

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as several mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-5 / 6-8 / 9-11 / 12-14 / 15-17

In this series in the Book of Acts, we see how God's Spirit changes the lives of Jesus' followers and begins to change the world, too. May we too be inspired afresh in our generation!

Day 1 – Acts 1:1-11 'The kingdom of God'

'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' Famous words from the world's most famous prayer. It's one that many of us use every day, and it shapes the heart of Jesus' teaching about how we humans can relate to our loving God. Every day, through this beautifully simple but profound prayer, we bring our needs before him: for grace sufficient for that day, both material and spiritual; for forgiveness and a heart to be able to forgive others; for strength in times of trial and temptation; for protection.

But that of course is the second half of the prayer. The first half is all about God's purposes in the world. It's the bigger picture stuff, and sometimes, if you're anything like me, it can kind of wash over us. We know that God *is* at work in the world, and one day everything will conform to his will – because he alone has the power and the glory. But we're not there yet. We live in this interim season, when Jesus has won the victory over evil, sin and death – but the world is not yet all it could be, and will be. And so we *pray for God's will and reign to keep increasing – on earth, as in heaven.*

And at the heart of God's ever-expanding presence in the world is this idea of the kingdom. The Kingdom of God is the central theme of Jesus' teaching – it's mentioned almost 100 times in the gospels, and right here in our passage today, as Jesus ascends into heaven, we note that after Jesus rises from the dead, he makes the kingdom the heart of his final teaching to his disciples: v3 '*He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God.*' In other words, it was the major topic of conversation just as Jesus was about to leave, which means it must be incredibly important.

But what is it? In a nutshell, 'the kingdom' defines wherever God reigns in the world. It's not a physical kingdom, of course – it lives in the heart of Jesus' followers, and, beyond that, everywhere that human behaviour conforms to the pattern of Jesus' teaching and lifestyle. When we gather in Jesus' name, the kingdom comes. When we give time to growing in our understanding of faith (just like you're doing now), the kingdom comes. When we pray, the kingdom comes. When we bless our neighbour, the kingdom comes. When we serve all who are marginalised, the kingdom comes. Basically, whenever we do something that Jesus can put his name to, the kingdom comes.

And as we begin this new series in the Book of Acts, let's observe that *this book is really an answer to the Lord's Prayer* – as the Holy Spirit is poured out and the church is birthed, as the followers of Jesus spread out across first Israel and then across much of the known world, so we see a real-life answer to that simple phrase in the world's greatest prayer: 'Your kingdom come...'

And we too can celebrate God's kingdom in our lives. Today, take a moment to give thanks that the kingdom has come *in you*. And pray to receive the 'power' that Jesus promised, by his Spirit. Amen, come Holy Spirit!

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Day 2 – Acts 1:12-26 ‘Just 120’

How many people do you need to change the world? It’s a good question, isn’t it? I read once that to change any culture you need 2% of the population to be passionately inspired and committed to whatever cause they believe in – given enough time, that 2% will be enough. In Britain, that would be about 1.3 million people. In Milton Keynes, about 5,000.

But what about the kingdom of God? It turns out that all you need is 120 people. Take a moment to dwell on that – 120. That’s what we learn in v15 of today’s passage. The second half of Acts chapter 1 is rarely looked at – mostly we jump between the twin peaks of Jesus’ Ascension in the first half of ch1 straight to the Spirit being poured out at Pentecost at the start of ch2. And there are so many interesting, or even curious, things to notice in this passage: the constant prayer (v14), the need to replace Judas and still have 12 apostles (v21), the casting of lots to let God decide who takes a job. (Is that something to practise now?? Would save a lot of time with interviews and scoring grids!)

But what struck me today is this throwaway phrase – stuck in brackets in verse 15. The total group left to continue God’s work on earth was 120. Think of all the people whose lives Jesus had impacted: at least 5,000 people were fed miraculously; there are 53 separate miracles recorded in the gospels; huge crowds still hung on his every word, even a few weeks previously at the Passover celebration in Jerusalem. And yet, three years of dedicated ministry of the Son of God here on this earth had left a committed group of just 120.

But our God is the God who multiplies. What Jesus preached is what he practised: the kingdom of God is indeed like that mustard seed – apparently so small and insignificant, and yet grows to become the largest of all plants. All God needed to start a worldwide movement which changed the world was 120 people, filled and empowered with his Spirit.

One of the words, of which God has consistently reminded me during my time in this parish, has been this: ‘You have all you need.’ I’ve often not wanted to believe it, praying for this extra provision here, or new resources there. But time and again, the word has been proved true – and it’s true for you as well. God’s resources in your life are always enough. His grace is sufficient. God is well able to achieve his purposes in you, and your family.

Take heart. God (plus you) is enough to overcome whatever you face today. By his grace and his life-giving Spirit, you have all you need.

And may that cause faith to rise in us, and to pray with confidence to the God who multiplies.

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Day 3 – Acts 2:1-13 ‘What does this mean?’

And so we come to the famous story of Pentecost – and many of you will be very familiar with the scene. A group is gathered, praying, and suddenly the place is filled with wind and fire. On Pentecost Sunday we usually look at what it means for God’s Spirit to manifest as fire and wind – how we need the fire to ignite our passion for God and whatever God calls us to; how we need the wind to blow us to the places God wants to be and the people God wants us to love. And that is vital.

But let’s look today at the immediate aftermath. This dramatic experience was not for its own sake. It set about a chain of events. The outcome for the disciples is that many of them received the gift of new languages. The gift of tongues is usually understood now to relate primarily to a form of ‘heavenly language’, unintelligible to most people – and that is the most common form of the gift today. But here at the start these were *actual* languages. What the disciples spoke was understood by a large multi-lingual crowd who had gathered from across the known world to celebrate a big Jewish festival. No Google Translate in those days: God was equipping a group of largely ‘unschooled’ people (Acts 4:13) to do his work in a remarkable way.

The second link in the chain is perhaps not surprising: this large crowd was ‘utterly amazed’ (v7) to hear their own language being spoken. More than that, they were ‘perplexed’ (v12). It is almost inevitable that they ask the million dollar question: ‘What does this *mean*?’

A lot is spoken – and mis-spoken – about spiritual gifts. Some make them a requirement of real faith, others a dangerous distraction. All I can say, from my own experience, is that such gifts are not faked, or forms of self-deception: they are absolutely real, and wonderful – but they also have a purpose. They are never given just to provide us with an ‘experience’. They are Jesus’ gifts – and as such, they are there to do Jesus’ work in the world. The exercise of such gifts in a Christlike way always prompts people to explore further: ‘What does this mean?’

Faith in Jesus is not just true, it’s *real*. And sometimes people need a divine prod to back up what we speak and how we live. Most of the most ‘noticeable’ gifts of the Spirit happen in the context of mission – in other words to demonstrate that Jesus is real, and exactly who he says he is. Just as we see here. This chain of events in today’s passage sets the scene for Peter’s great speech that comes next.

You may or may not have experienced this kind of thing. It doesn’t matter – there is no place either for pride or a false sense of inadequacy in the journey of faith. But perhaps we can all take a step today to pray for more of God, for openness to whatever gifts he may graciously want to give us – and for opportunities to meet those asking: ‘What does this mean?’ Our God is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

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Day 4 – Acts 2:14-21 ‘On all people’

We all love a bit of ‘secret knowledge’. Access to information that others don’t have. Recently I watched a documentary about the group of spies who created the deceptions that allowed the Allies to carry out the D-Day landings. It was absolutely fascinating to see how this group of five (codenamed Treasure, Tricycle, Garbo, Brutus and Bronx – great names!) played on a very human trait – our shared love of insider knowledge – to achieve something remarkable.

For most of us, it’s not that glamorous. A bit of gossip here, a tip about a sale item there. Early in 2020, as the pandemic took hold, we swapped endless stories of which shops had anti-bac or toilet rolls. And in the religious life most cultures have always been drawn to the idea of special people, or secret wisdom. Call them seers, shamans or senseis, it’s thought that certain people have privileged access to the spiritual realm.

At one level, we can recognise the value of this: humans have always needed leaders, in the spiritual life as much as in other spheres. But – humans being what they are – this brings with it the risk of unhealthy control, manipulation or downright deceit. God is the Lord of the whole earth, and every *human being is made in God’s image*, we carry the divine imprint. Is it right in the spiritual life to grant privileged access only to some?

At Pentecost, amazingly, the answer is ‘not any more’. The great gift of the pouring out of God’s Spirit is not just the new power it brings, or the energy for mission, or the birth of God’s great community (the Church) – it is the possibility of *direct access to the presence of God for all people*. ‘In the last days,’ Joel prophesies on God’s behalf, ‘I will pour out my spirit on all people.’ (v17) Young and old, women and men.

God’s Spirit has always been at work in the world – but until Pentecost, it tended to be for particular people at particular times. But from now on, *all of us* can encounter the presence of God, can have Jesus dwell in us by his Spirit, can know the joy and intimacy of a real and close relationship with the Almighty Lord of all creation. Or to use St. Paul’s words 25 years later: ‘By the Spirit we cry “Abba, Father”.’ By God’s grace and the gift of his Spirit, we can all become children of God.

So today, give thanks that this gift is for *you*. Not just for the great and the good, for the specially chosen and those privileged with ‘secret access.’ The secrets of the kingdom of heaven are laid open to all! Ask God to draw close to you again, to fill your heart and to grant you the joy of sharing in this remarkable gift with hundreds of millions of people across the world. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

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Day 5 – Acts 2:22-28 ‘Death cannot keep its hold’

Before writing this, I spent time looking at my patio. A strange thing to do, you might wonder. About 50 slabs of paving stone, grey and uniform. Pretty dull, I guess. But what I was really looking at were all the things pushing up between the cracks. Grasses, weeds, the occasional wild flower. Every few months we clear them – and they always just grow right back again.

For those of you who love order, it’s a mess – perhaps a headache you’re aware of in your own garden. But I like to look at it another way, and not just because I’m a lazy gardener. What I love about seeing all those plants pushing their way up and out into the fresh air is the sense of *irrepressible life*. However hard we try to destroy it, abundant life just keeps reappearing.

This has long been a passion of mine. Until we moved to MK, I’d lived virtually all of my life in urban areas, many of them on the rough and ready side. My world was concreted, bricked and paved. And yet, what was remarkable was *how often life would push out through the cracks* – up the side of a wall, through a crack in the pavement, peeping out through a fence. We usually dismiss them as weeds – but in the city, I used to call them beautiful. Signs of irrepressible life, no matter how hard we tried to stamp it out.

‘This is the testimony: God has given us life, and this life is in his Son.’ These words of St John remind us of a simple but profound truth. God is the author of life – and as people made in God’s image, *we are made for life, too*. Where God is, there is life.

So when God comes to earth, how does this play out? At one point, not as we expect: the author of life dies. Wrongly charged, corruptly convicted – innocent and betrayed, alone on a cross. But this could never be the end of the story. How can you destroy irrepressible life? Or as St Peter says in today’s reading: ‘But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.’ (v24)

The agony of death was not so much the physical process of dying, but momentary separation from his Father. And yet it could only be temporary, because life cannot be held back forever. The resurrection reminds us that God has life within himself, and God’s purpose, not just for Jesus but for all of us, is life. Death is not the final answer – the ultimate destiny of all those who choose to live their lives in God is *life*.

May our prayer today be David’s cry of joy at the end of this passage: ‘You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.’ And, perhaps, take a look at the weeds on your patio or your path and give thanks for irrepressible life! It’s what we were made for.

Day 6 – Acts 2:29-36 ‘God had promised’

Promises, promises. It’s something we all find ourselves doing, but fulfilling them is not always straightforward. During the covid pandemic, so many promises had to be postponed or cancelled, through things outside our control. Is it better not to promise at all?

Interestingly, God doesn’t have an issue with making promises or vows. Jesus’ teaching on not swearing oaths in the Sermon on the Mount is more to do with abusing language to manipulate people than the idea that we shouldn’t make firm commitments. Indeed, our integrity should be such that a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ is enough for people to know that we will do what we said we will do.

And God makes promises to us, too. Indeed at the heart of what we call ‘faith’ is that sense of trust that God will do what he said he will do. That God does wonderfully forgive us, fully and freely; that God does send us the Holy Spirit – what Peter indeed calls in this passage ‘the promised Holy Spirit’; that God will take us to enjoy eternal, abundant life in heaven. *Faith rests on the promises of God.*

And God also promised many centuries ago that a new anointed rescuer would come, a king to sit on David’s throne. ‘God had promised’ this to David – and it is now remarkably and perfectly fulfilled in Jesus.

The result of these promises: ‘God has made this Jesus.... Lord and Messiah.’ (v36) Our great rescuer and now the One we can worship and follow.

When life is tough it’s easy to get weary of commitments and promises. But a deeper truth is at work: a certain foundation on which our lives can rest. God’s promises never fail. He has not forgotten you. He still loves you. He is still with you. And you are still with him. Take a few moments today to call to mind some of the great promises of God. And may that lift your heart and soul in praise.

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Day 7 – Acts 2:37-41 ‘In the name of Jesus’

The week after Pentecost (in the traditional church calendar) is Trinity Sunday, a day when we celebrate the fact that the God we love and worship is one being with three natures: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On this Sunday of the year we reflect on why this profound idea is such an amazing thing: it means we worship a *uniquely 3-dimensional God*, someone we can relate to in many deep ways - a magnificent monarch, a wise teacher and judge, an inspiring example, a comforting presence in our lives, a close friend. God is both up in heaven and in our hearts. If God had only one nature, think what we would lose!

Today though, we remind ourselves that there is a ‘way in’ to this extraordinary relationship. God is Christlike – and Jesus (the Son) is also the way to the Father and the Spirit. The Christian faith is ultimately a *Christ-centred* faith: we trust in, and follow, Jesus. And this idea runs throughout the last part of Peter’s sermon:

- We are forgiven in the name of Jesus (v38)
- We are baptised in the name of Jesus (v38)
- As a result we receive the Holy Spirit (v38: noting it was Jesus who received the Spirit from the Father and pours it out on us – v33)
- Ultimately we are called by God (v39) to believe in the promises fulfilled by Jesus.

It’s all in the name of Jesus. This is how we change our lives (the meaning of the word ‘repent’ – a word sadly obscured sometimes by too much religious baggage).

What always touches me when I read these amazing stories of the early church is how much Jesus is at the centre of everything – how much the apostles loved Jesus, and built everything they said and did around this love. Every time I read it, I think to myself: I want a bit of that! Maybe you do, too.

The good news is that this is not just a historical record. As Peter insists, this kind of life is available to everyone: us, our families, and even those who are far off. No-one is too young or too old, too good or too bad, too cynical or too gullible. *Jesus is for all of us.* And in his name we have forgiveness, a new life, and power by his Spirit to live that new life. May that new life be ours today, this week, and for eternity.

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Day 8 – Acts 2:42-47 ‘The blueprint’

Many of you know that I love playing records. There’s something about the theatre of it that’s unbeatable. Even though I have a music streaming subscription, I love to get one of my 12-inch discs of black plastic out on a regular basis. I only own one record, though, that’s worth any money. Bizarrely I bought it by accident, but it’s by a band who split a couple of years later and deleted their whole back catalogue. You can’t buy this record new anymore, only second-hand copies.

Funnily enough my copy also has a little white sticker in the top-right corner, which adds £50 to its value. The sticker is worthless in itself, but it proves that my copy is one of the original pressings, as it was only these that had this sticker. I’m glad I accidentally bought the wrong record that day!

For all that we love new things in our culture, there’s a huge amount of interest in finding originals. We love the idea of having something that’s the *original version* – whether it’s a first edition of a book, the first series of a classic car – or the actual original piece of art, rather than a print.

It’s true in church life, too. There are so many denominations now, so many different types of churches, we find ourselves asking – *what was the original church really like?* Before there were human institutions and organisations, before we owned buildings and created hierarchies of trained professionals, before we decided that this particular practice defined our particular brand of church?

And in today’s famous passage we get a glimpse of the original church. The church newly anointed by the Spirit, led by the original leaders who’d been with Jesus. And as we read these verses, we’ll see some things that remind us (thankfully) of the church we have now, and others which are more challenging.

It’s no surprise to know that they devoted themselves to study of their faith (the apostles’ teaching now being written down as the New Testament), to unity (usually translated as ‘fellowship’, but the word means one-ness), to hospitality (breaking of bread referred to the act of sharing a meal, which probably included remembering Jesus’ death but not in the formalised way we have it now) and to prayer. So far, so good: we might recognise something of our own church family – hopefully!

But we also see a church which was extraordinarily generous, where miracles were normal, where the whole community admired what it was doing and where people joined it every day. These things are unusual now – and perhaps as you read this, you might have found yourself longing, as I did, that we might see more of it!

There is no perfect church this side of heaven. Which is just as well, or I couldn’t join it. But let’s be inspired by what we read today to lift our eyes, enlarge our vision, and declare over our church, our community, our nation – come, Lord Jesus, bless your church!

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Day 9 – Acts 3:1-10 ‘Give what you have’

Lots of us love a good Christian biography. We find stories of great people doing great acts for God inspiring: whether it's Jackie Pullinger in the slums of Hong Kong, or Nicky Cruz working with violent gangs, or Brother Andrew smuggling bibles into the Eastern Bloc, or Corrie ten Boom risking her life to protect Jewish families during the Second World War. It's good to remember what an awesome God we have.

And yet, if you're anything like me, reading such stories can sometimes make us feel inadequate. We think of our own lives in comparison with these heroes of the faith, and wonder where we've gone wrong or missed out. Never mind that in at least two of the examples above, their calling largely came out of their own circumstances, rather than a dramatic change of direction – we can find ourselves reflecting that perhaps we somehow fell short.

But this is not how God sees it. Comparing ourselves to others is rarely a smart move in the journey of faith. Today's wonderful story reminds us of one simple principle which we can all offer for God's glory: *give what you have*.

The scene is not an unusual one. Peter and John were doing what they usually did – going to pray at the temple – and almost certainly taking their usual route there. They passed someone who they'd probably passed many times before, who made the usual request for financial assistance. This is not a unique, one-off, dramatic encounter. It's an encounter they *might* have had dozens of times previously. But today they took a step of faith and applied one simple principle: they gave what they had, and trusted God for the rest.

And so when the chap asks them for money, Peter says, in effect: 'I don't have cash, but I'll give you what I can, something else you don't have – a prayer for healing in the name of Jesus.'

Today we can give thanks for this extraordinary miracle. But I also want us to note the very *ordinary* circumstances in which it took place. Two normal, working-class blokes making their usual journey at their usual time, passing someone they'd passed many times before, and doing one simple thing in the name of Jesus. Give what you have, and trust God for the rest.

Jesus teaches the same thing in that famous parable of the talents. He doesn't ask everyone to deliver the same amount of impact for the kingdom – only to make the best of what they have. In the kingdom, everyone gets to play. And all God asks is that we use what we have.

So in your circumstances today – however ordinary they might seem – take heart! God is simply asking you to give what you have, and trust him for the rest. By the grace of God, extraordinary things might come of it.

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Day 10 – Acts 3:11-16 ‘Where there’s blame...’

Just down from where we live, on the notorious chicane which leads out of our village towards the next community, they closed the road (on the morning I wrote this reflection) for some roadworks. Almost certainly it will be to fill in the large pot holes which have appeared (again) over recent months as extra buses and lorries, alongside thousands of cars have taken their toll. We’ll certainly be glad not to have to weave the car all over the road to avoid them, but it reminds us that the real reason these potholes are attended to so promptly is the risk of being sued.

We live in a culture nowadays which likes to apportion blame. We can no longer hold up our hands and insist that ‘accidents just happen’. If something’s gone wrong, someone has to take the blame.

And whilst we now take this to extreme lengths – good for potholes, bad for insurance policies! – this attitude is nothing new. In fact, it’s as old as the serpent itself – when God confronts Adam and Eve in the garden right at the start of the bible, the newly-shamed man says ‘blame the woman’; the woman says ‘blame the serpent’.

And in today’s passage, St. Peter doesn’t pull any punches either. He is of course talking about one of his best friends, so the pain is raw, but his words have a curiously modern ring to them: ‘*You* handed him over... (v13); *you* disowned the Holy and Righteous One... (v14); *you* killed...’ (v15). Where there’s blame, as they say, there’s a claim.

But the claim in this case, wonderfully and miraculously, is the very one paid in full by this innocent sufferer. The very moral failings that put Jesus on the cross are also the ones that God deals with on that same cross. The point is not that Peter is targeting particular groups with causing the death of the Messiah – that was a pernicious belief of mediaeval Christendom, which caused untold suffering for the Jewish minorities who lived in those societies – but rather *their story is our story*.

We can read these words knowing that we all carry the same guilt as Adam and Eve, the same guilt as the Roman and Jewish authorities referred to in this passage. We too put Jesus on the cross... and yet we too can make the same claim: that in the name of Jesus we can be forgiven, set free, restored.

God was not thwarted by human wickedness. God achieved his purposes regardless, and gloriously raised Jesus from the dead. This same God raises us too – the name of Jesus brings us life. Today, give thanks that nothing you’ve done can separate you from God’s love. You are forgiven, you are clean, and your only ‘claim’ is the life-giving power of the name of the Son of God. Hallelujah!

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Day 11 – Acts 3:17-23 ‘Times of refreshing’

As a student, I spent two of my long summer vacations working as a brickie’s mate. It was hard graft, albeit in glorious weather. And when I got home, my routine was usually the same: a long soak in the bath to wash off the grime and soothe the aching muscles, followed by a couple of hours with my feet up to rest.

It’s a familiar routine for many of us in the evenings – as we prepare for bed, we wash and then rest. It’s something we adopt as children (or for our children) – ‘bath and bed’ – and it remains a lifelong habit. Wash, and rest.

Funnily enough, there’s echoes of it in the spiritual life too. What does it mean to come to Christ? What’s the outcome – what does it look like? As Peter talks to the crowds in today’s passage, he describes what happens for those who come to believe in the name of Jesus, who change their lives in that direction (remembering that this is the meaning of the word ‘repent’ in v19). And it’s the same pattern I’ve just described: wash and rest. This is the force of the two words Peter uses in the second part of v19.

First, our sins are ‘wiped out’ (to use the NIV translation). The word literally means to wash off or erase. Its most common usage in the language of the day was to describe how a wet sponge would rub off a mistake made by ink on a piece of papyrus. The writer would rub the papyrus and ‘wash off’ (same word) the ink from the paper before re-writing.

What a wonderful image to demonstrate how Jesus deals with our own selfishness and wrongdoing! It’s like a wet sponge is applied to our lives, literally washing off the stains of the mistakes. We are, quite literally, washed clean!

But it doesn’t stop there – God’s promise is also that we might enjoy ‘times of refreshing from the Lord’. I love that phrase: how good to know that this is God’s plan for us. Again, the word literally means rest, relief, respite or refreshment, and it reminds us that our good news is not just ‘sin management’ – it is the restoration of wholeness. God desires not just that we wash, but we also rest.

‘The rest of God’ is a theme which weaves through the whole bible. After creation God rests on the seventh day, and then institutes rest every seventh day for us, too. And ultimately, that season of rest will be perfected for eternity in heaven, where we will enjoy, forever, the rest of God. Peter even alludes to this in our passage as he promises that when Jesus returns God will ‘restore everything’ (v21).

God has called you to enjoy his rest. We may have to work hard today – or we may be fortunate enough to enjoy the warm weather – but it makes no difference. Thanks to Jesus, our hearts can be at rest: and one day, we will know that rest forever.

Day 12 – Acts 3:24-26 ‘Heirs of the covenant’

Since we live just a few miles from Bletchley Park, one of the features of our community is that over the years, a number of our parishioners and church members worked there during the war. Thousands were billeted nearby, and some of them stayed and made their permanent homes here after 1945. Sadly, the last of our church members who worked in one of the famous huts passed away a few years ago – and she is much missed.

In the time that I knew her, although she had so many extraordinary experiences to recount, she was always very reluctant to speak about her work during the war – even 60+ years later, she only ever mentioned it a few times, and rarely gave specific details. Her reason was very clear: ‘I took an oath, and I can’t break it.’ Even though others had begun to talk once the statutory 30 years had passed, for this lady her oath was lifelong, permanent.

