

SALVATION OF THE RICH AS MISSION IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

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To be true to her mission, received from Jesus, the Church's preferential option should be for the poor. The Church is growing in her efforts to identify herself with the poor, in her desire to come up to the expectations of the Gospel. If not properly understood, this concern can lead to tensions between the rich and the poor. The 'honest' rich who are sincerely interested in the life of the Church may sometimes feel neglected. If the Gospels have to be understood and accepted as Good News, then we must try our best to resolve the tensions between the rich and the poor and guide them to live in mutual help and cooperation as was done by the early Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-47; 4:32).

The Church today is involved in a lot of social work in order to liberate the poor from their economic, material and spiritual oppressions, often with the help of money from 'distant' sources. The beneficiaries are mostly and 'supposedly' poor people. My endeavour in this article is to draw attention to the fact that we have certain obligations towards the rich in our ministry, even while we maintain the Church's preferential option for the poor. Luke shows Jesus' interest in the rich by demonstrating the possibility of their salvation. I would analyse the way in which Luke goes about encouraging the rich to enter the path of the Gospel.

A cursory look at the Gospel of Luke shows that there is in it a lot of material that refers to the difficulty and even to the impossibility for the rich to be saved. This is particularly evident in the Beatitudes and Woes (6:20-26), in the parables of the Rich Farmer (12:13-21) and of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31), and in the well-known Synoptic statement: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God" (Lk 18:25).⁽¹⁾ Why do the rich find such disfavour in the eyes of Luke?

Salvation in General

It appears to me that the rich do stand a good chance with regard to salvation, as his Gospel is a Gospel of salvation par excellence.⁽²⁾ This is obvious from the way he makes use of the terms that refer to salvation. The main group-word that he used to express it is *sozo* and its derivatives. While Matthew and Mark use it 15 times each and John 6 times in the Gospel, Luke uses it 26 times in the Gospel and 27 times in the Acts. Besides this group-word, he also uses the traditional vocabulary for the salvific plan of God: eternal life (10:25; 18:18, 30), Kingdom of God (18:24, 25, 29) and redemption (21:28).⁽³⁾

Universality of Salvation

It is Luke who speaks powerfully of the universality of salvation. According to him salvation is offered to all (some say even to the devil!). Hence in his genealogy (3:23-38), he goes back to Adam, the father of the 'human' race, whereas Matthew stops with Abraham, the father of the 'Jewish' race (Mt 1). While Matthew has only 57 names in his genealogy, Luke has 77 names. Universality in Luke is seen in the preaching of John the Baptist that "all flesh" shall see the salvation of God (Lk 3:6; cf. Acts 2:21). Though all the Synoptics have this quotation from Isaiah (40:3-4), it is Luke alone who prolongs it in order to include "all flesh" shall see the salvation of God" (Is 40:5). Moreover, the expression 'glory of the Lord' has been changed by Luke into 'salvation of God' in order to emphasize the possibility of salvation for all. In the prophecy of Simeon, too, salvation

has been prepared in the presence of “all” peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles (Lk 2:30-32). Here again we notice a modification: Luke changes the singular *laou* (cf Is 42:6; 49:6) into plural *laou* to include both the Jews (who were the people) and the Gentiles. Even when Jesus announces his social manifesto, he speaks in terms of universality: the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed (4:16-18). In the missionary command of Luke alone (10:1) the Lord appoints 70, a number which was used to refer to the whole Gentile world. Besides this general offer of salvation to all peoples, Luke offers salvation to many smaller groups of people: sinners, tax collectors, Samaritans, the poor, etc. In this vast complex of the Lucan plan of progressive realization in the history of the sovereign plan of God which offers salvation to all, we may question: is there an offer of salvation also to the rich?

Who Are ‘the Rich’?

