

“Acting on Acts”

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

Acts 4:23-37

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.

In Chapters 1-3, 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, was ‘taken up to heaven, and how, ten days later, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. On that day, Peter preached powerfully and the number of believers grew from 120 to over 3000! Luke has told us that the fledgling church met for teaching, fellowship, sharing the Lord’s Supper and prayer. Peter then heals a man crippled from birth, invoking the name of Jesus Christ. This provokes awe and wonder from the crowd, whereupon Peter seizes the opportunity to tell them why Jesus came, died and rose again and invites them to repent. But this puts Peter and John on a collision course with the authorities. They are arrested and ordered to stop preaching about Jesus. To which Peter and John show great courage by replying, “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

An amazing prayer meeting (23-31)

Peter and John, duly warned by the authorities, return straight away to their friends. Undoubtedly they have been praying for them and are greatly relieved to see them. When they hear about the actions of the religious authorities, they immediately recognise that this is following the pattern of opposition which arose around Jesus. There can be little doubt that they recalled Jesus’ warnings that what happened to him would also happen to them. And while this time they had received a stern warning, the future would hold further arrests, trials, persecution and even death.

Yet their response is not to panic, but to pray! It is not to have a crisis meeting but to turn to the scriptures, notably Psalm 2. So they respond by praying to the ‘Sovereign Lord’ (24) – remembering that God is more powerful than all human authorities and has demonstrated this time after time in his dealings with his people in the past. Particular mention is made of David – referring to him as God’s servant and their father. David was God’s ‘Anointed One’ for his own time (see 1 Samuel 16:13, 2 Samuel 2:4 and 5:3). Psalm 2 may be recalling his coronation but he also seems to be prophesying that the earthly powers would unite to oppose the Anointed One (the Messiah) when he came. That this prophecy is now being fulfilled is clearly the implication from the following verses – 27 & 28. Before Jesus’ trial, Herod (a Jew) and Pilate (a Roman) had been enemies, but in the face of the threat of Jesus, they became friends – as Luke tells us in Luke 23:12. Likewise, the Jewish religious leaders, knowing that they did not have the authority to crucify Jesus, entered into an unholy pact with their sworn enemies, the

Romans, in order to finish him off. Initially, Pilate found no reason to charge Jesus (Luke 23:4). But in an unprecedented act of betrayal of one of their own, the Romans were handed the ammunition they need to execute Jesus. Jesus was alleged to have opposed the payment of taxes to Caesar (Luke 23:2), a blatant mis-representation of his teaching (Luke 20:20-26). He also claimed to be a king – which was seen as a direct challenge to the authority of Caesar. And finally the religious authorities accused Jesus of stirring up the Jewish people against the Roman authorities (Luke 23:5).

Just as it was obvious to Jesus' followers that the actions of the religious authorities towards Jesus were self-seeking and politically motivated, so now, as the early Church grows, they can see the very same processes at work. Small wonder, therefore, that the Church throughout the world still encounters the same kind of opposition and the same pattern of unlikely alliances of enemies in order to seek to undermine Christ's work. The followers in Acts ask not for protection nor for God to neutralize the opponents (both of which would have been understandable) but boldness (29) to continue telling others about Jesus. They care so much for the honour of Jesus' name that they are willing to go where Jesus has gone and, if necessary, to suffer as he did. (This is surely a powerful argument for believing that Jesus really did rise again from the dead – one could hardly imagine people being willing to do this if they were not sure whether the resurrection was a fact.) But they know that they need his strength and so ask for his fresh empowering of them (30). The figurative language of God stretching out his hand over them may recall the language of Isaiah 52:10: "The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God." And the context of that passage is, likewise, the taking forth of the good news of God's salvation and peace.

