

Acts 1: 1-11 – The End and a Beginning

I used to very much enjoy the sports quiz show *A Question Of Sport*, and one of the rounds was called 'What happened next?' Some footage of a sporting event was played and then stopped and the teams had to guess what happened next. Did a dog run onto the pitch and steal the ball? Did the player taking the penalty fall over so that the ball barely moved from the penalty spot? Did a giant shark get into the Olympic swimming pool and devour several of the contestants? And having seen so much of the footage we all wanted to know what happened next.

And I think the same is true when we get involved with good books and films isn't it. You get to the end of a series and you want to know what happened next. Did they live happily ever after? Were there other adventures that we don't know about? How did all those loose ends get tied up?

And at the end of Luke's gospel we are left with a whole bunch of questions. What did the disciples do next? Did they end up being witnesses to Jesus to all nations? How was their message about Jesus received? Did they obey the command of Jesus that they wait in the city until they had been clothed with power from on high? And what did that look like? Is that how they coped without Jesus being with them? How did it all turn out? The life and ministry of Jesus on earth may have come to an end, but Jesus' work through his disciples was only just beginning. And so in his sequel, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke answers a lot of those questions.

In Acts chapter 1 verse 1 Luke starts with a reminder about all he wrote in his previous book. As in his gospel, Luke addresses his writings to a man called Theophilus but before he tells us what happened next, he unpacks some of the details from the end of Luke's gospel.

So in verse 3 Luke reminds his readers that Jesus gave many convincing proofs that he was alive, appearing to his disciples and the wider group of followers over 40 days. Luke adds that he spoke to them about the kingdom of God. That had been a key theme of Jesus' teaching right throughout his ministry but, as we'll see, the disciples still had a lot to learn.

Verse 4 however takes us to one particular occasion when something Jesus said stuck in their mind. It's actually a repeat of the command Luke records in the last chapter of his gospel, and it's a command to stay in Jerusalem and '*wait for the gift the Father has promised.*' In a few days, Jesus told them, they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit.

Now it seems as if they didn't quite understand this, and after mulling it over, perhaps for a few days, the next time Jesus meets with them they asked him a question. It's there in verse 6: "*Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*" It's a reasonable question, after all Jesus had been teaching them about the kingdom of God and he'd told them that the Holy Spirit was going to come upon them in power. And coming so close after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead it was no wonder that it all sounded very much to them that the fulfilment of God's promise to establish a lasting kingdom for his people was just around the corner.

But if the question seemed reasonable at first sight, it also revealed just how little they had really understood. The great reformer John Calvin says about their question that it contains as many errors as it does words. They still seem to be expecting an imminent political or territorial kingdom focused on the national state of Israel. But Jesus' kingdom is eternal not limited in time; it's not geographical but spiritual, and it's not national but international. Once again the disciples have got completely the wrong idea. Their horizons are too near, their dreams too small. And so Jesus teaches them one final time. And although

these lessons are clearly for those first disciples, those lessons equally apply to us today. So for the next 15 minutes or so we are going to focus on the teaching of Jesus to his disciples but also apply it to ourselves and our calling to be the church of Christ in this place at this time.

A Put Down

The disciples had got things wrong so Jesus needed to correct them. And his answer in verse 7 really put them in their place. They want to know the details. They want to know God's timings. They want to know what God is planning and exactly when it will take place. But did you notice that Jesus didn't tell them. His answer confirmed that there will come a day when God's kingdom comes in its entirety, but when that will be is none of the disciples business. *"It's not for you to know"* he says. That information belongs to the Father. He sets the times. He sets the dates. He knows when the great day of judgement is scheduled and the exact moment when his kingdom will finally come, but when that is to be is not the disciple's business.

And it isn't our business either. I don't know how many times I've heard Christians discussing the exact date of Jesus' return. The last time Judy and I were in America there were huge signs supposedly giving an exact date and time when Jesus return would happen. But that is not our business, and God is not going to tell us! There isn't some secret code in the Scriptures; there isn't a list of events that we can tick off one by one to know that the time is approaching. And so if one of your favourite past times is trying to work out whether that time is coming soon, and what date it will be, then please stop. It's not for you to know. The question the disciples asked was a distraction to them, and it has been a distraction to many Christian since. Let's not waste our time on it because, as we'll see in a moment, there is work to do instead.

Firstly, there is a put down, or a correction given by Jesus. But secondly there is a promise.

