This year St Luke’s Day actually falls on a Sunday, so it’s a great opportunity to think about a lovely man who wrote my favourite Gospel and is the patron saint of all of us who work or have worked in hospitals and health care. In fact this used to be called Hospital Sunday, and all the nurses and doctors would process to the nearest church and the whole service would be dedicated to thanking God for those in the healing professions and asking a blessing on them. I think that was a very good thing to do, as we have so much to be thankful for in the good health care we enjoy here. So I hope in the intercessions we can thank God for our local hospitals, nursing homes and care homes and above all for our marvellous surgery here in Codford and the brilliant team who care for us from there.

Let’s think first of all about Luke the man, then about the two part work he wrote, usually now called Luke-Acts, and then a bit about the work of healing.

We know a bit about Luke, from his writing and from the traditions. He was a second generation Christian, who according to tradition grew up in Antioch – that city, third biggest in the Empire, where the believers were first called Christians; a big centre of the faith. So he had lots of opportunities to learn from those who had first-hand knowledge of Jesus and his story. He was an educated man, who could vary his Greek style, sometimes writing formal and polished prose, sometimes a racy, narrative style in the popular language of the day, and sometimes adopting the style of the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. He was almost certainly a Gentile himself but knew his Old Testament very well, was familiar with synagogue worship, and had also researched the Jewish oral traditions about Jesus including the stories of his birth. I did think at one time that he told us so much from Mary’s perspective that he must have talked to her, but I think now that’s unlikely. He was something of a poet, and had an artist’s ability to paint vivid pen-portraits of the men and women he wrote about. In fact there is one tradition that he was a skilled painter: a Spanish cathedral has a picture of the Virgin Mary which is claimed to be painted by Luke. He delighted in marvels, and the narrative is full of miracles, angels and other supernatural elements. He was more interested in people than in ideas; had a lively social conscience and an inexhaustible sympathy for people in any kind of trouble. The sort of doctor we would like to have. He travelled with Paul and worked closely with him – in fact they spent two years together in prison in Caesarea, which must have been a bonding experience; it may have been during this time, 57-59 AD, that Luke embarked on writing; and Paul evidently thought very highly of him, referring to him in Colossians as “our dear doctor” or “our beloved physician” if your prefer. Paul had quite a lot of ill-health; was Luke his personal physician before he became a fellow-evangelist?

But why did Luke take on the enormous task of researching and assembling a vast body of material, both written documents and oral tradition, and writing a coherent narrative out of it…when there was already a written gospel, put together by Mark? The Gospel looks as if it was written for Gentile readers rather than Jews, and Theophilus to whom it is addressed may have been an educated and influential convert needing good teaching, but I think was more likely, a high Roman official (addressed as “your Excellency”) who needed to be convinced that this new faith was not subversive or dangerous, no threat to the Roman state, not revolutionary or anti-social, but the true fulfilment of Jewish prophecy (Jews were treated
with marked tolerance by the Romans) and aiming to inculcate a spirit of truth, love and peace in its followers who modelled themselves on a person of great charisma, high ethical principles and no desire for power or influence. The second part of Luke’s work, the Acts of the Apostles (better styled “Life of Jesus part 2” or “Acts of the Holy spirit”) charts the development of the early church, again emphasising its peaceful and spiritual focus despite persecution and opposition, and giving examples of the teaching given on different occasions.

So when we turn to Luke’s Gospel itself, what strikes us about it, and how is it different from the others? Well, as I mentioned before, there is lots of the supernatural – many miracles happen (both in Luke and in Acts), illness is seen in terms of demon possession or Satan’s grip, and angels are frequent visitors. There is a lot about poverty and wealth, both in stories Jesus tells (the Rich man and Lazarus, the Rich Fool) and in his teaching (the rich young ruler, the demands made of disciples). There is a strong emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, showing that he had emotions – anger, grief, frustration –, he had friends, and he feared his passion. There is a respect and care for women – this gospel has so many women in its pages, at a time when women's place was definitely in the home, unseen and unheard. We have John Baptist’s mother Elizabeth, Mary Jesus’ mother, Anna the prophetess, Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, a widow in Nain, Mary and Martha of Bethany, Mary of Magdala who was healed and followed him; Joanna and Susanna and “many other women” who used their own resources to support Jesus and the disciples; the woman with a haemorrhage, the daughter of Jairus; a crippled woman healed on the Sabbath; parables of the lost coin, and the importunate widow; the widow who put two tiny coins in the donations box; the High Priest’s servant-girl; the women at the tomb. And we meet more in Acts including Mary the mother of John Mark who had people praying at her house; Lydia, a wealthy trader who opened her house for Paul; Priscilla who with Aquila started a church in Ephesus.