It is necessary here to clarify the meaning of the terms: ‘the rich’ and ‘salvation’ according to Luke. Luke uses the term *ploutos* to refer to wealth and *plousios* to refer to the rich. The rich in Luke are not merely possessors of wealth. They are those who abound in resources and do not need to work for a living.⁽⁴⁾ They are those who because of their undue attachment to wealth, refuse to heed God’s call and let wealth become an obstacle to the Kingdom (18:18-30). Because of wealth they fail to put their trust in God (12:13-21), give themselves to enjoyment, become irreligious and fail to care for the poor (16:19-31). This is why even Zacchaeus is categorized as *plousios* until he was ready to give away his riches (19:1-10). In short, they do not make proper use of their wealth. For this reason Luke avoids attributing the term *plousios* to Joseph of Arimathea (23:50) while Matthew does it (27:57). The rich at the time of Luke oppressed the poor economically and socially.

What does Luke mean by ‘Salvation’?

The term ‘salvation’ has transcendental connotations that encompass the whole person. It may be considered negatively and positively. Negatively, it implies deliverance or freedom from evil and sin⁽⁵⁾ and is a present historical fact. Positively, it refers to the blessings of the Kingdom, the obtaining of the Kingdom of God itself or the inheriting of eternal life, which is the result of deliverance from sin and evil. This Kingdom may be understood in two senses: (i) to imply the mission of Jesus, i.e., forgiveness of sins, healing, presence of the Spirit⁽⁶⁾ – in this sense it is already present: (ii) to imply the full actualization of the rule of God – in this sense, it refers to the future consummation at the *parousia* (17:23-37).⁽⁷⁾

In our view, though there is an emphasis on the future aspect of salvation in Luke, both the present and the future aspects are synchronized.⁽⁸⁾ While the Kingdom of God has begun to be realized in the healings and exorcisms (11:20; 17:21), there is a definite weight on the future aspect: the Beatitudes and Woes (6:20-26) and warnings about the future judgement (9:11:29-32) presuppose that the consummation of the Kingdom will be in the future. This future aspect has relevance for the present, because it prompts the listeners to govern their lives according to the teaching of Jesus here and now in the present (18:8) so that the Kingdom of God may begin to be realized in them.

With the study of the connotations of these two terms ‘the rich’ and ‘salvation’, we are in a fit position to deal with the question of salvation of the rich in Luke.

Lucan Disfavour towards the Rich

Generally speaking, Luke is kind-hearted to the poor and hard-hearted towards the rich. At the time of Jesus, there existed a large gulf between the rich and the poor. The rich closed their hearts to the misery and hunger of the poor. Though Luke expresses a definite concern for people of all walks of life – the poor, the rich, the infirm, the outcast and the underprivileged,⁽⁹⁾ yet when he is confronted with the social practices that run counter to his vision of healthy relationships, e.g., the negligence and oppression of the poor by the rich, he does not remain passive but awakens the rich to the evil that they cause in society and asks them to divest themselves of their wealth and be just to the poor. The Lucan disfavour of the rich is seen in his frequent use of the term *plousios* to refer to them. He uses it 11 times in the Gospel, while Mark twice, Matthew thrice and John never. Moreover, showing extraordinary sympathy to the poor (9:18; 6:20-23), he makes the rich feel miserable.

Right at the beginning of the Gospel, in the Magnificat (1:46-55), by sending the rich away empty, Luke foreshadows his disfavour towards the rich. This same message is amplified in the Woes (6:24-26) and then further intensified in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus through the reversals of fortunes (16:19-31). They are shown to be too attached to their riches which in turn becomes an obstacle to obtain the Kingdom (8:14; 12:13-21). The extraordinary difficulty of their entering the Kingdom is made explicit in the case of the rich ruler: 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God' (18:24-25).

Lucan Interest in the Rich

Luke does not only show displeasure towards the rich. He is also optimistic about the rich. In his Gospel, Jesus mingles freely with the rich. This factor is obvious from the way he accepted invitations for banquets from various classes of rich people like the Pharisees (7:36; 11:37) and rulers (14:1, 12). Moreover, some well-to-do women provided for his necessities and those of the apostolic band of twelve from their possessions (8:3).⁽¹⁰⁾ He is also associated with the Roman Centurion and Jairus in the act of healing (8:40-56). The tax collector Levi was his disciple (9:57-61) and Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, followed him (19:1-10). While in Mk (10:22-23) and Mt (19:22-23), the young man goes away and Jesus speaks to the disciples, in Lk (18:23-24), Jesus still speaks to the rich ruler. This rich ruler for Luke stands for the rich of his community. His message here is particularly to the rich. It is they that are attached to wealth; and so, it is they that need to be instructed of its dangers. Therefore, he presents Jesus directly relating to the rich. Hence, even though Luke shows disfavour to the rich, he is genuinely interested in them and has hope for them.

Why do the Rich become the Targets of Luke's Disfavour?

Luke's main purpose in his reaction towards the rich seems to be *to call them to be converted and saved*. In fact the existing economic conditions prompted Luke to speak in terms of rendering material help to the poor and to express his displeasure at the rich, but this resulted in calling the rich to conversion. With the help of the Hellenic and Semitic modes of expression, i.e., by exaggerating the hopeless situation of the rich,⁽¹¹⁾ Luke touches the core of their hearts. The undesirable destiny, to which the rich fool (12:13-21) and the rich man who ignored Lazarus (16:19-31) are led, should move the rich to hear Moses and the prophets and their teaching regarding riches, to that they may be converted and remodel their lives like Zacchaeus and be saved (19:1-10). Hence, though the Kingdom of God is an offer of salvation on the part of God, the message of Jesus calls for a certain response from the hearer.⁽¹²⁾ Since Luke believes

that the final consummation of the Kingdom is in the future and that it has relevance to the present, he hopes that the rich will respond to his call in the present; and so he gives them a series of instructions which should govern their lives.

Lucan Admonitions to the Rich

1. *The rich are advised to make proper use of their riches in order to obtain salvation.* The best use one can make of riches is to share them with the poor and thus acquire a treasure in heaven that is incorruptible (12:33). One may also use them prudently and make friends, in order to be received “into the eternal habitations” (16:9). Help should be rendered particularly to the needy: “Give to everyone who begs from you” (6:30); “invite the poor” (14:13). By such proper use of riches, one will have treasures in heaven (12:12). Wealth is not necessarily a handicap, if used properly (19:1-10). Moreover, it must be given ‘out of love’ for one’s neighbour. Luke hammers on ‘love of neighbour’ as the ‘new’ Law, which together with the commandment to love God, constitutes the commandment par excellence (10:25-28). The rich are advised to love the poor like Lazarus, and exhibit their mercy and love by taking care of them.

2. *The rich are invited to lead a simple life by the renunciation of wealth.* The maxim with regard to simple life is: “whoever of you does not renounce ‘all’ that he has cannot be my disciple” (14:33). This is proper to Luke. Renunciation was the basic requirement of Jesus’ followers. Jesus himself (9:58) and his disciples, who ‘left everything’ and followed him (5:11,28), are the models in this respect. This is further amplified in the missionary command: “Take nothing for your journey, no staff...” (9:3). When compared with Mark (6:8) and Matthew (10:9), Luke seems to be the strictest: he does not even permit a staff.

Renunciation in Lk, however, does not mean total destitution. It does not mean that one should swell the ranks of the beggars and add more to the already intolerable number of the poor that dot the face of the earth. The rich are advised to give a substantial amount to the poor, unlike the contributions of the rich men to the Temple treasury (Lk 21:1-4; par, Mk 12:41-44). Zacchaeus who is ready to give away a half of his goods to the poor and to make a fourfold restitution, hears the consoling words of Jesus: “today salvation has come to this house” (19:9), which no other rich man in Lk was privileged to hear.

3. *The rich must learn to shift the trust that they have in wealth and the security that they find in it, to ‘radical’ faith in God.* Faith in God and adherence to Jesus are considered basic requirements for salvation. Luke shows the necessity of faith for salvation more than the other evangelists. He supplements Mk 4:15 by the phrase “that they may not believe and be saved,” through which he shows a relation between faith and salvation (8:12).⁽¹³⁾ Also in 8:50, Luke inserts “a direct relationship between faith and salvation.”⁽¹⁴⁾

But the rich in Lk seem to place their trust in riches (12:13-21; 16:19-31; 18:18-30). That is why in the surrounding material of these pericopes (12:22-34; 16:13), there is an encouragement to place one’s trust in God and to give away material goods; and then one will be given the Kingdom. Zacchaeus placed his trust in Jesus and followed his teaching meticulously, and so he merited salvation (19:1-10).

