

Lukas of Priene

A Presentation of the Message of Christmas through Story

By William Loader

Lukas was a Roman soldier. He had just arrived to his posting in Priene in the west of Asia Minor, present day Turkey. Just a few weeks ago he was in Rome. There he witnessed the triumphal procession celebrating the capture of Jerusalem from the Jewish rebels and the destruction of the temple. He remembered how the golden candlesticks glistened in the sun as they were carried along with the spoils and the many prisoners. Lukas, a Jew, could not help but feel a tinge of sadness and anger at what had led to this, but also a sense of pride that the forces of Rome, the forces of order had prevailed. Later he would revisit the occasion by standing under the arch of Titus, the general, erected to celebrate the occasion, a monument that still stands to this day.

Now he knew himself to be a soldier in the service of the greatest kingdom of his time, the kingdom of Rome, bigger than a kingdom, calling itself an empire, though for Lukas whose native tongue was Greek the one word *basileia* meant both: kingdom and empire. The emperor was gloriously robed and hailed as an agent of the gods on earth, indeed as himself a god, whom people should worship and acclaim as they had done to kings in his world and still do in our own day but only ceremonially. The emperor was a son of God in his kingdom and now Lukas had travelled hundreds of kilometres by land and sea across just one part of Rome's vast empire. On land it was safe, because Rome had gotten rid of the bandits and on sea it was safe, at least in the calmer seasons, because Rome had gotten rid of the pirates. He could be proud that he was part of the great empire, the great kingdom of the Son of God, who had brought peace to land and sea, peace on earth. Entering Priene also lifted his spirits because there as you approached was a large stone inscribed with a proclamation which declared "good news", another favourite term in the Roman propaganda machine. The inscription has survived to this day. The "good news" was about the birth of the "most divine" Augustus, the first Roman emperor, who had brought peace and salvation to the world.

It was while Lukas was having a day off and strolling through the market not far from the synagogue that a local Jew came up to him and invited him to join him and a group of fellow Jews who were meeting in a spacious house nearby. Lukas accepted and joined the group for the evening, not quite knowing what to expect. As a Jew he was familiar with prayers and readings, but on this occasion there was a reading he had never heard before. It began with reference to the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, people he had heard about through his connections. He realised he was in the company of Christianoi, Christians, as they were called because of their claims about Jesus.

He was familiar with the kinds of stories people used to tell about the births of famous people and this was little different, but he began to feel uncomfortable when it came to what the characters in the story were alleged to have said, especially John the Baptist's father and Mary, Jesus' mother. They spoke about regime change, about lifting up the poor and bringing down the rich and proud. They spoke about a messiah like David who would bring peace and liberation. Lukas knew that this was the very kind of theme which had bred the extremism which led to the revolts and ultimately to Jerusalem's destruction. What was he doing in such company when one of his main tasks in Priene was to enforce emperor worship and loyalty to Rome?

He could have slinked away, but did not want to cause offence and the people were friendly, so he sat down with them in the courtyard afterwards warming himself by the fire. Liz, one of the women, noticed that he looked troubled and came across to him and said rather directly: "You're looking worried." Lukas thought for a moment and then decided that without disclosing his profession he could indeed say what bothered him. This all sounded so dangerous. Did they not realise that language like Son of God, kingdom/empire, peace on earth, good news, saviour was the standard language of Roman propaganda? Were they wanting to insult Rome?

Liz may have sensed nevertheless that this stranger might mean danger, so explained. "No, nothing of the sort. We have used that language since the time of the prophets of old. Peace on earth doesn't actually mean peace in this world. It means peace in people's hearts and peace in heaven. If you believe in Jesus then you will enter the great kingdom and empire of God, but that's something spiritual, after death. Yes, it will be just like the Roman empire, but without all its troubles." For a little while Lukas was consoled and turned his attention to the bowl of soup which one of the attendants placed in his hands. Time to talk about how it tasted and the weather.