How long are we expected to keep a promise? It’s a good question, and I imagine most of you would answer: ‘It depends on the promise.’ In today’s passage we look at perhaps the greatest of all promises ever made: one made by God to an obscure Mesopotamian almost 4,000 years ago. The promise was this: ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’ Quoted in v25, the original promise goes all the way back to Genesis, the first book of the bible. God promised Abraham that one of his descendants would be the means to bless the whole world.

In a sense, *the rest of the bible represents the outworking or fulfilment of that promise*. And it took a long time coming – at least by our human calculations. There were many up and downs, pitfalls and sidetracks along the way. Viewed through human lenses, it almost didn’t get going at all – Abraham couldn’t have children, and the long-awaited heir took 25 years. The second generation fought and the third generation was exiled to another country in a time of famine. Hundreds of years later, the genocidal ruler of that nation tried to wipe out the heirs of the covenant – unsuccessfully. Then the heirs themselves repeatedly failed to trust the God who made that promise, eventually split into two and were again exiled. Various leaders had threatened to be the ‘person of blessing’ promised to Abraham, but had ultimately come up short. By the time of this sermon, nearly 2,000 years later, it would be fair to ask: when would the promise be fulfilled?

Peter’s answer is remarkable: ‘the time is now! We have now seen the fulfilment of those promises. However long it’s taken, God’s covenant can’t be broken, because God never breaks his promises. You are still heirs of that promise: and the servant has now come – his name is Jesus.’

With the passage of time, it’s easy to lose the force of how amazing this is. Never mind ‘30 years of hurt’ (to quote the famous song), how about 2,000 years of waiting? But God is good, and faithful. As Peter reminded the crowds in our reflection two days ago, God is ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’. *It’s the same God, keeping the same promise – faithful then and now.*

We too inherit this same blessing – since we are part of ‘all peoples’ that the promise was for. This faithful God is our God. Bring to him today whatever your needs are, and trust in his faithfulness for you – for you too are an heir of this amazing covenant.

Day 13 – Acts 4:1-4 ‘A dangerous freedom’

‘Like a mighty tortoise moves the church of God.’ This parody of a famous old hymn is one that a friend of mine told me many years ago. He’s a Christian – and there’s no harm in not taking ourselves too seriously! – but the sentiment is shared by many both within and outside the church: the church is seen as something very conservative, safe, unlikely to take risks or challenge the status quo. While other radical forces might shape society, the church moves relentlessly forward... but oh so slowly and carefully.

It’s funny that this is how many in the West see the church, when in many other cultures, the perception of our faith is totally different: the church is seen as dangerously subversive. This has been true throughout history, and right from the beginning, too. To preach the Lordship of Jesus is an implicit challenge both to other worldviews, and also to human power which likes to believe its own hype. The ‘Powers That Be’ are unsettled by those who worship a different boss, or insist that above this world sits an even bigger Boss than them, to whom one day they will give an account.

It’s funny when you think about it, that a group of people committed to peaceful living, loving their neighbour, serving the disadvantaged, giving generously and obeying the general law of the land wherever it doesn’t contradict the will of God, should be seen as such a threat. 99% of the time we are model citizens.

But the other 1% matters. The fact that ultimately our first loyalty is to the Lord Jesus is what makes human authorities uncomfortable. And so, in today’s passage, we see the first sign of trouble for the fledgling church, the first time that the authorities start to oppose what’s going on. Until now, the new community has been only a blessing – but as it grows to several thousand (v4), it starts to be seen as a threat. We get this marvellously ironic sentence in v2: The religious authorities ‘were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people.’ Not inciting them, or bullying them, or oppressing them – just enlarging their minds and hearts!

Of course, the real issue is the second part of the verse: ‘proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.’ The troublesome rabbi they had just got rid of a few months previously is the last name they wanted to hear being spoken of openly in the heartland of their faith.

Perhaps you’ve come across this type of opposition personally: at work, or within your family. If you haven’t, give thanks for the peace and freedom most of us still enjoy. But let’s pray today for all our fellow brothers and sisters for whom this type of opposition is a daily reality – both in this country and around the world. Many do so in secret, some openly – and all with great courage. In the end, their conviction that resurrection life is found in Jesus outweighs every cost. May their courage inspire us, and, like the early church, may it also bear great fruit for the kingdom of God.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

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Day 14 – Acts 4:5-12 ‘Called to account’

In 361 AD the Roman Emperor Julian, a fierce opponent and persecutor of the church, wrote a tract regretting the progress of Christianity because it pulled people away from the Roman gods. In this tract he wrote: 'Atheism [i.e. the Christian faith!] has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that *the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well*; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.' (italics my own)

It might seem remarkable that one of the reasons this emperor hated Christians so much was his sense of outrage that their care for others was so great that it extended to those of another religion. But it is a sobering reminder that not everyone likes followers of Jesus doing good!

That said, what we also see in today's passage is the reality that showing care and kindness for others has been at the heart of our faith from the beginning. God is self-giving love, and this God calls us to love others in the same way. So, Peter and John bless this man with prayer and kindness, and now find themselves hauled before the authorities to explain themselves. And Peter is not slow to point out the irony of what is going on here: 'we are being called to account for an act of kindness...' (v7)

Whilst this is certainly unusual, it reinforces the observation we made yesterday that radical love unsettles corrupt human power, because it exposes the myths of their authority. Peter understands that this is the real reason: 'know this.... it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.... that this man stands before you healed.' (v10)

In the grand scheme of things, if we are to get into trouble for anything, much better that it's for showing great kindness than great hatred or indifference. And the Jesus in whose name this mighty miracle happened is the same Jesus who empowers our lives today, who still gives his name to the acts of love and faith which we offer.

Thankfully, few of us face the sort of opposition Peter and John did. But if you do: know that God is with you, and will bless your integrity, just as he has always done. Psalm 37 reminds us: 'Do not fret because of the ungodly... for like the grass they will soon wither.... Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.' (vv1,2,4) In good times and bad, may that last sentence be our hope and prayer – God, grant me grace to delight in you and you alone, shape my heart to desire what you desire. Amen!

Day 15 – Acts 4:13-22 ‘They’d been with Jesus’

Recently I’ve been reading ‘Conspiracy of the Insignificant’, the autobiography of Patrick Regan, the founder of a Christian organisation called XLP, which has done brilliant work sharing and showing the love of Christ in inner-city schools and among the toughest estates in London. It wasn’t the kind of area where Patrick grew up, but he felt called to it at a young age. Visiting Cardboard City in Waterloo as a 16-year old, he writes:

‘It was there that my bubble burst for good and my heart broke. I returned to the church hall we were staying in that night and prayed a prayer that changed my life. As I tossed and turned on my air bed, tears ran down my face and my heart was overwhelmed with the things I’d seen... There was no Hallelujah Chorus, but there on the church floor I was suddenly intensely aware that all these people were made in the image of God and that as a Christian I had to respond in some way.’

And so began decades of faithful service on one of God’s frontlines: a journey which not only took Patrick into some of the most challenging areas of this country but also to places of great hurt and poverty overseas.

We worship an extraordinary Saviour. One of my prayers is that I’ll never lose sight of just how amazing Jesus is, that my heart would continue to be captivated by him. As yesterday’s passage concluded, ‘There is no other name...’

But as we marvel at Jesus’ saving love, today we can also remember that this amazing Saviour also empowers *ordinary people to do extraordinary things*. People like Patrick Regan. And people like Peter and John – ‘unschooled, ordinary men’ (v13). These are not people who were always destined for greatness; they had normal upbringings in ordinary places. But something made the difference. Or rather, we should say, Someone. The rest of v13 gives it away: ‘they took note that these men had been with Jesus.’

Being with Jesus makes the difference. Three years of personal friendship and investment from their Lord had turned Peter and John into bold evangelists, people with purpose and authority. Still flawed, still human: but ordinary people now able – through Christ’s power – to do extraordinary things.

There is nothing like being with Jesus. And because it’s not about us and our abilities, our capacities, our talents, Peter’s and John’s and Patrick’s stories can be ours too. We too can be ordinary people doing extraordinary things. We may not have books written about us, but all of us are privileged to witness little, ordinary, everyday miracles. The longer I go on in pastoral ministry, the more convinced I am that God gifts so many people to be part of these ‘ordinary, everyday miracles.’ No-one is excluded, because Jesus is the same Lord for each of us.

Let’s be uplifted by Peter and John, by what God can do in ordinary people like you and me. And let’s pray with St. Richard of Chichester: ‘Dear Lord, of you three things I pray – to know you more clearly, to love you more dearly, and to follow you more nearly, this day and every day. Amen.’

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

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Day 16 – Acts 4:23-31 ‘Stretch out your hand’

‘Stretch out your hand.’ There’s a phrase guaranteed to send a shiver down the spines of those of us old enough remember corporal punishment at school. (I am... just!) Those fateful words were usually the prelude to sharp pain a matter of seconds later, as the cane/strap/palm swung down.

But today is a chance to redeem this phrase: there’s a noble background to this phrase in the bible, because – despite the modern connotations of punishment associated with it – in the bible this phrase is used *to signify the activity of God*. Moses is told to stretch out his hand by the Red Sea, and as he did so, the waters parted (Exodus 14:16). Jesus tells the man in the synagogue to stretch out his hand (Mark 3:5), and as he does so, it is healed.

And here in this passage the disciples ask God to stretch out a divine hand, in order that they might see great miracles and wonders performed. Or rather, we might say that these disciples were asking that every time they stretched out a human hand in the name of Jesus, God’s divine hand anointed and empowered their step of faith to do something wonderful.

It’s a remarkable prayer, not least because it is made in the context of the onset of persecution. Peter and John have been briefly imprisoned, and then sternly warned not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Their response: to pray fervently to do so even more! And with more miracles, too.

It’s hard not to be inspired by such faith. But there’s an encouragement here for us, too: a reminder than whenever we stretch out a hand to do something in Jesus’ name, we can pray for God to bless and empower it. It might be something spectacular, but it might also be a simple act of love. Anything that Jesus can put his name to, God can bless.

And that is (part of) the wonder of what it means to follow Jesus. *Nothing is wasted*: even a cup of cold water offered in Jesus’ name has its reward (Mark 9:41).

So, let’s pray for grace to stretch out a hand in some way today – that God too might stretch out his hand to bless it.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

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Day 17 – Acts 4:32-37 ‘One in heart and mind’

‘The night has passed, and the day lies open before us: let us pray with one heart and mind...’

So begins one of the lovely opening prayers in the Church of England’s Daily Prayer. Its inspiration comes from today’s passage, which starts with the striking description of the early church: ‘All the believers were one in heart and mind.’

It’s a wonderful image – but what does it mean? We talk a lot about the unity of the church, and how important that is: but this seems to take ‘unity’ to a whole new level! These early chapters of Acts provide a good definition of what a church which is truly ‘one’ looks like. It involves deep friendship and regular meeting together, a love of (and commitment to) growing in wisdom and prayer, a common vision and mutual support in achieving that vision – and crucially, the capacity to meet each other’s practical needs. What is interesting is that the main example of what it means to be ‘one in heart and mind’ is the very down-to-earth financial support that was provided for any who had need (verses 33-35).

In these days long before the welfare state, the only safety net people had – apart from their immediate family – was the generosity of others. The early church provides an inspiring model of what a heart touched by the generous love of Christ, and a mind able to make wise choices as to how to meet others’ needs, looks like. In doing so, they fulfilled one of God’s original desires for his people, given in the law: ‘There need be no poor people among you’ (Deuteronomy 15:4) – something our author St Luke makes clear in verse 34.

Nowadays most commentators describe the life of the early church as an ‘ideal community’, a utopian society which couldn’t last long in its original state, and we must admit of some truth in that. But we should beware getting too comfortable with the idea that this kind of radical community is ‘just not for now’. It remains a prophetic vision to lift our eyes to a greater horizon, and our hearts to a higher love. My prayer for myself is that I would remain open to hear its voice – perhaps that is a prayer you can pray, too. And can I also offer this wonderful follow-on prayer to the invitation which began our reflection today:

As we rejoice in the gift of this new day, so may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love for you, now and forever. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

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Day 18 – Acts 4:36-5:11 ‘But to God’

This is not a passage many of us enjoy reading! Reflecting on it today, we too might feel, as the rest of the church did, ‘great fear... about these events.’ (v11)

And it is certainly a difficult passage to get our head around. The judgement seems extremely harsh, perhaps something we’d be more likely to read in the books of Judges or Samuel than in the New Testament. We have to remember that at this very early stage of the church’s life, its reputation was at stake. It was still a tiny, fragile community, its leaders were already being held up to close scrutiny (and overt persecution begins later in this chapter), and they were also expecting the return of Jesus within their generation. The timescales on which they were operating in order to prepare the church for Christ’s return were a matter of years or decades at most, not millennia.

This backdrop created a dramatic urgency for absolute integrity. Think today of the howls of hypocritical outrage from the press whenever any person or organisation with a reputation for goodness gets caught doing something less than upright – and multiply the stakes by ten for a community awaiting the last day and the restoration of all things.

The key phrase here – and the simple takeout for us now – is this: *what matters is what God thinks of anything we do*. Whilst we might receive praise or judgement from other humans, the only audience we do things for is The Audience of One – the Lord.

This cuts both ways: our good deeds might be praised by others, but it is only God’s opinion that really matters. Hence beginning our reading to include Barnabas’ gift at the end of chapter 4. This is a deliberate comparison in the text which is lost by a chapter division. Barnabas is one of the great characters of the bible, and someone held in very high regard by human society. Even the apostles decided that he needed a name which befitted his wonderful character: he was no longer just Joseph, but ‘son of encouragement’, which is the meaning of the name Barnabas.

But although this act of great generosity is such that it gets a specific mention in scripture, we know from the other stories about Barnabas that he’s not really interested in human praise, only to be right before God. Barnabas lives for the Audience of One, whether that gets him plaudits (as here) or criticism (15:36-40).

In the same way, the problem for Ananias and Sapphira was not that they let the church down, but they lied to God. The one opinion which really mattered was God’s – and it is this that led to their downfall.

As we offer our lives to God today, may he grant us all grace to live more and more for The Audience of One – and may he also grant us confidence in his love and mercy towards flawed and broken people like us. There but for the grace of God... and thankfully, the grace of God is very much alive and well for us today.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

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Day 19 – Acts 5:12-16 ‘Open heaven’

After the scandal of Ananias and Sapphira, what would happen next? That was the big question that must have been playing on the minds and the lips of both the inhabitants of Jerusalem as well as the fledgling Church. What I think is significant about this short but dynamic passage is firstly what it does say, and secondly what it doesn't. Allow me to explain...

The most striking thing about the start of this passage is where the apostles chose to lead their ongoing meetings: in Solomon's Colonnade, the exact place where they had gathered after the lame man had been healed and the very place from which they had got in trouble with the authorities! They were absolutely true to the word they had spoken to the religious authorities: 'Should we listen to you, or to God?' (paraphrase of 4:19) Indeed, they had also prayed for boldness, and it seems this boldness was there in abundance (4:29).

Similarly, their prayer for more signs and wonders (4:30) was being wonderfully answered – indeed their reputation for miracle-working was such that people even believed in the power of Peter's shadow (v15)! And this is where what the passage *doesn't* say is helpful too. Many cults and sects have started when a gifted leader starts to believe their own hype, as crowds of followers ascribe special status to them. Power corrupts, and sadly the history of the church has seen it happen numerous times.

It could have happened to Peter – imagine people wanting even to experience your *shadow* – but it didn't. There is no sense in this passage or what comes next that Peter's ego is inflated, or that he changes his determination to offer his gifts for the Lord with humility and a servant heart. Perhaps the greatest miracle in this passage, among all the healings, is the one in Peter's heart. He stayed true, he stayed surrendered, he stayed humble. And as a result, 'more... believed in the Lord' and 'all of them were healed'.

It's wonderful to be used by God, to be fruitful. But let's all pray for grace to have a heart like Peter: bold, humble, giving God the glory.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

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Day 20 – Acts 5:17-24 ‘At a loss’

If you’re anything like me, you’ll be very familiar with the experience of going to some room in the house to retrieve a particular object – and finding to your bemusement that the item isn’t there. ‘I’m sure I put it there,’ I suspect you’ll say to yourself. ‘Where can it possibly be?’

I had that very experience recently with the special ink we use for weddings: I went to the drawer where I keep it, and.... 40 minutes later, after searching every other place where it might conceivably be, I went back to the original drawer in desperation – and there it was, hiding in a corner I hadn’t searched properly. Welcome to my world.

Well, if you’ve had this kind of experience, imagine what it was like for the prison officers in today’s passage: heading over to the prison, as instructed by the authorities, to the place where the apostles were being ‘kept’ – and, lo and behold, they weren’t there! Never mind a missing household object... To misquote Oscar Wilde’s Lady Bracknell, if losing one apostle would be unfortunate, and two looks like carelessness – what does losing twelve apostles look like?

No wonder the authorities were ‘at a loss’ (v24). It was a loss they would have to get used to: this is the first of three such heavenly prison breaks over the following chapters. And it reminds us that our God, who created the laws of nature, occasionally overrides them at his will. With good reason, in this case: the church is very new and very fragile, despite its explosive growth. Arguably, the future of the new community which Christ’s work has brought about is at stake.

This kind of situation needs a miracle – and it certainly gets one! But what is most striking about this passage is not the miracle, but *the obedience of the apostles*. They go straight back to the location which got them in trouble in the first place. They don’t even hesitate; as soon as it gets light (v21), they are back in the temple courts proclaiming the good news.

And this good news is about ‘this new life’ (v20). And that message remains as true for us today as it was then. God is about *life*, and we can share this life, thanks to Jesus. If you find yourself dealing with disappointment or failure today, let’s take heart that our God is still the same, yesterday, today and forever – and this wonderful, amazing God has come to give us life to the full. A fullness which is not ultimately dependent on our circumstances, but on his grace, love and power.

May that life be ours today – and may it give us hope, even in trying times. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

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Day 21 – Acts 5:25-32 ‘Wood for the trees’

It's easy to lose perspective – especially in situations of dispute or conflict. Many years ago, we attended a weekend away for our church group in a remote location in Herefordshire. The house was set in lovely countryside, with one village nearby, and another down the road. As we went out for a walk on Saturday afternoon to explore the area, we were advised that the two villages in question hadn't fraternised for decades. No-one could even remember why they fallen out in the first place! It was a beautiful part of the world – but under the surface, there was darkness.

Such stories like this abound. Sadly, even in families this is true. Sometimes the source of the fall-out is clear and the blame obvious – at other times, we find ourselves clinging on to a sense of right which, were we to see it in others, we would challenge them to justify.

In today's passage, the authorities are getting increasingly angry at the success of the new 'Jesus' movement. In fact, they are downright jealous, as v17 yesterday made clear. So once again the apostles are arrested and called to account (vv26-27). And I think it's significant to note what the authorities' principal beef is: 'You are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.' (v28)

It's a classic case of failing to see the wood for the trees. Never mind the incredible good this group was doing: the people being cared for, and healed, and given new hope and life and purpose. Never mind the power of the Holy Spirit and the miraculous signs which accompany them. Never mind the complete absence of violence or menace associated with this pacifist sect. What they're bothered about is incurring some sort of blame, with an underlying current of envy at this group's popularity.

And whilst it's true that the apostles are uncompromising as to who made sure Jesus was killed (3:14-15, 4:10, and here v30), the authorities have been blinded by their need to win, to be right, to cling on to power. They're missing all the positives: the promise of new life, the gift of the Spirit, the renewal of the nation's life implicit in the teachings of this dynamic new movement.

It's an object lesson for us, too, of the dangers of letting either blame avoidance or a need to be right cloud our judgement and stain our lives. Sometimes we need to step back and see the wood for the trees. To see those we fall out with as God sees them. To see what God is doing in a given situation. Or just to acknowledge that we might have been wrong about something.

It's never easy, but it is the path of grace and life. My prayer is that we can all retain an open heart and open mind, that we might never miss what God is up to, nor allow conflicts to endure longer than they have to.

Lord God, grant me an open heart and an open mind. Give me the courage to admit where I'm wrong, the grace to restore relationships in conflict, and the eyes to see what you're doing in me, and in others. In the name of Jesus, the author of life and forgiveness, the maker of all things new. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

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Day 22 – Acts 5:33-40 ‘By its fruit....’

Today’s passage revolves around this million-dollar question: *how can we judge if something is of God, or not?* This is the central dilemma which often faces us – just as it did the religious leaders questioning Peter and John. Instinctively they don’t like this dynamic new group – they feel threatened, jealous. They’re all for fire and brimstone, shock and awe, threats and repression.

And then a voice of reason intervenes. Gamaliel – who we later learn was St Paul’s teacher – stands up and effectively says: it’s too early to judge whether this is of God, or not. Time will tell: if it isn’t, it won’t last. If it is, we won’t be able to stop it, because God is blessing it.

In effect it echoes exactly Jesus’ own teaching on the same question – how do we recognise the value of something? *By its fruit.* Look at the long-term outcomes – are they good ones? Are lives being changed, people helped, virtues growing, prayers answered, newcomers not just joining but flourishing, communities changing – in other words, are there real positive outcomes, good consequences?

As an aside, this is one of the reasons it can be difficult to answer this most vital of questions. It’s easy to get caught up by the appearance of success, or short-term flourishing. Fruit takes time to grow – one of the reasons Jesus’ advice is so profound.

And although we may not suffer the sort of opposition the early church did – for which we are very thankful – it’s a great question to apply to our lives as well. What is really bearing fruit? And take heart, there will be something! Probably several things.

Change is slow – always slower than we’d like. But as we look back, we can usually see the hand of God at work – and often others can see the change better than we can. If you know someone to ask – ask them. You’ll be pleasantly surprised by what they say.

So let’s be encouraged by this great bit of practical wisdom., modelled by old Gamaliel – and let’s give thanks today for the fruit God has matured in our lives, and the lives of people around us.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

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Day 23 – Acts 5:41-42 ‘Counted worthy’

In the summer of 2021, my daughter finished her Duke of Edinburgh Gold Expedition. It had been delayed numerous times by the pandemic, and eventually she was spared having to travel to Snowdonia and camp out in (probably) heavy rain. Nevertheless, the days were arduous – up to 17 miles each day hiking, carrying a 20lb rucksack on your sodden back. Her ankles were very sore and swollen, so the last couple of days were more of a hobble than a walk.

But, she did it! And we were very proud of her. She hasn't yet been able to go to Buckingham Palace to receive her award – but we live in hope!

‘Counted worthy....’ – it's a striking phrase, isn't it? Our daughter went through significant pain and challenge to be counted worthy of her gold award. No doubt as you look back on your own life, you'll think of some challenge or goal where you too made a significant effort to be counted worthy – a qualification you completed, a new skill you mastered, a promotion you worked hard for, perhaps a competition you succeeded in. And you were counted worthy....

Most of us are wired to enjoy challenges, and the rewards that come with them – even if it's just personal satisfaction. And pretty much all of us like the feeling of praise or affirmation from our peers. To be counted worthy is, we think on the whole, a thoroughly good thing.

And yet, here in today's passage, we see the opposite. The apostles rejoice because they too had been counted worthy – but to what end? ‘Worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (of Jesus).’ It's an extraordinary, upside-down, topsy-turvy view of the world. Most of us fear disgrace, or punishment. These early Christians delighted in it. What's going on?

The answer can only be found in where they seek their affirmation – or rather, *from whom*. They didn't care what people thought of them, only God. For them, they could endure any sort of human negativity, as long as they were confident of their Lord's approval.

Many of us are fortunate that we don't have to choose between human approval and God's. But we can take inspiration from the example of these extraordinary early Christians to recommit ourselves to live our lives for The Audience of One this day and this season. For that is more precious than any (even gold!) award.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

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Day 24 – Acts 6:1-7 ‘Practical solutions’

A man is walking on a cliff top when a sudden gust of wind blows him over the edge. In a moment he is left clinging by his fingernails to the last remaining ledge between himself and a 100-ft drop onto the rocks below. A devout Christian, he begins to pray fervently, seeking the Lord's rescue. A minute later a couple walking along the same path hear his cries and lean down to offer him assistance. 'It's OK,' the man says, 'the Lord will save me.'