4. *The rich have to repent for the injustice done to the poor.* Luke places repentance, conversion and forgiveness of sins of God’s extended hands of mercy in Jesus, men must repent and be forgiven, and not be passive recipients of salvation.⁽¹⁵⁾ That is why *metanoia* (repentance) and *epistrophes* (conversion) are closely connected with the

forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 3:19). In order to emphasise the need of repentance to obtain salvation, Luke (alone) prolongs the text of Is (40:3-5, Lk 3:3-6) and hopes that all who repent shall see the salvation of God (cf. Acts 13:24; 19:4). At the end of the episode of the Sinful Woman with the Ointment (Mk 14:3-9),⁽¹⁶⁾ Luke alone, in Jesus' declaration, clearly tells her that it was because of her love, faith and repentance that she was granted salvation (7:50). Those who do not repent, come under divine judgement (13:35), while those who repent are generously forgiven.

Luke's Gospel is a Gospel of forgiveness. Only in Lk we find the story of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32). Jesus forgiving his executioners (23:34), and pardoning the repentant thief by promising him the Kingdom for he showed genuine signs of sorrow (23:43). But the rich men in Lk remain unrepentant, and so they deserve Hades. They must repent for the evil that they cause in society and for the injustice they do to the poor. Zacchaeus was a rich man; the main source of his wealth was perhaps extortion, because tax collectors were known for such things. They collected more than what was their due (Lk 3:13), in order to obtain an attractive commission from the top bosses who were the Romans. Their rates could not be checked. Some of them demanded taxes by false accusations. The Romans made use of these taxes to fill their own pockets rather than for the maintenance of social order. Hence tax collectors in Judaism were considered thieves, sinners or even robbers.⁽¹⁷⁾ Zacchaeus was the 'chief' tax collector and hence was a rich man. The term *architelones*, tax collector and hence was a rich man. The term *architelones*, chief tax collector (19:2), emphasizes his injustice further. He was probably the head of a group of tax collectors and thus made profit on his transactions and he was aware of it. In order to become rich he became the cause of the miseries of the poor. For such people, over and above doling out part of their unjustly acquired wealth, a total conversion of heart is also necessary in order to obtain salvation (19:8). From this it follows that they should stop being the promoters of injustice. It is Zacchaeus alone among the rich who showed ample signs of repentance and total conversion and thus obtained salvation.

Deeply touched by the gracious action of Jesus, Zacchaeus promises to use his wealth to help the poor and to make restitution for his former evil deeds. He immediately resolves to be ready to give one half of his wealth to the poor,⁽¹⁸⁾ instead of the normal practice of giving 20 per cent of his fortunes.⁽¹⁹⁾ Though he is only an extortioner (Lev 5:16; Num 5:7) he restitutes, binding himself to the law imposed on rustlers (Ex 22:10) who were liable to a fourfold penalty.⁽²⁰⁾ Here fourfold restitution may refer to generous restitution. Again he gives far beyond the demands of law and duty. The term 'four' in the Bible has a reference to 'totality'; here in 19:8 it might refer to the totality of the conversion of Zacchaeus. His declaration to lead a new life was an adequate sign of repentance, so that in the Lucan perspective, he may now be a recipient of salvation. He underwent a change of heart and turned from the evil of injustice and thus obtained salvation.

