

To the ends of the earth

Please read Acts 1 v 1-11 and Luke 24 v 45-53; then pray these words of Charles Wesley:

*Come Holy Ghost, for moved by Thee, the prophets wrote and spoke:
Unlock the truth, thyself the key, unseal the sacred book. Amen.*

Welcome to Acts! In most books of the bible there is generally *one key verse* that sets the tone and direction for the whole book. Within Acts - it is without a doubt - **Acts 1 v 8**:

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.

This verse summarises the content and purpose of Acts. It is a book which reveals how the Church *was born into this missionary mandate* and how the divine “wills” in the above verse became a historical reality under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit, who was sent from heaven by the resurrected, ascended and exalted Lord of all - Jesus Christ!

Acts has its own special place in the canon of the New Testament. It comes straight after the four gospels which focus on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Acts communicates what happened next. It was written by a gifted physician named Luke, a Gentile, who wrote two volumes which we know as Luke-Acts. They were both written to a significant and esteemed Roman official called Theophilus, and for the benefit of a Gentile audience generally. Acts was written about AD61-63, some time before the death of Paul who we find in the final chapter (28) under house arrest in Rome, but still continuing to fulfil the evangelistic mandate **above** and with anointing for his own personal calling. (Acts 9: 15-16). The book, as you would expect, ends on a forthright and powerful evangelistic note:

Boldly and without hindrance he preached the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. (Acts 28:31)

Acts 1 is an important preface to this whole book of missionary **action**. It resumes where Luke’s “former book” left off and prepares us for Pentecost, the powerful descent of the Spirit and the launch of the Christian Church in Jerusalem. Where Luke’s gospel ended with resurrection appearances, missionary mandate and ascension – Acts begins, and then moves on with pace. The passage we are looking at today (Acts 1: 1-11) focuses on the **forty-day period** from resurrection to ascension. Next week’s passage (Acts 1:12-26) looks at the **ten-day period** between ascension and the pouring out of the Spirit. As you would expect, **Jesus is at the centre of everything**; *his* resurrection appearances and *his* instructions; *his* ascension and *his* pouring out of the Holy Spirit. He is now, amongst other things, the One who will soon **baptise** with the Holy Spirit and fire as had been prophesied three years earlier.

Luke unveils what were the most important features of this forty-day period from Jesus’s resurrection to his ascension. What were the main reasons why the Church and its apostles were able to boldly and confidently pursue this incredibly ambitious mission-centred mandate?

The first thing of huge importance in this forty-day period were *his many resurrection appearances* to the disciples. Jesus gave his disciples **many convincing proofs (v3)** that he was alive. He had physically risen from the dead. There could be no mistake about this historical fact! Jesus offered the disciples irrefutable proofs which included “*eating with them*” on **many occasions** (v 4 and Luke 24:37-43). It was upon this **concrete immovable fact** that the apostles were going to march forward into mission. All their witnessing and preaching was going to be built upon the solid base of Jesus’s certain victory over death. Because *they knew* Jesus had risen, they were never going to back down from their historic

and eternally significant message! **Jesus had died but was alive!** They would willingly die (and did do) for the fundamental truth of this gospel. After all, who would die for a lie knowing it was a lie?

Friends, we must grasp the fact that **our faith** is built upon a historical rock of certainty! Jesus conquered death, and all those who put their faith in him will be raised as he was! We know he is the Son of God. His resurrection confirms it! We know he is the Resurrection and the Life! We know that death has lost its power and sting and we have the sure and certain hope of eternal life. This is why the resurrection must always remain at the epi-centre of true Christian preaching. All the apostolic sermons in Acts highlight the resurrection of Jesus. This certainty enabled the apostles to be extremely bold and deliver their message with unyielding conviction. Does the Church today, including **our** Church, carry and display this clear conviction? If not, it will fail and fall!

Secondly, this forty-day period was used by Jesus to **teach** his disciples. Jesus it appears, centred his teaching on *two* subjects (v3-4) – **the Kingdom of God** and **the Spirit of God**. Jesus was not teaching his disciples about these vital subjects for the first time. His message about the Kingdom had always been his main message around which his parables had been based. And the gospels also reveal that Jesus taught the disciples about the Spirit and his imminent coming. There is lengthy teaching in John's gospel and some in Luke's first volume. (Luke 11:13, John 14:15-18, 25-27, 15:26, 16:5-15, 20:22).

