



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist, Sunday, Trinity XIX, October 20th, 2013

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

St. Luke the Physician, whose feast we celebrate today, would have felt completely at home in today's America. The Roman Empire in which he wrote his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles bore an uncanny resemblance to modern Western society.

Certainly, communications – something that mattered a great deal to Luke – were, in some instances, a tad slower. I say “in some instances” because they could get a letter from one end of the empire to the other – from one end of the known world to the other – in less than a couple of weeks. The U.S. Post Office finds this virtually impossible with an armada of trucks, planes and ships at its disposal.

Roman roads were well built and well maintained. Their hydraulic engineering was in many respects even better than ours. And thanks in large part to the harbors they this enabled them to construct, Rome's shipping lines ran scheduled services throughout the Mediterranean and to Spain, Gaul and Britain.

True, Romans didn't have electricity, the internal combustion engine or nuclear power. But, like us, their economy operated on carbon based energy: the backs of slaves – unlike our carbon fuels, an infinitely renewable power source. Slaves were the Romans' agricultural and industrial equipment and household appliances.

The Romans were brash and enterprising. They believed whole-heartedly in capitalism and the empire was a breeding ground for entrepreneurs. It was the sort of place where any one with a bit of

initiative – even a freed slave – could really clean up and make a bundle. Indeed, Roman society mirrored our American version to an extraordinary degree.

The Roman banking system was scarcely less sophisticated than ours. Importers throughout the empire were issued letters of credit to pay for their shipments. And exports were insured in the same way that our manufacturers insure their goods.

Their factories and farms operated on a mass-production basis. Their machines were powered by humans and hydraulics, of course, but the principles of were the same. And, as here today, Roman investors snaffled up the profits – which explains why so many of their politicians, like ours, were often very wealthy businessmen.

Sulla the dictator made a packet in the insurance business. Marcus Crassus – who played George Soros for Julius Caesar – was a billionaire banker, whose ambitions led him to a very sticky end. Sadly, his generalship wasn't a patch on his business acumen. Crassus lost the war he waged against the Parthians (reputedly the richest nation in world) and, having captured him, the Parthians, in grisly jest, executed him – aptly they thought – by pouring molten gold down his throat.

Public works departments maintained the infrastructure in city, town and country. There was public education and a public health system that provided free medical clinics for the poor of the inner city – places where Luke possibly worked during his travels. There were unemployment benefits and an extensive welfare program. Cops

kept order. Firefighters fought fires. The secret police snooped on all and sundry.

Tax collection was superefficient. It was contracted out to private collections agencies. St. Matthew ran a revenue-raising agency before he was called to the ministry. Regular censuses were taken to keep tax rolls up to date. Indeed, Jesus was born while Mary and Joseph were registering for the census.

Socially, the Romans weren't so different. The super rich lived in luxury mansions and vacationed at opulent retreats in the country or by the ocean. Middle class folk lived in condos or suburban villas with central heating and running water while blue-collar families lived in rented apartment and the poor crowded into tenements.

Their taste in entertainment was much the same as ours. They went for bawdy comedy, pop groups and the sort of bloodletting we see daily on our TV screens. The Romans didn't regard the people dying in the arena as any more real than the simulations of death created by Hollywood.

They, too, idolized sports stars and pop musicians. They, too, lived in a society obsessed with sex and violence. They, too, were intensely materialistic and acquisitive – obsessed with new possessions and the latest fashions. And they also shared our problems – violent crime, runaway government spending, a vast, out-of-control entitlement state, bouts of inflation, unrest and rioting in the inner cities.

Traditional morality had broken down. Adultery was commonplace. Unwanted babies were exposed to die on the city garbage dumps. Self-indulgent youths were increasingly unwilling to serve in the nation's armed forces. Thus Rome, in large part, was defended by foreign mercenaries: The ranks of its vaunted legions filled with Gauls, Germans, Swiss, Greeks, Visigoths, Huns, Macedonians and Syrians.

What hast this to do with St. Luke? The answer is what we know as the "Right Time' Doctrine." Jesus came at time when conditions were precisely right for the work of spreading his Gospel throughout the world – and Luke was one of the people most responsible for spreading it.

The First Century AD was a time of great spiritual hunger and a time when communications were the best they had ever been. Indeed, they were really not been equaled until the present day. The world was dominated by a single superpower. Literacy was widespread even among the humble. Army NCOs were required to pass examinations in reading, writing and math. People were so spiritually barren the government desperately tried to fill the gap by inventing its own religion – worship of the state; the politicians' ultimate "trust me."

It was demonstrably the right time because within a decade of the resurrection the Christian Faith had spread from one end of the Empire to the other from the Silk Road to China to the Tin Isles in the gray North Sea. In short, the Gospel spread like wildfire – and by the mouths of ordinary people.

When you read the Gospels, you realize just how ordinary the apostles were. Peter was a braggart; John and his brother. James had foul tempers; Simon Zealotes was a retired terrorist; Matthew was a bit of a crook; Paul was a religious fanatic.

Yet under the influence of the Holy Spirit, these very ordinary people rose above their natural limitations to become giants of the Christian Faith. And with the help of that same Spirit, an obscure Greek physician from the cosmopolitan City of Antioch was inspired to write one of the four books that have exerted a greater influence on the world than any other books ever written.

In terms of qualifications, Christians today are no more impressive than the unpromising group of people who were first called upon to spread the Gospel. We are just as weak and just as deeply divided. But they didn't have to rely on human strength alone. And nor do we. Like them, today's Christians can also rely on the strength of the Holy Spirit to build on the legacy of their achievements.

Our social ills are the same as those that afflicted the Roman Empire. Our society's spiritual hunger is also the same. Thus Luke's Gospel is as relevant to the world today as it was two millennia ago. Ours, you see, is the right time too. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.