Barely has he heard their footsteps departing when a fisherman calls from the sea, offering assistance. Again, the man refuses: 'The Lord will save me.' As his fingers begin to slip, a search-and-rescue helicopter hovers ahead and a harness begins to descend. But the man shouts up, his voice by-now fading to gasps: 'Don't worry, the Lord will save me.'

Eventually his fingers slip... and when he meets the Lord in heaven a little while later, he shouts angrily: 'Why didn't you save me?' 'Well,' says the Lord, 'I sent you a couple, a boat and a helicopter – what more did you want?'

We can sometimes over-spiritualise the journey of faith. Yes, we believe in the life-changing power of God; we believe in answers to prayer, the gifts of the Spirit and 'divine appointments' – those moments when God seems to intervene in very direct ways in our lives. But God also gives us practical skills, and the capacity to organise ourselves. We don't put our trust in them, only God – but they can be a great blessing nonetheless. Sometimes, it's the way God works in a situation.

In today's passage, the church faces a very practical dilemma. The food distribution programme is failing, and people are getting resentful. How are the apostles going to fix it? Do they preach on the value of fasting, do they counsel the grumbling groups to show patience and forgiveness, do they pray for the gripes to miraculously disappear? Not a bit of it: they come up with a very pragmatic solution. They find a new team of appropriately gifted leaders to run the welfare programme, while they continue to preach and pray.

But let's note: it's still a spiritual solution: they take counsel together (v2), they make spiritual maturity a requirement for the job (v3), and no doubt the time freed up for prayer (v4) was invested at least partly in making the right appointments.

Our God is the God of the whole of life. There is no ultimate divide between sacred and secular, practical and spiritual – it's all God's. Let's take heart today that God is interested in the practical details of our lives, and values the practical gifts he's given us. Yes, we soak everything in prayer – but then we act, offering real solutions which bring real hope to a real and hurting world.

Day 25 – Acts 6:8-15 ‘In Jesus’ footsteps’

A long time ago, when I worked in the marketing industry, one of my clients asked me to lie publicly on their behalf. We were producing a research report in support of a controversial planning application: 9 out of 10 results were very positive, one was ambiguous – the one I was asked to remove. I refused, which caused 48 hours of very difficult negotiations with our client.

Eventually the report was released in its entirety, and went straight onto the front page of the local press – at which point I was immediately reported to the Market Research Society by the group opposing the planning bid for breach of professional standards. It was a crude tactic to devalue the impact of our research, but since I had released the report in full, it backfired. The case was dismissed, at which point the developer which had commissioned the research splashed our success over the front pages of the local news. The bid was eventually approved, and the development built.

The irony in all this is that, had I succumbed to our client’s pressure to lie, the smear tactic would in fact have worked, I would have been fired and the research would have been worthless. The developer’s reputation would have been severely undermined and quite possibly the new development would have been denied. Doing the right thing brought me a significant amount of trouble – but ultimately also blessing.

I can’t pretend to have suffered the sort of extreme opposition that the early church faced – only isolated examples of what you might call ‘low-level pressure’, like the one I refer to above. The discomfort I felt for taking a stand for my faith gives me only the merest insight into what inspirational characters like Stephen must have lived with. But it’s striking how Stephen’s predicament mirrors Jesus’ own so closely just a year or two beforehand: a backdrop of great miracles (v8), jealousy from the religious establishment (v9), false witnesses (v13), including a very specific one about the future of the temple which is very close to the one also quoted by the gospel writers (e.g. Matthew 26:61).

Stephen’s story is most definitely Christlike, and a sobering reminder that, throughout the ages, some are called to walk in the footsteps of Jesus in a very literal way. Today’s passage is a great encouragement for us to pray for all those who face similar troubles around the world: if you feel drawn to seek specific examples, organisations like Open Doors and Barnabas Fund will give you plenty of situations to pray into.

For us, too, we may not be called to pay the ultimate price like Stephen. But there will be occasional challenges for most of us – like mine above – where we taste something of what means to take up a cross. May God grant us grace in those times, and may we too find joy and peace in knowing that Christ is with us especially in those times, and his grace is always sufficient, for his power is made perfect in our weakness.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

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Day 26 – Acts 7:1-16 ‘The God of glory’

I wonder how you would define glory? I imagine most of the times we’ve heard the word used has been in connection with sport: Wimbledon glory, Euros glory, Olympic or Paralympic glory, and so on – in essence we normally use the word as shorthand for victory or success.

In the bible, the Hebrew word for glory is *kabod* – it literally means ‘weight’. So, the glory of God was God’s ‘weight’ being felt in the world. It became synonymous with the manifest presence of God, so overwhelming that people usually fell on their faces when they experienced it – see for example when God’s glory (‘weight’) fell on the first sacrifices in Leviticus (9:23-24).

Naturally this kind of dramatic experience associated God’s glory with sensations of dazzling light and power – but it’s as well to remember that the original meaning is simply God’s real presence in the world.

And this matters, because God’s glory isn’t always what we think it is. Far from always being associated with ‘victory’ or ‘success’ or dazzling light and power, there is another golden thread running through Scripture. St Paul summarised it later in reflecting on his own experience: God’s ‘power is made perfect in weakness.’ When Jesus predicts his forthcoming death, he says: ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.’ Glorified by being wrongfully convicted and dishonourably killed.

God’s ways are not ours – and this upside-down kingdom, where the first are last and the last are first, can be seen at work throughout Scripture. So when Stephen begins his extraordinary history of God’s people by referring to the work of ‘the God of glory’ (v2), we might be expecting a list of great victories and spectacular successes. Instead, virtually all of these first 16 verses describe struggle and challenges. God calls a solitary man and his family (v2), to a land he did not own (v5), with the promise of slavery to come (v6) and well-known issues with securing an heir (v8).

God’s plan had to survive iniquitous behaviour from a set of siblings (v9), famine (v11) and effectively exile away from the land promised to them (vv13-14). With the exception of Joseph’s personal flourishing – which saved his family, indeed the future of God’s people – there aren’t many overt ‘successes’ to speak of here.

And yet *this* is the plan of ‘the God of glory’. It reminds us that, even in times of trial and difficulty, God’s presence is real and at work, often in ways we can’t see at the time. What made these early generations great was their capacity for faith, even in the dark times.

Maybe you find yourself in such a dark time – or know of others who are. May this passage inspire you again – the God of glory is still at work, making his grace and power perfect in our weakness. This day, take heart: God is *still* with you.

Day 27 – Acts 7:17-38 ‘The invisible hand’

The life of Moses is one of the most famous in all scripture. It is a story both of personal and corporate redemption, and Stephen before the Sanhedrin reprises some of its most famous scenes here. We get a wonderful summary of Moses meeting God in the burning bush; rescuing God’s people from slavery in Egypt, and then through the Red Sea; and finally receiving the ‘living words’ of God’s law, which shaped the life of God’s people from that time on.

These iconic stories have the supernatural activity of God writ large throughout – a bush which doesn’t burn, the signs in Egypt, the parting of the waters. But this whole sermon of Stephen’s is a testament to the outworking of God’s plan for his people, and what strikes me today is how God was also very much at work in Moses’ life *before* his dramatic call beside the burning bush.

God isn’t mentioned at all in verses 18-22, and yet there are at least three miraculous interventions: the midwives who saved thousands of Hebrew children from a genocidal Pharaoh (v19, referencing Exodus 1:17-21); the saving of Moses’ life as a baby (v20-21, referencing Exodus 2:3-6); and then his raising in the royal household, equipping him for his great life’s work many decades later (v21-22, referencing Exodus 2:7-10).

Were it not for these miracles, the much more obvious ones of Moses’ later years would not have happened as they did. Throughout Moses’ life – a microcosm of God’s saving presence among all of his people – an invisible, divine hand was at work. For all the disobedience and unfaithfulness of God’s people, God was ‘fulfilling his promise to Abraham’ (v17).

We live in uncertain times. And the future perhaps seems even less clear. We may also face personal challenges and uncertainties: with our health, with our family, with our work or direction in life. This passage reminds us that we are not alone, nor without help. God is at work in our chaotic world. God is at work in our lives, too – and in the lives of those around us. We may not always see his invisible hand, and the outcomes we hope for may take longer than we’d like (they usually do): but we can trust, as Moses did, that God’s word is sure, and his will is good.

‘Put your hand into the hand of God: that shall be to you better than a light, and safer than a known way.’ Amen.

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Day 28 – Acts 7:39-60 ‘True worship’

Like Ananias and Sapphira, this is another difficult passage! The martyrdom of Stephen proves a turning point for the church – though not for the reasons we might expect. More about that tomorrow.

And there’s so much we could say about this intense reading. But today I want to focus on a theme which bubbles under the surface of so much of Stephen’s sermon. What does true worship of God really look like? This passage gives us some invaluable pointers:

True worship always remembers that our God is a great big God (vv48-50) – as someone once sang. For all that it’s lovely to have beautiful buildings in which to worship, God can’t be contained in even the grandest and most impressive of boxes. God is Lord of the whole earth – indeed the earth is a ‘footstool’ for the Almighty Creator of the universe. A ‘big view’ of God is always a healthy starting point for our lives.

True worship prizes humility (v51) – whatever blessings and privileges we have received in the journey of faith, we retain a humility of character that guards us from pride. Our necks are willing to bow in the service of God and others.

True worship is always sensitive to the Spirit (v51) – this is a natural outworking of cultivating humility in the sight of an awesome God. We keep our hearts and minds open, we try to listen and discern what God is up to. God never contradicts his (already written) Word, but he does prompt us to new insights and opportunities. The humble of heart are most likely to hear them.

True worship obeys God (v53). Our lives match our lips match our hearts. It’s one thing to know the right thing – and quite another to actually do it!

I think it’s hard to place ourselves in the middle of this story. But we can mine gold from its lessons. Let God speak to you one particular word that will bless you today. And may God grant us all grace to worship him anew, in Spirit and in truth. Amen.

Day 29 – Acts 8:1-8 ‘Unintended consequences’

At the end of November 2013, a few weeks after we’d arrived in Milton Keynes, the heating system at St Mary’s suffered a catastrophic failure – a major pipe burst, which was then discovered to be clad with asbestos. It took more than two months to fix, meaning the building was without heating during the coldest months of the year. For eight weeks we were forced to hold our services in the school hall, who kindly let us use their premises for free, setting up from scratch every Sunday morning.

It was challenging, but most of the congregation remarked at the end how many unexpected blessings had come from it. The ‘blitz spirit’ had created a great camaraderie; more people had pitched in and helped out, and the unfamiliar environment meant that people sat together who hadn’t before, and made new friends. In the first 6 months of 2014 we had the highest average Sunday attendance of any period in the last 15 years, prior to the lockdown of spring 2020.

Lockdown itself, as we have noted, saw a similar pattern. An unexpected disruption, an energising solution, and then significant growth. Today there are far more people connecting with our services (either in person or online) than we’ve had since the days a century ago when attending church was a social expectation. For all that we might have worried whether closing the building would weaken us as a community, in fact, by God’s grace, we have seen growth in all kinds of ways – both deeper and broader.

Both of these disruptive (and productive) periods were triggered by external causes which were ‘morally neutral’. No-one was opposing us, as it were – unlike, say Joseph, who was able to testify to his brothers once he was ruler of Egypt: ‘*You* intended to harm me, but *God* intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.’ (Genesis 50:20)

But the point is the same in all of these circumstances – God is able to bring good and growth out of unfavourable circumstances. What might have damaged the community of God’s people actually blessed and strengthened it. And so we see in today’s passage: a great persecution breaks out against the church, triggered by Stephen’s martyrdom. This is a terrible situation, and the intent is clear: to destroy the church (v3), to stamp it out once and for all.

But what *actually* happens? ‘All except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (v1)... those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went (v4)... so there was great joy in that city (v8).’ The plan to destroy the church backfired totally – all it achieved was to *grow* it, both in leadership – Philip, previously one of the feeding programme organisers (6:5) now takes on an apostolic role – and in reach, as the refugees spread out across the whole country, spreading the faith and winning new believers as they go. As a ‘church destruction project’, it’s an epic fail. God ‘works all things for good for those who love him.’ (Romans 8:28)

May this be an encouragement to us, too. Whatever circumstances we face, our good God is able to bring unexpected outcomes – pray in faith and trust today that this would be true for you, for those you love, and for our church community.

Day 30 – Acts 8:8-13 ‘A greater name’

We live in a spiritual world. Nowadays you can dip your toe into all kinds of interesting waters, and our media is full of curiosity in the supernatural. From programmes about real-life haunted houses, to psychics on-demand, to endless stories about beings with special powers, ‘modern’ humanity is no less fascinated by the spiritual realm than ever it was. Materialists and secularists who expected our Brave New World to be an atheistic one must hold their heads in their hands.

That said, it is possible to argue that our love of watching stories about ghosts and goblins, or great battles between heaven and hell, could be taken to suggest that we have relegated ‘the spiritual world’ to the level of myth and fantasy. But I’m not so sure. The ‘God-shaped hole’ is an idea which seems to be hard-wired into all of humanity – the opening chapters of Genesis record that the earliest human beings after The Fall began ‘to call upon the name of the Lord’ (Genesis 4:26) – and if this innate longing is not filled with God in the traditional sense, we’ll look for it in all kinds of other places. We are spiritual beings, wired for eternity.

And so we see human attempts to harness the power of the spiritual world run like a fault line through all of human history. It remains widespread today, but it was just as much a feature of ancient society as well. In today’s passage, we meet Simon the sorcerer, who had a large local following in Samaria. We don’t know exactly what his sorcery entailed, but he was certainly not shy about his success, calling himself the ‘Great Power of God’ (v10).

But Simon was about to meet his match. The early Christian leader Philip arrived in town and even Simon was blown away by the ‘great signs and miracles he saw’ (v13). The ‘Great Power’ had just met the Greater Power. And the source of this greater power was *a greater name*: Philip proclaimed ‘the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ’ (v12). Jesus’ name is shorthand for his authority and greatness, and it remains the source of our hope and blessing too. Philip declared the greatness of this name to be ‘good news’, and it is still just as good today!

It’s easy to be troubled by the wide range of so-called spiritual practices which seem to be popular now. Some of them are phony, but others are sadly unhealthily real, and bring only darkness rather than light. We, however, live under the blessing and protection of a greater Name, the greatest in the universe, a Name before whom one day every knee will bow.

Give thanks that you know and trust this greater Name, and may that name be your comfort, your inspiration and the source of all you do today.

Day 31 – Acts 8:14-17 ‘Receiving the Spirit’

In Holy Week 1906 a small church in Los Angeles met to pray. On the night of 9th April, a preacher called William J Seymour and seven others were waiting on God on Bonnie Brae Street, ‘when suddenly, as though hit by a bolt of lightning, they were knocked from their chairs to the floor.’ The seven other men began to speak in tongues (angelic languages) and shout out loud praising God.

The news quickly spread; the city was stirred; crowds gathered; and a few days later Seymour himself experienced the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit. It wasn’t long before services were moved outside to accommodate the crowds who came from all around. The supernatural experiences continued, even outside the building: people fell down under the power of God as they approached, and others were spontaneously healed. The ‘outpouring’ – which became known as the Azusa Street Revival – lasted until 1915, and birthed what became known as the Pentecostal movement. Today Pentecostal churches number some 500 million believers around the world. Countless others within historic denominations – myself included – have been similarly blessed.

Today’s passage in Acts 8 is a pivotal one in Pentecostal theology, which teaches that even after someone comes to Christ, they are saved but have not yet received the fullness of the Spirit. This comes in a second and subsequent experience – like that of William Seymour and his friends, and also, crucially, like the one described in our passage. The text is very clear: ‘the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of [the new believers in Samaria]; they had simply been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus’ (v16).

What is going on? Is it really true that we need this ‘second blessing’ to truly thrive as Christians?

This debate is one that has preoccupied significant sections of the church for the last century. Conservative scholars will point to the fact that the situation was unique: this is the first church planted outside Jerusalem, and in particular, the first outside traditional Jewish borders. Samaritans were not orthodox Jews, so – the argument goes – this is not a theological justification for a ‘two-stage process’ in becoming a Christian, but rather God deliberately (and only temporarily) withheld the obvious signs of the presence of the Spirit so the apostles could see for themselves that God really intended all people to become followers of Jesus.

It’s a fair argument, albeit one weakened by the fact that the same thing happens in Acts 19 as well! Thankfully there is also a middle way, a ‘both/and’ approach which affirms that *everyone* who comes to Christ receives the Spirit (as explicitly promised in Acts 2:38), *but also* affirms that we need to keep seeking the fullness of the Spirit, and the gifts that the Spirit gives. The risk of relegating this passage to a unique experience is that we miss out on the very real blessing and growth that such experiences bring. The risk of over-emphasising these experiences is that we create two classes of Christians. Neither of these outcomes is desirable.

What today does affirm is that God’s Holy Spirit is *real*. Amazingly, the presence of Almighty God graciously comes to dwell in us (yes, us!), transforming us from the inside out. We may sometimes also experience this presence in tangible ways, and there’s no harm in seeking God for more of his presence. ‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.’

As we begin this week, give thanks that God is a real presence in your life – and why not ask him for a fresh outpouring of his love and grace into your heart? It’s a prayer the Lord loves to answer.

Day 32 – Acts 8:18-25 ‘Heart of the matter’

The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. This pithy summary of Jesus’ teaching is one I’ve long relied on. Throughout his ministry Jesus teaches that *the key to living right is to get our hearts right* – that is, our desires, motives, and ambitions, what you might call our ‘inner life’, the core of our being. If we get the heart right, then the actions/behaviour will follow.

This was Jesus’ real beef with the Pharisees, and why he called them ‘hypocrites’ (literally ‘actors’). They paraded a form of behaviour that was thought to be righteous – particularly by themselves, though also by others – but it masked their corrupt motives. They wanted reward for their righteousness, it didn’t flow from a humble love for God. Their eyes were on human recognition not God’s affirmation, on worldly power not spiritual authority.

And we see something similar here today. Simon the sorcerer has nominally become a follower of Jesus and been baptised, but his heart hasn’t changed. When he sees the apostles blessing people in the power of the Holy Spirit, he wants to harness that power for himself – but not for good reasons. He misunderstands completely the massive difference between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, and therefore the true nature of godly spiritual authority. As someone who has spent years practising occult arts, Simon sees the spiritual world as a power to be manipulated and profited from, not as a gift from Almighty God. He wants fame but not humble service; he wants to enjoy control, not release people into freedom.

And so, Peter quite rightly unmasks the darkness within Simon’s heart. He sees that this is not really about money, but about what the offering of money says about Simon’s motives – his heart, in other words. That has to be right before anything else can be right, too.

We probably have never tried to buy a spiritual gift! But we too may sometime fall prey to jealousy of others’ gifts, or perhaps make requests of God for motives which are more to do with our issues than God’s glory. It’s not easy to admit this, but it’s good for us to be honest with ourselves. And there is good news: if the diagnosis is sin, the cure is repentance. This was true for Simon, but it is also true for us. We worship a loving Saviour whose name is salvation and whose heart is forgiveness. Jesus loves healing hearts – ours included. Let’s pray for this healing grace again today, and receive it with joy.

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Day 33 – Acts 8:26-31 ‘The invitation’

How proactive should we be in sharing our faith? That’s a huge question, and one which many Christians wrestle with. I don’t think there’s a ‘right’ answer to that, but it’s interesting that the general pattern of the New Testament suggests that for most of us, our role is to be ready to share our faith when invited. A few people are gifted to ‘take the initiative’ and actively lead people to faith – but for the rest of us, we should be ready but wait for the invitation. St Peter puts it like this:

‘Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.’ (1 Peter 3:15). It’s good advice.

Similarly in today’s passage, Philip receives a clear divine instruction to head for a particular place (v26), and then a particular chariot (v29). Philip is obedient - he makes himself available to God, and comes up beside the chariot. He also asks a helpful question, which gives the official the opportunity to engage, or indeed to say a polite ‘thanks but no thanks’. But as a result it’s the official that makes the invitation to discuss matters of faith. At this point, Philip is only too happy to chat with him and share the good news.

I think this is a great model for the rest of us. It balances faith with human action, and enthusiasm with politeness and gentleness. God graciously invites us to partner with him, to be available to him – and then we can pray and wait for the right opportunities. We don’t have to ‘force the issue’ or manipulate a conversation. That kind of thing is what damages the integrity of the church. We share grace graciously!

May that be good news for us today. We’ll all have people we’d love to share our faith with, and much of the time we don’t know *how*. How liberating to know that it’s not all about us! Let’s pray to be ready, let’s pray for God to prepare the way, and let’s entrust the rest to him.

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Day 34 – Acts 8:32-35 ‘Good news’

Today’s reflection is a very simple one. Jesus is good news!

It’s so easy to forget this. We can get bogged down in the challenges, the doubts, or just the machinery of church. We can miss the wood for the trees. And every so often, God just invites us to stop, to breathe and to remember that, at its heart, what we believe is good news. Following Jesus is good news: being forgiven, having a purpose and a future, having the presence of God with us always, having a Christian family to share it with, having the bible and prayer, having the fruit of the Spirit slowly transforming us from the inside out – in short, having God at the centre of our lives is good news.

My simple suggestion today is that you spend a few moments reflecting on *why this is good news for you*. Perhaps turn to a favourite passage. Perhaps remember the joy of hearing the news for the first time – like the official does in today’s passage. Give thanks for all the ‘good news’ you’ve brought to mind. And, whatever you face at present, grasp a mustard seed of faith to believe that God is bigger and better than all of it.

‘The time has come, and the kingdom of God has come near... Good news!’

Day 35 – Acts 8:36-40 ‘The water of life’

A member of the youth group once approached her minister asking to be baptised. The minister held quite strong views on the subject, and as they discussed what method to use, the minister was quite forthright that she should be fully immersed in the water. The young woman had been hoping for a different answer, so she quizzed the minister a bit more: ‘What if I went in up to my waist, would that be OK?’ ‘No, it must be right under the water.’

‘What if I went in up to my neck?’ ‘No.’

‘What I went in up to my nose?’ ‘Again, no.’

‘What if went in above my eyes, leaving just an inch or so?’ ‘I’m sorry, but no.’

‘So what you’re really saying is that as long as I get the top of my head wet, then that’s the bit that matters.’

It’s a cheesy old joke, but it highlights an important point. The church has long argued about baptism, and the ‘right way’ to do it. But the truth is that no church in any of the main denominations nowadays actually baptises people like they did in the New Testament. Every time we read of it in the Book of Acts, it’s an immediate and spontaneous event in the nearest body of water. No catechism or preparation classes, no gap of months or years between first believing and ‘sealing the deal’, no required church attendance, no candle or oil for that matter. Just an immediate dip, as soon as possible after hearing and receiving the news.

Sometimes it’s good just to recover the sheer joy of what baptism signifies. A new spiritual life has been birthed! The cleansing death and resurrection power of Jesus are ours, by God’s grace. Never mind *how* you do it – and wouldn’t it be great if we just embraced the diversity of our practice, trusting in the capacity of God to anoint our human ceremonies with his divine blessing – what matters is that we *do* do it, and continue to celebrate the large numbers of people who find their hope and joy in Jesus.

I love the way the official sees a pond by the road and says: ‘What can stop me from being baptised?’ May we as the church never get in the way of what God is up to in our lives. And perhaps, too, today is a day to give thanks for your baptism (or confirmation), to celebrate the significant markers along the way, the people who have blessed you, the ‘lightbulb’ moments that changed your life and your future – to remember the story of God in your life.

And if you’ve not been baptised – well, what can stop you?

Day 36 – Acts 9:1-4 ‘The body of Christ’

Jesus loves his Church. It’s an obvious thing to say, really – but it’s easy to forget that this love affair cuts both ways. Much of the time we think about how we put our love for Jesus into action: in our worship and singing, in our prayer, in our lifestyles, in how we love and serve others.

But, no matter how hard we try, Jesus loves us more. He’s crazy about us. We are the apple of his eye, the object of his affection. We are his body, not just in a spiritual sense, but a literal one too. We are Jesus’ hands, feet, eyes and heart on earth – and when we suffer, Jesus suffers too.

It’s striking that when Paul meets Jesus on the road to Damascus in this iconic story (which we’ll reflect on some more over the next couple of days), he doesn’t say: ‘Why do you persecute *them*?’ He says: ‘Why do you persecute *me*?’ What we suffer, he suffers. When his body hurts, Jesus hurts too.