This emphasis on these two subjects was no doubt due to the *prominence of the Holy Spirit* throughout Acts, and the *growth of the Kingdom of God* through the passionate preaching of the gospel of Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and Lordship. His Kingdom was here! I would like to draw your attention to what Jesus teaches about the Spirit in Acts 1 (and other places). There are four important things taught by Jesus in **Acts 1 v 4-5** alone.

- Christian mission and preaching are impossible without the Spirit. Being certain about the resurrection is one thing, having the **power** to communicate the message is quite another! The Church needs power! It is supplied by the Spirit of God. Hence Jesus's *insistence that the disciples DO NOT set out without it! Wait to be clothed!* When it comes to the Spirit – are we clothed or are we naked?
- The Spirit (like our whole salvation) is a **gift** (v4) to us and to the Church. The Spirit comes through God's grace, not because we merit, earn or deserve Him. We certainly need the Spirit for mission, and we cannot even be brought into the Kingdom without the Spirit and his regenerating power, but we can never claim to deserve the Holy Spirit. He is a precious gift. Do we know and treasure the gift of God's Holy Spirit?
- The Spirit is **a promise** (v4) *from the Father to his children*. This promise can be traced back to the Old Testament through prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Joel. But Jesus also spoke about the *promise of the Father*. The ancient promises were about to be fulfilled. Another divine promise would be kept and another blessing graciously and generously bestowed. *We too* have the "promised Spirit" living in our hearts, empowering us for service and changing us from the inside out, so that we might become like Jesus, who was himself filled with the Spirit at the beginning of his mission and ministry.
- Receiving the Spirit is a **baptism** (v5). This meant that the disciples were soon going to be dipped or immersed in the Spirit. They would be filled to overflowing. The Spirit would be *poured out generously*. The disciples would experience "streams of living water flowing from within them." (John 7: 37-39). I rather like way one person once described this baptism which

is for *all Christians*, not just the apostles; Christ's servants were to be **marinated in and with** the Holy Spirit.

As Christians today, all this applies *to us*. We can and should know the empowering, infilling and enabling of the Spirit so that we can participate in Christ's mission. We too can experience the life of the Spirit as a precious gift and a fulfilled promise (Acts 2: 38-39). We can know, experience and rejoice in Spirit baptism. This is our inheritance in Jesus and a vital part of our new life in the Kingdom of God! Friends, the two subjects within Christian theology that I would like offer teaching on in some depth for the sake of Christ's mission in our world are;

- The person and work of the Holy Spirit
- The Kingdom of God (its presence now and its future consummation)

Today there is far too much ignorance in the Church about these two crucial subjects. This must be rectified. Both were so important for Jesus to share with his disciples during that final forty-day period, and I find it startling that many in the Church don't know the basics about the Spirit or the Kingdom. We must according to Jesus, "seek first the *Kingdom of God*", (Luke 12:31) and "ask, seek, and knock for the *promised gift* of the Father" (Luke 11:9-13) which he loves to pour out on his children.

Now onto the heart of the message upon which the title of this sermon is based – **to the ends (uttermost parts) of the earth**. (v8) Jesus, who is head of the Church, emphasises the nature and full extent of *HIS mission* – the gospel is to be *taken* to the **ends** (eschatou), the extremities of the earth. This is a gospel for all – without exception. Jesus came for all, died for all, rose again for all, and will reign over all. At his name *every knee* will bow and *every tongue* confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father ((Philippians 2: 9-11). Jesus therefore quickly moves the disciples thinking and questions away from Israel's present/future restoration to what really matters – a worldwide mission, not a nationalistic revival! Israel will always be upon God's heart and providentially kept in God's hands and purposes, but Abraham was ultimately chosen so "that all the nations upon the earth would be *blessed*." (Genesis 12:2-3). Hence Jesus's clarion call to take the gospel **to the ends of the earth**.

But how and where will this global mission start? Jesus provides the answers. It will begin from the point when the disciples **receive power – the power that comes from the Holy Spirit being poured upon them**. This outrageously ambitious mission can only begin and continue with the power of the Spirit. The success of the mission hinges on this. This is why Pentecost will be so important. At the end of that historical day – after the outpouring of the Spirit - 3000 will be added to the Church! The power from on high, poured out by Jesus, will have arrived!