A Promise

The promise comes in verse 8: *"but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you."* I mentioned earlier that the kingdom of God in this age is not a geographical or territorial kingdom but a spiritual kingdom that exists wherever there are Holy Spirit filled disciples of Jesus living with him as their Lord and their Saviour.

You see although Jesus was about to leave the disciples and ascend back into the glory of the Father in heaven, the spread of his kingdom through the proclamation of his good news would continue through the ages. The disciples were about to be given a spiritual task that could only be done by the power of God's Holy Spirit living in them; they couldn't do it on their own. This was the promise that the Prophet Joel had announced hundreds of years before when the power and the presence of God would not just rest on one or two select individuals called for special purposes, which is what we see in the Old Testament, but on all of God's people. Jesus had spoken about this on a number of occasions and he reminded his disciples again of it here. It's a promise to correct their thinking, to calm their fears and to equip them for the calling they are about to receive.

And of course this promise is for us too. In his Pentecost sermon Peter tells the crowd that this promise is for all those who are far off, both those far off in distance, in culture but also those far off in time. This promise is for us. And we don't need to go to Jerusalem to receive it, because the promise of the Scripture is that when we come to Jesus in repentance and faith we are born again by the Spirit who then lives and works in our hearts through faith. We are not alone in this task because God is with us by his Spirit. We too can be changed more into the likeness of the Lord Jesus because his Spirit is at work in us as He is at work in all those who believe. Yes sometimes God does meet with us in dramatic ways, and if that is your

experience then I hope you treasure that as a great gift from God. But all believers have received the Holy Spirit and so already have the power that comes from the Holy Spirit to live and work to the praise and glory of God. And that's a truly wonderful thing, because as well as getting a put down and a promise, the disciples also get a promotion, if I can put it like that.

A Promotion

Up until now the disciples had been following Jesus around, watching him do the vast majority of the ministry. Yes, there had been a few occasions when he had sent them out either as the 12 or as a group of 72 to preach and proclaim the good news, to heal the sick and restore sight to the blind, but by and large they had been apprentices, curates in training, if you like.

But now Jesus was about to ascend back to Heaven so it was time for the apprentices to step up to the plate. And this is where Jesus gives them their marching orders. Once they were empowered by the Holy Spirit they were, verse 8 again, to be witnesses to Jesus *"in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

The pattern in the Old Testament was for God's glory to be so beautifully and wonderfully revealed through God's people and the worship of God in the magnificent temple in Jerusalem, that nations would see and hear and come from afar to know and worship Him. But in the New Testament the pattern is different. Instead of a centrifugal force pulling people in, the gospel has a centripetal force sending people out. The disciples are to go out with the good news, first to the Jews in Jerusalem. But then they are to spread outwards to those who live in Judaea and Samaria, as if the nation of Israel which had been split into two hundreds of years before was being joined together again in Christ, before going out to the ends of the earth.

And that's what we see in the book of Acts. Chapters 1 to 7 are focused on the events in Jerusalem as thousands are added to the church following the day of Pentecost. Chapter 8 shows us how this good news spreads throughout Samaria and then from chapter 9 onwards the good news goes out to the Gentiles, to the Greeks and the Romans and eventually to Rome itself.

And friends, that job still hasn't been completed. There are still places in this world that have never heard the gospel of Christ; some parts of far off lands don't have the gospel in their own language. What's more, as each generation dies out and a new generation is born, that new generation needs to hear the gospel of Jesus. And it is our job to tell them.

You see whilst you might be tempted to think that this was just the task given to the first disciples, the apostles, those specially chosen ones and so imagine that this calling now really only applies to bishops and vicars and curates or specially trained evangelists, that simply isn't true. This great commission, as the New Testament makes clear, is a command for all disciples. We are all called to be ready to give a reason for the hope we have received. And if you can't do that yet, then you better get trained for it, you better work hard until you can, because this is your job too. On a battleship all of the sailors have specific roles to play, but they are all trained in certain basic things: fire fighting, first-aid and so on, so that when the need arises they are ready to play their part on those things too. And that's exactly the same for us. So whilst your main gifting might be cleaning, or cooking, or electronics, or music, you are also called to be witnesses for Jesus. This isn't something you can leave to everyone else. Get ready! You've been promoted and there is work to do.

And there's work to do because fourthly, there is a parting.

A Parting

When Jesus finishes giving them this great commission verse 9 tells us that he was *“taken up before their eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight.”* Over the previous few weeks Jesus had come and gone, before returning to teach and encourage his disciples but now the final part of their training was over and he was returning to the Father.

