

Acts 1:1-11

Over the coming weeks we are going to be teaching from the book of Acts. Those who are ministering the word will have prayerfully read through Acts to allow the Holy Spirit to quicken what He wants to say to the church for their further study. Study and listening to the Holy Spirit is vital, we want to have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying and hearts that receive and respond to Him.

Whenever I read through the book of Acts I am encouraged to see ordinary people being called and equipped by God, challenged to examine my own life, convicted in my spirit, filled with expectation, awe and the fear of God. I get excited about the possibilities for us as a church and I feel compelled to ask why not now?

Habakkuk was moved to pray, during the period of captivity in Babylon, at a time when there was violence, injustice, and the wicked far outnumbered the righteous. He acknowledged that his own people had been wicked and unfaithful to God, he understood their captivity was a just punishment God had brought about to bring correction. In the midst of those years he prayed that God would again revive His work.

Habakkuk 3:2

***"I have heard all about you Lord.
I am filled with awe by your amazing works.
In this time of our deep need,
Help us again as you did in years gone by.
And in your anger remember your mercy."***

Also in Psalm 85 the psalmist remembers the former mercies of God, and prays that he will continue to show mercy.

Ps 85:6

***"Will you not revive us again,
That your people may rejoice in you."***

Both of these scriptures were at the forefront of the Bootle revival when the Jeffries brothers preached to thousands of people in tent meetings. People were healed, and being saved daily. Articles about the revival are recorded in the Liverpool Echo archives.

Why not today? We too live at a time when the godless outnumber the godly. There is increasing godlessness and a need for another move of God. I fear however God also wants a move of His people in prayer, crying out once again for spiritual revival in the midst of moral decay.

We can read Acts merely as a piece of church history or We can ask ourselves where do I fit in the timeline of God's plan and purpose?

This is our story! We are the church and it is our history, our beginning.

Acts is part two of a work written by Luke to prepare for Paul's defence as he awaited trial in Rome. Isn't it amazing how God uses the seemingly negative and difficult circumstances for the greater good, that many may come to understand and believe?

Luke Address Theophilus as 'most excellent' Theophilus in the gospel of Luke and his title suggests he was a lawyer or judge. Acts wasn't written as a history of Paul's life but to help Theophilus understand how the Christian faith had developed and why the apostle Paul was now unjustly accused. That of course is just at the natural level, we also know it is an inspired work of the Holy Spirit!

The book sets out some significant events in the churches development and helps us to understand what God intends for His people today.

Can you imagine the court scene? "Your honour, can I refer you to section 2 in your bundle." What we see happening was foretold more than 800 years ago by the prophet Joel when he said....."

Acts 2:17-21 (Joel 2:28-32)

Luke helps us to understand what we witness in these scriptures is the next great event in redemptive history. On God's time line, most of the events foretold by the prophets have come to pass. As you read scripture we see that events are often explained using the terms "in accordance with the scripture" or "that the scripture may be fulfilled" or "this is what the prophet said would happen."

Christianity is not a fairy tale. The bible records for us, historic events and tells us of things yet to happen. Not only that, it is living and active with the ability to transform our lives.

There are still some events yet to take place, but Luke wants people to understand, they should not be surprised at these things, because God said they would happen!

First there was the Old Testament revelation spoken by the prophets, without which the New Testament makes no sense at all.

Then we have the arrival of God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

His death, on the cross to pay the ultimate price, the penalty for sin, that through faith in Him we are made right with God.

A few days later, the resurrection from the dead.

40 days after that was the next great event, the ascension into heaven that we have just read about when Jesus ascends into heaven and is crowned having accomplished redemption.

The next great event is the sending of the Holy Spirit to equip believers and establish the church, in which He takes up residence. Jesus is the head of the church and we the body of Christ.

Just for a moment, imagine you are there, on the day Jesus ascends into heaven. You've been meeting with Him over those 40 days, he's encouraged you with the news Holy Spirit is coming and then up He goes. You've seen Him go to heaven and in wonder and amazement you are gazing into the sky with the others, perhaps you are wondering "now what?"

You could have stayed for hours, or even days if two white-robed men hadn't turned up. They stand with you, wondering, 'what are you waiting for!'

"Men of Galilee, they said, why are you standing here staring into heaven?"

All kinds of thoughts and questions must have been racing through their minds but Jesus had told them all they needed to know before he left them and the angels were about to tell them something that would remain with them and become part of their thinking for the rest of their lives. It is a message that should also be at the forefront of our thinking.

"Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw Him go!"