For Paul, this was a life-changing experience, in all kinds of ways. But it begins with the realisation that his own relationship to God has been mediated through zealous rule-following and not a deep intimacy with the Lord. He comes to understand Jesus’ deep connection with his followers in the most direct of ways: ‘Why do you persecute *me*?’

‘We love because he first loved us.’ This was old John’s conclusion in the first of his letters – and this passage echoes that sentiment. For all that it’s good to put our love for Jesus into practice, let’s never forget who initiated it; nor that Jesus’ love for us didn’t stop at the cross, or the resurrection. It goes on – and on. It is a constant, a given, and something we can come back to and rely on again and again.

To say that Jesus loves his church means Jesus loves *you*. And whatever you face at the moment, know that Jesus cares, he feels it with you, he suffers with you. As the puritan Thomas Goodwin observes: ‘Take our hands, and lay them upon Christ’s breast, and let us feel how his heart beats and his affections yearn towards us, even now he is in glory – to encourage believers against all that may discourage them, from the consideration of Christ’s heart towards them now in heaven.’

And may Christ’s deep heart of affection for you lift your heart today.

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Day 37 – Acts 9:5-9 ‘I am Jesus’

As we reflect further on Paul meeting Jesus directly on the road, we face the challenging question of Christ’s heart for all people, even those who have committed great sins. Decades later, Paul still described himself as ‘the worst of sinners’, yet this very realisation gave him an awesome grasp of God’s immeasurable grace, and a profound intimacy with his Lord.

The great comfort for us is that, *if God can save Paul, he can save any one of us*. Such deep reserves of grace are plenty enough for the likes of us. Today I’ll share excerpts from a marvellous book by Dane Ortland, called ‘Gentle and Lowly’:

‘We do not come to a set of doctrines. We do not come to a church. We do not even come to the gospel. All these are vital. But most truly, we come to a person, to Christ himself....

‘We cannot present a reason for Christ to finally close off his heart to his own sheep. No such reason exists. Every human friend has a limit. If we offend enough, if a relationship gets damaged enough, if we betray enough times, we are cast out. The walls go up. With Christ, our sins and weaknesses are the very CV items that qualify us to approach him. *Nothing but coming to him is required* – first at conversion and a thousand times thereafter until we are with him upon death.

‘Perhaps it isn’t sins so much as sufferings that cause some of us to question the perseverance of the heart of Christ. As pain piles up, as numbness takes over, as the months go by, at some point the conclusion seems obvious: we have been cast out. Surely this is not what life would feel like for one who has been buried in the heart of a gentle and lowly Saviour?

But Jesus does not say that those with pain-free lives are never cast out. He says those who come to him are never cast out. It is not what life brings to us but *to whom we belong* that determines Christ’s heart of love for us. The only thing required to enjoy such love is to come to him.’

Paul on the road to Damascus experienced a transforming glimpse of Christ’s extraordinary heart – and fallen though he was, he simply came to him. May we too hear the same voice, calling us – ‘I am Jesus’ – and may we too simply come to him. For ‘whoever comes to me I will *never* drive away.’

Day 38 – Acts 9:10-17 ‘Yes, Lord’

Keep saying yes to God.

That piece of advice was given to me many years ago by a wise older Christian. It’s been one of the best and most important pieces of practical wisdom that anyone has ever given to me, and one I’ve tried – not always consistently! – to put into practice. Keep saying yes to God.

Free will is both a remarkable and a difficult thing. The fact that God lets us make choices is a great blessing and can also lead to great wrongdoing. Many of our deepest questions relate to situations when God doesn’t intervene as we’d like, or where the free choice of someone else has caused suffering for us, or perhaps for someone we love.

And yet we also know that the capacity to choose is one of the most precious things any human being can exercise. Think of the sacrifices people made to win the chance to vote – because the freedom to choose was seen as something so precious. On a more prosaic level, the joy of shopping for many people lies precisely in the fun of making choices. Leisure time is precisely that because it defines the periods of time when we can *choose* what we do, rather than the expectations that come with employment.

During the covid pandemic, one of the most difficult and controversial questions which society divided over was to do with the consequences – for good or ill – of giving people freedom to make choices. Here is not the place to comment further on that, but we simply observe that what dominated our public narrative in that season also lies at the heart of many of the challenges of the spiritual life. To trust in God’s guiding hand in our lives is not to say that all our decisions are mapped out for us. *God gives us opportunities, but also gives us freedom to choose whether to accept them or not.*

We see this in today’s passage – God meets Ananias and gives him a task. A difficult, possibly dangerous task: but one that will change the course not just of one life, but of history. Ananias is troubled, and questions aloud whether this is a good idea or not. But I’m struck that his opening words to his Saviour are simply this: ‘Yes, Lord.’ He is open to listen – and ultimately, he obeys.

I think of times in my own life when I’ve been prodded to do something. Sadly, on some occasions I’ve resisted, and said ‘no’ to God. But as I’ve journeyed through the life of faith, I’ve tried to take to heart the advice of my friend, and to say yes to God. Sometimes those ‘yeses’ seem risky, but always the safest place to be is in the centre of God’s will. Ananias discovered this through today’s life-changing encounter, and ultimately played a part in changing history.

May we too keep saying yes to God – and may God grant us grace and courage to obey whatever he calls us to do.

Day 39 – Acts 9:10-17 (ii) ‘My chosen instrument’

Today’s reflection is something of a ‘counter-balance’ to yesterday’s! Don’t get me wrong, I do endorse what I wrote yesterday, but most deep truths in the spiritual life require us to hold things in a certain degree of tension. Life-changing faith is rarely a case of ‘either/or’ – much more often ‘both/and’.

The tension in this case is the risk that what I said yesterday reduces God’s authority in the world too far. It becomes *all* about our choices. Push that too far and you end up with God as something of a passive onlooker in our world, or perhaps a distant manager who has ideas but is totally reliant on frail or fickle human beings for any of them to happen. Whilst we give thanks for the freedom God gives, we also acknowledge that our sovereign God is, at the same time, very much at work and gradually transforming things in conformity to his will.

My spiritual director talks about ‘friends for a reason, friends for a season, and friends for life’. That’s a great way of understanding the complex web of our relationships. Today I’d also like to apply that to the idea of callings: in the journey of faith there are callings for a *reason*, callings for a *season*, and callings for *life*. In fact, we see all three here in today’s passage.

Yesterday, we saw Ananias receiving a calling for a reason. He was to go to find Saul and lay hands on him. It was a one-off event, and God spoke to him for this specific purpose. And with callings like this, it’s possible to say yes or no to God. I don’t doubt that if Ananias had said ‘no’, God would have called someone else, as he needed someone to do this – but he gave Ananias the chance, and Ananias was faithful to the call. A calling for a reason.

Then there’s Judas – the chap who hosts Saul (v11). We don’t know *how* Judas comes to play host, but the fact that he agrees to look after such a dangerous man suggests a certain degree of divine conviction. I suspect this was Judas’ calling for a season. There’s nothing in the text to indicate that Saul moves again after he regains his sight, so it’s likely that Judas continued to host the new evangelist Saul during his stay in Damascus. God gave Judas a task for a season, and in being faithful to this task, he too played a quiet but significant part in the growth of the kingdom of God.

Finally, there are callings for life – this is clearly where Saul comes in: he is tasked by God to proclaim the good news to non-Jews (v15), and this becomes his life call, something he testifies to 20+ years later in the letter to the Romans: ‘It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.’ (Romans 15:20) Just as Saul had planned to break new ground taking persecution to Christians in Damascus, so God saw, transformed, and then greatly used this pioneering skill for his glory.

If we have a lot of freedom to say yes or no to ‘callings for reason’, and perhaps slightly less but still significant capacity to ignore ‘callings for a season’, it is certainly harder to say no to God when a ‘calling for life’ is concerned. Or rather, we can say no quite a lot, but God usually gets us there in the end! God does have plans for us – ones he doesn’t force upon us, but I think we can all say that we are ‘God’s chosen instrument’ for *something*. I wonder what that would be for you?

Day 40 – Acts 9:17-22 ‘The scales fell’

Wednesday, May 24th, 1738: ‘I think it was about 5:00 this morning that I opened my Testament upon these words, “There are given to us great and exceeding promises, even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature.” Just as I went out I opened it again upon these words, “Thou art not far from the kingdom of God”... In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society on Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine while he was describing the change whereby God works on the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and the assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and He saved me from the law of sin and death.’

This is how John Wesley described his conversion to Christ. Although he had been a minister for some years, he had never fully grasped the deep reality of what Christ had done for him – until May 24th, 1738. Thereafter he became one of the greatest evangelists the world has seen, who changed the culture of our nation and influenced many others besides.

Wesley's conversion is one that resonates for many of us because it is quite ‘normal’. We can marvel at Saul's experience of blinding lights and audible voices from heaven, but perhaps feel a bit distant from it, in that it represents an experience quite outside of our experience. However, what they both have in common is that sense of an ‘awakening’ to God, and an internalisation of truth, so that it is not just something which impacts our intellectual understanding but sits deep in our heart.

When Ananias prays for Saul in today's passage, we read that ‘something like scales fell from Saul's eyes’ (v18), and this may indeed have been a physical sensation. Saul had been afflicted by a temporary blindness, and the cause of this may well have been some sort of actual growth or blockage which covered his eyes, and which was now loosened and released.

Nevertheless, this famous phrase has sunk deep into our culture, and is now used as a way of describing an important moment of realisation. We don't know if this was the exact moment that Saul's heart turned to Christ – I suspect that happened gradually over the three days between his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road and the encounter with Ananias here – but it certainly represented the culmination of Saul's conversion process. Following it, he was baptised, recovered his strength and ‘at once’ (v20) began to preach the very opposite of what he had come to do: the message that Jesus was in fact the Son of God, and the Messiah God's people had longed for.

Many of you reading this may remember a specific moment when ‘the scales fell from your eyes’ with regard to Jesus and God's grace. For others it was a gradual process. Either way, there is always more to learn. Every time God reveals a beautiful new scriptural truth that we hadn't perceived before, *some more scales fall from our eyes*, and we see Jesus more clearly.

May God continue to bless us all with such revelation, and the gift of seeing Jesus clearly, each and every day.

Day 41 – Acts 9:20-30 ‘Barnabas brought him’

Everyone needs a Barnabas in their life. Someone with the gift of encouragement, willing to see the best in people, who in turn become the better people that the encourager sees.

It's not easy to find stories of great encouragers. By definition, they often act out of the spotlight, behind the scenes. One well-known example was showcased in the film 'The King's Speech' – Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Mother) was shown to have played a huge role in supporting and encouraging King George to overcome his stammer, which had always prevented him from being able to speak to the nation.

Another less well-known example is that of Abraham Lincoln's stepmother Sarah Bush, who saw the young Lincoln's love of books and learning, and was the one to encourage him to build his own bookcase, and to light fires in the evening so that he could read and develop the great mind that would one day exercise such a huge influence on his nation.

But the Barnabas of the bible (and today's passage) is perhaps the greatest example we have of this gift. Indeed, his very name means 'Son of Encouragement'. His real name was Joseph, but such was the depth of his gift, it also became the name we all know him by. And here we see the second of four great examples in the book of Acts to the power of this extraordinary gift. Back in chapter 4, we saw Barnabas giving generously to the church, so that it could support those in need. Later in Acts, Barnabas plays a decisive role in the growth of the church in Antioch, and then defends the nurturing into leadership of young John Mark, even to the point of falling out with the man he meets here and who becomes his great friend, Saul (later Paul).

As I read today's passage, I find myself wondering: if I was a member of the church in Jerusalem, and the famous persecutor Saul suddenly turns up, claiming to be a Christian and wanting to join our fellowship, how would I respond? Much as I like to believe that I would choose to see the best in Saul, it's hard for any of us to know exactly how we would react. There would be fear, suspicion, maybe cynicism. People have suffered, and died – can that be forgotten, even if it is forgiven?

'But Barnabas....' (v27) – one of the great phrases in the bible. For all that it would be understandable to be suspicious, one person sees Saul both as he is and also *as he could be*, one person takes a risk to offer unconditional welcome into the community of grace – and that person was Barnabas.

The long-term effect of this was extraordinary. It is possible that Saul's/Paul's history-changing ministry could still have happened regardless – but surely not to the same extent. The fact that Saul/Paul was welcomed at an early stage to the leadership of the early church (thanks to Barnabas) must have played a huge part in the growth and development of his calling.

So, as we give thanks for Barnabas today, let's also take a few moments to give thanks for the encouragers in our lives. Maybe take a moment later today to call them or drop them a quick note to thank them. And, perhaps, you too can be a Barnabas to someone else this week?

Day 42 – Acts 9:31-35 ‘A time of peace’

When I lived in London, one of my favourite moments of the day was the moment I climbed into bed at the end of the day and just... enjoyed the silence. I loved living in London – I was born and brought up there – and I always found the intensity of the experience part of its attraction. I loved the buzz and the bustle, the sense of energy all around. But the moment when I could just lie for a few minutes in a dark bedroom and hear nothing but my own breathing was a beautiful one. The calm after the storm.

‘After the storm...’ would be a good heading for today’s reading. The church has been suffering its first extended period of oppression and even persecution. It had to make radical changes to what it did and how it met: large numbers of Christians had to leave their homes and relocate elsewhere, leaders were targeted and in some cases either imprisoned or murdered. But, eventually, the storm blows itself out: the church stands strong and in one last act of quiet defiance, Saul escapes the plots of his enemies and heads back to his home town (v30).

‘Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria (the South, the North and the Midlands i.e. the whole country) enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened.’ This lovely verse is like the first spring day with a warm sun and a gentle breeze, after the climatic poundings of the end of winter. It lifts the heart, and puts a smile on our face. ‘Living in the fear of the Lord, and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.’ A sure sign that peace was restored is the fact that the apostles – who had stayed in Jerusalem and gone underground – were now able to move about the country freely again, doing good and encouraging believers (verses 33-35).

Many of us probably long for a greater sense of peace in our own nation, or perhaps our own lives. But it struck me as I reflected on the passage that my biggest issue is often that *I don’t recognise times of peace when they come*. There’s something in human nature that tends to forget our blessings and remember our troubles. And the great challenge of life is that times of trouble are inevitable.

But, so are times of peace – and having the capacity to recognise those times for what they are, to give thanks for them, remember them and make the most of them, is one of the wisest and healthiest things we can do.

To some degree, most of us find ourselves in a difficult season at present. This too shall pass. But let’s also apply it at a personal level. The encouragement of this passage is that times of peace always come eventually. Let’s take heart from this truth, especially if this is a time of trouble for you. And, if you happen to find yourself in such a time of peace, give thanks, resolving to treasure it for as long as it lasts. God is the God of the storm, and the calm.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as several mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-5 / 6-8 / 9-11 / 12-14 / 15-17

Day 43 – Acts 9:36-43 ‘In Jesus’ footsteps’

Today’s passage feels like something of an interlude sandwiched between the famous episodes which describe how the gospel takes root among non-Jews (ch10), and the person whom God calls to spearhead this mission in the long-term (Saul/Paul in the rest of ch9). So, of all the stories which Luke could have used, why is it included?

Well, it does serve a very real purpose, one which becomes clear when we think about the story it reminds us of. I wonder if you made that connection as you read it... if not, take a look at Mark 5:35 onwards, and you’ll see that what Peter does here is very close to one of Jesus’ healing miracles.

The connection points are numerous: the person has just died; Jesus/Peter is sent for urgently; there is great collective grief; Jesus/Peter sends everyone out of the room; Jesus/Peter commands healing (noting as a lovely aside that what Jesus says to the girl in Aramaic is ‘Talitha koum’ and what Peter says here is ‘Tabitha koum’!); the dead person is miraculously restored to life.

I think the point that Luke is demonstrating is that Peter is very much a true apostle/representative of Jesus – to the point now that he is able to perform miracles (only in Jesus’ name, of course) just like his Master. And this forms the backdrop to Peter initiating the huge step forward in the mission of the gospel in the very next episode – the final link in the chain, you might say, whereby the good news of this same Jesus is now able to reach the whole world. Up to this point, it was still largely Jewish – from now on, it will spread like wildfire to everyone.

We too, follow in Jesus’ footsteps – perhaps not in the dramatic way described here. But whenever we do something in Jesus’ name, or manifest a spiritual virtue which echoes Jesus’ own life, in our own way we are doing as Peter did, following the Master, being a ‘little Jesus’ – i.e. a Christian. However small or great, it all matters, it is all for God’s glory.

God simply calls us to be faithful – he takes care of the rest. How can you follow in Jesus’ footsteps today?

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Day 44 – Acts 9 ‘The cast’

One final short reflection to end our time in Acts chapter 9. Take a look back at the motley crew assembled in this chapter, whose lives we have briefly encountered over the last few days:

- Saul the fanatic, whose dramatic change channelled his vast energies into work *for* the kingdom of God rather than against it
- Ananias, about whom we know nothing, except that he was faithful in one key moment which changed history
- Barnabas the encourager, always taking every opportunity to bless and build others up
- Peter, now freed from fear and able to do the work of Jesus, just as his Lord had prepared him for
- Aeneas, affected by chronic illness and marvellously freed
- Tabitha/Dorcas, known for her good life, whose life was miraculously extended

It strikes me again how this good news of Jesus really is for everyone, at every stage of life – young or old, healthy or ill, from every walk of life. Jesus meets us where we are, as we are – and changes us.

Maybe one of these characters particularly resonates with you at the moment. Take heart – our God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. If not, just sit with that reflection for a few minutes: this glorious good news is for *all* of us. God meets us where we are, as we are. And maybe ask yourself: what is God changing in you at the moment?

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and shall be forever. Amen.

Day 45 – Acts 10:1-8 ‘A memorial offering’

Shortly before he died, Jesus was approached by a teacher of the law, who asked him which was the greatest commandment. You may remember the story, which you can read in Mark 12:28-34: ‘love God and love your neighbour,’ Jesus replied. The teacher wholeheartedly agreed – at which point Jesus said: ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’

‘Not far from the kingdom.’ I wonder how you interpret Jesus’ reply? Certainly the people listening were unsettled by it: ‘From then on, no-one dared ask [Jesus] any more questions.’ If loving God and neighbour, isn’t quite enough, then what is??

What Jesus meant, I think, is that our good works and religious observance are important, but they can only get us far. They can’t get us all the way into God’s kingdom on their own. We need something more, something which connects us to God directly and makes us whole, which enables us to really love God and neighbour as the Lord intended.

Fast forward a year or two, maybe more, and we come to Cornelius. Cornelius is from a very different background – a Roman soldier, not a Jewish teacher – but in many ways, he is in a similar position to Jesus’ questioner. A good man, devout and God-fearing, known for his generosity and with a personal prayer life (v2). Not far from the kingdom of God....

What’s missing? Cornelius is about to find out. This story will occupy us for the next few days; but it starts with a vision: one in which Cornelius’ good wood works are described as ‘a memorial offering’ (v4). They don’t save him, but they have been noticed in the heavenly realms – and as a result, Cornelius is about to be given the opportunity to experience something which turns out to be immensely important in the history of the church, indeed the history of the whole world.

We will all know people like Cornelius: good people, whose lives bless others. Today’s passage reminds us of two things: first, that a good life is commendable. Much as we all need grace, what Jesus condemns in the Pharisees is pride and hypocrisy, not trying to live a good life. But second, even good people need to meet with God. Cornelius is going to do just that – why not pray today that the Corneliuses you know will do the same? Grace is for all of us.

Day 46 – Acts 10:9-23 ‘God has made clean’

I must confess I only occasionally watch cookery programmes. One, however, that I found very memorable was when Jamie Oliver went on location to Italy. One of the tasks he was set was to kill the animal whose meat he would cook. He found this immensely difficult and upsetting; but also profoundly challenging because, as he admitted, most of us in our culture are insulated from the reality of what eating meat actually involves. As a result, he found the challenge to ‘kill and eat’ horrifying.

Peter faced a similar situation in today’s reading – albeit his horror was for different reasons. As a fisherman in that culture, and very likely a meat-eater too, he would be well used to what was involved in the preparation for meat. His issue was different – all the foods he saw in his dream were unclean according to the Jewish law. Although he was now a follower of Jesus, he remained very much an orthodox Jew – indeed, Jesus was the fulfilment of the law and of Jewish messianic hopes. Hence his blunt reply: ‘Surely not, Lord!’ (v14)

God’s reply to him is remarkable: ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ (v15).

Peter only came to understand the meaning of this later in the story, which we’ll see in a couple of days’ time: but today, let’s marvel in the truth that *our God is in the business of making things clean*. As we sing in one of our favourite hymns: ‘He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace.’

To be forgiven is many things: to be free, to have a new start, to have hope – but also to be *clean*. We may not have done terrible things; but even small wrongs leave a stain. We need washing: and the great news of our faith is that through the cross, God wipes away the stains in our lives. We are clean.

Today, take a moment to say sorry to God, to confess anything that you feel is getting in the way of your connection with him. And then, even more importantly, give thanks that you *are* forgiven, you are free, you are clean. We may not always feel like this – but the reality goes deeper than our feelings. What Peter heard in his dream is true for us too: ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ That’s you, that’s me, that’s us!

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Day 47 – Acts 10:21-26 ‘Only a man myself’

I’m currently reading Robert Harris’ Cicero Trilogy. It’s a brilliant set of books – pretty much as good as historical fiction gets – and, apart from being a gripping page-turner, has given me a real insight into the political culture of ancient Rome. The three novels tell the story of Cicero’s remarkable life, in particular how the Roman Republic crumbled and gave way to the dictatorship of Julius Caesar, who became its Emperor.

At one point in the story, a senior senator is publicly critical of Caesar during a senate sitting. Even though Caesar at this stage was still just another senator – i.e. of no greater rank than his critic – he forced this senator to kneel before him and utter a humiliating apology. It was then that Cicero, and many of his fellow senators, realised that Caesar was not just another ambitious politician: he wanted to dominate, to be the *only* power rather than the primary power – ultimately, he wanted to be worshipped.

Although Caesar met his end, as all despots do, the role and rule of Emperor outlived him, and became the way that the Roman Empire was governed for the next 400 or more years. Fast-forward a hundred years from that scene in the senate house and we get to Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, whose first act on meeting Peter is to fall at his feet in worship. If that sounded surprising to your ears when you read it, since Cornelius was a centurion, i.e. an important man himself, then that story of Caesar humiliating a fellow senator helps to explain it.

The Roman Empire was a very hierarchical society – you had to know your place, or suffer the consequences. The Emperor was worshipped as a god, and therefore in that culture it was entirely natural that anyone who possessed what appeared to be divine power should be treated as worthy of worship. So Cornelius did what he imagined was required...

Peter’s response is blunt: ‘Stand up! I am only a man myself.’ Peter also worshipped a divine human, the Son of God – but this divine human taught something entirely different: ‘whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant... for the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.’

For the follower of Christ, whatever spiritual authority we may have is always held with humility; we are servants of the King, flawed humans who can bless others only by the wonderful grace of our Lord. Peter knew this – and generations of Christian leaders after him have been called to tread the same path. But there are always temptations... Today, let’s pray for all who are called to be shepherds of Christ’s flock, that they may practise the humility of Jesus and Peter. And may we, too, have grace to walk humbly with our God, who alone is worthy of our worship and our praise.

Day 48 – Acts 10:27-35 ‘Against our law?’

Ten years ago we had a week’s holiday in Marrakesh. While we were there, we visited the Jewish Quarter (known in Morocco as a ‘mellah’), and visited their beautiful synagogue. Many years ago the mellah would have been a walled area, with its gates closed at night – partly for protection, and partly to reflect the customs and practices of the Jewish population.

Even today, there are many cities around the world with Jewish Quarters, which are often boundaried with *eruvim* – markers (including wires and cords, not just permanent boundaries like walls and fences) which signify an enclosed area, within which Jewish families are able to travel outside their home on the Sabbath. Indeed, there are 18 such ‘quarters’ in the UK, most of which are in Greater London.

The other practical motivation for creating these quarters are the rules of the Torah (Jewish Law) regarding associating with non-Jews, something which Peter refers to in our passage today. For a devout Jew, visits to non-Jewish homes are forbidden, as is any form of meaningful association. This would have been a lifetime’s practice for Peter, ingrained into him since childhood. Imagine what it must have taken for him to do what he does in this chapter!