A little later on Lukas realised that he was still feeling uneasy and Miriam, another of the crowd, noticed. She bowed up to Lukas and said: "Hi, I'm Miriam. People call me Maisie." Lukas introduced himself in turn. Then Maisie came straight to the point: "You're looking troubled." It was nice of people to care, thought Lukas, so he repeated what he had said before, this time adding that all this talk about change did sound dangerous and – and this was what set him worrying again – wasn't it true that the Jesus they talk about was executed by the Romans as a rebel. This was pushing the hospitality somewhat because these people obviously admired Jesus. The answer he expected, having heard from Liz, was that Jesus' death was all a misunderstanding because people failed to realise that he was talking only about the spiritual world and life after death. But that was not what came.

Instead, Maisie explained: "We didn't join the rebellion against Rome, but we do believe in change. We do believe in good news for the poor. We do believe in removing discrimination. We do believe in peace on earth, reconciliation among peoples. Jesus was not a military rebel, but he did go to Jerusalem with a message about God's kingdom and that was not just about life after death or what goes on in people's souls, but also about what needs to go on in community. We are part of this movement because it brings hope. People in authority often don't like it and don't understand it. That's why they killed Jesus."

This was already a lot to take in, but Maisie went on: "You can't squash a movement like this. That's why we claim he is alive. His Spirit drives us on. We can respect some of the good things Rome has done, but we have a higher priority, a higher loyalty and we know that this will sometimes put us in danger. That story of Jesus' birth was quite deliberately setting up a contrast: our good news is not about an emperor on a throne over a kingdom but about a baby wrapped in baby rugs lying in a feeder box. The lowliness that represents stands for the love and lowliness he lived and calls us all to follow. That's the only way to peace."

At this point Lukas felt a little overwhelmed and decided he had better come clean, but also speak a little more openly. What Maisie said made sense. It gelled with what he had heard about the prophets as a child from his Jewish mum and in the synagogue. But he was a Roman soldier. When he explained this, Maisie did not seem shocked, nor did she waver. Instead she said that soldiers

were sometimes followers of Jesus and proceeded to spell out what that would mean for soldiering – no to rape, sexual exploitation, cruelty, not the first call to armed forces to clean up their act.

Lukas felt a mixture of embarrassment and confusion. Should he have told them who he was? His best option was quietly to move to the edge of the crowd and withdraw. There was a lot to think about. He needed space. As he managed to move largely unnoticed to the courtyard entrance, an elderly lady sitting on the side, Anna, grasped his hand and said: “Come with me.” At first Lukas thought he was being asked to support her and accompany her back to her home, but this was not so. She led him not into the old streets but to the edge of town.

“Come with me,” she said. “Let’s go and sit up on this hill. It’s one of my favourite places. From there you can see the whole world.” Lukas was respectful enough to entertain the old lady’s fantasy and went along. Soon they were sitting on the hillside, a few sheep nearby. Anna looked up into the sky. “Can you hear that?” she asked. Lukas couldn’t hear anything, but realised that this old lady had a vivid imagination. “Can you hear it, hear the singing? ‘Glory to God in the highest and peace to God’s people on earth.’” No, he couldn’t and yet as she spoke the words, they seemed to echo across the sky. There was that word “peace” again. And soon the other familiar words rolled out across the sky: “Don’t be afraid, for look I am bringing you good news about something which will bring great joy to all the people. A saviour has been born in the city of David, Christ the Lord, the new emperor, and you will find him wrapped up in a baby rug and lying in a feeder box.” Peace on earth, good news, saviour, kingdom empire, Son of God – it was all so familiar for Lukas, but not like this. And there he was with the whole world before him confronted by a choice. Lukas would have been quite happy to sit there for some time and then to spend the days and weeks that followed reflecting on new possibilities. He knew in his heart how to recognise truth and here truth had spoken to him.

But that was not to be. Anna turned to him and said: “Are you coming? Let’s go and see for ourselves these things that have come to pass.” Lukas knew this was the moment. He heard the cries of his people. He heard the cries of the poor. He heard the cries of his own heart. He heard the cries of the troops on the charge. And had we been there we would have seen what he did, but alas, we are left on the hill wondering and pondering: what did he do? what would we do? What will we do?

Prayer

O God, we are on that hill with the whole world before us.

And we are invited to hear the cries of the people,
to hear the cries of the poor, to come and to adore.

Give us the courage and compassion to go and see,

To go and tell,

to go and become good news and bearers of true peace in our world.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen