

You've got the time 3 (John – Acts 16)

Acts 4:1-22 & Acts 13:1-12

If you're following the 'You've got the time' series and you're up to date with your listening or reading then you'll have heard the whole of John's gospel and the first 16 chapters of Acts in the last week.

I'm not really going to speak about John's gospel this morning. Instead we're going to concentrate on the book of the Acts, so just a few quick comments on John's gospel.

I'm sure you already know that John's gospel is very different to the other three, to Matthew, Mark & Luke. If you remember a couple of weeks ago we used the analogy of artists painting a portrait of Jesus to help us think about the differing styles of the gospel writers. Mathew, Mark and Luke, although giving different emphasis to their pictures stand quite close together as they draw, and in fact it would seem that Matthew and Luke keep copying from Mark. John, on the other hand is standing in a very different position, and the portrait he produces is abstract.

John's gospel has been described as 'being like a pool that is safe for a child to paddle in but deep enough for an elephant to swim in' in other words it is possible to read it and to engage with it at a number of levels, depending on your maturity as a Christian. Although I'm not sure whether any of us would like to be described as a spiritual elephant!!

The gospel is structured around seven sayings, the 'I ams' and seven signs. (John calls them signs rather than miracles because they point to who Jesus is.) We looked at both the signs and sayings a couple of years ago, so if you want to know more there are two sermon series' on the website (if you go to the sermon index you'll find they're numbered. The 'I ams' begin at number 268.

The latter part of John's gospel has lots of teaching about the Holy Spirit, passages where Jesus has lots to say on the subject. And this forms a bridge into the next book in the Bible, the Acts of the Apostles, which we're going to concentrate on this morning, because Acts describes the coming of the Holy Spirit on the believers. Some commentators think that might be why John's gospel and the Acts of the apostles have been placed next to each other.

So, on to Acts....

You'll remember (I hope) from a couple of weeks ago that the Acts of the Apostles is the second part of Luke's two-parter. Dr Luke, who set out to write an ordered account to Theophilus, got as far as the resurrection appearances of Jesus in his first book. Luke's gospel ends with a very brief account of the ascension, where Jesus is taken into heaven.

The sequel begins with a slightly fuller account of the same event and then moves on to chart the beginnings of the early Christian church. Although it's called the Acts of the Apostles a more accurate name would probably be 'The Acts of Jesus through His Holy Spirit. It's a continuation of Jesus' ministry after his death, resurrection and ascension.

The book of Acts is not by any means a comprehensive history of the church, but rather a focused history centring on the beginnings and early development of the church in Jerusalem, the ministry of the apostle Peter (and to a lesser extent John), and an extensive account of the way God used the apostle Paul to take the gospel to Asia Minor, Greece and Rome.

A more complete history of the early church would have told us about the ministries of the other apostles, the development of the church in Galilee, the story of the spread of Christianity to Egypt and the origins of the church in Rome.

But let me sum up very briefly the first sixteen chapters of Acts (I need to leave the rest for Ian next week):

A number of crucial steps are taken in the life of the early church in these first sixteen chapters, and each step is propelled by the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, the disciples break out of their ghetto and tell the Jewish audience, who are representative of all nations, of the story of Jesus. This results in persecution, but also progress as the message spreads, leading into the death of Stephen, the gospel being brought to Samaria, the conversion of Saul and then of the Roman Centurion Cornelius. And the message being preached to Gentiles. All this culminates in the Council of Jerusalem who try to sort out the confusing mess that the church seems to have got itself into.

So the two passages that we heard this morning are designed to give you a flavour of what's contained in the Acts of the Apostles. There isn't time this morning to do more than simply get the flavour.

In the first reading we heard that Peter and John, having healed a crippled beggar in the name of Jesus, were in trouble with the authorities. But rather than being cowed by a night in prison they gave their testimony boldly to the high priest and elders the next day. It was obvious to those in authority that these were just ordinary blokes who had somewhere along the road gained extra-ordinary courage. And we read that it was noted (v13) 'that they had been with Jesus.'

When the authorities said 'you mustn't speak or teach the name of Jesus any more' Peter and John replied 'we can't help it. We can't help speaking about what we've seen and heard'.

