and Sarah, or Hannah, or the parents of Samson.

Zechariah, by being struck dumb, is unable to complete his priestly ministry, by giving the priestly blessing ('The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace' Num 6:24-26 NRSV).

The Journey begins: Zechariah cannot remain in the Temple, but must return home for John to be born; Mary and Joseph must travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem; Jesus must journey to Jerusalem and his Passion; the apostles must journey out from Jerusalem after the Ascension.

Topping and Tailing: Luke's Gospel begins in Jerusalem, in the Temple; we will return to Jerusalem and the Temple at the end of the Gospel but what will have changed?