It’s easy for us to minimise the radical step Peter takes – but this is revolution. There’s no other word for it: indeed, it changes the world profoundly. From this point, the message of Jesus transforms from being essentially a Jewish sect, into a gospel which is genuinely able to spread into every culture. There have been echoes of this in the Book of Acts so far – the work in Samaria, the meeting of Philip and the Ethiopian official, the mission given to Saul; but now, the primary leader of the early church himself understands fully for the first time: ‘God does not show favouritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.’

Wow! And you can trace a line from this moment in Acts chapter 10 right to you, today, wherever you’re sitting and reading this. You’re only doing that because of what Peter grasped here: that the good news of Jesus truly is for everyone. God can, and does, call each of us, from every background, every culture.

Take a moment today to let that sink in... and be thankful! And, if we’re tempted to think of certain groups of people as being less likely to receive God’s favour, may the Lord grant us all grace to repent of that thought – Jesus died for the whole world, that he might call the whole world. Amen!

Day 49 – Acts 10:36-43 ‘Good news of peace’

If you had a couple of minutes to summarise the good news of Jesus, what would you say? It's a good question, isn't it? What are the key things you'd want to include? And at this point you may want to pause there to think about that....

Today we get to another of Peter's presentations of the message in the book of Acts. We've had previous examples in chapters 2 (vv14-36), 3 (vv12-26), 4 (vv8-12) and 5 (vv28-32) – and it's fascinating to observe how Peter does it each time. There are subtle changes of emphasis to suit his audience, as well as consistent themes, which we also see here in chapter 10: of Jesus' miracles, of his death, of the forgiveness he offers.

What is new, this time, is the summary: 'the good news of peace through Jesus Christ.' It's something we take for granted now, and with the gospels to hand (which of course weren't written when Peter was meeting Cornelius) we can see the angels declaring 'peace on earth' to announce Jesus' arrival, and Jesus speaking 'peace be with you' to his disciples after his resurrection.

What led to Peter's realisation that a fundamental blessing of the gospel is peace? I suspect the answer can be found in his own personal experience of it – as would probably be true for most of us, too. It's interesting to speculate whether Paul (or Saul as he was then) gave him this insight, since it formed the greeting to most of his letters; or that he might particularly have emphasised peace to a Roman soldier!

Either way, it's a wonderful reminder that alongside grace, the good news of Jesus brings peace. Peace with God, peace with others, peace with ourselves. Peter knew this peace; Cornelius was about to. And we, too, can rejoice that what Jesus spoke over his disciples remains true for us today: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.' The peace of the Lord be always with you!

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Day 50 – Acts 10:44-48 ‘A gift for all’

In my younger days I attended many summer camps – first as one of the overall leader’s family, then as a ‘happy camper’ in my own right, and finally as a leader myself. Probably the most memorable was in 1995, when I helped lead a camp for 12-15 year olds. The first half of the week was probably the worst camp I’d ever done: we were understaffed, we had real behavioural issues – eventually sending one boy home, the only time in my experience that this happened – the chaplain got up and gave the same talk every evening, and then we had a serious accident at the swimming pool where a boy broke a bone in his foot and was taken to A&E.

When the hospital party returned to camp, the boy (now with his foot in plaster) asked the chaplain to pray for him while the rest of us organised our usual mid-afternoon activities. All I do remember is that 20 minutes later this same boy was running round the camp. No plaster, no more foot trouble – he had been spontaneously healed after the chaplain had prayed a prayer asking for this to happen in Jesus’ name.

As you can imagine, the whole atmosphere in the camp changed. God had done something amazing. Suddenly the chaplain’s talk – still the same every evening! – was listened to with rapt attention. Other people wanted to be prayed for. Many experienced God in powerful ways – myself included. By the end of the week, half the camp had decided to follow Christ. What started as the worst camp had become the best.

What made the difference? The same thing that we read here in this passage: *the tangible presence of God at work by his Holy Spirit*. The pouring out of God’s Spirit in the world – which began the Book of Acts – continues to be the thing that activates and energises the church. Peter had already seen it in his vision (vv10-16), and in the miraculous arrival of Cornelius’ messengers (vv19-22). Now, the Spirit comes on all his listeners (v44) even before he asks for it!

Jesus is not just true – he’s real. And his love in our hearts is not just a doctrine, it’s a lived experience. We don’t always feel things as dramatically as Cornelius and his friends did here – but the transforming power of Jesus’ love in our lives is still at work nonetheless. ‘God does not show favouritism,’ Peter concludes – and this wonderful promise is one to lift our hearts today, because it reminds us of that simple but profound truth that *these same gifts, this same love, is for all of us too*.

Let’s claim that promise – and may God cause our hearts to overflow with praise and thanksgiving again.

Lord Jesus, come to me again by your Spirit. Thank you that your love is poured out for all – I gladly receive it now. Fill my heart, and renew my life this day. Amen.

Day 51 – Acts 11:1-18 ‘Pass it on’

It's always great to hear stories of what God is doing. As we observed last time, our faith is not just a firm belief in a set of doctrines, it's a lived experience. And part of this experience is to pass it on. Testimonies encourage us because they demonstrate the reality of what we believe – they earth it in real peoples' lives. If it happened to them, we think, it can happen to us. God really does answer prayer, change lives, renew situations.

Testimony also has a role in shaping the wisdom of the church. We have to be careful here: God never contradicts his Word, so that is a basic test we should never forget. But, assuming there's no conflict with biblical truth, then Jesus' basic maxim that we can know something by its fruit becomes significant. What is God blessing? Seeing God at work helps us to discern the mind of our Lord.

This is certainly at the heart of today's passage. The early church is still in formation: there has been so much change, so many amazing things God has done, the human beings tasked with leading this radical movement are still trying to catch up. Yes, they know Jesus is Lord; yes, they know God's plan of salvation has been enacted through the death and resurrection of Jesus; yes, they also know that faith in Jesus is the new entry point into becoming part of God's people.

But how do those who have traditionally been outside that chosen group fit into it? In the past, non-Jews could become proselytes, and join the people of God (through baptism, interestingly) in a limited way. They were never fully integrated or seen as 'full members'. But Peter has just glimpsed that God's plan might be way bigger and more comprehensive than even he had grasped; and now he is being called on by his fellow leaders to explain himself.

In short, Peter has to take his fellow church leaders on the same 'spiritual journey' that he has just undergone. He could have done it through detailed exposition of the scriptures – and the time would come when the early church leaders (notably Paul, but also Peter) would put in writing the theological framework which explained what Peter had just experienced. But, here, in the first instance, when faced with the hard questions of his friends, Peter does it through *the power of testimony*. God's activity in Cornelius' house is, if you like, a powerful visual doctrinal statement. God's plan to save the whole world – non-Jews every bit as much as God's chosen people – has been visibly demonstrated through what Peter saw in Cornelius' house.

It's notable that Peter *also* backs up this experience with God's Word: quoting Jesus' teaching on baptism. The disciples had long known these words – but Peter's testimony brought those words to life, demonstrated the life-changing and life-giving truth of them. And the effect was profound: the other church leaders were convinced (v18), and the whole understanding of the nature of the gospel and its relationship to the whole world changed forever.

It's a wonderful reminder of the power of stories, of testimony. We still need such testimonies today. If you have a story to share, pass it on. If you don't, may the Lord bring you a story this week to encourage you. Let's all keep passing it on: for the lifting of our faith and, most of all, the glory of God.

Day 52 – Acts 11:19-21 ‘Spreading the word’

‘God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.’ So begins a famous hymn of William Cowper. Less well-known is the fact that he wrote it shortly after one of the darkest seasons in his life, culminating in a suicide attempt. Thankfully, Cowper survived and this hymn (originally a poem titled ‘Conflict: Light out of Darkness’) represents part of his reflection on this turbulent season. Once you know the background, then the words of verse 3 take on a particular resonance: ‘Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.’

The mysterious movings of God are similarly showcased in today’s passage. It may be short, but its implications are enormous and profound. Let’s return briefly to chapter 8: (v1,v4) ‘On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria... Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.’ We observed a few weeks ago that the attempt to crush the church completely backfired: those who were scattered took the good news with them, and the end result was only to *grow* the church!

Today’s passage is not so much a post-script to this event, but effectively the start of a new season in the church’s life. Now that the leadership has embraced the bombshell that the gospel is equally open to everyone, we start to see its effects in practice, beginning with the ‘what happened next’ of the scattering that took place after the first big wave of persecutions. In chapter 8, this scattering only got as far as Samaria (now central Israel). Today we learn that it actually went far further than that: to ‘Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch.’ (v19) These are all further north than Samaria – in the case of Antioch, a good 300 miles further north.

Even more amazingly, the mission was already reaching Gentiles (non-Jews), led by people from even further afield: not just Cyprus (the island more or less opposite Antioch) but also Cyrene (v20), which is in North Africa, about 400 miles across the Mediterranean Sea! It is tantalising to wonder if one of these missionaries was Simon, the man who carried Jesus’ cross – pure speculation, but perhaps one of those ‘mysterious ways’ of the Lord?

Either way, the good news is now dramatically breaking the banks of the existing river of grace and flooding into the world. What can sometimes just sound like dry placenames on a map are in fact indicators of a mighty move of God: ‘The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.’ (v21)

We’ll see in due course how Antioch becomes a centre of mission – but today, let’s give thanks for those mysterious ways. Why not google the text of the hymn and use that as a prayer? Perhaps, especially verse 5: ‘His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding ev’ry hour; the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flow’r.’ For any of us walking through dark seasons, may that word bring comfort, hope and light.

Day 53 – Acts 11:22-26 ‘The power of encouragement’

Today we meet again one of the quiet heroes of the bible: Barnabas. You may remember his previous appearances in the book of Acts: in chapter 4 he made a generous gift to support the work of the church (4:36-37); then, in chapter 9, he was the chap who – when the Church was (understandably) nervous about whether Saul really had become a believer, or was just pretending to be one, in order to wreak more havoc – had the courage and faith to reach out and embrace Saul, and welcome him into the fellowship of followers of Jesus Christ (9:26-28).

As I observed then, we all need a Barnabas in our lives. And, we can perhaps ask ourselves today, can we be a Barnabas to others? In this short passage, Barnabas does two exceptional things, thanks to his God-given ability to discern the best in people: first, he is trusted by the ‘home church’ of Jerusalem to go and see what God was doing in Antioch (v22). The fact that they sent Barnabas is not only a measure of the trust they placed in him; it also (more negatively) suggests that they were suspicious, so they wanted to get their best evaluator out there. Either way, Barnabas proved the right choice: he observed the wonderful work of the Lord at first hand (v23) and was able to give it his (and the wider church’s) blessing.

That was the ‘organisational’ part. Now for the personal part – and for someone like Barnabas, you sense it was always first and foremost about people, and what God was up to in individuals: he went and found Saul in his home town of Tarsus (about 100 miles from Antioch), and gave him an opportunity to put his remarkable gifts to good use.

At first sight, this makes good sense: Barnabas spent time with Saul in Jerusalem, so would have seen that his gifts would be a good ‘fit’ for the great mission opportunity growing in Antioch. Second, Tarsus isn’t that far from Antioch, given the quality of Roman roads. However, what makes this much more impressive is that Saul’s visit to Jerusalem was a long time ago: from the letter to the Galatians we know it was at least ten years previously. In that time, Saul had apparently been very quiet – even Saul/Paul himself said very little about what he had done in that time – see Galatians 1:21.

And yet Barnabas saw something... and remembered... and then took the initiative to seek Saul out. The results were spectacular: for a year together they ‘taught great numbers of people.’ (v26) This year launched Saul’s/Paul’s ministry and set the scene for all the great missional activity to follow.

And whilst Saul/Paul rightly gets the attention for his extraordinary life, today let’s celebrate the person who was instrumental in making it happen; someone who gets one of the great summaries in the bible, one that I think most of us would love to have said about us, if our life was encapsulated in just a few words: (v24) ‘he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.’

May the Lord stir up more Barnabases among us! Could that be you?

Day 54 – Acts 11:25-26 ‘The first “Christians”?’

When people ask what you are, or what you believe, what do you say? It’s an interesting question. Assuming that we can admit that we have a faith (and that’s the first big hurdle to cross!), then what we say next carries a lot of weight, and can be interpreted differently, according to the words we use: it might be ‘I’m religious’ or ‘I’m a churchgoer’ or ‘I’m a believer’ or ‘I’m a follower of Jesus’ – perhaps most likely you would say ‘I’m a Christian’.

I wonder, though, if you’ve ever thought where that word ‘Christian’ comes from? It’s not as obvious as you might think. The first believers were all Jewish and were known as ‘followers of The Way’: a name that echoes *halakha*, the ‘way of life’ enshrined in the Torah, as well as Jesus’ own testimony that he was ‘the way’ to God the Father.

As the gospel spread further and wider, however, the Jewish roots of this idea of The Way became less accessible to the large numbers of Gentiles (non-Jews) now turning to Christ. As we saw on Tuesday, this was particularly marked in Antioch, a thriving city with a population of at least 100,000 (and possibly several times that) – much bigger than Jerusalem, whose resident population at the time was about 25-30,000.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Antioch became the crucible of change; or, you could say, first reflected the broader changes happening across the early church – the most striking of which was the very name given to this movement. From this point on, followers of Jesus began to be known as ‘Christians’ (v26).

Nowadays we take this for granted, and in our culture the word covers a huge spectrum of meaning: from a nominal cultural attachment to our historic religious heritage through to committed belief and practice. Indeed, in Muslim countries, believers never use this word as it carries unhelpful cultural baggage; they much prefer to be known as ‘followers of Jesus’ (or ‘Isa’, as his name translates in Arabic).

But today, let’s go back to the heart: the word Christian literally means ‘little Christ’. In other words, we identify so completely with our Lord and Saviour that we live as he lives, love as he loves and do what he does. That’s quite a calling, isn’t it? (A bit more taxing than just getting baptised, married and buried in church!) It’s also a wonderful privilege; whilst we’ll never fully embody that calling, we can still carry that name through grace, because our gracious Lord gives His Spirit to all who confess His name. In that spiritual sense, every Christian is a little Christ, because we bear the divine imprint, the Spirit of our Lord.

Today, let’s give thanks that we bear His name. And may the Lord grant us grace to be ‘little Christs’, as far as we can, for His glory.

Day 55 – Acts 11:27-30 ‘Gifts in action’

Yesterday we learnt (or reminded ourselves) that the word ‘Christian’ means ‘little Christ’. Those who follow Jesus are called, ultimately, to reflect the image of our Saviour as best we can, empowered by His Spirit: living as he lives, loving as he loves and doing what he does.

In that vein, although today’s passage at first sight appears to be a couple of short bits of ‘news’ enclosed within the broader sweep of the narrative, a closer inspection reveals that it is very much linked to the previous verse. What does it mean to be a ‘little Christ’?

‘Lots of things,’ would be the immediate reply – but certainly one of those things would be the use of gifts. In fact, we see two types of gifts in these verses: the exercise of spiritual gifts (vv27-28), and the collection and distribution of financial gifts (vv29-30). Both reflect the heart of our Saviour, and therefore demonstrate admirably what it means to be a ‘little Jesus’.

First, then we see a reference to a group of prophets. The word prophet literally means ‘mouth’, and the capacity to hear and to speak God’s will for a specific purpose has been part of the gifting of the church (and not just Old Testament times) since the very beginning, mentioned several times in Paul’s letters – and here is a very practical example of that. A rather sobering prophecy, it has to be admitted; especially as it sadly came true.

Second, we see the first indication that the churches in Judea (southern Israel, including the area around Jerusalem) were under particular duress. We might have inferred as much from the persecution that started in Jerusalem in chapters 7-8; but today’s passage makes it clear that this persecution led, among other things, to genuine hardship. Gifts were therefore collected from other churches – in this case, Antioch – and sent to relieve this hardship.

This did, in fact, become a regular feature of life in the early church. Collections were organised regularly, especially for Christians in Judea, and were then taken by church leaders and distributed to fellow believers in need – see, for example, 2 Corinthians 8-9. This kind of generosity was both radical and unique. Whilst the Jewish law advocated for relief of the poor, this was practised at a local level; it was almost unheard of for collections like this to be given and transported hundreds of miles to complete strangers. In that sense, this little passage today is nothing less than another ‘quiet revolution’, which left its imprint on human history and society.

It is, also, a very practical outworking of the reality that each of us is a ‘little Christ’ – we may be strangers in a human sense, but, thanks to Jesus, we share something profound and indivisible; we are bound together for eternity. As the early church began to grasp the enormity of this in Antioch, so it remains true for us now. The Lord calls each of us to ‘gifts in action’ – to all in need, yes, but especially to our fellow believers. Which ‘little Christs’ are you being called to bless today?

Day 56 – Acts 12:1-3 ‘Like father, like (grand)son?’

At a recent quiz night, we were set this question: who is the most famous baddie of all time? If you asked 100 people in the street, the answer is, apparently, Darth Vader. These are, of course fictional baddies, but if you were to ask 100 Christians who is the most famous baddie in the bible, I wonder what you would answer? I imagine many would give the name of the character we meet today: Herod.

Herod is a name synonymous with corrupt power: whether it's interrogating the Magi and killing children in the Nativity story, beheading John the Baptist or cosying up to Pilate before Jesus' execution, he's always up to no good. At which point, we must ask a necessary question: *which* Herod? As it happens, the New Testament has no less than four different Herods in the story – all related, and mostly all as bad as each other.

First, there's old Herod the Great (not my nickname), the despot who tyrannised Jerusalem when Jesus was born. He was then replaced by one of his sons – one of those he didn't suspect of trying to take his place and subsequently murder – Archelaus, who records himself as 'Herod the Ethnarch' on his coins. Actually the bible doesn't record anything negative about him – but don't be fooled, he was arguably the worst of the lot! (and was fittingly deposed after ten years of repressive rule.)

By the time we get to Jesus' public ministry, the Herod now being referred to in the gospels is Herod the Tetrarch. He's another surviving son of Herod the Great, and is the one who conferred with Pilate when Jesus was arrested and regularly listened to John the Baptist... before he killed him. As it happens, this Herod got his come-uppance: the father of the wife he divorced to marry Herodias (the scandal for which John criticised him publicly) was none too happy and eventually went to war with him, defeating him heavily and forcing him off the throne and into exile. The Jewish historian Josephus records that many people regarded his defeat as divine retribution for killing the Baptist. You can make up your own mind on that one.

And so, we get to the fourth Herod – Herod Agrippa – the one we meet today. Not that anything has changed: he is still scheming (v1, v3) and slaughtering (v2), just like his grandfather Herod the Great and his two uncles the Ethnarch and the Tetrarch. With the Herods of biblical Palestine, it's very much a case of like father, like son (or grandson).

We'll see how chapter 12 unfolds over the next few days (and it's quite a story) – but today, let's remember that there is another biblical version of 'like father, like son'. The version where the Heavenly Father sends a righteous Son to show us what He is really like, and to draw all His wayward children back into His family. The version where the Son is not only exactly like the Father, but gives all his new spiritual siblings the power to become like the Father, too. This is our version – and as we begin this week, give thanks that the Son really is just like the Father, and commit your way into his grace-filled hands. May we bear the family likeness this day, and this week. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as several mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-5 / 6-8 / 9-11 / 12-14 / 15-17

Day 57 – Acts 12:1-5 ‘Politics, persecution and prayer’

I come from a church tradition where every good sermon has three points beginning with P – and sometimes it’s good to return to your roots! Just be thankful I didn’t add Peter, Passover and Public Trial as well, or you’d have had a 6-pointer today...

As we observed yesterday, chapter 12 sees the re-appearance of a notorious name in the scriptures: Herod. Unlike his predecessors, this Herod (Agrippa) was popular with the majority of Jewish people, because his mother was a Hasmonaean – these were the rulers of Judea before Herod the Great and were related to Judas Maccabeus, the great Jewish hero of the second century BC.

Politically astute as ever, Herod Agrippa saw an opportunity to gain popularity by turning on the early Christians. The timing is significant: the fact that the gospel was now spreading rapidly among non-Jews – and that church leaders were openly fraternising with Gentiles – would have caused concern among the populace. It was also Passover time – the greatest celebration in the Jewish year, and the time when Jesus was arrested and executed. Herod saw a chance to gain further favour with his subjects; I doubt very much that he was bothered with questions of belief and practice, as the Pharisees and High Priests in the ruling council had been earlier in Acts. This was about politics and power.

But it led to a fresh wave of persecution, on this occasion costing the life of one of the ‘Big Three’. Peter, James and John were Jesus’ inner circle – and now James was martyred (v2), to the approval of the general public (v3). This spurred Herod on to seize Peter as well; the situation looked grim for the fragile Jesus movement, especially in its ‘spiritual home’ of Jerusalem.

But human power had reckoned without one thing, the thing that brings an even greater Power to bear in any situation: prayer. ‘The church was earnestly praying to God for [Peter].’ (v5) Later, in one of his letters, St Paul put it like this: ‘The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.’ (2 Corinthians 10:4)

Tomorrow we’ll see how this particular ‘stronghold’ was demolished. But today, let’s seize faith to remind ourselves of the power of prayer. As the old hymn declares – and may it inspire us today: ‘Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged: take it to the Lord in prayer! ...In His arms he’ll take and shield thee, thou wilt find a solace there.’ Amen.

Day 58 – Acts 12:6-11 ‘The Lord’s rescue’

During the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in 1960, missionaries Matt and Lora Higgins were returning on the night of 23rd March to Nairobi through the heart of Mau Mau territory, where Kenyans and missionaries alike had been killed. Seventeen miles outside of Nairobi their Land Rover stopped. Higgins tried to repair the car in the dark, but could not restart it. They spent the night in the car, but claimed Psalm 4:8: "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." In the morning, they were able to repair their car.

A few weeks later the Higgins’ returned to America on furlough. They reported that the night before they left Nairobi, a local pastor had visited them. He told how a member of the Mau Mau had confessed that he and three others had crept up to the car to kill the Higgins’, but when they saw sixteen men surrounding the car, the Mau Mau left in fear. "Sixteen men?" Higgins responded. "I don't know what you mean!"

While they were on furlough a friend, Clay Brent, asked the Higgins’ if they have been in any danger recently. Higgins asked, "Why?" Then Clay said that on 23rd March, God had placed a heavy prayer burden on his heart. He called the members of the church, and sixteen of them met together and prayed until the burden lifted.

What a remarkable story! And such stories are more common than you might think, even today. If you believe in the existence of the spiritual world, and that this world interacts with the physical world; similarly, if you believe that the Lord Jesus Christ has legions of angels at his command, as he himself testified (Matthew 26:53), and that he exercises his authority to bless his people, the church (Ephesians 1:22)... then why not?

Today, we see God’s miraculous intervention in Peter’s dire situation. Facing trial and likely execution – like his close friend James (v2) – Peter is languishing in prison, guarded round-the-clock by a very different group of 16 men, this time members of the Herodian guard (v4). ‘Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared...’ (v7) What happens next is extraordinary, but bears the unmistakable ring of truth: Peter humbly admits that initially he had no idea what was happening (v9); there are also key details (‘first and second guards... iron gate... when they had walked the length of one street’) which indicate a reliable first-hand account.

Ultimately, the greatest indicator of its veracity is that Peter was clearly in prison under armed guard... and then he clearly wasn’t. As with the resurrection narrative, if you want to construct an alternative version you have to work out how Jesus got away from the tomb and the soldiers, when everyone else had either fled or was in hiding.

Our God reigns! That is ultimately the good news of our passage today. God heard the prayers of his people, and intervened to save Peter. We, too, will have stories of answered prayer: perhaps not as dramatic as this one (or Matt and Lora Higgins), but no less real. Why not take a few moments to remind yourselves of prayers which the Lord has answered for you – and may that give you faith and courage to keep praying, especially for those who most need our prayers today.

Day 59 – Acts 12:12-17 ‘More than we can imagine’

I’m glad prayer isn’t a slot machine – imagine if you only ever got exactly what you asked for, no more and no less? Whilst it’s good and right to pray according to our level of faith, God is not a miser, he often does ‘more than all we ask or imagine’ (Ephesians 3:20)

Today’s passage is a case in point. We pick up our story as Peter finds himself miraculously outside the prison walls late at night, unharmed but vulnerable. He needs refuge: so, he heads for the home of a well-known Christian family. It’s possible that this was itself divinely inspired, as there must have been many such places he could have chosen – it is, though, exactly the right place to choose, as there was a prayer meeting going on, just for him.