The second reading features Saul (who became known as Paul) and Barnabas being targeted (set apart) by the Holy Spirit, and being sent out from the church in Antioch on an

evangelistic mission which would last in total a couple of years. We know it as Paul's first missionary journey. Their first leg of the journey was to Cyprus, and it was at Paphos that they encountered their first serious opposition to the gospel, in the form of Elymas the sorcerer. But Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit was more than a match for the sorcerer, and as a result the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, was converted to Christianity.

These two readings help to illustrate what we already know of the story contained within Acts: that it's cutting edge stuff. But let me draw your attention to three things:

Number 1. It's all about people who have been changed, transformed, by meeting Jesus who then go out and risk their necks to communicate the good news that Jesus transforms lives. Paul has had probably the most dramatic meeting with Jesus possible, so much so that 'Damascus Road experience' has come into and remained in our vocabulary as representative of dramatic. Saul, the violent persecutor of Christians, becomes Paul the Apostle who allows nothing to stand in his way of proclaiming the gospel. Not prison or shipwreck or illness, nothing. Meeting Jesus has utterly changed Paul.

Peter and John, the timid, unseeing disciples who are ignorant peasants become bold, carefully-spoken preachers and teachers because 'they had been with Jesus'.

Number 2. The Holy Spirit has centre stage in Acts, and that is evident in both these stories, although perhaps in slightly different ways. Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit and is therefore able to speak powerfully to the Sanhedrin. He is articulate and convincing, as he had been when he preached to the crowd gathered at Pentecost. For Paul and Barnabas the Holy Spirit gives particular direction, calling them away from Antioch. The Spirit also gives them specific knowledge and discernment when dealing with the problem of Elymas the sorcerer.

Number 3. These people operate at the cutting edge of the church with nowhere to hide. They are often in danger and regularly suffer hardship and discomfort for the sake of the gospel. Paul elsewhere lists some of the trials he has been through. They give themselves totally to the cause. There is nothing safe or cosy about this book and what it describes.

As you listen to, or read through, the remainder of Acts in the next couple of days it will probably feel a bit like a travel guide at times as you try to keep track of Paul's different journeys. And Acts is, in a way, a sort of travel guide isn't it? A travel guide to how the gospel progressed.

People who buy travel guides often fall into one of two distinct categories. The first is the 'arm-chair' traveller who really enjoys the descriptions of places, likes to pour for hours over the photos and maps, and for whom the travel guide forms a substitute for real travel. They will rarely get out to see the places they read about. The other is the person who loves to travel, has been all over the place and is looking for further inspiration. Their travel guide

will become dog-eared from being thrust into a bag, as they have tried out all the recommended destinations.

As you continue to read the book of Acts this week ask yourself of those readers are you? Into which category do you generally fit? Does this book, this travel guide give you pleasure because you can read all about how the church came into being from the safety of your armchair, knowing that you don't have to do anything about it? Or does this travel guide inspire you to leap up and get out there, telling more people about Jesus.

You see I think we're the former. And I'm speaking for myself here. We've lost the desire to get out there, if indeed we ever had it in the first place. Instead we're satisfied with reading about others who have got out there! We don't know in this country what it means to face hardship of persecution for the sake of the gospel, and we don't particularly want to find out either.

The church is never going to grow if we aren't willing to live on the cutting edge. We might be scared, as I'm sure Peter and John, Paul and Barnabas and all the others were. But they had experienced the transformation of a meeting with Jesus, known the power of the Spirit in their lives and it made all the difference. Those of us here this morning who have been transformed by Jesus and who know the power of the Spirit in our lives, it's time to get out there and let it make all the difference.

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A brief summary of the first sixteen chapters of Acts:

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For Discussion

1. When you think about the book of Acts, is there a passage that particularly stands out for you? What is it, and why?
2. Look at Acts chapter 4. It was noted that Peter and John had 'been with Jesus' (v13). What difference did that make to their lives?
3. How can we 'be with Jesus'? What difference does it/should it make to our lives?
4. In Acts 13 the Holy Spirit **said** 'set apart for me Barnabas and Saul...' (v2). How do you think the Holy Spirit communicated this? Does the Holy Spirit still **say** things? How? Share any experiences you have.
5. The Apostles experienced hardship, danger and persecution for the sake of the gospel. How can we respond to our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who face these issues? How do you think experience of this would alter eagerness for the gospel?

Spend some time thanking God for those who live at the 'cutting edge' of the church.