5. *The rich have to hear the word, believe it and 'hold it fast'*. Hearing the Word (the message of salvation) is constantly emphasized in Lk,⁽²¹⁾ and that salvation accompanies it or immediately follows upon it, in Acts (2:40-41; 11:14). But merely hearing the Word is not sufficient. One has to believe, practise and persevere in it. Among the four groups that hear the Word (8:12-15), only the ones that 'believe' and 'hold it fast in an honest and good heart' are saved (8:15), while the other three groups of hearers who yield to the devil (8:12) or allow themselves to be led into temptation (8:13) or are carried away by the cares and 'riches' and pleasures of life (8:14), are not saved. Riches can

prevent the seed from growing into maturity and bearing fruit (i.e. from obtaining the Kingdom).⁽²²⁾ The rich in Lk especially in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31), do not hold fast to the message of salvation, i.e., to the words of 'Moses and the Prophets' (16:29, 30), but they are told to do so in order to obtain salvation.

The Possibility of Salvation for the Rich

After having shown the difficulties that the rich have in entering the Kingdom, and thereby instructing and guiding them to obtain salvation, Luke (alone among the evangelists) shows that salvation is possible for them. At the end of the Journey Section and at the climax of his Gospel, he shows how it is possible (18:27) and then demonstrates it in the person of Zacchaeus (19:1-10).

Lk 18:27: "What is impossible with men is possible with God." Jesus makes this positive, hopeful and optimistic statement exactly in the context where he spoke in a metaphorical manner of the extraordinary difficulties that confront the rich by stating; "For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God" (18:25). Humanly speaking, it becomes impossible for them to obtain eternal life, and this had been shown in a living example of the person of the rich ruler (18:18-24). Luke alone says that their salvation is difficult, but no impossible. It is possible with the help of God. Though the metaphor in 18:25 by itself indicates impossibility,⁽²³⁾ yet when it is taken in the context of 18:22, 27, it may be understood to refer to the extraordinary difficulty the rich have in entering the Kingdom. Exaggeration was an accepted mode of emphasizing something in the Semitic world. 18:24 follows as a consequence of the rich ruler's refusal to give away his wealth, hence it has to be taken in its proper context. If it were altogether impossible for the rich to enter the Kingdom, Jesus would not have invited the rich ruler to it (18:22) and he would not have pointed out its possibility immediately afterwards (18:27) and thereafter shown it realized in Zacchaeus (19:1-10). Because there is such a possibility, he instructs the rich to give alms to the poor (12:33). It is those who serve mammon that are reprimanded (16:13). The rich who use it wisely to promote their welfare in the next world, may hope to be received "into the eternal habitations" (16:9). God can break the spell which wealth exercises over the rich.⁽²⁴⁾ Even when a rich man's possessions prevent him from entering the Kingdom, God's grace can take the initiative and move the heart of the rich, because it is efficient and they can obtain salvation, "for with God nothing will be impossible" (1:37). If the birth of the 'saviour' was effected by God through an extraordinary intervention, God can also bring about the salvation of the rich. Thus Luke alone among the Synoptics suggests, at the climax of his Gospel, that salvation is not altogether impossible for them if they respond to God's grace (19:1-10).

Conclusion

At first sight, by placing the rich in opposition to the poor, Luke appears to condemn them, but when we study his interest in them in the context of the Gospel as a whole, his good-will towards them cannot be denied. It is obvious from our analysis that the rich indulge in luxuries and refuse to come to the aid of the hungry poor and thus cause tremendous scandal in society. Naturally Luke had to be stern with them and tell them in unequivocal terms, that an undesirable destiny awaits them if they continue to be in the same state. But he does not stop there. He goes on to give them a series of instructions and points out the dangers connected with riches. A response from their part is a must. He gives them a call to conversion by asking them to divest themselves of their riches and give them to the poor and thus acquire a treasure in heaven. Hence I have shown that by driving home this message directly and categorically, Luke intends

that the rich be awakened to the injustice they do to the poor and be converted by imitating the example of Zacchaeus and that they may not suffer the loss of eternal life. The manner in which many people lived at his time would deprive them of the Kingdom, but if they follow the teaching of Christ, salvation is not impossible to them. Since Luke has pushed the parousia to the future he sees the necessity of the role of the Church in the present, that can instruct people and change them. Luke intends that the rich in the present undergo a change of heart after listening to his instructions. Luke's Gospel is progressive and universal; it points out the ways and means of realizing the salvation of all.

