

The book of Acts is a continuation of the gospel of Luke. Luke wasn't able to give his own eyewitness account of Jesus' life because he wasn't there, but he did speak to those who were with Jesus throughout his ministry. His gospel is a retelling of the stories that people like Peter, James and John told as well taking quotes from other gospels such as Matthew and Mark.

The book of Acts, although it is a continuation, or sequel to the gospel, differs slightly because not all of Acts is a retelling of someone else's story. Luke knew Paul and accompanied him on some of his missionary journeys and so there are parts of this book which are very much autobiographical first-hand accounts of what was happening in the early church. (We can spot these parts of the book by watching for what are known as the 'we' passages. Those parts of the story where Luke places himself alongside Paul.)

As I've said before, Kirk Session asked for us to read and learn about the book of Acts because of the focus we have on developing our mission statement and plan. As I've read through Acts in preparation one of the things that has struck me is the confidence the apostles and early church had in the gospel, in Christ and the ability for God to do the incredible. They genuinely believed that faith in Jesus Christ changed lives and so it changed how they lived. It's my prayer that as we work our way through this book (and it will take us some time, although we will do it in bite-sized chunks,) that we will be challenged not just about how we live, but about our confidence in the gospel and how our faith in Christ is lived out.

Acts begins where the gospel of Luke ends, Jesus' ascension into heaven (glory). The gospel gives very little information about how Jesus ascended to heaven. We are simply told that Jesus was blessing his disciples and while he was blessing them, he was taken up into heaven and the disciples returned to the temple praising God. (Luke 24: 50-53)

In Acts Luke gives us a little more detail, not so much of the mechanics of how Jesus ascended to glory, but of the conversation (or state of mind of the disciples) in the lead up to this incredible event.

As we can imagine the disciples were filled with awe and wonder. Little more than a month before they had watched Jesus' arrest, the mock trial during which most ran away, and Peter had even denied knowing Jesus and of course the result of this kangaroo court was Jesus' crucifixion. The devastation of Jesus' death was then replaced with the confusion, fear and joy of his resurrection, which Luke tells us was 40 days before the ascension. During these 40 days Jesus appeared on numerous occasions to the disciples, he ate with them and taught them.

It seems, understandably, the sheer impossibility of what had just happened, the demonstration of God's power in raising Jesus from the dead fuelled in the disciples the hope that maybe this would be the time when God would restore the promised land to Israel.

The centuries of being downtrodden, under occupation by one empire or another and the seemingly inability of God to keep his promise that a descendant of David would always be on the throne would come to an end. Jesus would rule, Israel would be restored; this was an incredibly exciting prospect, and so the disciples asked: ***Lord, are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?*** (Acts 1:6)

Despite all the time spent with Jesus the disciples were still thinking in terms of an earthly kingdom, they hadn't yet grasped the importance of the heavenly kingdom. (This would change with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.)

If we were to translate Jesus' answer into Northern Irish English, it might sound something like this: *Boys you're running ahead of yourselves.* He told them it wasn't for them to know the times or dates that God had set for such things.

What the disciples were looking ahead to Jesus total rule on earth. That moment the prophet Isaiah foresaw when he said: ***By myself I have sworn, my mouth had uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.*** (Isaiah 45:23) The disciples were hoping they would see this prophecy fulfilled in Jesus before their very eyes.

It wasn't that Jesus was denying the truth of this, or that his complete rule isn't something that we should be looking forward to, but there is a Christian life to be lived, a mission to be completed, a gospel to be preached before any of that will come to pass. And so, he said to the disciples, don't be running ahead of yourselves, focus on what needs to be done today. ***But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*** (Acts 1:8)

The church today, we as Christians, get caught up with all sorts of questions. Covid, is this a judgement from God or a sign of the end times. War, earthquakes the seemingly unending political turmoil across the world and even in the most stable of countries like the UK and the US.

We look at the church and ask when revival will come, will the church ever be strong again, will we ever see people coming in the way they once did.

The truthful answer to all of these questions is the same answer Jesus gave to the disciples. God alone knows and there is nothing that we can learn about his timings or when we might expect Jesus' return.

Yes, we are to look forward to that day, when Jesus ascended the angels promised the disciples that he would one day return, but they also said ***Men of Galilee why do you stand here looking into the sky?*** (Acts 1:11) In other words there is work to be done, go and be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea & Samaria and to the ends of the world.

Instead of worrying about what tomorrow will bring or what the future will be, what the church will look like, or when Christ will return, we have been charged with witnessing to the goodness and the gospel of Jesus Christ. That witnessing begins here in these pews, our Jerusalem. We are to remind one another, teach one another, point one another to Jesus, the cross. We are to remind one another that our hope not just for the future, but for today lies in Christ alone.

Folks, do we witness to each other about all that Jesus has done and is doing for us? If we can't talk openly about faith to each other how will we ever witness to a wider world? One of the things we can start to do is to get used to using the name of Jesus or referring to the Holy Spirit by name and recognising he is a person and not it.

This may sound like a daft thing to say, but how comfortable are we to talk about Jesus, to talk about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives – we find it easier to talk about God (I'm not sure why), maybe because Jesus, the cross, his death and resurrection, the work of the Holy Spirit in

our lives is much more personal. When we talk about what God is doing in us through Jesus and by his Spirit, we are making ourselves to be incredibly vulnerable before God and each other.

When we are able to witness more freely among one another it is then we will find ourselves equipped to take this gospel message beyond these four walls and into a wider world.

I can already hear the alarm – maybe even the fear and panic at thought of opening our lives up in such a way. I know for many of us we're naturally closed books and the thought of this goes completely against the grain. Good news, Jesus knows this as well and so he told the disciples to wait for the promised Holy Spirit, he was clear when he said: ***But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.***

We will only be effective witnesses when we seek the power of the Spirit in our lives. Please understand what we're being asked to do this morning. We are not being asked to do more, we are not being asked to carry yet another burden, have yet another responsibility placed on us.

We are being told to seek the Holy Spirit who will then work through us. The most powerful way of being Christ's witnesses is in learning what it is to wait on him in prayer, to have the courage and faith to ask for the Spirit, the patience to wait on the Spirit for it is when he comes that we are equipped to do all that Jesus commands.

There is no magic formula for this, no special prayer, no set time frame. It is simply about asking, surrendering our lives by saying Lord I know this call to be your witness stretches me, but I am willing, come Lord and enable me.

As we read the book of Acts, we will see this command to go first to Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria and unto the ends of the world fulfilled. Peter will preach in the city, he and John will heal the lame man – Phillip will travel into the Judean countryside and meet the Ethiopian Eunuch; Paul's missionary journeys will result in believers in Caesar's household – but all of this starts here with this command to wait and know the power of the Holy Spirit.

As we begin our journey through Acts, as we seek to develop our mission plan so let us begin in the same place by waiting.