

Recording 21-05-16 Acts1:1-11 Ascension

Thank you, Alastair, for our reading!

Last Thursday was Ascension Day – did you notice? Well, you did if you were in church! But because it is on a Thursday, 40 days after Easter, it tends to get ignored! But it’s a really important moment, when the earthly ministry of Jesus comes to an end, and ten days later the ministry of the church begins through the power of the Holy Spirit. Our passage today is the introduction to the book of Acts – the exciting account of the beginning of the church, and a book which we need to know well in order to understand better what the church should be – and in a few cases, what it should not be!

So Luke is writing his second book, following on from his carefully researched gospel account. He reminds his readers how he had described what Jesus did and what he taught, and how he had instructed his chosen apostles through the Holy Spirit. And Luke, the doctor, the scientist, is utterly convinced by the proofs Jesus gave that he had indeed risen from the dead! After all, he ate with them on more than one occasion – this was no ghost! How we would have loved to have heard more about his teaching as he appeared to his followers after his resurrection! Just as he had on numerous other occasions, especially in his many parables, he was teaching them about the kingdom of God. This was what they needed to understand and pass on.

Jesus gave his disciples instructions as to what they should do next. This was what he said, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about, For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.” They were not to wander off home, for Jerusalem was the place God had chosen for both the suffering and death of Jesus, and the place where the new era, the era of the Holy Spirit, would begin – and for that you will have to wait until next week!

They had all received John's baptism with water – read on a few verses – which meant they had been plunged into the river as a sign of commitment and forgiveness of their old lives – it was a symbol of death and resurrection into a new life with God. They were now awaiting a similarly life-changing experience, being baptised by the Holy Spirit, plunged into his power! I am sure they had no idea what would happen on the day of Pentecost!

But on this critical day, the last day Jesus would be present in bodily form on this earth, they showed they still didn't understand! V6: "they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'" Even after all he had taught them, they were still looking for a political solution, a restoration of David's kingdom with no pesky Romans in charge! So he tells them, I imagine with a resigned sigh, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority." The disciples were asking the wrong question! They were to follow where the Lord was leading them, even when the future seemed uncertain. The certainty was in the presence of God in their lives and their obedience to his word and his guidance.

But Jesus continues with a promise: "but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you." That would change everything! They hadn't been able to heal the boy with the unclean spirit, when Jesus was on the Mount of Transfiguration (that's Luke 9:40), but now the Holy Spirit would work within them to give them power to speak and to heal. When we look further on in the book of Acts, we see both Peter and Paul healing the sick as well as speaking in the power of the Spirit.

Jesus' promise continues with an outline of their future ministry: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This was only a few short weeks after Jesus had been arrested and crucified – were they really to be witnesses in Jerusalem, of all places? Surely, they must have thought, anywhere but Jerusalem!

It was a place of acute danger to anyone who didn't fit in with either the political or religious establishment! But this was a word of prophecy – it was exactly what did happen! The church started with a bang in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, and then moved north when persecution broke out. As a result, the despised Samaritans were reached, then the base for mission moved north to Antioch – a much more strategic base for moving into Asia Minor, Greece and Rome. And eventually the good news of Jesus reached the rainy island the Romans called Britannia! That would have felt like the ends of the earth!

Once Jesus had given them the plan of action, we are told the he was taken up before their very eyes, and the cloud of God's presence hid him from their sight. So they were just standing there, watching, wondering when two angels appeared! What an odd question they asked! "Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking into the sky?" Wasn't it obvious? I think we would all have just stood there and stared into the sky! But the angels continued, "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." Then they knew he would come back – but they didn't know when! It was not given to them or to us to know the times or dates! Meanwhile, they were not just to stand there staring into space – they were to go back to Jerusalem and wait for what God had in store for them. We know they gathered together in prayer for ten amazing days before the Spirit burst upon them on the day of Pentecost.

So what do these verses mean for us today? I think the promise of power through the gift of the Holy Spirit is for the church of today as well as the church of the first century. The disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem – they all joined together constantly in prayer. That has a lot to say to us today – when we have been forbidden by government edict from joining together in an ordinary house! Pray that soon we will be able to meet without restrictions, without having to be so far apart that communication is difficult.

But something that before we took for granted, and perhaps we didn't take seriously enough, has been taken away – and pray that our prayer life as a church will soon be restored. Meanwhile, we are in those ten days of prayer when we are to pray for five people who do not yet know the Lord – that's something we can do!

The key promise of this passage is the one that we will be witnesses to Jesus. This is for all of us – we don't need a degree in theology! We just need to be able to share simply that we know Jesus, that he makes a huge difference to our lives, and that as a result we are prepared to pray for those we encounter. We need to stand up for the truths of Scripture, the lifestyle that God calls us to. But, of course, there will be some people who won't like what we stand for. We remember that the Greek word for 'witness' is the one from which we get the word 'martyr' – and many people down the ages have paid with their lives for being witnesses to the truth of Jesus.

But let us not be afraid, let us seek the refilling of the Holy Spirit in our lives as we dedicate our lives to serving Jesus wherever God has placed us, and let us experience that inexpressible joy in following him! In these days, let us pray faithfully 'Thy kingdom come' as we look to the future with confidence in the Lord who has called us and saved us to be his witnesses.

***Let's pray.* Lord Jesus, come in power and fill us with your Spirit, so that we will fulfil our calling to follow you and to show your love to others. Amen.**

Now over to Jeremy for another song, after which Julie will lead us in our prayers.

Questions for discussion.

Read Acts 1:1-11

1. What is the 'former book', and what did Jesus do and teach?
2. What were the 'convincing proofs'? Do they convince you?
3. What do you think Jesus taught them about the kingdom of God?
Read Luke 13:18-20, 17:20-21
4. What is 'the gift my Father promised'? See John 14:15-17, 25-27.
5. How is that gift present in your life?
6. Verse 6 shows the disciples still haven't understood the nature of the kingdom of God. What sort of kingdom are they hoping for?
7. What will be the result of the coming of the Holy Spirit, and how do we see that in our church life – or do we?
8. What are the characteristics of a witness?
9. How can we be the sort of witnesses God calls us to be?
10. What is the significance of the cloud?
11. What does this passage tell us about Jesus' return?