From that day on they lived in anticipation of His return and so should we! We mustn't be like the foolish virgins who failed to take oil with them and had to go and buy more, missing the return of the king.

Next to be ticked off the list? The coming of the Holy Spirit.

He had already explained they would not be left as orphans and it would be better for them that he goes to be with the Father. So before he goes, he tells them, this is it. I'm going, so in not many days from now you are going to be baptised with the Holy Spirit.

There are definite times and seasons set on God's calendar, it's not for us to know the times and dates for all that will take place but we know we live in this period of time between Jesus ascension into heaven and His return.

The disciples were now to wait until they were clothed with power from on high. They didn't have to wait long. This power was not power to live a happy and content life and be comfortable and secure, free from all the problems of life, not even to escape cruelty and persecution, but it is the power to be Jesus' witnesses, with the ability to boldly proclaim 'Jesus is alive' and the power to demonstrate he forgives our sins.

I believe Jesus wants to demonstrate His power still today. Paul said he didn't come with wise and persuasive words but with demonstration of the Spirit's power that your faith didn't rest on man's wisdom but God's power. We need the good news message that comes with Christ's seal of approval, the evidence of His power.

We are in the period of history whereby Jesus has given to us the great commission of Matt 28:19-20 and the power through the Holy Spirit to continue this effort until He returns.

Until this time, the church had been a mystery, something hidden and about to be revealed. Now we meet the bride of Christ, the church. We meet the branches connected to Christ who is the vine, we become ingrafted branches together with Israel the natural branches, part of the household of God, a family, sons by adoption, a spiritual temple fit for Christ to dwell, and of course a unique and wonderful revelation that we are now the body of Christ.

We must never forget the times we are living in or lose our expectation of His imminent return, when He will judge the living and the dead. Paul had to remind the Corinthian church about the gospel message he had preached to them and which they had believed.

1 Cor 15:1-10 NLT

We need to be reminded again and again of the Good News. It is the Good News that saves you, but notice the conditional clause "if" and the verb to "continue" that Paul includes.

If you hold fast and if you continue.

People are often "sold" the gospel as a means to a happy life. "Come to Jesus and all your worries will be over, troubles will end and life will be all wonderful." Jesus, however never promised a trouble free life. He promised the opposite! "In this life you will have trouble (tribulation) but take heart for I have overcome the world."

If your pursuit is happiness, you will miss God but the pursuit of God will lead to true blessings.

The good news is:

Jesus died for our sins according to the scriptures. Why is it Good News? Through Christ we are made right with God. Why is that Good News? There are so many reasons but one piece of Good News is that in the judgement to come, when Jesus returns, you are spared an eternity in hell and promised an inheritance in the new heaven and earth.

He was buried and rose again according to the scriptures. He is the first fruits and we will join Him soon enough!

He ascended to heaven and he is coming back.

These truths were so real to the first believers that they gave their lives to the gospel. Look what Paul concludes in **1 Cor 15:56-58**

He concludes that a life lived for Christ is the only way to live.

Because of the resurrection, nothing we do for Him is wasted. Sometimes we become disheartened about serving the Lord because we don't see any results. Knowing that Christ won the ultimate victory should affect the way we live right now.

Look again at your life choices, don't live in the false belief that having said "the prayer" you can live as you please. If you are born of the Spirit, listen to what He is saying and make wise choices.

People can be told about Jesus, and receive it rather like a history lesson and these are historical events, but spiritual blindness requires a spiritual awakening and saying a formulaic prayer for salvation will not raise the spiritually dead. There must be revelation, deep conviction and repentance or there is no salvation. Every salvation is a mighty miracle of a spiritually dead person being made alive. It is no less miraculous than Jesus resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven!

The message of salvation comes with the power of the Holy Spirit, the same power that raised Christ from the dead. The natural is not enough, there must be the spiritual.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit gives us the power to be His witnesses. He promises to be with us to the very end of the age as we go about His work of the great commission.

Acts teaches us the true nature of the church and challenges us to turn the world upside down.

Going back to our reading in Acts.

If you were ask me what series of bible teachings I would have most wanted to listen to, you have my answer here! Jesus spent 40 days between his resurrection and ascension teaching His disciples and they were transformed by his words. Here in this series of meetings with the resurrected Messiah the disciples would have had so many questions answered and the eyes of their understanding opened. Just that short walk on the Road to Emmaus, which Luke records for us in Luke 24, caused their hearts to burn and gave great revelation. Jesus opened the eyes of their understanding and did the same whenever he met the disciples from that time on. Imagine 40 days of such teaching!

They were thoroughly convinced about the resurrection, learned about the Kingdom of God, and to expect the gift of the Holy Spirit to come very soon.