Finally, if the rich are ready to respond to Jesus, Luke promises them God's revolution that will liberate them from the compulsion to possession and power. They will be converted and will be enabled to pass through the eye of the needle. This will in turn bring about a change of structures, i.e., liberation from oppressive social system.⁽²⁵⁾ Then the Christian community will become like that of Jerusalem having no needy in it (Acts 2:44-45; 32-35); and thus " 'all flesh' shall see the salvation of God" (Lk 3:6).

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⁽¹⁾ Par. Mk 10:25; Mt 19:24.

⁽²⁾ R. DEVILLE, "Jesus, Unique Sauveur du Monde," *Assemblies de Seigneur* 12 (1964) 43.

⁽³⁾ F. BOVON, *Luc le Theologien: Vingt-cinq Ans de Recherches (1950-1975)* Neuchatel/Paris, Delachaux & Niestle, 1978.

⁽⁴⁾ J. DUPOND, *Le Beautitudini*, 11, Edizioni Paoline, 1977, 64-5.

⁽⁵⁾ F. BOVON, "Le Salut dans les Ecrits du Luc," *Review for Theology and Philosophy*, 23 (1973) 301.

⁽⁶⁾ Lk 4:16-18; 6:19; 7:39-50; 8:41-56.

⁽⁷⁾ B.R. GAVENTA, "The Eschatology of Luke-Acts Revised," *Encounter* 43 (1982) 27-42.

⁽⁸⁾ J. LEVEQUE, "Aujourd'hui le salut, *Temoignage de Luc*," *Vie Spirituelle* 130 (1976), 815; W.G. KUMMEL, *Promise and Fulfilment*, London, SCM Press, 1957, 105-09.

⁽⁹⁾ M. KIDDLE, "The Admission of the Gentiles in St. Luke's Gospel and Acts," *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (1935) 163.

⁽¹⁰⁾ G.W. BUCHANAN, "Jesus and the Upper Class", *Novus Testamentum* 7 (1964) 195-209.

⁽¹¹⁾ Lk 12:13-21; 16:19-31; 18:18-30.

⁽¹²⁾ I.H. MARSHALL, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, Exeter, Pasternoster Press, 1979, 190.

⁽¹³⁾ J. DUPONT, "La Parabole du Semeur," *Foi et Vie* 66 (1967) 18.

⁽¹⁴⁾ B.H. THROCKMORTON, "Sozein Soteria in Luke-Acts," *Studia Evangelica* 6 (1969) 521.

⁽¹⁵⁾ J. BEHM and E. WURTHWEIN, "Noeo", TDNT, ed. G. KITTEL and G. FRIEDRICH, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964-79, IV, 1001.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Par. Mt 26:6-13; Lk 7:36-50.

⁽¹⁷⁾ O. MICHEL, "Telones", TDNT VIII, 102

⁽¹⁸⁾ N.M. WATSON, "Was Zacchaeus Really Reforming?" *Expository Times* 77 (1966) 283-84.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Cf. H.L. STRACK and P. BILLERBECK, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, IV, Munchen, C.H. Bicksche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1924, 546-51.

⁽²⁰⁾ W. VOGELS, "Structural Analysis and Pastoral Work, The Story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10)," *Lumen Vitae* 33 (1978) 487-88.

⁽²¹⁾ 5:1; 7:22; 8:4-21; 10:24.

⁽²²⁾ I.H. MARSHALL, "Tradition and Theology in Luke (8:5-15)", *Tyndale Bulletin* 20 (1969) 63.

⁽²³⁾ H.L. STRACK and P. BILLERBECK, *op.cit.* 1, 828.

⁽²⁴⁾ N. WALTER, "Zur Analyse von Me 10:17-31", *Zeitschrift for die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 53 (1962) 210-11.

⁽²⁵⁾ G. SOARES-PRABHU, "Good News to the Poor: the Social Implications of the Message of Jesus", *Bible Bhashyam* 4 (1978) 21.