

Sermon Notes on The Acts of the Apostles

Introduction

I will try and paint a word picture of some aspects of life as experienced by the early church. Just as an artist starts his painting by stretching the canvas and block filling in the background and building up layer upon layer of paint before the fine details are skilfully applied, so I want to run through some of the details of this period.

At the time of Jesus on earth, if you lived in the Middle East, your life opportunities were very much shaped by your birth circumstances. If you were a member of either a prominent Greek or Roman family you had great access to material benefit and gain. If had a trade or skill this also gave you greater opportunities to survive. But if you belonged to neither, then life would be a great challenge. You would probably live and work off the land as a smallholder or a slave or you may be pressed into military service for which you would be paid poorly.

Both of the Roman and Greek cultures predominated at the time. The Greek Empire had been won with sweeping military victories but it was now the turn of the Romans to predominate and they were brutal in their advances and administration of rule. That's not to say there weren't some good Roman and Greek people who lived at the time of Jesus - we read stories of Him ministering to the Roman Centurion who loved God and in Acts, many Greeks believed.

The Greeks liked to see themselves as thinkers and philosophers – they appreciated the fine things in life – the arts – music, plays and dances; they promoted this concept that beauty and form was everything to which you should aspire – enlightenment was to be reached at all costs; **and yes ladies, they loved their sports and contests.**

The Romans too would say that they had open minds and were lovers of fine things - grand buildings, temples, statues, monuments etc. In fact in Rome, they tolerated different cults and religions and initially saw Christianity as being just another cult.

Both cultures merged history and liberated thinking and developed their separate mythologies. Both cultures promoted hedonistic, gluttonous lifestyles in which food, drink, sexual practices were excessive, liberal, and desirable.

Into this backdrop comes Jesus, both man and God, born of a virgin, but born into a family with humble and lowly status in life.

He was born a Jew - born into a nation that has been downtrodden and ruled with a rod of iron by their Roman oppressors.

But born at this precise time and with a specific purpose – *“For this purpose Christ was revealed that He might destroy the works of the devil”* – not just dent the enemy and give him a bloody nose, but eradicate, annihilate, decimate, nullify the devil’s works once and for all times!

So when we read the Acts of the Apostles, it’s against this backdrop that we see the struggle which the early church faced. But it wasn’t just the Roman and Greek culture which they faced; they had to contend with the legalistic and bigoted Jewish elite who had rejected Jesus and His claims that He was the Messiah.

So perhaps the first question we should ask is, **who at that time,** would want to be a Christian and stand up and say, *“I reject all of this misplaced and self-seeking lifestyle and I want to follow Jesus and live God’s way”?*

The early Apostles and the early church members are absolute heroes in my view. They are giants of faith and perseverance in tackling these great trials and explaining a way of life which is the bedrock of our Christian faith.

- The Acts of the Apostles probably written covering a period of 30 – 40 years.
- God has not spoken for 400 years from the Prophets until the time of Jesus
- In order to fulfil OT prophecy, Jesus comes primarily to speak and minister to *the lost sheep of the House of Israel*. He engages with Samaritans, Romans, Greeks and Gentiles but in order to fulfil the Mosaic Law, He reaches first to Israel. Apart from the flight after His birth to Egypt, all His life was spent in inside Israel mostly in the north of the country. And apart from one visit to Tyre and Sidon (originally part of the Land promised to the tribe of Asher but never possessed by them), His 3 year ministry is conducted in the Land where He is establishing His credentials as both Messiah and the rightful heir to the throne of David i.e. King of Israel.
- **So God speaks to His ancient people through Jesus and then upon Jesus’ ascension to Heaven, God sends the Holy Spirit to the earth, upon the church in order to speak to the world.**
- Imagine if you were one of the early disciples or one of the twelve apostles, what is your world view? You are a devout Jew; hating Roman oppression;

tolerant of the stranger and proselyte but never imagining that God's grace will fall fully on the Gentiles.

- So with an understanding of how pressurizing the times were for believers, Peter speaking with a wonderful anointing from God says this, (Acts 3 v 19) – *“Therefore, repent and return so that your sins may be wiped away in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord”*
- In reading through the Acts of the Apostles, I want to give you some brief impressions before we read a portion of this Scripture and I want to talk about three different challenges for us as a church today.
- As I teach these things please be aware that I am saying, **“note to self”**.

OUR AVAILABILITY – The first observation I wanted to bring you as a church which I had laid on my heart as I read Acts is this – **are you wholly available to God to be used by Him just as the early disciples were asked this question also?**

When we read Chapters 1 and 2 of Acts and some of the following encounters, imagine how challenging these events are for you. **The events which unfold turn your world upside down.** You are either going to resist them or you're going to get on board and see that God is beginning to do a new thing which as of yet you don't fully understand.

- The early disciples turn from weary defeated and traumatized followers to faith fuelled and bold and courageous evangelists. **How could this happen?**
- They are re-invigorated by the return of Jesus after His resurrection and they certainly could have become dispirited after Jesus who had been with them for 40 days was suddenly taken away from them and they are on their own. **Scary!**
- Towards the end of John's Gospel we read that Jesus *breathed on His disciples* (a temporary infilling), but in Acts Chapter 1 we read that He said, *“You will be filled with the Holy Spirit and with power...”*
- If they had all run away – gone back to their families and their original jobs, there was no future church.

