

MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE BIBLE #8 LUKE'S PORTRAYAL OF OUR LORD by David Carlson

The New Testament contains four portraits of Jesus Christ, each with a particular focus or emphasis. In our Divine Liturgies and especially during the Divine Services of Holy Week, all four gospels are employed to give a complete picture of Our Lord.

I am not ashamed to admit that I have a favorite Evangelist of the Gospel and that is according to Saint Luke. While all four Evangelists reveal Christ to us, Saint Luke's account of the Gospel has always profoundly moved me. I love the parables of Jesus, and the Gospel according to Saint Luke includes the majority of these. Because Luke was led to include two special parables, we have the amazing stories of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37).

I love another story found only in Luke, that being the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), which I first heard as a little boy in Sunday School. And for me, one of the most moving accounts in the earthly life of Christ is when a prostitute, having been forgiven by Our Lord, crashes a dinner party in the house of Simon the Pharisee to wash Jesus' feet with her tears (Luke 7:36-50).

But most of all, I am struck with how Luke begins and ends his portrayal of Jesus. Luke's Christmas story features the shepherds who are tending flocks, which may seem like a very peaceful and innocent scene. But early Christians would have understood the story differently. The rabbis of Judaism named three occupations that would automatically exclude someone from the coming kingdom of God. The first two occupations excluded by the rabbis—prostitution and tax-collecting for the Romans—make a kind of legalistic sense. Both prostitutes and tax collectors broke God's law in their work lives, prostitutes breaking the commandment against adultery and tax collectors breaking the commandment against stealing.

But the third occupation that the rabbis concluded would automatically prohibit someone from being loved by God is more of a surprise. That occupation was those who tended sheep. The reason for their exclusion was the fact that those who tended sheep were not usually the owners of the sheep, but people hired to tend the sheep when they were out grazing. The rabbis knew from the experience of many that these "sheep-tenders" would often sell some of the sheep on the black market and then tell the owner that wolves had attacked the flock. In the view of the rabbis, shepherders were both liars and thieves, people unworthy of being loved by God.

So how does St. Luke introduce the birth of Jesus Christ? He tells the story of an angel appearing to shepherders in the night. Their reaction is one of terror (Luke 2:9). It would fit Luke's portrayal of Jesus if these shepherders reacted with fear because they have had a history of petty thieving. They would naturally have thought that if God was sending an angel to them, that angel was sent to punish them for their sins. But the angel surprised them. "Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared with the whole people. Today, in the town of David a savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11, emphasis mine). Luke seems to begin his gospel with the amazing announcement that God has sent a Savior, not for the righteous, but for sinners such as shepherders.

Throughout Gospel according to Saint Luke, Jesus reaches out to rescue and forgives those considered by the religious authorities to be beyond the love of God. Jesus forgives the prostitute and extends His love to the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus. It is as if Jesus knew the rabbis' condemnation of prostitutes, tax collectors, and shepherders and deliberately and lovingly offered the kingdom of God to them.

And how did Saint Luke end his account of the Gospel? In the other accounts of the Gospel, Jesus, on the Cross, is mocked by the other two criminals who are also being crucified. But Saint Luke included the change of heart of one of the thieves, who suddenly realized that Jesus had done nothing wrong. "Jesus," he said, "remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus'

reply is one that has echoed down throughout history, comforting all sinners who throw themselves on the mercy of God. “Indeed, I promise you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23: 40-43). We can only imagine how many times this story has been read by men and women in prisons, giving them new hope for redemption.

In the Gospel according to Saint Luke, Jesus constantly offended the religious authorities who proclaimed that God hated both sin and sinners. For Jesus, no one is outside the love of God.

How can we not love a Savior who loves us—all of us—with such abandon?

The rest of Isaiah’s long ministry as a prophet is nothing more than his being faithful to this heavenly vision. When the nation of Judah was tempted to join an alliance to fight the Assyrians, Isaiah told the king of Judah to refuse, for God was using Assyria as His “rod of anger.” And later, when the Assyrian armies had surrounded Jerusalem and threatened to destroy the city, Isaiah gave the king at the time the opposite advice—don’t surrender to the Assyrians, for God is the true King, and Assyria will not take God’s city. The people awoke the next day, expecting to find the Assyrian troops breaking through the city walls, only to find that the Assyrian troops had withdrawn.

The crises of our own time challenge our faith, even as Isaiah’s faith was challenged centuries before. Current events make it seem as if history is out of control, with the most brutal leaders shaping the future.

But the prophet Isaiah would encourage us to resist this despair. Can we today, as did Isaiah long ago, believe that below the surface of life God is working out His will? Do we believe that God is the true King, the Lord of history, even when the foundations of the world are shaken?

Such faith in God’s sovereign rule over human history is not easy, especially in a time when our worries are triggered almost daily by the news of the world. This Lenten season, we have the opportunity to ponder God’s control of history and to offer the prayer uttered by the father of the epileptic son (Mark 9:14-24): *“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.”*