



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist, Sunday, Trinity XX, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015

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

It's a common failing to judge the past through the lens of the present. Yet, at the same time, paradoxically, we often fail to appreciate the similarities between times past and our own.

For instance, St. Luke, an acutely observant physician, whose feast it is today, would have felt completely at home in modern America. The Roman Empire in which he wrote his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles bore an uncanny resemblance to our own society.

Economically and socially, Romans were much like us. 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. Blue-collar families lived in rented apartment and the poor crowded into cramped tenements.

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.

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, too were afflicted with the same problems – violent crime, runaway government spending, a vast and out-of-control entitlement state, long bouts of inflation, unrest and rioting in the inner cities.

As in America, traditional morality had broken down. Adultery was commonplace. Unwanted babies were exposed to die on the city garbage dumps. Spoiled, 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 much vaunted legions filled with Gauls, Germans, Greeks, Visigoths, Huns, Macedonians, Syrians and, yes, Jews.

It was a time of great spiritual hunger. Belief in the old gods had been more or less abandoned, except among the most uneducated. The people as a whole were so lacking the traditional Roman virtues that had once unified the state, that the government, in desperation, attempted to inspire a renewed sense of patriotism by inventing its own religion. It instituted worship of the state in the person of the emperor. One might describe the move as the politicians' ultimate "trust me."

The Jews were not in any better spiritual shape, though by no means all of them realized it. Many had become virtual apostates, adopting gentile ways and living in the same way as their Greek neighbors. Pious Jews wrote them off as sinners. Others had grown rich working as publicans – the despised contract tax collectors for the Romans overlords.

The Pharisees – the most pious of all – had their own problems. They went to the synagogue or temple

every day of the week. They studied the Bible. They tithed scrupulously – not just their income, but they owned.

Yet they understood that only the really well-to-do could afford to observe the 613 extraordinarily strict laws in the Five Books of Moses. The ordinary Joe had to compromise. The Rabbis recognized the laws were so frequently at odds with one another it was often very hard to fulfil the most important law of all: the *Sh'ma Yisrael* – the prayer Jesus summarized in the words:

“Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”

Because of this difficulty the Rabbis argued that God would accept as righteous – saved – people who were able to observe 51 percent of the Law. The problem was: Which laws constituted that vital 51 percent.

This is the \$75,000 question the rich young man wanted answered when he asked Jesus: “What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” After he had answered young man’s question, Jesus remarked: “It would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

The very idea that the Laws God had given his chosen people could not save that prompted Peter’s despairing cry: “Who then can be saved?”

The vast spiritual hunger encompassing both the Jewish and gentile worlds made it precisely the right time for the mankind to receive Jesus’ Gospel. And the prevailing political, social and economic conditions made it exactly right time for spreading it.

It was the right time because communications during the First Century AD, were the best they had ever been. Indeed, they had reached a peak unequaled until the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Roman government’s mail system could get a letter from one end of the to the other in a fortnight or less. The U.S.

Post Office has difficulty in doing so with an armada of trucks, planes and ships at its disposal.

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

It was the right time because literacy was widespread – even among the humble. Roman soldiers were required to pass examinations in reading, writing and math in order to earn promotion to non-commissioned officers.

Jews were the right people to spread the Gospel for they were among the world’s most literate people. Virtually all of them could read and write Hebrew, their language of worship, and Aramaic, the language they’d brought back from Babylon. And most could speak the Greek that was the Lingua Franca of the Roman Empire. Many also spoke Latin, the tongue of their conquerors

It was demonstrably the right time because, inspired by the Holy Spirit, within a decade of the resurrection the Christian Faith had spread like wildfire – from the Silk Road to China to the Tin Isles in the gray North Sea.

With the help of that same Spirit, a Greek physician from the 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.

Our social ills are the same as those that afflicted the Roman Empire. Our society’s spiritual hunger is also the same. And Luke’s Gospel is just as relevant to the world today as it was two millennia ago. Ours, you see, is the right time too. The question is: Are we the right people – doing the right things – to spread it? *AMEN.*

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