

December 16, 2007

## Fifth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the prologue St. Luke attached to his Gospel, it is clear he was explicitly and self-consciously endeavoring to write an account of Jesus that would meet the standards of what the readers of his day called "history," that is, an orderly, directed, carefully researched narrative of historical facts. He announced, "Whereas many have set their hands to compose a narrative (*anataxsasthai diegesin*) of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, since I have followed everything carefully (*akribos*) from the first, to write to you in an orderly way (*kathexses soi grapsai*), most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the reliability (*asphaleian*) of those things in which you were catechized" (Luke 1:1-4 my translation)

We observe that Luke lists three kinds of sources he consulted in his close investigation of the subject: earlier writers, the apostolic testimony of eyewitnesses, and his own search for personal stories. It is useful to comment briefly on each of these sources.

First, there were earlier written forms of the Gospel story available to Luke ("many have set their hands to compose a narrative"). One of these, without doubt, was the Gospel of Mark, on which he seems to have relied closely in so many scenes of his narrative. Moreover, in most scenes common to Mark and Luke, Luke normally followed Mark's narrative sequence.

Modern specialists in this field endeavor to identify certain other written sources in Luke, and even earlier versions of Luke's own work. Their efforts, I believe, vary from somewhat plausible to overly speculative, but in truth I have not found many of the results terribly helpful in the practical task of interpreting Luke.

Second, there was data from the apostolic preaching ("eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us"). As we may discern from the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline epistles, Luke was well connected with all aspects of the extensive missionary work of Christians in cities and towns around the Mediterranean Basin. He enjoyed ample opportunity to learn many details of his subject directly from apostolic preachers, especially eyewitnesses of Jesus' miracles and teaching.

In addition to this material, we should consider also a formal influence on Luke from the theology of St. Paul. Indeed, from patristic times it has been common to speak of Luke's Gospel as representing Paul's preaching. I believe that there is some warrant for this view. For example, only Luke among the Evangelists tells the story of the praying Publican who "went down to his house *justified* rather than the other" (18:14 emphasis added). This is one of five times that Luke uses the Pauline verb *dikaioo*, "to justify," which is found only twice in Matthew, and never in either Mark or John.

Third, Luke did his own investigation ("I have followed everything carefully from the first"). More literally, Luke claims that he "followed everything *from the top*" (*another*). Indeed, this pursuit "from the top" is readily perceived in the Lukan narrative, inasmuch as he begins the story of Jesus at a much earlier stage than either Mark or the apostolic preaching. Luke goes

back past Jesus' baptism by John to write of His conception, birth, first visit to the Temple, and even a significant event when He was twelve years old. Luke does some of the same for John the Baptist. To do this, he took advantage of a source not consulted by either Mark or the apostolic preaching, and I have argued elsewhere that this source could only have been the Mother of the Lord.

(Let me mention my scant patience with those who fancy that Luke, right after declaring his determination to adhere strictly to historical facts derived from reliable sources, immediately departed from this resolve and crafted his first two chapters as an imaginative story with slight or no historical basis.)

Other evidence of Luke's recourse to firsthand narrative reports includes Jesus' visit to the synagogue at Nazareth (4: 16-30), the bereaved widow at Nain (7: 11-17), the contrast of Mary and Martha (10: 38-42), the crippled woman in the synagogue (13: 10-17), the healing of the servant's ear (22: 51), and Jesus' inquisition before Herod (23: 6-12).

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**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phrii@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phrii@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
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