The result of their prayer is almost a reprise of Pentecost as the Holy Spirit filled the believers as the meeting room was shaken (31). The shaking of the room would have been further evidence of God's presence and divine purposes at work for this had been encountered at the time of the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18) and in the vision of Isaiah in the temple at the time of his calling (Isaiah 6:4). The prophet Haggai also prophesies that God will shake the nations (Haggai 2:6-7) as a sign of his glory. The other result of the prayer is that the believers were indeed given boldness to carry on preaching as the sequel to this passage picks up again at Acts 5:12. There is more powerful teaching, more healings, signs and wonders, more arrests and trials, leading eventually to the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, in Acts 7.

More sharing (32-37)

This passage shows considerable similarities to 2:42-47 and it and 5:1-11 expand on the importance of the mutual generosity between Jesus' followers. The over-riding impression is that following Jesus is not just about intellectual assent to him but a pattern and way of life. And it is a pattern that everyone should 'buy in' to (32). Everyone who had property put it at the disposal of the apostles. In other words, they did not necessarily sell it, but if the apostles really did discern a need to release some cash, owners were willing to sell their property in order to achieve this. In this manner, resources were made available to the apostles to help those in genuine need. This seems radical to us but is, of course, taking to its logical conclusion the two great commandments of Jesus (drawing on the Old Testament): love God and love our neighbours as ourselves (Luke 10:27).

God's great power was still evident among them (33) – especially, one assumes, in bringing more people to a life-changing encounter with the risen Jesus through preaching and teaching. St. Paul refers to this kind of evidence of God at work in 1 Thess. 1:5: "our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the

Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction.” And the reference to ‘much grace’ (33) may indicate that this Spirit-inspired preaching was favourably received and efficacious in growing the church.

Luke records something astonishing in verse 34 – namely that poverty did not exist amongst the believers. This was another fulfilment of the Old Testament promise from God that there would not be anyone poor among his people (Deut 15:4). The context of that promise was some very practical teaching about the opportunities for everyone to create wealth and the giving of opportunities for everyone to escape from crippling debts. The business of overseeing this important work among the early believers is at this point given to the apostles as the highest authority. As the church grew, so did the burden and, by Acts 6:1-6 it was necessary for the apostles to set up new arrangements with other people of faith and the Holy Spirit (‘deacons’) being set apart for this task.

We are now introduced to a shining example of generosity, Barnabas, who will feature later in Acts as a leader of conspicuous merit. His original name was Joseph, a good Jewish name, of course. The fact that he was a Levite underlines his excellent Jewish ancestry. The Levites (ie descended from Levi – one of the sons of Jacob) were those given by God the privileged task of ministering in the Temple as priests and of caring for the Ark of the Covenant. At some point, his family must have emigrated to Cyprus where there was a sizeable Jewish population. As a Levite, though, he would have returned to Jerusalem periodically for major festivals and, perhaps, decided to stay, and settle down. He was clearly a man of some wealth, owning land as he did. Interestingly, in the Old Testament, the Levites were forbidden from owning land (Numbers 18:20) so evidently that part of God’s law had fallen into disuse!

The custom of changing names to reflect a new calling is one we encounter quite frequently in the Bible. Abram was re-named Abraham, Jacob renamed Israel, Gideon renamed Jerub-Baal to cite but a few. Most famously, Simon was renamed as Peter. In each case, the re-naming marks the change into a new phase of life with God – a new vocation. So Joseph the Levite is given the name Barnabas – ‘Son of Encouragement’ – as he begins a new ministry among the believers.

Summary

The first four chapters of Acts are breath-taking! So much has happened. And yet, this was just the beginning. Following the first wave of persecution against the believers, the gospel was to be taken far away from Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit would come upon Gentiles (non-Jews) just as he had upon the Jewish believers at Pentecost. And one of the chief persecutors of the believers, Saul, would come dramatically to meet Jesus on the road to Damascus. As the renamed ‘Paul’ he would, with others, take the good news north and west into modern-day Turkey, into Greece and on to Rome and beyond.

So Jesus’ final command to his Church just before his Ascension (Acts 1:8) was and still is being fulfilled: “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.” And that includes Liverpool!