- I need to ask myself the question and put myself in their shoes, *"Did they hear and take in what God had said and promised or did they nod and have no anticipation of what was about to happen or what was possible?"*
- You know where I'm going with this – are we the same now. Do we limit God and just give Him a nodding acceptance when in reality **we are either not listening with purpose or at worst, we have no intention of following and obeying His will for our lives?**
- So they only did the things they did because they were faithful – *"Tarry (or stay) in Jerusalem until the promised Holy Spirit comes upon you"*
- Are you staying where God has planted you? Or are you ever looking to move on where it might be different; less challenging; easier to deal with?
- The Apostles and the early church are marked out in the following ways
 - They didn't run away
 - They didn't have a plan
 - They didn't give up despite great persecution and hardship
 - They became passionate and excited
 - They became bold and courageous
 - They were happy to lay down their lives for their faith
- **In fact they were all the things we are not at times**
- What they did consistently should inspire us today and every day of our lives.
- Let's realize that the early church became emboldened and courageous. Rather than becoming passive and protective of their own welfare, they saw their mission was to burn brightly and count their life here on earth as merely a preparation for the fulfilment of the kingdom to come.
- They only did the things they did because God the Holy Spirit came in a new way and they received Him with gladness.
- The greatest observation about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts Ch 2 is not that people spoke in tongues for the first time; it was that God spoke to the world!
- Our cry this morning should be, *"Holy, holy Spirit come upon me afresh and fill me and keep me where you want me to be"*
- **Story of Americans visiting a Chinese church planter having great success.**

OUR OPENNESS – I reading through Acts, the Lord showed me many incidents when the “suddenlies of God” took place and this brought a challenge to me.

Acts 1 v 10 – **behold or suddenly two men in white garments stood by Peter and John**

Acts 2 v 2 – **suddenly there came from heaven a violent rushing wind**

Acts 9 v 3 – **suddenly a light from heaven flashed around Saul**

Acts 10 v 30 – **behold or suddenly a man stood before peter in shining garments**

Acts 12 v 7 – **behold or suddenly an angel appeared before Peter in prison**

Acts 16 v 26 – **suddenly an earthquake shook the prison where Paul and Silas were held**

Luke 2 v 13 – **suddenly there appeared a multitude of heavenly hosts singing praises.**

- **There is an immediacy to the word “suddenly” and its use in these Scriptures indicates a different spiritual dynamic.**

- Do you want to be a dynamic church? That is the title Rob has given to this series of studies and reflections from Acts.
- *One missionary from the Southern Baptist Convention had a very exciting and powerful experience. He was sent to a large Muslim city in Africa to find ways to win the people to the Lord. His love and compassion for them was apparent to all, and in a short time he gained the friendship and respect of many Muslims in the city. One day he received a telephone call from the eighty-year-old Imam, the leader of the central mosque, who asked if he would come to their mosque and bless his people in the name of Jesus. At the meeting, the Imam asked the missionary to pray for his people, and after praying for some in the mosque, a distinguished looking man stood up and brought his eight-year-old daughter to the front, asking the missionary to pray that God would heal her withered legs. The father heard that there was power in the name of Jesus”. Immediately after the prayer, the condition of the girl remained unchanged. The father thanked the missionary and returned to the back of the mosque. The girl struggled in her father’s arms until he put her down and she stood on her legs for the first time in her life. She had been healed.*

After this power encounter, many Muslims in that area of Africa believed and were converted to Christianity, not because of an intellectual change but because of a real spiritual power encounter.

- **Sues “suddenly” story – her hairdresser**

- **Mike Dominy’s story – do you want Compton House?**

- **David Pawson’s story – the lost manuscript**

- Do you want to be a church that was like the first century church?
- God is looking for an ordinary people whom He can use by the power of His Spirit. From where I stand, you all look as if you qualify **but the bottom line as always is, are you willing?**

OUR RESPONSE IN HIM - Let's read about an incident recorded in Acts Chapter 3 and 4. It's about the healing of the lame beggar – **(Read Ch 3 v 1 – 10)**

- Why is this story significant?
- The disciples had been meeting daily amongst themselves, but now this is the first record of them taking the mission of God into the marketplace.
- And what a very public place!
- Darry Northrop said, *"Our job is to catch the fish, but Jesus will clean the fish"*
- You and I need to be skilful fishers of men
- If we take this account as a true chronological event (and I do) then this is where the church, **as yet unidentified and certainly embryonic at this stage**, becomes engaged and noticed.
- The miracle itself is wonderful and significant but the response from Peter when they are charged by the Jewish leaders is very enlightening.
- In Acts Chapters 3 we see that Peter first tells the onlookers why this miracle took place and why that generation had been guilty of Jesus's death.
- But in Acts Chapter 4, we see that Peter and John are arrested and they find themselves before the Sanhedrin.
- **Let's read Ch 4 v 8 – 24**
- Jesus is *"the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone."*
- Peter here is quoting the Psalms and he is also referring to the words of Jesus.
- **If you are going to build a dynamic church then you have to start with the right foundations** and the setting out of the corners and walls is of great importance. I have seen bricklayers and masons reject a stone or particular brick because it is not true and straight. The walls, the structure won't be stable nor will they be true.
- **If you are found in Christ, then Christ will be seen in you.**
- **Story of a dynamo versus a battery**

You and I have a responsibility to do the works of God, operating through the power of the Holy Spirit which He has given to each one

So the challenge is, are we acting responsibly or are we found wanting in our duties?

A boldness; an excitement; an anticipation came upon the early church. They discovered that by the power of the Holy Spirit given to them they were transformed from traumatized and disbelieving people to a powerhouse of grace.

Is Kingsway the Northern Powerhouse that George Osborne referred to?

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Summary

If I had to precis what I have learnt from re-reading Acts in a constructive and listening manner it would be this:-

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you....”

I’m done but I don’t believe God is done with us this morning. Come and be prayed for. Come and be filled with His power.

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J A Savage – Sept 2017