Peter knocks, and the household servant – a young woman called Rhoda – goes to the door. What happens next bears distinct echoes of the sort of holy confusion which surrounded the dramatic events of Easter morning. First, Rhoda is so surprised that she forgets to actually open the door and let Peter in! Then the assembled masses of the faithful don’t believe that it could really be Peter – much like the disciples who heard the wonderful news of the resurrection: ‘You’re out of your mind!’ (see Luke 24:11 for comparison). When she kept insisting, they wondered if it could be an angel rather than Peter himself.

What is fascinating in all this is that, despite praying all night for Peter, they didn’t believe he could actually be released – but God did it anyway. My guess is that they were praying for strength for Peter and acquittal at the forthcoming trial; but the Lord did so much more than they asked or imagined. The Lord set Peter free.

Eventually the message got through, and Peter was able to share his amazing story. He didn’t stay long – no doubt he was heading somewhere safer, until the Passover was over and life settled down. But can you imagine the joyful prayers and praises of this meeting after he’d gone! (By the way, the James mentioned in v17, is probably Jesus’ blood (half-)brother, who is by now a major leader in the early church, and who we’ll meet in detail in ch15.)

God is bigger than our faith. We might only have a ‘mustard seed’ – but in the kingdom of Jesus, that is enough. We may not be praying into the sort of crisis we see in this passage, but the principle remains the same. May the Lord grant us all grace to keep praying faithfully for whatever is on our hearts, trusting in the great God who can do ‘more than all we ask or imagine.’ Amen.

Day 60 – Acts 12:18-24 ‘The appointed day’

A couple of weeks ago, we went for a long walk at Stowe – a lovely area of parkland near Buckingham designed by Capability Brown, at the heart of which is an enormous stately home, now a famous school. But it wasn't always a school – in years gone by it was the home of the Dukes of Buckingham. In fact, one of the reasons it's a school *now* goes back to the time of the 2nd Duke, the hubristically named Richard Temple-Nugent-Brydges-Chandos-Grenville. Richard was something of a wild character, and also immensely ambitious. Succeeding his father in 1839 with a vast estate and one of the largest incomes in the country, like many of the nobility, he was desperate for Stowe to host a royal visit. This he finally achieved in 1845, when Queen Victoria came to stay.

It was, however, to prove his undoing. Duke Richard spent so much money upgrading what was already a massive and marvellous residence to show off to the monarch that he bankrupted the estate. His financial ruin in 1847 caused a national scandal. He just about kept hold of Stowe by selling his other estate in Somerset and auctioning off the contents of Stowe itself, but it was downhill all the way from there.

Power corrupts. History is littered with stories of the proud and powerful who got their come-uppance, whose hubris came back to haunt them. The great temptation that the serpent offered Adam and Eve was to become like God, if only they would eat that lovely piece of fruit. This sobering tale lies at the heart of the human condition, and we see it manifested everywhere, today as much as ever. Even rulers who start with good intentions often find themselves absorbed by the trappings of politics and power.

In chapter 12 of Acts, two types of power come up against each other – on the one hand there is brute human force and political intrigue; on the other, the power of the Holy Spirit, the divine agency which works like a mustard seed until all the birds of the air perch in its branches. The two central characters in this tale are Peter and King Herod: we've already seen how Peter was miraculously freed – but what happens to Herod?

Initially Herod carries on as you would expect, ruling through force and finery. The guards who 'lost' Peter are brutally executed (vv18-19) – the most corrupting quality of power is that it dehumanises people, life becomes cheap and expendable (as long as it is other peoples' lives). He then goes on a political tour (vv19-20), signing a deal with an impoverished region, whose populace laud him as 'a god, not... a man' (v22).

But little did Herod know that his 'appointed day' (v21) was not for deification, but death. He had some sort of acute illness – possibly a parasitic worm infection – and met his end. What is interesting is that our author Luke – who, bear in mind, was a doctor, so had a much better working knowledge of the body than most people – is sure that this is not just a medical condition but a divine judgement. Like King Nebuchadnezzar in the time of Daniel, Herod had chances to see the kingdom of God and to change his life; but, unlike old King Neb, he hadn't taken the warning.

It is a sobering tale, and a healthy reminder of the folly of chasing wealth and power without God. But Luke's postscript is important: (v24) 'But the word of God continued to spread and to flourish.' The ultimate message of Acts chapter 12 is that nothing can stop the kingdom of God. Or as St Paul wrote later: 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' Today, give thanks that we love and worship a God whose kingdom will always, ultimately, prevail. May that kingdom continue to flourish in us, and through us. Amen.

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Day 61 – Acts 12:24-25 ‘Hidden depths’

If you have time, then the whole section I’m referencing today is Acts 11:19-13:4

Most of us who follow Jesus believe that the Bible is the Word of God – and rightly so. It’s what it says about itself, numerous times, and many have experienced its power: often something we read hits us between the eyes, and we know that this is not just a human author speaking to us.

The bible is also an ancient text, and whilst our culture is fascinated by all things ancient, many of us also consciously or unconsciously buy in to the modern myth that ancient societies were necessarily more primitive. We might bristle at the sort of comment historian Diarmuid MacCulloch made in a newspaper interview last month – that the bible is a kind of “cacophonous library of competing voices; how anyone could have mistaken it for the word of God baffles me” – and yet we feel quietly uneasy that at some level MacCulloch might be right. Or at the very least that to openly declare our conviction in the beauty and power of the bible is to invite criticism for being naïve or even ignorant.

It’s good to remind ourselves, then, that the bible is a much more complex piece of writing, and often more expertly written, than modern commentators give it credit for. Ancient people were not stupid, nor were those early church leaders who compiled scripture. Take this section of Acts we’re currently exploring, for instance: if we take a brief pause from looking at it in a devotional way, and analyse it as a piece of writing, we discover a highly structured, even symmetrical account.

Take a look at 11:19 to 13:4 in this way, and what you see is this:

(a) Spreading the word / (b) Barnabas and Saul / (c) Prophets / (d) Gift – outward journey sending / (e) Herod / (f) James / (g) Peter / (h) angel / (i) the praying church (*the centre point* – unlikely to be a coincidence!) / (h) ‘it must be his angel’ / (g) Peter / (f) ‘Tell James’ / (e) Herod / (d) Gift – return journey / (c) Prophets / (b) Barnabas and Saul / (a) Spreading the word

Isn’t that brilliant? Hardly any of us notice this when we read it – it’s not dry or self-consciously ‘clever’; in fact, at surface level, it’s a very exciting story, that keeps us gripped. But there is so much going on under the surface! And the structure supports the central themes: the story of the early church begins and ends with mission, and at the heart of what enables this mission is prayer!

We see this kind of literary flourish in small ways too: for example, take the fact that we’re about to meet Mark – the author of the gospel – who plays an unfortunate role in the next part of the story; so, before we get there, Luke even has the time to introduce him briefly in 11:12, so that we know who he’s talking about in today’s short version of the passage (12:25).

The brilliance of scripture ultimately points us to the brilliance of the living Word: Jesus himself. Or, as the great Christian writer, Dallas Willard, puts it: Jesus ‘is not just nice, he is brilliant. He is the smartest man who ever lived. He is now supervising the entire course of world history (Rev 1:5) while simultaneously preparing the rest of the universe for our future role in it (John 14:2).’

May the Lord continue to grow our trust in his awesome word, and in the One behind it. And may that cause us to pray with renewed faith and hope today for all that is on our hearts. God’s word never returns to Him empty, but achieves the purpose for which He sends it. Amen!

Day 62 – Acts 12:25-13:3 ‘Set apart for me’

‘And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ So Jesus commissioned his followers at the beginning of the Book of Acts, and thus far the gospel has spread beyond Jerusalem, and throughout Judea and Samaria; it has an important new base in Antioch north of Samaria – but it is yet to spread intentionally ‘to the ends of the earth.’

Today’s reading is the critical moment when that next, huge step is taken. As we saw in chapter 11, the church in Antioch was thriving – and we return to them (with Barnabas and Saul) in chapter 13, to find them worshipping and fasting. In this lovely snapshot, we also discover the cultural and ethnic diversity the church was already becoming known for: Barnabas was a Jew from Cyprus; Simeon called Niger was almost certainly a black African; Lucius was also from North Africa; Manaen had been raised in the royal court; and Saul was a well-educated rabbi from modern day Turkey – and here they all were, in Antioch, worshipping together. It’s a wonderful image of the global family of God, which Jesus came to redeem.

No surprise, perhaps, that it is to this diverse group that the Lord speaks the critical word which decisively takes the message of Jesus into new territories and new peoples. They are a microcosm of the mission the Lord has in mind; and the Lord calls two particular people to be agents of this task. We already know from Saul’s conversion in chapter 9 that this was the Lord’s call on his life: but now the timing is right as well. His great friend and mentor Barnabas is the perfect person to journey with him: as is so often the case in the Lord’s work, while this is very much a step into the unknown, it is not a leap in the dark – these two have known each other for years and work well together.

In that sense, this is both a call by the Spirit and also by the church, who commissioned them and sent them on their way with their blessing.

Over the next two chapters, we’ll see how this first ‘missionary journey’ unfolded – but today, let’s give thanks for the Lord’s call on each of our lives. It may not be on the scale of Barnabas and Saul, but every call matters – we all have work to which the Lord calls us.

And let’s also pray for those with the great task of spreading the good news of Jesus. They are ‘set apart’ in a very particular sense – and they continue to need our prayers today, as much as they did in the early church.

Day 63 – Acts 13:4-12 ‘Faith demonstrated’

What causes someone to believe in Jesus? It’s a more complex question than it appears. The simplest answer is that we hear the message and respond. And at one level that is often true: I can remember the date I did so for the first time in a meaningful way: 25th July 1982. My dad was preaching on the famous meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus in John chapter 3, and I understood what it meant for the first time.

But, if that was the ‘tipping point’, a whole lot of other things worked towards that point. I was blessed to be born to Christian parents, who taught me about Jesus from a young age. No doubt there were people praying for me. I had friends at church – even if the main way I wanted to relate to them as a child was to play football with them in the church hall afterwards! As the years went on, I also saw answers to prayer, even the occasional miracle; I met other inspiring Christians, and I saw God at work in my life: it all contributed to what we call ‘faith’ – or perhaps trust would be a better word, since that is faith in action.

Today’s passage is a great example of how God uses not just words, but actions and circumstances to lead someone to faith. The kingdom is both taught *and* demonstrated. Faith is backed up by a miracle which proves the truth of what Saul and Barnabas are teaching.

It’s a great start to the mission journey which begins in this passage. Saul and Barnabas leave Antioch and head for the nearest port, which takes them to Cyprus – a good place to begin, as it’s Barnabas’ home island, so it is familiar territory. (This also suggests that the gospel has already started to be preached there.) As becomes their usual practice, they start by preaching the message to Jews, with opportunities to do so in the local synagogues (v5).

Word spreads, and they get to meet the island’s governor, who is a Gentile, but is obviously spiritually engaged, and actively seeks to hear the message (v7). At this point, Barnabas and Saul meet their first real opposition (there’s lots more to come!), in the shape of a sorcerer, whose privileged access to the governor is threatened by the Christians’ message. In reply, Saul demonstrates the power of the name of Jesus by declaring a judgement on the sorcerer (vv10-11).

If this makes us a little uncomfortable, we need to remember that the stakes are high. This is the first test of the message, and the spiritual battle is real. Most cultures are far more attuned to this than we are in the West. And the judgment was only temporary – but its effect was awesome: the governor came to faith (v12). But let’s note *why* he believed: ‘he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.’ Word and deed went hand in hand. Saul’s authority is not a spiritual circus act – rather it proves the truth of what he is saying. Sergius Paulus both heard *and* saw, at a moment when he was open spiritually.

God is at work in all of us, in multiple ways – through words, through actions, through the witness of friends, through answered prayer, through the circumstances of our life. God weaves it all together. We hear the message taught and see it demonstrated. Today, give thanks that God is at work in you – and pray in faith to learn, and see, more this week. Amen.

Day 64 – Acts 13:13-16 ‘The God of second chances’

Our God is the God of second chances. And third, fourth, fifth and tenth chances, for that matter. Perhaps you have direct experience of this – most of us do, or, at the very least, are conscious of God’s endless patience with our foibles! Today’s passage, though, gives us a great and somewhat unexpected example of this – albeit not directly in the passage itself.

You may recall a few readings ago that we first met John, also called Mark – it was his mum’s house in Jerusalem to which Peter headed after his miraculous escape from prison (12:12). So, we learn from this that Mark was part of a well-known Christian family, who were prominent in the early church.

Fast-forward a short while and we learn that Mark accompanies Saul and Barnabas from Jerusalem on their journey back to Antioch. Perhaps he was inspired by what he saw with Peter’s escape, perhaps he is just keen to grow in his faith – either way, he is young and sufficiently well thought of to get a special assignment, shadowing two of the most capable and celebrated leaders in the young Jesus movement.

From Antioch Mark journeys with them to Cyprus on the first leg of their mission journey. However, at this point – and at the start of today’s passage – we learn that, sadly, he returns to Jerusalem as soon as they set foot on the mainland again (v13). We don’t know what happened: he may have been homesick; he may have realised that his gifts were not ideally suited to the sort of full-on evangelism required for this journey; it may have been illness; or there may have been a clash of characters – certainly Saul was not keen to have Mark back – something we’ll see later in the story.

Our author, Luke, is not about to let us know why – quite rightly, he simply mentions it in passing. But the good news is that this is not the end of the story. For this John, also called Mark, is the author of the second gospel. It turns out that God did have a big role for Mark in the story of the Jesus movement after all.

The bible is full of people who got second chances, including some of the greatest characters of all: Moses, Peter... and here, Mark. No mishap or failure puts us beyond God’s love – in the kingdom of Jesus, every setback can be made whole. God is well able to use flawed people like us!

Give thanks that God did this with Mark. And this God is the same yesterday, today and forever – he doesn’t change. God is the God of second chances for all of us. Give thanks for your ‘second chances’ today. And if you’re conscious of having let God down in some way, seize faith and hope – this message is for you. God can work all things for good, and redeem every situation. Amen.

Day 65 – Acts 13:13-25 ‘The God of his people’

Today we get the chance to hear St Paul (and he’s now called Paul from this point, not Saul) deliver a sermon. We’ve seen his extraordinary journey from persecutor of Christians at the start of chapter 8, through his conversion in chapter 9 to his growing role in the leadership of the church. And from chapter 13, he becomes the central character in the story, rather than Peter, who was the key figure up to chapter 12.

What’s interesting about this first sermon that Luke records (there will have been many before it, but this is the first one that gets a chapter in the bible!) is that Paul preaches it to a Jewish audience. This is the great apostle to non-Jews – but here he is speaking to his own people. And if you compare this sermon with the one in chapter 17, which he preaches to a Greek audience, you’ll see how different it is, and therefore what a remarkable communicator Paul was. He is able to adapt his message to suit the culture he is speaking to.

For this Jewish audience, Paul reminds them of their covenant relationship with God. In this first segment of the sermon we learn, firstly, that *God chose* his people (vv17-19). As part of this choice, he not only rescued them from Egypt, but ‘endured’ their moaning and faithlessness in the desert and enabled them to settle in Canaan.

Next, *God gave* his people leaders – first judges, then kings (vv20-22). Paul reminds his listeners that having kings wasn’t God’s idea – it was the people’s, and even after King Saul’s failure, God found them David, ‘a man after my own heart’.

Finally, *God brought* them a Saviour (vv23-25). This was the one promised by the prophets and declared as the saviour by John the Baptist. The prophets and John were both revered by his audience, so Paul makes sure to emphasise their role in this wonderful salvation story.

Tomorrow we’ll look at what Paul says about Jesus in more detail. But today, this brief ‘history lesson’ reminds us that God is at work in human affairs, and is gently orchestrating events for the blessing of his people. God chooses, God gives, God rescues. That is our reality, too! Give thanks that God has chosen you, that he provides what you need, and that he continues to rescue flawed and fallen people like us. And may this God be your guide, your light and your strength today.

Day 66 – Acts 13:26-31 ‘Unintended consequences’

One of the controversial pieces of legislation in early 20th century America was Prohibition. Enacted in 1920, it was later described by President Herbert Hoover as ‘a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose’. The outcome, however, was the opposite of what was intended: there were more speakeasies in 1925 than there had been legal bars before Prohibition! People were in fact drinking *more* when drinking was banned – and crime surged as well. The historian Michael Lerner concludes in a recent essay on the subject: ‘The solution the United States had devised to address the problem of alcohol abuse had instead made the problem even worse.’

Sometimes an action achieves the purpose of what is intended. This can be just as true of less noble enterprises. In Genesis, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, but ended up as a great ruler who enabled millions to survive a period of drought. He is able to affirm to his brothers at the end of the story: ‘You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.’ (Genesis 50:20)

In today’s reading we see a similar ‘divine design’: Paul is continuing his sermon in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch and he makes the exact same point about those who decided that Jesus should be crucified: (v27) ‘The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognise Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath.’

You can almost hear Joseph’s words echoing round the room more than a thousand years after his encounter with his brothers: (I paraphrase a little) ‘this was intended for harm, but God intended it for good – saving many lives in the process.’

The world may appear a chaotic place, but God’s plans are not thwarted by human machinations. Indeed, sometimes the plans people make to try and stop God’s work only seem to help it. Witness the spread of the gospel in chapter 8 when the persecution began. Or, even today, the rapid growth of the Christian faith in certain countries which try to ban it. As the ancient proverb understood 3,000 years ago: ‘No plan can succeed against the Lord.’ (Proverbs 21:30)

God is bigger than our circumstances. If you’re facing great challenges, may this beautiful truth give you courage and faith. And if not, then take a moment to pray for those who are, trusting that the Lord is working his purpose out, and is able to work all things for good for those who love him.

Day 67 – Acts 13:32-37 ‘Raising up Jesus’

All things tend to decay.

If that sounds morbid, it's only a rewording of the second law of thermodynamics, known as 'the law of entropy', which states that 'as one goes forward in time, the net entropy (degree of disorder) of any isolated or closed system will always increase (or at least stay the same)'.

Or, to put it in more concrete terms: it's why your cup of tea cools down, your house needs redecorating every few years, your body picks up aches and grumbles as you get older – and even the stars in the sky burn out and die. The latter takes billions of years, but it's still the law of entropy at work. Everything in this world decays. (In fact, did you know that honey is the only foodstuff that doesn't go off, if stored properly? Weird, but true – though it still crystallises!)

But one body did not – and does not. It was a body prophesied by King David 3,000 years ago, and quoted in v35 of our passage today: 'You will not let your holy one see decay.' And St Paul makes it clear that this could not have been David himself, since, as he says, (v36) 'he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed.' Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

So, it must have been someone else... and that someone is Jesus. The proof is in the resurrection: (vv34) 'God raised him from the dead, so that he will never be subject to decay.'

Jesus reverses the fundamental curse of our fallen world: that all things tend to decay. He is not only the author of life, he possesses unquenchable life within himself. It follows that those who come to him, and are therefore now 'in' Christ, will one day enjoy the same eternal undoing of the curse – we too will receive the gift of eternal, unquenchable, irrepressible, abundant life.

Our bodies may creak and groan today – but not forever. The second law of thermodynamics will one day be broken, for all God's children, for all time. When God raised up Jesus, he did more than save us from our sins, he began a revolution: he created a new humanity. Let's give thanks today that this is our ultimate reality. And when we pray 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,' let's grasp with renewed hope that this is a prayer which counteracts the law of entropy – truly the Lord is making, and will make, all things new. Amen!

Day 68 – Acts 13:38-39 ‘Set free from every sin’

Is there a sin which God doesn't forgive?

According to Jesus: only one – to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. Which is basically calling the true work of God the work of the devil. It is the absolute refusal to receive what God offers humanity in and through Christ, a complete rejection of God himself. Pretty heavy-duty stuff.

Everything else is forgivable. But do we believe it? That is more the question. Many of us carry things around which we struggle to believe that God forgives. They might be big mistakes in the past, or a small habit we can't break. Either way, however often we say sorry, we somehow feel 'uncleansed'. We are not free.

All the more reason to take today's message to heart. This is one of those passages where truth trumps feelings. Our forgiveness, according to Paul, is a *fact*. 'Everyone who believes is set free from every sin.' Not just some sins, or most sins – but *every* sin. Listen to it again if you didn't believe it first time! 'Everyone who believes is set free from every sin.'

The reason is that it's not about us. Not really. Yes, we need to say sorry – and it's useful to have the sort of confession prayers used in many historic churches, comprehensive confessions like this one: 'in thought, word, and deed; through negligence through weakness, through our own deliberate fault.' That covers all the bases, I think!

But the point is, it's not all the 'clauses' that set us free – it's the fact of Jesus' death and resurrection. It was to win our forgiveness for *everything*. God doesn't listen to our confession and think: 'well, I'll apply my Son's redemptive death for this and this, but I don't think it covers that.... or that.' That's not who God is; nor how Jesus' death and resurrection works.

You are free from every sin. Every single one. Forgiven, and free.

Today, can I encourage you to choose to believe this wonderful truth, this amazing fact! Believing it will enable you to live with greater freedom – more joy, more peace, more love. May the Lord grant us all grace to believe, to receive – and to live. We *are* the free, and God's is the glory. Amen.

Day 69 – Acts 13:38-46 ‘The club mentality’

‘I don't want to belong to any club that would accept me as one of its members.’ Those famous words of Groucho Marx on resigning his membership of the Friar's Club make me chuckle – but there might be more truth in them than we like to think.

There's a natural tendency in human beings to want to belong. It's one of those God-given impulses – but it can have negative side-effects, even in faith communities. ‘People like to be with people like them,’ was a very popular catchphrase in the world of mission and evangelism in the second half of the twentieth century. The motives were noble – to reach as many people as possible with the good news of Jesus – but the outworking was questionable. If people like to be with people like them (which they naturally do) then the best way to reach people with Jesus' message, so the theory went, is to create church communities full of people like them.

At one level, it worked a treat. Lots of churches grew, reaching particular segments of the community. People like to be with people like them, after all. The problem is: the very idea isn't really part of Jesus' message. We built and invested in churches apparently to maximise the spread of “Jesus' message”, which missed out a huge part of Jesus' actual message: the bit which was about the gospel being for everyone – and not just ‘everyone... as long as they're somewhere I don't actually have to spend time with them,’ but ‘everyone in a big, real family, all together.’

Jesus didn't come just to save individuals, but to create a new community, a new humanity which reflected the redemptive work of God. We are all part of the body of Christ, and this body embraces *everyone*.

And it's this idea which got Paul and Barnabas into trouble. It had all started so well in Pisidian Antioch: (v42) ‘the people [of the synagogue] invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. But then the next Sabbath came; and, amazingly, ‘almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.’ (v44)

Cause for rejoicing, surely? Not a bit of it: (v45) ‘When the Jews [i.e. those in the synagogue the previous week] saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.’ It's all very well talking about this grace of God stuff... as long as God only wants to offer this to *us*. God can't surely mean this is available to everyone??

Grace is the best and most wonderful – and in many ways also the hardest – part of what we believe. The scandalous idea that we don't have to earn God's favour, and that God lavishes this grace on everyone who seeks him for it, even the people we don't like very much, or who we think don't deserve it... Deep down there's a bit of all of us that rather likes the club mentality: but it's a cancer that undermines the very message we live by.

Today, let's all give thanks that our amazing Lord sees fit to lavish his grace on whomever he sees fit – including us! Hallelujah! And let's also pray – and keep praying – that we never fall into the trap of deciding who's in and who's out. After all, who'd want to belong to a club which would have me as a member?

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as several mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-5 / 6-8 / 9-11 / 12-14 / 15-17

Day 70 – Acts 13:44-52 ‘A light for the Gentiles’

Today’s passage is really a ‘part 2’ to yesterday – or you could say, the flip side of the coin. As one group of hearers rejected Paul’s message, so another embraced it. A group who may have felt excluded in the past, but who now could respond and receive the good news on equal terms.