Now partings are never easy are they, and I’m sure the disciples were saddened and perhaps a little confused by it all. They had taken their courage, their lead from Jesus being there with them in person, and now he was gone. How would they cope? What would they do? Where would they start? Wouldn’t it just have been easier if Jesus had stayed around to direct them? And it may be that we wish that Jesus was still here today too. Wouldn’t it be awesome to be able to travel to Jerusalem or Rome or wherever he was and see those nail prints in his hands ourselves and get his instructions face to face? Wouldn’t that be more useful in building our faith and helping us serve him in the right way?

Well whilst we might think that, there are plenty of good reasons why it’s good that Jesus is not here with us now. Let me give you 4.

Firstly we’ve already talked about the coming of his Spirit which means that all Christians can know the presence of Jesus with them wherever they are at the same time. There’s no need to travel to a sacred place to meet with God, no need to stand in long queue waiting your turn. Because Jesus ascended the Spirit of God could come and so his ascension actually brings us great comfort.

Secondly, that same Spirit inspired the Scriptures so we can hear God’s Word all the time. It’s all here in the Bible, everything we need to live a life that pleases God, if we take the time to read and study its pages.

Thirdly, the fact that he ascended to the right hand of God in heaven is a great reminder that he is the Lord of heaven and earth. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus is right now seated at the right hand of the Father, robed in all the majesty and glory that is his by right. The ascension reminds us that we serve a glorified Saviour and Almighty God.

Fourthly, the Scriptures tell us that Jesus is now praying for us in Heaven. That astonishing isn’t it. Isn’t it wonderful to think that Jesus Christ, the perfect son of God, is right now praying for me and for you as we follow him and step out in service and witness? Yes we have a tough task – we are the main means by which people can hear the gospel and be saved for all eternity – but Jesus is praying for us as we do it.

There’s actually fifth reason too, and it’s my last point today and it comes from verse 11. It’s actually another promise; a promise that the one who ascended back to the Father in Heaven will one day come again.

Another Promise

The scene is a little comical at first glance. Jesus ascended until a cloud hid him from their sight and the disciples were so stunned that they were left standing there, perhaps with mouths open, staring into space. From the way Luke describes it they are still standing there, perhaps wondering whether Jesus will reappear once more, when two men dressed in white, who are obviously angels, come and stand beside them. It’s a beautiful link to the scene on Easter day where the women were speechless at the sight of the stone rolled away from the empty tomb. In both cases the job of the angels is to bring clarity and hope to the situation. They brought hope at the tomb by telling the women that Jesus had risen, just like he said

he would. And they bring hope here by telling his disciples that *“this same Jesus, who has been taken from you into Heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”* So whilst this may look like the end, it isn't. This isn't the scene at the end of the Lord of the Rings where Gandalf and Bilbo and Frodo sail away forever into the undying lands. This is the end of Terminator 1 because one day Jesus will be back! Across the ages and around the world the kingdom of God will advance through the witness of the disciples and the growth of the church until the time comes for the Father to call time on history and for Jesus to come back and take his own to be with him for ever.

And in these few short verses we see the post-Jesus timeline laid out for us. We see the Ascension, which happens in this passage. We see the promise of Pentecost, which happened just a few days after this event. We hear the mission of Jesus to send his disciples out in the power of the Spirit to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, which is where we are now, and we are pointed to the glorious second coming of Christ which is the one event still to come.

And although on that great day Jesus will descend from the heavens to the earth in the same way his disciples saw him go he won't be returning alone and it won't be just a few people who see him. On that great and glorious day Jesus will return surrounded by an army of angels and with the saints that have died and gone on to meet him; and on that day every person, no matter where they are in the world, will see his return, such will be the glory and majesty of his arrival.

So there really isn't time to be staring into space or sitting on our hands. And the words of the angels are a call to action. They are a reminder that while we wait for the return of the King we have a job to do, a calling to fulfil, a quest to complete. Of course we don't do it alone, because filled with the Spirit of Jesus we go out in His power to reach people He died to save and to build His kingdom. And so when we preach, He preaches and when we are heard, Jesus is heard.

And we won't do it forever, not just because our time on earth is short, but because one day Jesus is coming back. But until that time, a time known only to the Father, as ambassadors for Christ we carry His saving message to a dying world.

The story of the growth of the kingdom of Jesus in this world goes on and on far beyond the pages of the Book of Acts, but as the early church was on the move so we need to be on the move also. We are a missionary people, a gospel people with good news to proclaim. And so in the light of the ascension, in the power of the Spirit, and in joyful anticipation of the return of our Lord, let's get on with the mission Jesus has left us. Amen.