The fact is, we don't miss out! The Holy Spirit who led them into all truth, now leads us into all truth. Our eyes can also be opened! This is Paul's prayer for us in Ephesians 1:18 "the eyes of your understanding being enlightened" (flooded with light).

This promise, the promise of the Holy Spirit, the scripture says ".....is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

We have the apostles teaching, we have the scriptures and we have the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of our understanding.

We too can receive Christ, be baptised in His name, be baptised in the Holy Spirit and through His work in our lives be transformed into a new people. A redeemed community. We join in! We continue the work of the kingdom of God proclaiming the good news to our generation, warning people to flee the judgement to come, for when he returns, he will judge the living and the dead. Those who are saved are those who persevere to the end.

The early believers were witnesses of what they had seen and heard. After seeing the resurrected Christ, they were fearless and risked everything to spread the good news of salvation around the world.

We have the same message, the same hope, the same call and the same Holy Spirit who makes Jesus known.

When Jesus returned to heaven he planted in our hearts the upward call through the Holy Spirit. It will not be fully realised until he comes again to judge all people and remove all the evil from the world. Before this time comes, all believers are to work to spread the kingdom of God across the world.

What did the new believers prioritise?

They formed a community.

People are trying to duplicate church! Community has broken down in many respects and people feel isolated. I heard someone interviewed on BBC Radio who has started a 'Secular Church' They don't sing Christian songs but power ballads, they don't have a preacher but have motivational speakers. What he is doing is drawing community together but without God.

You cannot replicate the true body of Christ!

They gathered together not just to socialise but as a true family of God. They were of one heart, to love God and one another.

Acts 2:42-47

"All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to the sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.

A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.

They worshipped together at the temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity – all the while praising God and enjoying the good will of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved."

As a church we want to:

Reach the lost

Restore the broken

Refresh believers

The church (believers) has the power to change lives, it is the hope of the world!

(It is the very expression of Christ on earth. (Eph 1:23))

We want to create an environment where our relationship with God, fellow believers and others thrives, the kind of 'Fellowship' that creates biblical community, an authentic expression of what it means to live the Christian life. You can't help but get a real sense of genuine love and care in the fellowship described above.

People who are not just going to church as a venue but being the church as a people.

What are we going to do about it?

Today we are launching our new small group initiative.

Small Groups are at the heart of our vision.

To have true Christian Fellowship.

To create an environment where people are part of a -

- Loving and inclusive community (same hope, same God, common purpose)
- A place of welcome and friendship
- An opportunity to reach out to our friends, relatives and neighbours
- Pastoral care. Noticing and Caring for one another and letting others know.
- Being able to express and function in your gifting
- To grow spiritually and to serve. Not just growing in knowledge of the word but through the transforming power of God's word.
- Welcome and connection of newcomers
- Enjoy ourselves and God's favour
- Prayer, We need to encourage each other in pray and join together to pray regularly

We want to be a people of Faith, family and mission.

It can't happen on Sunday only or the occasional invitation, but through regular meaningful gatherings and commitment to opening up our lives more to one another.

To help facilitate this vision we are launching new small Groups and starting the Groups with the Whiteboard Bible Study.

What is the Whiteboard bible study?

- Not just an academic study but to encourage application of the truth of God's word.
- The series takes us from Genesis to Revelation
- In 3x6 week series of teaching that applies the word of God to our lives.
- 12 point time line for characters and events in the bible.
- A way of making sense of the whole bible story, how it all fits together.
- Resourced with DVD and workbooks
- Teaching accessible for new and mature believers.
- Small group meetings will be for 1 hour. This is to enable as broad participation as possible.
- By having a break after 6 weeks we hope people will be able to fully commit to the six weeks and work things out around this rhythm.
- You are free to invite friends and neighbours if they are interested. These are not closed meetings.
- At your first gathering you will get to meet the people in your group and get to know each other. You will hear how the programme works and be able to talk about any practical arrangements.
- You will get from it as much as you want and hopefully more!
- Sign up sheets are waiting for you downstairs. Please sign up today and don't worry about what group others are in. Just jump in and get to know new people.
- Try to avoid staying with your old house Group if you can. I know this isn't always practical where there are transport needs.
- There are Groups at lots of different times of day and just about every day of the week. So find one that suits you.
- Mature believers. See this as an opportunity to input into others.
- New believers an opportunity to grow and ask lots of questions.
- Non-believers. Part of your journey of discovery!
- All ages welcome
- Please get involved.

Reminder of the prayer meeting tonight.