Thirty years ago this year, 17 million black South Africans were able to vote for the first time. Millions queued in lines over a four-day voting period. I still remember the news reports, seeing the long lines of those ready to wait for hours if need be, just be able to do something they had waited all their lives for, something that others had been entitled to do for much longer. The joy, the anticipation – it’s hard to capture in words what it must have meant.

It does, however, give a flavour of what it must have been like in the streets and public forum (central square) of Pisidian Antioch, as people listened to Paul’s message. The grace of God was now fully available to all – in one sense it always had been, but now the door was open in a new way. Those who now had to share this ‘space’ were less enamoured, as we saw yesterday. Today, though, we can see the response from everyone else.

First, they were *glad* (v48). It’s sometimes easy to forget that our good news is really that: good news! It was certainly good news for the non-Jews (Gentiles) who heard it.

Next, they ‘*honoured* the word of the Lord.’ They took the message at face value. They didn’t water it down, or find reasons why what they’d just heard might not mean what it sounded like it meant. Sound familiar?! And our author Luke is quite right to note in passing that this honours God’s word.

As a result, they *believed*. The message found a home in Pisidian Antioch – and, quite quickly, far beyond it: (v49) ‘The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.’ Good news travels fast.

Sadly, for Paul and Barnabas it also brought fierce opposition, and they were quickly hounded out. (Let’s note in passing that in shaking the dust off their feet, they were consciously doing what Jesus told his first disciples to do (Mark 6:11) – a clear indicator that ‘second generation believers’ like Paul and Barnabas had direct knowledge of Jesus’ teaching, presumably from the apostles themselves. They didn’t invent a different version of the Jesus movement, as it has become popular to suggest.)

Ultimately, our passage ends with joy and spiritual fervour. May that be our response, too. We have the same good news, and, for all the challenges, we can rejoice in the continuing spread of this good news around the world. May we, likewise, be filled with the same spirit of Jesus, honouring the word and living it joyfully today.

Day 71 – Acts 14:1-7 ‘The dividing line’

‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man’s enemies will be members of his own household.”’

This teaching of Jesus is one of his most difficult, and also one of the most misinterpreted. Tragically, the first part has been taken out of context to justify violence perpetrated by so-called Christians – something which Jesus himself abhorred. What it means, though, is not much easier to swallow: Jesus is candidly advising his followers that following him will act as a dividing line across people and relationships, even within families. People will be for or against him, and that will cause the ‘sword’ he refers to.

Why should it be like this, we might wonder? I think we can point to three reasons: first, these are important issues, matters of life and death; inevitably the stakes are high. Second, the exclusive claims of Jesus can offend peoples’ sensibilities. Third, it’s a spiritual battle – there is something in human beings that instinctively resists God and rebels. Reflecting on this, the theologian R.A. Lambourne described Jesus’ miracles as moments of *krisis* (judgement) – when faced with proof of Jesus’ authority, people had to decide: are they for him or against him? Jesus calls us to life and peace – but that very call becomes a dividing line across families, groups, communities, peoples.

We see this principle, expressed so vividly by Jesus, at work in today’s passage. God is on the move, and, as Paul and Barnabas begin to share the good news in a new city – Iconium – they see many people choose to be *for* Jesus (v1). Immediately, though, the backlash comes. Faced with this dramatic change, another group decides to be firmly *against* Jesus (v2). The result was a divided city – not peace, but a sword.

It’s a sobering text, and the outcome is unsurprising – Paul and Barnabas are threatened and have to move on again. But not before they demonstrated the message with some *krisis* moments of their own: (v3) ‘the Lord... confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.’

Our good news is not just true – it’s real. And the knowledge that it is real gives us faith, hope and courage to stand firm, especially in the places where we experience division over what we believe. May the Lord grant us all grace to face such division in his mighty strength, and with the love that covers over a multitude of sins. His grace is always sufficient, and will continue his good work in us: today and to its completion. Amen.

Day 72 – Acts 14:8-15 ‘Only human, like you’

Most old churches in the UK, and across Europe, are named after someone – during the course of my life, I’ve worshipped at St Mary’s (several times), St Mark’s, St Matthew’s, St John’s and (hedging our bets here!) ‘All Saints.’ From memory I’ve led worship at a St Luke’s and a St Nicholas, and attended an event or service at a St. Joseph, a St Barnabas, a St Jude and a St Michael’s – probably others, too. I do wonder, though, if given the choice, whether any of these saints would actually have wanted their names attached to places of worship, and be venerated as such?

Certainly, I suspect, St Paul – who has no less than 667 churches dedicated to his name just in the Church of England, and no doubt hundreds or thousands more elsewhere – would not be too pleased, if the evidence of today’s passage is anything to go by. What distinguishes all of these great heroes of the faith is their great humility: their determination that Jesus, and not them, gets all the glory for the extraordinary things He accomplishes through them.

This was the challenge for Paul and Barnabas as they begin their next missionary activity in Lycaonia, a province they had to flee to, after they had been hounded out of Iconium (v6). They find their way to the city of Lystra and, soon after their arrival, they encounter a man who is unable to walk. As a sign of the good news they had come to preach, this man is wonderfully healed, in the name of Jesus (vv8-10).

What happens next is remarkable, for two reasons. The first is that the people are so overwhelmed by this miracle that they conclude that Paul and Barnabas must be divine: (v11) ‘The gods have come down to us in human form.’ (Of course, God had come down recently.... just not these two! More on that next time). Barnabas is thought to be Zeus, and Paul the divine communicator in the Greek pantheon Hermes. We might marvel today that one miracle could have such an extraordinary effect; but, if nothing else, it shows the deep spiritual hunger present in so many people. There is a God-shaped hole in humanity – then, as now.

What is even more remarkable, however, is how Paul and Barnabas respond: they are horrified, appalled. They even go so far as to tear their own clothes (a common sign of great grief and anguish in the culture of the time) and shout to everyone: (v15) ‘Friends, why are you doing this? We are only human, like you.’

What an inspiring example of humility! For all the great things God accomplished through them, Paul and Barnabas never forgot who they were: normal people, flawed people, saved by the grace of God. Everything good that they did was always and only through His marvellous grace and abiding presence and power. I want that kind of faith, that kind of humility – perhaps you do, too. May Paul and Barnabas’ example inspire us today; and, as we walk in humility, may the Lord likewise accomplish his great purposes, in us and through us.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever, Amen.

Day 73 – Acts 14:13-18 ‘Not without testimony’

When I used to work in marketing, one of the buzzwords of the time was the so-called ‘elevator pitch’: imagine you get into a lift with somebody and you get into conversation; they ask you about your product/ business/ mission, and all you have is the time you’re in the lift with them – say, a minute or so. Can you explain clearly and winsomely what you’re about in that time? It’s a useful skill – assuming you use lifts/elevators! – but as I get older, the question I’d want to ask back is: well, who’s in the lift with me?

Great communicators are able to adapt their message to their audience. In the case of the ‘elevator pitch’, I’d want to vary what I say on the basis of who’s in the lift with me. One size doesn’t fit all.

St Paul understood this perhaps as well as anyone in history. He had a remarkable capacity to adapt the same message to his audience. As he himself reflected later in his first letter to Corinth: ‘I have become all things to all people, so that by all possible means I might save some.’ In today’s passage he has a very different crowd to the synagogue he addressed in chapter 13. There, he was addressing an almost exclusively Jewish audience; here, in the city square of Lystra, he is with pagans, mostly influenced by Greek culture, and who would have known little of the Jewish scriptures or way of life. How is he going to communicate the good news of God’s love?

What he says is extraordinary – it is completely different to his sermon in the previous chapter. No biblical quotes or fulfilment of prophecy. Rather he finds the shared assumptions across both cultures which allow him to relate to pagan Greek culture, as well as challenge it. First, he tells the crowd that the one true God is *living*. In a culture which had temples and plenty of (stone) idols, he wants the people to know that God is very much alive and active in this world.

Second, this God *creates* – the heavens, the earth and everything in it. The heavens being particularly important as this was thought to be where Zeus and all the other gods lived – but this God, the one true God, made that as well! Third, this God *provides*: ‘plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.’

To a culture which knew almost nothing of the one true God, in this short ‘elevator pitch’ Paul has connected with his listeners and demonstrated how this God has ‘not left himself without testimony.’ The divine imprint is there, for anyone who cares to look for it.

This is our reality too: we worship the same Lord: who creates, provides, and who is very much alive and well. As we begin this week, gives thanks to our glorious Creator and Provider. And may his living presence in our lives fill our hearts with joy. Amen.

Daily Inspiration in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-17)

Note: this large series can be enjoyed as several mini-series: chs 1-2 / 3-5 / 6-8 / 9-11 / 12-14 / 15-17

Day 74 – Acts 14:18-22 ‘Many hardships’

What is it like becoming a Christian, a follower of Jesus? One of the answers I give is – at least to people over the age of 40 who can appreciate the image! – is that it's a bit like changing from watching TV in black and white to watching in colour. Perhaps you can remember that moment when your family first got a colour TV. You're watching the same pictures on the screen – but everything is *richer*, more vibrant, more intense.

It's like that with the decision to follow Jesus. We live the same life, but now everything is richer, more vibrant, more intense. The joys are greater – but also the challenges can feel greater, too. Jesus promises us both abundant life and a cross to carry. No cross, no crown. Or rather, both together – in this earthly life, at least.

Paul knew this better than most. In one of his later letters, near the end of his eventful life, he talks passionately about 'the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord...'; and then follow that up in the next phrase: 'for whose sake I have lost all things.' (Philippians 3:8).

Today's passage captures the joy and the pain perfectly. In one afternoon, he goes from being worshipped (v18) to being stoned (v19). Paul survives, thanks in part to the support of other Christians – and it's likely that 'gathered round' (v20) is shorthand for healing prayer; after all, how else did Paul recover so quickly? – and, undaunted, he and Barnabas begin a new ministry just down the road in Derbe.

The fruit is remarkable: (v21) 'they preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they begin the return leg home, going back through the places they had just left – and remember these were all places from which they recently had to flee; the courage of these two is extraordinary!

Their summary to the new believers: (v22) 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.' If that sounds sobering (and it is), remember there are two hidden encouragements: first, those hearing this word can see living proof that the faithful overcome. Paul and Barnabas have faced worse, and are still standing; more than standing, they are thriving. In tough times, we too can take courage and inspiration from knowing that others have done the same – and overcome.

Second, God used their challenges for great good. There is a mystery to suffering and trial – and we may not receive the answer this side of the grave; but the consistent witness of scripture is that God can turn all things to good, and abundantly bless those who have suffered and overcome.

May that be a word of hope for us today – whether that's you, or someone you know and love. Whatever we face at present: by the grace of God, we will overcome. Amen.

Day 75 – Acts 14:21-28 ‘The return journey’

My wife and I love to go for walks – though I must confess we much prefer a circular walk: one which starts and ends in the same place, but involves a route which doesn’t repeat itself. We’re not as keen on a ‘there and back’ kind of walk – unless it’s a up a big hill and the best route down is the same way we came up!

Circular walks make for interesting routes; however, it’s just as well we weren’t with Paul and Barnabas in Acts chapters 13 and 14, on what’s now known as Paul’s ‘First Missionary Journey’. It’s been a rollercoaster ride, and they have faced severe challenges wherever they went. And yet, as we observed yesterday, once they left Derbe, they decided to go for the ‘there and back’ option, making an exact return journey through the places they had visited in southern Turkey (known then as ‘Asia Minor’). Not only did this take extraordinary courage, given that they had been attacked in all of the places to which they now returned; it also added significantly to their journey.

If you look at a map and plot a route from Derbe back to the port at Attalia (now Antalya in modern-day Turkey), your most direct route initially takes you close to Lystra; however, after that, you would naturally head south west to get back to the port. Doing what Paul and Barnabas did – heading back through Iconium and Pisidian Antioch – actually takes you in the *opposite* direction, back north again, and adds about 100 miles in total to the journey. In other words, what they did was not only dangerous, it was exhausting.

Why did they do it? Certainly not because they were ‘return journey’ obsessives! Our passage for today gives us two powerful motives: first, their priority was ‘strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.’ (v22) It’s not about converts, it’s about *disciples*: followers, those committed to the journey for the long haul. Paul and Barnabas had been forced out of each city too quickly – so they wanted to return, to see that God’s work was alive and well, and do whatever they could to encourage that.

Second, they appointed leaders in each place (v23), commissioning them to carry on their good work. Given that they may only have had a matter of weeks in each place, no wonder they needed to pray about these appointments! It was an act of great trust; but vital, if these fledgling Christian communities were to survive.

Yet, it wasn’t trust in human power and skill, although I’m sure they gave as much leadership coaching as they could. These leaders were ‘committed to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.’ (v23) Ultimately, it’s Jesus’ job to build His church. We do as much as we can – but we leave the rest to the Lord.

It’s amazing to reflect today, looking out at a global church with billions of followers, on how it was all built on these tiny, fragile communities; oppressed, mostly forced underground, without access to much in the way of material resources or practical support. And yet, they survived; and thrived; and spread out across the world. It’s all God, isn’t it?!

This God is the One in whom we put our trust today. We are on one level all on a return journey – a journey home. May the Lord grant us all grace for our return journeys: ‘Put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’ Amen.

Day 76 – Acts 14:26-28 ‘All that God had done’

As we reach the halfway point in the Book of Acts, it's worth reflecting on something we addressed briefly yesterday. Looking at all the remarkable efforts of the early disciples – and we've read some amazing stories over the last couple of months – who does all the work? Who gets all the credit?

There are so many heroes in this story: Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul, Barnabas, to name just a few. There are so many who are blessed by their ministry: the man at the Gate called Beautiful, the Ethiopian official, Tabitha, Cornelius, whole cities in southern Turkey...

The full name of this book is The Acts of the Apostles. There are many, however, who think it should be renamed; for all that we rightly marvel at the apostles' faith, their courage, their resilience, I wonder if this book should really be called The Acts of the Holy Spirit?

The great devotional writer A.W. Tozer once observed: 'If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.'

These are challenging words, but probably truer than we care to admit. In the end, for all the great human exploits we've witnessed over the first fourteen chapters of Acts, there is only one Being who gets all the credit – and, significantly, those original heroes knew *exactly* who that was: (v27) 'On arriving there (Antioch, the community which sent them out) they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith...'

It's all God! The Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, promised at the start of Acts and then given in power at Pentecost and beyond, is the primary agent in this story: the lead role, the mover and shaker (sometimes literally – see 4:31). As we give thanks for all that we've learned, and for all the ways in which these amazing chapters have inspired us, let's echo the opening words of Psalm 115, which Paul and Barnabas would certainly have known – and who knows, may have quoted in this very homecoming to those who listened to their report? – 'Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.'

Or, as Paul himself puts it in his great letter to Rome, and there could be no better prayer for all of us to pray today: 'Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen.'

Day 77 – Acts 15:1-11 ‘Saved through grace’

On the afternoon of 9th May 1940, a meeting took place which was to change the course of world history. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain met privately with Lord Halifax and Winston Churchill to discuss the future of the British Government. Chamberlain had been broken by the failure of the Munich Agreement and the ensuing start of the war, and was resolved to step down. The question was: who would replace him? Lord Halifax, current Foreign Secretary, friend of the king, the obvious candidate; or Churchill – maverick, unpredictable, for some years on the fringes of political life, and seen by most people at the time as ‘yesterday’s man’?

We know the answer to that question – and the rest, as they say, is history. But C.J. Sansom’s novel ‘Dominion’ asks the question: what if Halifax had been appointed? What if, as would have been likely were that to have happened, England had sued for peace with Germany (Halifax had supported Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement throughout) instead of fighting on? The following decades would have looked very different.

The outcome of one meeting dramatically impacted the course of history.

In Acts chapter 15, we see a similar meeting. The Council at Jerusalem is by far the most significant meeting that not many people have heard of! Certainly one of the most significant gatherings in the whole 2,000 years of church history – because it answers this most fundamental of questions: how does any human being have access to God? What is required for any of us to be ‘saved’?

The Church is thriving. As chapter 14 ended, Paul and Barnabas returned to their de facto home at Antioch having just completed a big missionary journey, and, despite significant opposition, having seen many new believers won and churches planted. The grace of God is bursting the banks everywhere and flooding the eastern Mediterranean with the good news.

As often happens, now comes the backlash (v1): ‘Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised... you cannot be saved.”’ This is more than just a theological debate – although it was that – this is a battle for the soul of the gospel. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? Is the ‘new’ covenant really just an adapted version of the old?

It’s not surprising that the local debate in Antioch quickly escalated to Head Office – a Council in Jerusalem was convened (v2). Paul and Barnabas travelled 350 miles to be there, gathering supporters as they went (v3). It is telling, though, that the keynote speech comes from Peter – one of ‘Jerusalem’s own’ – who describes his own experience of seeing God at work in Gentiles i.e. non-Jews (vv7-9). He concludes with this remarkable declaration (v11): ‘We believe that it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we saved, just as they are.’

Saved through grace. What a message! Salvation is a gift, won by our Lord Jesus. Everyone can meet God on the same terms now, because Jesus has opened a door to all of humanity.

We all have our ‘unless you...’ thoughts – it’s human nature. Let’s hear that glorious news again today: that each one of us *can* be saved, because Jesus receives us as we are. The way to God stands open, in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. And as we receive this truth with joy, may we also pray it with faith and hope for others – loved by God and saved through grace, just as we are. Amen.

Day 78 – Acts 15:5-18 ‘A pivotal moment’

‘Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened... Take my yoke upon you... for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’ As we pick up the story from yesterday, these words of Jesus are worth keeping in mind, because, in many ways, they lie at the heart of the debate taking place in Jerusalem in today’s passage. The yoke – the part of the plough that fitted over the ox’s shoulders – was often used as a word to describe the Jewish Law. To obey the Lord was to bear ‘the yoke of the Law’, and it was a phrase Peter would have known well, and one he references clearly in v10: ‘Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?’

Peter gave this powerful riposte to some Pharisees who had come to faith in Christ, but who still insisted that ‘Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses’ (v5).

As we observed yesterday, this was more than just a theological question, it would determine the whole future of the Jesus movement. Although no doubt there may have been some Gentile (non-Jewish) voices in this council, it is significant that Luke records only the contributions of Jewish followers of Jesus – Peter, Barnabas and Paul, and finally James, Jesus’ own half-brother. To be conclusive and authoritative, whatever was decided had to be agreed by those who were themselves of Jewish heritage – and eventually three factors swayed the argument.

First, the Spirit – as Peter declared, God had clearly poured out the Spirit on (uncircumcised) converts, just as much as circumcised ones. It appeared that circumcision was no longer the primary factor determining who was part of the Lord’s people. Second, signs: Paul and Barnabas were able to share with joy the ‘signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them’ (v12). Finally, Scripture. Now it was James’ turn: (v15) ‘The words of the prophets are in agreement.’ He quotes a key passage from Amos, which had always been understood as reflecting God’s future plans for salvation history. It turned out that this plan included ‘even all the Gentiles who bear my name’ (v17).

Let’s also observe that each speaker contributed something – so you could say the fourth factor was the sheer weight of the testimony. As James wrote in his circular letter, which we’ll look at tomorrow, ‘it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us....’ The mind of Christ was being expressed through wise Christian leaders.

Many centuries later, the Puritans taught that God’s guidance could be discerned through a combination of five factors: Scripture, Spirit, Saints, Signs and (Common) Sense. We see the first four of them here, and the growth of the church of this point indicates strongly that the fifth one was very much in evidence, too!

The church today still faces many questions and dilemmas. We would do well to go back to the wisdom of our ancestors. Big changes can’t be pushed through if only one or two of these ‘tests’ are in agreement. The Council of Jerusalem discerned the will of God through Scripture, Spirit, Saints *and* Signs; the fruit of that decision confirmed it as Sense, too. Today, let’s pray for all leaders tasked with discerning the will of God in our generation. May the Lord endow them with the courage and wisdom of those in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago.

Day 79 – Acts 15:19-35 ‘A holy compromise’

‘We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.’

What a wonderful summary! In my view, one of the greatest statements in the whole bible, albeit beautifully understated. And let’s admit that sometimes we *do* make it difficult for people to join the family of God. Indeed, I’ve met many people who’ve shied away from a secret longing to try church or faith because they fear being judged or forced to undergo all kinds of tests before they’ll be accepted. It’s not that faith isn’t transformative – it’s just that Christ welcomes us as we are, and then gets to work on transforming us from a place of security and belonging.

But, there are still dilemmas. Different cultures don’t always fit together easily – the very inclusive nature of faith in Christ means that people from all kinds of backgrounds have to rub along together. What one culture considers unimportant is fundamental in another. Do you wear Sunday best to attend worship? Do you leave your bible on the floor sometimes? Do you cross yourself regularly? Do you drink alcohol? Ask 100 Christians across the world these questions and at least some will consider one (or more) of these to be a big deal, while others can’t see the problem.

In both Romans and Corinthians Paul addresses the thorny issue of the ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ consciences. A weak (or tender) conscience needs to follow rules; a strong conscience emphasises our freedom in Christ. It’s not that one is innately better – but it means sometimes those with a ‘strong’ conscience do things which upset those with tender consciences; conversely, ‘weak’-conscience people can be unfairly judged as legalistic and rule-bound.

In today’s passage, the main conclusion is that Gentiles are free to become full members of God’s people without having to obey the Jewish Law. This paves the way for the global expansion of the church we’ve seen for the last 2,000 years – many of us reading this owe a huge debt to this judgement. However, in a masterstroke of practical wisdom, James indicates four particular areas of cultural sensitivity which would allow Jewish and Gentile believers to get along more easily in their new, shared communities of Christ. Three of them relate to food: meat sacrificed to idols (which most of it was, in cities with a pagan temple) or from strangled animals, and also the consumption of blood. All of these were expressly forbidden by the Jewish Law – but what is significant here is that these new Christian communities *ate together frequently*. Addressing food issues would make a huge difference to their capacity to build friendships ‘across the divide’.

‘Sexual immorality’ has been much debated, but the most likely interpretation is that this refers to marriages to close relatives, which were forbidden under the Jewish Law but relatively common in some pagan cultures. This again would make it hard for these two communities to worship together – and of course with a growing church family, suddenly more potential marriage partners were now possible.

In other words, these compromises were both reasonable for Gentile believers and reassuring for Jewish believers; most of all, they were wonderfully wise, both practically and pastorally.

The results were fantastic – the decision was disseminated clearly (vv23-29) and widely (v22, vv30-32), and bore much fruit. As we give thanks today for the grace and wisdom shown in this episode, let’s conclude by offering our own ‘blessing of peace’ (v33) to whoever is on our hearts. The grace of God is made to be shared. Amen!

Day 80 – Acts 15:36-41 ‘A sharp disagreement’

How many chances do you give someone before you give up on them?

That tough question lies at the heart of today’s story. Great friends Paul and Barnabas – freshly back from Jerusalem, having secured an historic agreement for the future of the church – are planning another mission trip; or rather, a return trip to all the places they had previously visited and planted churches. They are deciding on personnel and the question of Mark comes up. Does he come, too?

Here it’s worth saying that every good team need different personalities. Paul and Barnabas are very different. For Paul, the mission always comes first; for Barnabas, people always come first. And whilst my sympathies instinctively lie with Barnabas – I would say that, I’m more of a pastor than an evangelist! – the truth is that a good mission team needs both. Barnabas needs the energy and sheer courage of Paul; Paul needs the compassion and generosity of spirit of Barnabas.

However, when it came to the question of Mark, they couldn’t agree. There was no real compromise possible: either Mark went, or he didn’t. Barnabas – ever the big-hearted encourager – thought Mark deserved a second chance. Paul – perhaps still peeved at Mark quitting last time, or more likely taking the pragmatic view that if it was too ‘hot’ for Mark to handle last time, then it wasn’t going to be any different this time, so they were setting him up to fail – thought it wasn’t worth the risk.

Sadly, both of these great leaders felt too strongly to back down; and so they parted ways. Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus, Paul found a new companion in Silas and pursued the original plan. Interestingly, Paul also found Timothy soon after the trip started (more on that next time) – a clear indication, not just of how valuable Barnabas was, but also how Paul maintained a similar strategy to the last trip: a junior leader (Timothy) being mentored by two experienced leaders.

