

2.4 The Rich and the Poor

The message of the arriving of the Kingdom is related to issues of justice and injustice and to wealth and poverty in particular according to Luke-Acts. Injustice provokes the intervention of God on the side of the oppressed, thus in Luke-Acts we find significant emphasis on a reversal of the structure of society. This topic already clearly present in the Magnificat, and is emphasized again in the first public teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth (cf. Lk 4. 18). In the sermon on the plain Jesus preaches the good news to the poor in particular (Lk 6.20 - 23). The blessing to the those who 'hunger now' (Lk 6.21) is worth noting, as distinct from the version of the saying in Mt 5.6, those who hunger now are not further qualified as those who 'hunger for righteousness', and thus the Lk version point to the issue of famine in the first instance. Short saying such Lk 13.30 'some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last' formulate this expectation of reversal explicitly, and are complemented by others 'For every one who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted' (Lk 14.11, cf, the parallel Lk 18.14).

Jesus' teaching, according to Luke, is motivated by a particular concern for the poor. In recent scholarship the question has been raised whether this means that the Gospel addresses the poor in particular and thus in some sense indicates exclusion of the rich and powerful of society from the kingdom. Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann have pointed out that this is not so, but rather to a significant extent Luke-Acts address those in powerful positions and of considerable means. A scene like Lk 18.18-23 in which a rich man is invited to leave everything behind to become a disciple only makes sense if there are some among the audience to whom such a scene would appeal, either as an invitation or as confirmation to what they had already done upon joining the movement. Thus it has been argued that the addressees cannot be merely lower class members of society. This subsequently leads to the conclusion that there must have been members of the Christ movement of at least some wealth. The focus on issues of wealth and poverty in Luke-Acts is differentiated in that the warnings against wealth are not mere condemnations of people who have considerable possessions. Although the poor and have-nots are favoured the rich and wealthy are admonished not to overestimate their worldly achievements, and above all to use their means wisely, that is in support of those in need. (Lk 12.13-21; 16.1-13; 16.19-31; 18.24-27; 19.1-10).

A parable may serve as examples for this special concern for the poor and the address to the rich especially in the Gospel of Luke.

The Parable of the Great Banquet

In narrative form the parable Lk 14. 15-24 formulate the same message as the beatitude Lk 6.20 'Blessed are the poor for yours is the reign of God'. The banquet represents the reign of God.

The parable contrasts people of wealth with, 'the poor and maimed and blind and lame', that is, with people who live in the streets, have no status in society and certainly are not able to repay the invitation by a reciprocal hospitality. While the poor beggars may represent all sorts of people in need, including tax collectors and sinners, the parable highlights first of all the contrast between rich and poor. The message of the parable is thus challenging the rich, but far from condemning wealth they are shown a way to make use of their wealth in a way which promotes the kingdom of God. At the same time the parable is comforting and reassuring message for the poor.

It should be noted that the narrative context of the parable of the great banquet is a meal at a Pharisees house on Shabbat. Far from presenting this as a hostile environment, the narrator may indicate here that the Pharisees and Jesus and his disciples were involved in conversations over issues which they were both interested in and perceived very important. We will deal with the relationship of Jesus and the Pharisees later in units 4 and 5.

In a number of passages we learn of the problems associated with wealth which hinder the cause of the kingdom: it provides false security, as in the parable of the rich fool, Lk 12.13-21; it leads to competition with God, as in the saying of God and mammon Lk 16.13; wealth hinders people from following Jesus, as the rich man in Lk 18.22-23.

Other passages provide examples how wealth should be used in the context of the kingdom, as e.g. in the parable of the dishonest steward 16.9-10: 'make friends for yourself by means of unrighteous mammon'. In the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus another emphasis on the ethos of sharing is found which significantly is related to Moses and the prophets. The ethos of sharing is not new to the message of the kingdom, it is a tradition of old, laid out clearly in the Scriptures of Israel (cf. Lk 16.29, compare with Dtn 15.1-11, Isa 58.6-7).

Thus we see that Jesus' mission to the poor claimed by him in the Nazareth synagogue becomes a major theme in the narrative of Jesus' words and deeds according to Luke

Essential Readings

** 2.7 Esler Philip F., 'The Poor and the Rich', *ibid. Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, pp. 164-200

Further Readings

Tannehill, Robert C., *Luke*. Nashville, TN: Abdingdon Press 1996, pp. 227-234.