

For many of us here this morning, the crisis that is rapidly unfolding in the middle east will not be the first time that we have found our world to be enveloped by catastrophe. I remember speaking with my grandfather only a couple of weeks ago as he recalled his memories of sleeping in an Anderson shelter during world war 2. He spoke vividly about how bombs would rain down on the Doncaster plant works, where his father was working and only a stone's throw from his home. He spoke movingly about how for him and for his parents, the future was not something that held much relevance for them. What his efforts were focused on was getting through the night. After the first world war, the trenches and the mud and the death....the second world war was going in the wrong direction; humanity was moving, but not towards a new era of peace or international collaboration but more division, Holocaust and war.

I find it tempting at times such as the one we are living through right now to want to find platitudes of hope located somewhere in the future, a belief that peace and truth, light and love will win through. After all, isn't that written into our Christian faith, that after the suffering, death and descent into hell of Christ, on the third day he rose again? Surely things are, more or less, moving in the right direction, or at least will do at the last?

Today the Church remembers with thanksgiving the life and work of St Luke the Evangelist. St Luke is credited by the early church fathers as the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the apostles. Between them, the Gospel of Luke and the Books of the Acts of the Apostles make up over one quarter of the new testament. A careful reading of the Luke's gospel points finds signs and precursors of what is to come in the book of acts; as the twelve disciples and then the seventy two are sent out into the world by Jesus in Luke chapter nine and ten then so in the book of Acts does the story continue, a story of how the apostles move out into the world witnessing to the events of Jesus. Yet, although the direction of travel was one of sending out, going out into the world proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God, we have painted for us in our second reading, the second letter to Timothy, a very different image. Having followed the call of Jesus to go out into the world, we hear in two Timothy of how the author has been 'abandoned', 'poured out' and finds himself in jail and that 'Only Luke is with me'. It is not the image of success and prosperity that one might expect, things appear to have taken a different turn to the triumphalism that was perhaps very tempting to preach. The story perhaps, was not moving in the direction that many early Christians hoped.

This image reminds me of another very Lukan story, the story of the resurrection appearance of Christ on the road to Emmaus. In this story the disciples are fleeing Jerusalem in fear and despair; all the hope and promise that those men had felt and encountered with Jesus, the man who they believed would usher in the kingdom of God, was now dead. Rather than renew Jerusalem, the men were now walking away from it; walking away from

the City, away from hope and away from promise. Instead they were walking towards an uncertain future. Despondency for the disciples, prison and probable execution for Luke. Despite Gods involvement with the world, it would appear that the world continues to move away from, rather towards the fulfilment of the promise of redemption.

The Gospel of St Luke and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles would appear to refute a view of the world which suggests that being a follower of Christ leads to a happy ever after ending. As St Luke looks back at the life of Jesus, and recounts the stories of the early church in Acts, then what he recounts is not an account of history that is full of the triumphs and fascination with human achievement that so much of our history books are full of; rather what we find is a testimony to the capacity of God to maintain the steadiness of his work in the middle of earthly conflict, disruption and human weakness even when, as is so often the case, we human can neither see it or believe it. For St Luke, a "theology of the cross" is a belief in Gods redeeming work that long outlives our own capacity to testify to that work. In the end, after the darkness, despair and disorientation of present events subside, which one day they will as other new unforeseen tragedies emerge into our history, then God and only God remains through the apparent denial of his own saving purposes and in the tragedy, destruction and the hellish suffering that human sin inflicts upon itself. When all hope is lost, and only platitudes remain, God remains God whether we believe it, like it, feel it, trust it or not. On this feast day of St. Luke, I would like to suggest that the saint can guide us through a non-triumphalist approach to history and to understanding our present day which is wreathed with disaster because Luke, with St Paul, having encountered the fulfilment of all their expectations, longing and hope, found themselves in prison and sentenced to death with little hope for the future.

It certainly feels to me today, that the world is moving and moving quickly, but in a direction towards the escalation of violence and horror, not its cessation. At times like this we can perhaps find an ally in St Luke, a man who in the uncertainty, suffering and despair of his own day recalls how Jesus sent the seventy two out into that same world; a man that gave us the story of the road to Emaus, a story that reminds us that when we find ourselves and our world in darkness and doubt and walking away from the promises of God, a stranger walks with us on that road that seemingly leads only into further darkness and unknowing. I admire the steadfastness of Luke, not abandoning his companion in prison and I look to St Luke as a pattern of Christian discipleship for myself; an example of knowing the presence of God come near in Jesus Christ, and an example of standing and remaining in the darkness of doubt that is human history, holding the tragedies before an absent and present God.