But Luke’s vision is wider still; he has a heart for the whole world – for non-Jews (Gentiles), for Samaritans, the poor, the disabled, outcasts and sinners of every kind. More than the other Evangelists he shows us God, in Jesus, loving every part of his creation and honouring those who are least honoured by human society. More than the others, to my mind, he assures us of God’s love, even preference, for those who are despised, neglected or pushed out. This includes so many who are healed of their infirmities or illnesses – the physician’s interest showing through.

And what a story-teller he is! It’s been observed that if we only had the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal son, we would still understand perfectly God’s love for us and how we should love our neighbour – the whole Christian gospel in two short stories. And only Luke has preserved them, though they must have been a rich part of the oral tradition. About half the gospel is Luke’s own rather than being drawn from Mark or the source Luke shared with Matthew….and it’s nearly all Jesus telling stories, stories which must have been handed down by those who had heard Jesus tell them.

And if we look at our Gospel reading, we can imagine that this too had been repeated time and time again since Jesus first gave the instructions to the seventy – it must have become the “standing instructions” to evangelists setting out on a new mission. It’s urgent, direct, uncompromising...these are messengers in a hurry, not stopping even for greetings, in haste to get their message out. There are lots of puzzles in the text, many questions I would like to ask about it; but in the context of St Luke, what strikes me is the casual, almost passing reference to “cure the sick”. It’s as important as “say the Kingdom of God has come
near”, in fact it comes first, and it’s the unmistakable sign of God’s power and love breaking in.

And, at least in New Testament times, they did cure the sick. In the brief span of the NT, we have Peter and John healing a lame man at the Gate Beautiful; Philip performing healing miracles in Samaria; Peter restoring Dorcas to life; Paul and Barnabas healing a lame man in Lystra; Paul restoring a young man, Eutychus, to life in Troas. Signs and miracles attended the apostles wherever they went.

So why doesn’t it happen now? What has happened to the Christian church that we have lost sight of Jesus’ command to preach, to teach and to heal? Why do we not even have a healing service anywhere in this benefice?

Of course it’s not actually true that “the Christian church” no longer undertakes healing. Some parts of it are very active, especially the Pentecostal churches. There are Christian healing centres such as Burrswood and Ffald-y-Brenin where the Holy Spirit’s power to heal is taken seriously as part of their daily life and work. When I lived in Uganda, there were regular mission conventions, often heralded by banners saying “Throw away your crutches”! Yes, they offer openings for charlatans to mislead a credulous public – but the Holy spirit is alive and active, and miracle cures still happen. I could tell you of a couple I know quite close to here.

But I think we are more aware that “healing” is different from “cure”. We understand cure as referring to some bodily ailment – an infection or a source of physical pain – but healing embraces a wider perspective, including mental, psychic or spiritual dis-ease. It’s widely understood now that some physical symptoms may be indications of an underlying mental or spiritual problem – perhaps unresolved grief, or long dormant guilt or anger – and that addressing the underlying problem can produce physical relief. When Jesus said to the paralysed man – unable to move, perhaps because of a burden of guilt? – “your sins are forgiven”, he was free to move again. When we pray for someone, that empowers the Holy Spirit to move in that person’s heart and mind, to do what is best for them – and it isn’t always physical healing. It may be a stronger courage, or the insight to mend broken relationships – or perhaps the grace to accept complete dependence on God in the face of death.

And healing is not only a one-to-one process. At its best, the church community could and should be a place of healing for those who need it – a safe space, where hurt souls can find acceptance, friendship, loving concern and a sharing in God’s grace. A place where the Holy Spirit is present and active, where in the Eucharist we recognise and celebrate God’s presence with us and share his peace with one another. A community that loves and cares for one another and for those who come. Is that something we can offer to those who need it? Could the church be a healing centre for Codford? May God so work in us that he can work through us to heal our broken world. Amen