



Reviews

The Widening Road: From Bethlehem to Emmaus: An Exploration of the Gospel of Luke, Leith Fisher, Edinburgh: Scottish Christian Press, 2003, pp. 262, ISBN 1904325114. £11.99

For much of last year, as the lectionary led us through the third Gospel, Leith Fisher's little book on Luke's Gospel was my constant companion and it never let me down, and was often my first port of call after reading the Gospel for the Sunday which lay ahead.

Many expressions are overused in reviews of this nature: fresh, new, exciting, challenging – and yet I found this book to be all these things and more as well. It is, of course, a commentary, but it is a commentary which has been preached; it's also right up to date with contemporary theology and it is certainly not just another setting out in different words of what I learned from the commentaries I read at college or in the years just afterwards.

One of the most attractive features of the book is that it is not uniformly detailed. Leith Fisher has something to say on each of the sections in the Gospel narrative, naturally, but he knows which sections deserve most consideration and he stops and enjoys those passages pointing his readers to new understanding, revelling in the messages of forgiveness, social justice and God's love which emerge.

I enjoyed his reading of the widow woman who brought her case to the unjust judge and eventually, through her persistence, received justice and I was helped to see, I think, that in having considered this to be a contrast parable for so many years it was actually something much more: something which spoke to the church of Luke's own time, about perseverance.

Having described the setting and painted a picture of first-century life and the situation in which the widow found herself with everything and everyone against her, the author concludes:

But she will not be silenced, she is the heroine; in the light of the rest of Luke's gospel, we can well see why Jesus would tell this story in her honour. We can now hear this story as one with two calls for persistence: to persevere in prayer on the long road of discipleship and to be as persistent and persevering in unmasking the pretensions and corruptions of power, which often operate under a veneer of legality, in the long road for justice.

Leith Fisher constantly acknowledges the sources he uses, in this case the thoughts of William Herzog II, and one of the real values of this book is in the ideas of other people to which we are introduced. Another is in the chapter endings entitled simply 'Study' which include something for those who read his book to think about 'by yourself' and 'in a group'. So, for example, following the passage quoted above the author continues:

The parable of the woman and the judge has as its heroine the unnamed, unknown woman who fights for justice in an everyday situation of corruption. Make for yourself a list of women and men who have 'persisted' in the struggle for mercy and justice in their world, against the odds. Think not just about important historical figures, but about people today in your local community and your own experience. Their lives have been their prayer. What can you take from their lives to inspire your prayer and action?

This is a good question, not just because it is something worth thinking about, but because it captures the essence of what Luke's Gospel is all about – the lives of ordinary people touched by God's forgiveness, set free to uproot mulberry trees and plant them in the sea. And if it is a question which channels our thoughts to the widow in the story, Leith Fisher's book never fails to bring out the main themes of God's all-embracing love for his people and his forgiveness.

Pick up the book in a bookshop and turn to pages 160 and 161 just to read the author's few words on 'Forgiveness. . . and unconditional

forgiveness'. They come at the end of his chapter on Luke 15 and reach their climax with these words:

Is the welcome of the waiting father in our story an instance of 'unconditional forgiveness?' Certainly the father's welcome precedes the son's confession. Is the word from the cross and indeed the word of the cross, not the supreme example of unconditional forgiveness, grace abounding and undeserving, which bring resurrection? Meanwhile our lives go on. There is the daily practice of accepting and forgiving one another in the light of a generous love, there is the deeper exercise of turning the other cheek and breaking the cycle of violence, and the continuing challenge in Nouwen's words to become, be, like the waiting, welcoming, prodigal Father.

I'll be sorry to put this book back on the bookshelf – but I'll know it's there for the future and even if I don't reach for it again next year, I know that I will be returning to it as an old friend when the lectionary cycle comes round again to the treasure which is the Gospel of Luke.

Dane Sherrard,
Luss & Arrochar



Confidence in a Changing Church, Finlay A. J. Macdonald,
Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2003, pp. 224, ISBN
071520812. £8.99

Not another ex-Moderator saying the Church is in good heart? Well no. Here we have a careful and critical assessment of the Church of Scotland as it is at the start of the new century. Finlay Macdonald brings his experience as a parish minister and an ecclesiastical civil servant to the task of looking at the bigger picture. While we have much to gain from wider influences from the worldwide church, this book reminds us of where we have come from and should be of interest to any who wishes to find out about the history and strengths of the Reformed Church in Scotland.