Where will the mission start? In **Jerusalem** and at a time where many people from different nations will be gathered to celebrate Pentecost (2:5). Spreading the word will commence from day one! The book of Acts will then take us on step by step to see how this mission develops. We see from chapters 2-7 how **Jerusalem** hears and receives the gospel; then, largely because of persecution, the gospel goes out to **all Judea and Samaria** (8-12); next after that, to most of the Mediterranean world as Paul steps out with others upon evangelistic mission. His 3 missionary journeys go ever wider each time until he ends up in Rome itself, where Acts comes to an end – **but the global mission will continue!**

How does this apply *to us*? **The story of Acts continues** and **we** are called to be part of the ongoing story to reach the whole world with the gospel. After Jesus ascended, he in effect had two bodies. His personal body was in heaven where he sat down at the right-hand side of the Father. However, Jesus has **another body** here on earth. This body is his Church (1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 4:4, Colossians 1:18) which he fills with the Spirit so that it has the power needed to take the gospel **to the ends of**

the earth. We are part of his body on earth – and that body has one main goal under Jesus’ leadership and authority – to take the gospel **to the ends of the earth**.

You cannot read Acts as a Christian or study it as a Church and then conclude that you have no interest in this worldwide mission. If we are not part of this, then we are not part of the mission of Jesus. Every Christian is called to play their part in spreading the good news in their locality (in their Jerusalem), but they are also called to show significant support for the world-wide spread of the gospel. *Do you personally take this specific challenge and mandated priority seriously? Do you demonstrate personal commitment in the way you support evangelism locally, nationally and internationally?* This is one of the main reasons to commit to LYCIG because it can take Christchurch deeper into this challenge at a local level.

Jesus **will not** return (Acts 1:11) until this mission is completed (**Matthew 24:14**). We still have some way to go, but the body of Christ moves ever nearer to reaching this goal – and now in this age of easier travel and sophisticated international communications – the end is within sight. Are you enthusiastic about the sharing of the gospel and reaching out toward that great goal? I am!

The great George Whifefield of Gloucester, (1714-70) took this gospel throughout the UK and to all the new American Colonies – crossing the Atlantic numerous times in the process. William Carey (1761-1834) took the gospel to India. Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) took the gospel to China. The gospel is growing exponentially there today! Reinhard Bonnke (1940-2019) followed on from others in taking the gospel to the African continent. Significantly, the organisation which he founded is called **Christ For All Nations**. It has been responsible for leading almost 80 million souls to Christ in Africa. What do all these people and so many others have in common? They were powerfully anointed with the Holy Spirit and highly motivated and inspired **by Jesus’ commands** in **Acts 1:8** and **Matthew 28: 18-20**. What about *us*? What about *you*? Where is Acts 1:8 in *your* personal thinking and priorities?

Our passage ends with Jesus ascending “**into heaven**”. (v11) We are told that he was “**taken up**” (v2 and v9) in full view of the disciples. As Jesus was raised from death by the Father, so he was “taken up into heaven” by the Father. At one point, Jesus is hidden by a cloud, perhaps the cloud of God’s glory. Then he is gone. There will be no more appearances, except to Paul (1 Cor 15:8) until he returns in glory and power. The disciples had been chosen **eyewitnesses** of his resurrection *and* ascension.

Jesus now reigns! He has been - and is right now, exalted above all! He oversees his Church as Lord and pours out the Holy Spirit upon those called into *his mission to the ends of the earth*. He also intercedes for his people as their perfect High Priest. At the ascension, Jesus **went home**. He returned to his Father. He once again entered into the glory of God. He will return as promised – when the mission is completed, at the moment the Father decides is right (Matthew 24:36). The unshakeable promise *to us* is this; when we die *in Christ* we are immediately “taken up” to be with him. We are **taken home**. If we are still alive at the end point of this age when Jesus personally returns, then we will be “taken up” at that moment to be with him for ever. (1 Thessalonians 4: 15-18). Either way, those who are *in Christ* will one day “take up” their true and primary citizenship in heaven. (Philippians 3:20-21).

Friends, if you are “in Christ”, you have died with him, you are raised with him, you are seated with him in heavenly places, and you are destined to go home to be with him forever. You will be part of an unnumbered supra-national community living for ever within the glory of God and the Lamb. (Revelation 7:9-10). Our heavenly Father who pledged to send his Spirit and did so, will also keep his solemn pledge to take his children home. As a matter of fact, the gift of the Spirit is the down-payment and guarantee of our eternal life. (Ephesians 1:13-14, 2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

The Lord bless and keep you unto eternal life. Amen!