

“Acting on Acts”

‘Breakfast and the Bible’/‘Supper with the Scriptures’

Acts 1:12-26

The Acts of the Apostles is unique in the Bible. It’s an account of the exciting events which followed the resurrection of Jesus and the genesis of the first communities of his followers. Acts starts with the return of Jesus to heaven (the Ascension), continues with the coming of God’s Holy Spirit (Pentecost) upon the first believers, and goes on to describe how those first followers of Jesus were equipped to continue his work on earth and to take that message far away from Jerusalem and into Europe.

The author of Acts is widely thought to be St. Luke, who also wrote the Gospel that bears his name. Although he probably never met Jesus face-to-face, Luke gathered together the eyewitness accounts of those who did and has faithfully passed them on to us. But he did witness the miraculous growth and work of the first Christians and this too we can read, thanks to his hard work.

So far in Acts 1, we have learned that Jesus taught his disciples for forty days after his resurrection, told them to wait for the coming of his Holy Spirit, and then was ‘taken up to heaven’ – what we call ‘The Ascension’.

In obedience to Jesus’ command to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit, the disciples now begin a ten-day prayer meeting! But, meanwhile, there is some unfinished business to be dealt with....

The ten-day Prayer Meeting (12-14)

After the excitement of seeing Jesus return to heaven in glory, the disciples quietly returned to Jerusalem (12). This was a short (a Sabbath’s) walk away – about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile. This may be a turn of phrase (meaning a short walk), rather than implying that the Ascension took place on a Sabbath. The Jews were prohibited from doing work on the Sabbath and this included making longer journeys. But some walking was essential – for example to the synagogue! – so anything under about 1.2 kilometres was acceptable. We find out now that the Ascension took place on the Mount of Olives, the place where Jesus had taken the disciples after the Last Supper (Luke 22:39). According to Luke’s gospel, he had been there many times with his disciples. It was there that they had seen him sweat drops of blood in prayer as he wrestled with the full horror of what awaited him on the next day.

We do not know precisely where the disciples were staying (13). It is possible that it was the same upper room where they had celebrated the Last Supper with Jesus. It may have been the house of the mother of John Mark where the disciples will be found some days later (Acts 12:12) but we cannot be certain. The list of the ‘core’ disciples is given – as much to emphasise that there are only eleven of them, rather than the twelve that Jesus had called in Luke 6:14-16. The Eleven were joined by others close friends, including Jesus’ own mother. One can only wonder what she was making of all that had been happening!

And so the prayer meeting got underway (14). Two things are significant about this: firstly they were all involved and secondly that it was constant. So the two key features of this prayer meeting were unity and perseverance. Perhaps this has something to say to us?!

A new community (15)

We now have a number for the followers of Jesus – about 120. This is quite remarkable; who were they all? And where were they at the crucifixion? Up until now, the gospels have suggested that, as well as the Twelve, there was only a handful of ‘hangers on’. The gospels mention several women by name. And, of course, Jesus had appointed seventy-two people to go out in pairs (Luke 10:1) but no more is written about them after that. But clearly there were others who were in the wings and who now became more committed. Perhaps some of those who had been on the receiving end of Jesus’ healing ministry now came forward and nailed their colours to the mast?

In the business of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, we do need to recognise (a) that there are people who are touched in many ways but who do not necessarily ‘come on board’ straight away and (b) that, given the right time and conditions, there will be those who gradually grow closer to Jesus and become more involved in life of the Church family.

The number 120 is probably significant. Under Jewish law, in order to set up a new community with its own council, 120 men would be needed. So in Jewish eyes, 120 men would be enough to start a new community of the followers of Jesus. Peter refers to them as ‘brothers’, the first use of this term.

A new disciple (16-26)

Peter points to the fact that Judas’ betrayal of Jesus on the night before he died was a fulfilment of Scripture. Peter, along with the other disciples would have heard Jesus speak of this. When Jesus celebrated the Last Supper he had prophesied that one of the disciples would betray him and added, “but woe to that man...” (Luke 22:22). In his great prayer in John’s gospel, Jesus says to his Father that he has kept his disciples safe but adds, “None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled” (John 17:12). We have to assume that Judas still had choice in the matter, however. But Jesus knew that Judas had already shown his heart as being far from him – as indeed becomes evident when he objects to Jesus being anointed with expensive perfume (John 12:4-6).

Peter now shows us the verse from Psalm 69 which Jesus, presumably, had in mind (20). Perhaps Jesus had pointed him to it during the forty days. It seems very likely that the disciples would have talked with Jesus about Judas. Luke adds a parenthesis here in order to explain to us the fate that befell Judas – so these were probably not Peter’s words. The problem is that the grisly end described here does not seem to accord with the end of Judas as recorded in Matt. 27:3-10 where we are told that he hanged himself. Unless, of course, that he did hang himself and that the rope then broke, or was cut, and upon impact with the ground his body ruptured and all the insides fell out! There is some history to the place where this took place – the Field of Blood – which goes back to 2 Samuel 20:10 if you want to pursue it.

Peter goes on to explain that Judas must be replaced. Why is he so insistent? Does it really matter? Partly it is about fulfilling scripture, and Peter cites Psalm 109:8. But it may have been too that the reason Jesus chose twelve disciples was to mirror the twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament. And the qualification for being an apostle here is not just that someone must have witnessed the resurrection but have been with the followers of Jesus from the time of the inauguration of Jesus’ ministry by the baptism of John. The two candidates are Joseph Barsabbas (which means ‘Son of the Sabbath – and about which nothing more is known) and Matthias. As apostles are not humanly chosen, but divinely appointed, the assembled company first prayed about the matter (24) – a good example for all of us to follow when trying to make decisions!

The casting of lots may seem arbitrary to us but it has Old Testament support. Proverbs 16:33 states, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." And this seems to be the way to understand it. The casting of lots cannot be interfered with by humans! So it was the way that God was perceived to be showing his choices.

Someone has commented, though, that after the coming of the Holy Spirit, we do not have any documented evidence of the early Church using the casting of lots to make choices. So the process of discernment has several parts: (i) allowing scripture to prompt the need for a replacement; (ii) allowing common sense to guide the criteria for determining suitable candidates; (iii) praying; and (iv) giving the final choice to God in a process which cannot be manipulated by humans.

The lot fell to Matthias and he became one of the Twelve apostles – those at the heart of the Church of Jesus, who were witnesses of the resurrection. These men, along with all the other believers, were about to find out what bearing witness to the living Jesus was all about. The stage was set for their baptism in the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

King of kings, Majesty
God of Heaven living in me
Gentle Saviour, closest friend
Strong Deliverer, beginning and end

*All within me falls at Your throne
Your Majesty, I can but bow
I lay my all before You now
In royal robes I don't deserve
I live to serve Your Majesty*