Although it is always unsettling to see disagreements like this, it is helpful to remember that these were real people with real flaws; we can too easily idolise the heroes of the faith. There is also an encouraging postscript: near the end of his life, Paul actually asks for Mark to come to him, ‘because he is helpful to me in my ministry’ (2 Timothy 4:11). Thanks to Barnabas’ persistent encouragement, Mark continued in ministry and flourished to the point that even Paul came to respect his worth. To say nothing of Mark writing one of the gospels!

As humans, it’s tempting to give up on people. But God never gives up on us. He can work all things to good. Let’s give thanks for the Barnabas’s of this world, and strive to emulate their example. Let’s also give thanks for the Pauls, too – we may not like them as much! But we need them as well... On God’s team, everyone has a vital part to play.

Day 81 – Acts 16:1-4 ‘All things to all people’

Classes of primary school children often visit one of our churches, to see what Christians do when they gather to worship. One thing I usually have ready is a table covered in different bibles. There's always a stern-looking one clad in black leather, with small print – I explain that this is how people tend to picture 'the bible'! Alongside this, however, are a range of other bibles: a children's bible with bright pictures and simple text; a youth bible with lots of helpful tips and advice; there's a small bible to take travelling, a board bible for toddlers, an adventure bible and even a comic strip bible – which always gets the most attention.

Other bibles I could have shown are the Street Bible, which is the bible in rap/urban poetry, and the Journaling Bible, so people can draw and write along the pages as they go. It's the same text, the same glorious gift to humanity – but the wrapping changes, according to the group it's trying to reach.

One of the great strengths of the church is that, although the good news remains the same, the cultural clothing we use to communicate the good news can always be adapted. This has been true from the very beginning – St Paul, writing in his first letter to Corinth puts it like this: 'Though I am free and belong to no-one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews... To those not having the law I became like one not having the law... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.' (1 Cor 9:19-22 excerpts)

This adaptability explains what might at first glance seem like an odd episode today. Having just decided that uncircumcised believers don't need to be circumcised, why does Paul insist that half-Gentile Timothy does exactly that? It seems even more bizarre, given that Timothy's first task is to journey with Paul, communicating the message about not needing to be circumcised to the people he's meeting!

At first glance, it does look like a serious case of 'do as I say and not as I do.' However, there's more to it. Notice that Timothy's mother was Jewish (v1). Jews trace their family line (and religious heritage) through their mother – so for Timothy not to be circumcised immediately ostracised him from any effective ministry among Jewish people. It declared that he was 'not one of them', and therefore wouldn't be welcomed into their company.

So, this is missional wisdom at work here. Gentiles (non-Jews) wouldn't care if Timothy was or wasn't circumcised. Jewish people definitely would. By being circumcised, Timothy is able to minister with Paul to *everyone*, wherever he and Silas went. 'To the Jews I became like a Jew... to those not having the law, I became like one not having the law....'

The wisdom of this decision is shown by its fruit (as Jesus originally observed): (v5) 'The churches were strengthened in faith, and grew daily in numbers.' Significantly, this kind of thinking paved the way for the spread of the gospel across the world. From now on, the cultural clothing could adapt, even if the message remained the same. The good news that Jesus is for everyone can be explained to everyone, in whatever way they can receive it.

Today, give thanks that we have the great blessing of a message whose presentation can change even while the fundamental good news does not. It connects us with God's big family everywhere. We can trace a line from Timothy all the way through to us – and by God's grace, to those we love and whom we long to know this good news, too. Thanks be to God!

Day 82 – Acts 16:6-10 ‘The end – or a new beginning?’

This time two weeks ago, I was walking by the North Sea, watching it crash onto the beach. I’ve always loved the shore. I love being at the edge of land, looking out. It’s a place of possibility, perhaps of eternity. But it’s also on the edge of something – and so, for some people, reaching the end of land has the opposite effect. It’s the end of the road.

The coast is a polarising place – is the coast a place of possibility, of the future; or of constriction, the end of something? Let’s go back about 1,975 years to Troas, a coastal town by the shore of Eastern Turkey, where a small group of evangelists were gathered. Candidly, they had probably arrived feeling more like the latter: like they had come to the end of the road, the end of the line, perhaps the end of their particular missionary journey for now.

Everywhere was being closed off to them – and not just by human beings, but by the Spirit of God himself: they were ‘kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia (western Turkey).’ (v6) It gets worse: then ‘they tried to enter Bithynia (north-western Turkey) but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to do so.’ (v7)

So here they are at Troas – literally at the end, on the far western shoreline of Turkey. They can’t go east or south to Asia Minor, they can’t go north to Bithynia. The only place they can go is West, into the sea...

...but maybe... ‘During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” (v9) God has a plan after all. He did mean for them to go west, onto the sea – in order that they might travel to Greece. Macedonia is the name at the time for the Greek Mainland. God was shutting every other door, in order to open a new one: the Lord wanted them to start a new work in Greece. The gospel was heading to the mainland of Europe!

Today’s passage is a particular encouragement for any of us who wonder what plans God has in mind for us. Maybe you’ve been seeking the Lord and all it feels like is that doors are shutting; you’re drifting toward the modern-day equivalent of Troas, the end of the line, and you’ve no idea what’s coming next. You know it’s something, but God hasn’t made it clear yet. Paul’s experience shows us that doors shutting is not a bad thing if God has something better in mind. The good is the enemy of the best. Let’s take heart and resolve to trust that our Heavenly Father knows what he’s doing, and to redouble our determination to seek him.

And for the rest of us, there’s a healthy reminder that true, biblical guidance is not about us presenting our plans to God and asking him to rubber stamp them. If we really want the dynamic walk with the Lord which we long for, we have to take the risk of letting God pull the strings. It’s not easy – but the Lord always comes through: he did for Paul and his friends, and he will do for us. May the Lord grant us all grace to trust, wherever he directs our paths. Amen.

Day 83 – Acts 16:11-15 ‘New place, new opportunities’

And so, Paul’s European odyssey begins... Setting sail from Troas, even the weather was a sign that the Lord was directing their paths: they made the 150-mile voyage to Neapolis in two days (it took them five on the way back). Having arrived in port, they walked ten miles along the Via Egnatia – the main road across Greece, some of whose large paving stones are still visible today – from Neapolis to Philippi, the capital city of this region.

Philippi takes its name from King Philip of Macedon, who lived in the 4th century BC, and by the time Paul visited, it was now one of the principal Roman colonies on the Greek mainland. Normally, Paul would head straight for the synagogue to begin his mission activity. The fact that he does not suggests that Philippi at this time had no synagogue – which in turn indicates that the city did not have ten Jewish men living in it, which is the minimum required to establish a synagogue; however, it did have a ‘place of prayer’ conveniently sited on the River Gangites (so that it could be used for ceremonial washing), about a mile from the city centre.

Here, Paul and his friends ‘sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.’ As you read this, perhaps you picked up strong echoes of Jesus’ famous conversation with a Samaritan woman in John 4. It needs emphasising just what an unusual thing Paul does here. Normally no Jewish man would speak in public with a woman who was not a part of his family. Those who unfairly dismiss Paul as a crusty old sexist would do well to notice how much like Jesus he behaved in this encounter. He even stays with Lydia, just as Jesus did with Mary and Martha.

A new place opens up new possibilities – this mature Paul was acting with a godly missional freedom that may reflect the sense of opportunity that a new place brings. Significantly, each of his first three ‘divine encounters’ in Philippi brought the gospel to unusual people: a female merchant, a slave and then a prison guard. The river of the gospel is not only bursting the banks of geography, it is reaching new people, too. This message is truly universal.

There is so much to admire here: not least Paul’s creativity and Lydia’s courage; but let’s not miss that ultimately the impact is all God’s. It was the Lord who ‘opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.’ God needs our words, but ‘unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain.’ (Psalm 127:1) It’s what God does between Paul’s lips and Lydia’s heart that matters.

And so, Lydia becomes the first convert in Europe! At least, the first we know about – it’s quite possible that a church in Rome was already beginning, maybe others elsewhere. But a purple cloth dealer is written into history – and all because Paul and his friends were willing to let God lead them to a new place, a new mission. Maybe the Lord has a ‘Philippi’ for you, too – if so, why not pray for God’s leading and blessing? And if not, pray for those reading this reflection, who may be in that position. The Lord has it all in hand.

Day 84 – Acts 16:16-21 ‘Hostages to fortune’

We humans love to know the future. We can't, of course – but it doesn't stop us trying. Almost since the dawn of civilisation, religious practice has had an element of trying to influence what is going to happen next: sacrifices to deities for a good harvest, fertility, and so on. When the Lord first reveals himself to his people in the early pages of the Old Testament, one of the most distinctive things about him is that this kind of practice is banned. The one true God wants us to relate to him on the basis of trust, and grace. The only sacrifices commanded are for thanksgiving, generosity or atonement – not to sway the future. This Lord is not a capricious tyrant.

We might think of ourselves as much more sophisticated now. But even as recently as 2015, 8% of Brits thought that horoscopes could predict the future, and 20% thought star signs could tell you something about yourself or someone else. The industry as a whole is worth billions a year worldwide – maybe we're not so very different from the citizens of Philippi who paid large sums of money to have their fortunes told by a slave girl – our passage for today.

Luke passes no comment on the truthfulness of her predictions – though we need to acknowledge that the bible always treats the spiritual world as real; there was clearly some sort of unhealthy spiritual power at work, otherwise Paul would not have been prompted to do what he did: delivering her from whatever spirit was oppressing her (v18).

What causes problems, however, is not the spiritual confrontation itself – it's much more earthy than that. This is about money. The slave girl was being exploited, making a lot of profit for her bosses. Fortunes were making a fortune! When these bosses 'realised that their hope of making money was gone,' suddenly they start concerning themselves with the wellbeing of their city! Only *now* are they bothered that 'these men... are throwing our city into an uproar.'

The kingdom of God makes enemies – often not by being hypocrites and living badly, but rather by living well. Our goodness throws light into dark places that would rather stay hidden. 'Live such good lives among the pagans,' Peter says later, 'that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.' (1 Peter 2:12)

We'll never know if the particular 'pagans' in this story eventually did so – the immediate outcome was jail time for Paul and Silas (more on that tomorrow). But the more fundamental lessons here are about distinctiveness, and trust. Our calling is to live distinctively – and to trust God for the rest. We don't, and can't, predict the future. But we do place our hands into the One we can trust, whose plans are to prosper us and not to harm us, to give us hope and a future. May we all have grace to trust our loving Lord today, whatever it has in store.

Day 85 – Acts 16:22-34 ‘Chains fell off’

I’ve always loved the hymns of Charles Wesley. My favourite is probably ‘And can it be’ – I’m sure I’m not the only one! In particular, my favourite verse finishes: ‘My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed Thee.’

For me, I can appreciate my chains being broken in a spiritual sense – but for Paul and Silas, their experience in today’s passage is much more literal. As we saw yesterday, their ministry has gained unwelcome attention from local businessmen who’ve lost a dubious income stream. As a result, the civic authorities – and it’s interesting how such authorities are often unduly swayed by people with money, then as much as now; there is nothing new under the sun! – have taken the easy route of punishing the ‘outsiders.’ And not just a slap on the wrist: Paul and Silas are ‘stripped and beaten with rods... severely flogged.’ They will no doubt carry these scars for the rest of their lives.

Even more amazing, then, that their response is to be ‘praying and singing hymns to God.’ They might be imprisoned and in great pain, but their hearts remain full of joy and faith. It’s quite a testimony, and no surprise that the other prisoners are listening too – they probably can’t believe these two men are behaving like this! We can imagine their fellow inmates thinking: what must be in their hearts, to live as they do?

But there’s more to come... much more: ‘Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose.’ The Lord was freeing his people.

This, of course, was a death sentence for the jailer – so what happens next is perhaps even more amazing than the chains coming off: no-one does a runner! It’s easy to imagine Paul and Silas staying put – but the others, too? I think that’s even more of a miracle, and suggests that the other prisoners were also turning their hearts towards God. However, we don’t hear more of that story (though a part of me wishes we did!) – what we do hear is that the jailer is saved. Literally, first – he’s about to end it all, when Paul tells him to stop. And then spiritually: ‘they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.’

As is customary in the early church, baptism happens next, and immediately. What began as literal chains coming off for Paul and Silas has concluded as spiritual chains coming off for the jailer, and also his whole household. Wesley’s birth was long in the future, but I like to think that as dawn glimmered on the eastern horizon that morning, you could hear singing in the jailer’s house, along the lines of: ‘My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed Thee.’

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim... freedom for the prisoners.’ Luke, the writer of Acts, recorded this as Jesus’ manifesto in his gospel. Here we see it in action. Today, give thanks that the Lord has loosened the chains around your heart. And why not pray, too, for the Lord’s work in prisons. Many thousands come to faith in prisons around the world – may the Lord continue to open doors for the gospel today.

Day 86 – Acts 16:35-40 ‘Innocent as doves, wise as snakes’

‘I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. Therefore be wise as snakes and innocent as doves.’ (Matthew 10:16) This advice of Jesus was given to his friends as he sent them out on mission, and here we see a great example of Paul and Silas putting this into practice. In fact, the context matches Jesus’ own prediction of when this advice would be needed pretty exactly – Matthew 10 continues: ‘Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.’

What does Jesus mean by this phrase, ‘wise as snakes and innocent as doves’? It’s a valuable reminder that, whilst followers of Jesus are citizens of another kingdom, we still live in the current one. We are to live pure and trusting lives (innocent as doves), but not be blind to the ‘ways of the world’ (wise as snakes). Spirit-filled and streetwise at the same time.

Paul and Silas thus far had been innocent as doves – literally! They were wrongly imprisoned and flogged, and, even when they had the chance to flee the jail, they refused to do so – thereby saving the jailer’s physical and spiritual life at the same time. However, as the authorities arrive to announce their release (v35), now it’s time for ‘snake mode’: (v37) ‘Paul said to the officers: “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison... Let them come themselves and escort us out.”’

Paul is no lover of worldly badges – not any more. Indeed, in his letter to the believers at Philippi some years later, he talks about all such accolades as ‘trash’ when compared to Christ. But there’s a time when such things can be useful – ‘wise as snakes’ – and the fact that he and Silas are Roman citizens is his trump card. According to the ‘Lex Julia’ (Roman law), a Roman citizen could not be beaten or bound by a local magistrate, let alone untried and uncondemned. In other words, if Paul wished to pursue this matter further with, say, the Roman Governor of that region, he could get the authorities in Philippi in a lot of trouble. Heads might roll...

And so, they get their apology, and safe passage (v39) – but not before taking some time to encourage the small group of believers who had gathered at Lydia’s house (v40). I like to think that perhaps the jailer and the slave girl were among them. But to answer the question that might be in your mind at this point: why did Paul and Silas kick up a stink like they did, when they were being released anyway? It wasn’t ego, or wounded pride. Their concern, as always, was for the church they were leaving behind – new, fragile, at risk of facing the same violent opposition he’d just experienced. Paul’s assertion of his rights was a message to the authorities to leave the church he had planted alone. To put it in modern terms: the authorities owed him one, and if he could harness that to win even a modicum of extra protection for his new-found friends and sisters and brothers, then he was going to do so.

Wise as snakes, innocent as doves. It’s wonderful wisdom from the lips of our Saviour. Today, take a few moments to reflect upon it. Our ‘default setting’ is innocence – ‘to the pure all is pure.’ But there is a place for being streetwise – if you face such a situation today, or this week, pray for wisdom, exercised in innocent humility and Spirit-filled trust. Jesus is with you, in it and through it.

Day 87 – Acts 16:11-40 reprise ‘A city divided, a church united’

Before we move on to the next part of Paul’s journey, let’s pause briefly one more time to reflect on this remarkable episode in Philippi....

As we observed yesterday, Paul and Silas’ time in Philippi is a very real illustration of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 10. There, Jesus is clear about both the opportunities and also the risks and costs of taking the good news into the world. We can easily forget that the world is not ‘neutral territory’ – there is a power at work which opposes God and contests the spread of his good news. It is a ‘clash of kingdoms’ – and not just between missionaries and civic authorities, but across society as a whole, as Jesus admits candidly: ‘Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth... I have come to turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother... a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”’ (Matthew 10:34-36, quoting Micah 7:6)

Paul’s healing of the slave girl caused such a ‘turning against.’ Vested interests were challenged and ‘worldly forces’ directly opposed the kingdom of God. And yet, at the same time, as the city divided so there was one unifying power at work, bringing people together. A wealthy businesswoman, an exploited slave, a thankful jailer all found the grace of God, and a new hope and purpose. They also found a common community, despite their very differing backgrounds; no other body in the world cuts across all human boundaries like the Church. Philippi is the global church in microcosm.

It’s noteworthy that Paul spent time encouraging the fledgling body of Christ before leaving (v40). He knew just how precious this work of God was – people from many backgrounds finding the same Saviour; and not just finding personal salvation, but also a new family, made up of all people.

So, the arrival of the gospel in Philippi divided a city and united a church. This is a challenging reality, but let’s take heart from the fact that a good ten or so years later, Paul could write one of his most upbeat letters to this same group of believers; whatever they had faced, they had weathered every storm, so that Paul could declare with joy: ‘I thank my God every time I remember you... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.’ (Philippians 1:3,6) Today, you can still visit living churches in Kavala (modern-day Philippi). The work that Paul and Silas began over just a few days or weeks has lasted 2,000 years.

To outward appearances, the church often seems weak; but it endures – and not through human power. To return to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 10 one more time: (vv19-20) ‘Do not worry about what to say... it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.’ The Lord builds his church, and is still building it today – in you, in me, in us, across the world. No wonder Paul could write to this church in Philippi many years later: ‘Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: rejoice!’ Amen.

Day 88 – Acts 17:1-10 ‘Humble revolution’

One of the fascinating things about this section of the Book of Acts is that we have subsequent letters written by Paul to many of the places which he and Silas visit on this journey – Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus. It gives us a wonderful insight into Paul’s reflections some time later on his experiences.

His first letter to the Thessalonians is one of his very earliest, probably written just a year or two after the events described in today’s passage. As Luke records it, Paul and Silas were only able to stay about three weeks in the city (note: ‘three Sabbaths’ in v2), before they were hounded out. It’s barely any time at all to begin a work of God in a new place – and yet, Paul was able to write to them in time to come: ‘You became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia... your faith in God has become known everywhere.’ (1 Thess 1:7-8)

An extraordinary outcome for such a short and tempestuous visit – and yet, Paul is quite clear as to why: (1 Thess 1:5) ‘our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.’ This is Paul’s reflection on what Luke records in Acts 17: (v4) ‘Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.’ These were the people who experienced ‘deep conviction’ and whose lives were changed forever.

But, as is now customary, it came at a cost. Having been flogged and forced out of Philippi (something which even Paul, who was used to bad treatment, referred to as ‘outrageous’ in his first letter to Thessalonica 2:2), Paul and Silas walked 100 miles along the Via Egnatia to Thessalonica, only to face the same opposition within a matter of weeks.

This time the charge was more serious: (v7) ‘They are defying Caesar’s decrees, saying there is another king, one called Jesus.’ The word used in v6 and translated as ‘caused trouble’ has revolutionary undertones. Paul and Silas are not just social irritants, they are dangerously subversive. They preach obedience to another, greater ruler. In short, the potential charge is high treason – and execution.

This explains what happens next. Jason and his fellow-converts are bound over to keep the peace. Paul and Silas are allowed to leave, but only on condition that they never return to the city – something Paul refers to in his letter as ‘Satan blocking our way’ (1 Thess 2:18). They leave hastily (v10), but not in vain. The Lord has done something remarkable in their short stay: another great work of God which would endure, despite opposition and suffering. *A humble revolution of faith, hope and love.* Today, let’s pray for ourselves, as Paul prayed for this young church: (1 Thess 1:3) ‘We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Amen.

Day 89 – Acts 17:10-15 ‘They examined – and believed’

On the face of it, today’s passage appears to conform to what has become the ‘standard’ experience of Paul in his latest mission journey. He arrives, makes a great start, a good number believe – then there’s trouble, and Paul (and his friends) have to flee for their lives. We don’t know, either, what sort of Christian community they leave behind (although Paul’s subsequent letters joyfully confirm that much of their mission work has lasted and flourished).

So far, so predictable. However, Paul, Silas and Timothy’s short stay in Berea, fifty miles south-west of Thessalonica, does have a different flavour. Luke describes this (rather unflatteringly, if you happen to live in Thessalonica!) as follows: (v11) ‘The Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica.’

The reason is not just their enthusiasm, but their curiosity: ‘they examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.’ Two things are noteworthy here: first, their hunger – they didn’t just confine their interest to the Sabbath, when they were expected to be in the synagogue; like the first church in Acts 2, they gathered every day. They filled their minds and hearts with God’s word on a daily basis.

Second, they reflected on Paul’s message with real rigour. The word ‘examine’ here is generally used for judicial investigations: it’s the same word Luke uses when Herod questions Jesus, or when the Sanhedrin tackle Peter and John back in chapter 4. Paul believes in doctrine, but not in indoctrination. He is happy to present his case and let his hearers test it.

This remains true for us today. There is a popular cultural narrative that faith is simply uncritical acceptance, that somehow we can only have ‘faith’ if we turn off our brains. Paul would roll his eyes at such a thought. We have good reasons to believe. We can examine (rigorously analyse) the Scriptures with confidence. Much scientific enquiry also confirms basic principles that we find in God’s word thousands of years ago – despite what you may read in the press! God’s word is just as able to do its work today.

So, let’s be inspired by the Bereans today – dare I say it, let’s ‘be more Berean’! If, in the end, we hold on through simple trust in all circumstances, that trust is built on the firmest of foundations. The Lord has opened our minds and hearts, and never lets us go.

Day 90 – Acts 17:16-17 ‘Saw, felt and did’

I wonder, what is the greatest city you’ve visited? In our modern world, there are many such cities. I myself have lived most of my life in London, and I’ve been fortunate to visit some of the other great cities of the world: Paris, Rome and Sydney among them. I now live in the new city of Milton Keynes – unquestionably the greatest of them all! (If you’re smirking at this point, why not come and see for yourself – those of us who live here do so for a reason...)

In our main passage for today, we find St. Paul in Athens. We don’t know if that was always the plan – probably not, the vision Paul had was to visit the region of Macedonia, and thus far he had been hounded out of several cities in fairly quick succession. To get from the coast near Berea to Athens was some 300 miles, so it may be that, having faced such opposition, he needed a fresh start in a completely different region.

Either way, Athens was on a different level altogether from the places he had visited recently: at the time, it was the second greatest city on earth behind Rome, and unquestionably its greatest in terms of learning and culture. If Rome was the great political power of the day, Greece was the intellectual and cultural power; Athens was the city of Aristotle and Plato, a city most educated people of the time would have longed to visit.

However, I’m fascinated, and profoundly challenged, by Paul’s response to this experience. It would be easy to be overwhelmed, awe-struck; and most of us who might have the opportunity to visit such a place would simply be wandering around, going ‘wow!’ on a regular basis. But not Paul – let’s look at what he saw, what he felt and what he did as a result.

What Paul *saw* was not a city full of extraordinary buildings and unparalleled learning, but a city full of idols. What he *felt* was not awe at its grandeur, but distress at its spiritual ignorance. What he *did* was dedicate himself to sharing the good news of Jesus.

Paul got behind the impressive outward appearance of this city, to get to its heart. Despite all its prosperity, influence and culture, it was still a city full of people who needed Jesus – just as much as anywhere else. The equality of all humanity before God is the great leveller: on the one hand, we are all equally precious; on the other, we are all equally in need of salvation. Our learning our wealth, our power, counts for nothing before the Almighty. Like the tax collector in Jesus’ famous story, what the Lord looks for is a humble heart, ready to receive his love and grace: ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner!’

We may not have degrees and accolades – but if we have Christ, we have all we need. Our faith is ‘of greater worth than gold’ (1 Peter 1:7). Let’s rejoice in this precious news today, and may it fill our hearts with peace and our lips with praise. Amen.

Day 91 – Acts 17:16-25 ‘Our great big God’

Paul’s brief stay in Athens is a story full of contrasts. We observed last time the great contrast between the impressive facade of the city and the real state of Athens in the middle of the first century AD: a declining culture with defective religious thought and practice.

We can also see a marked contrast between Paul and the philosophers. Both highly intelligent, both committed to truth – but one party is ‘all talk’ (they ‘spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas’ v21), while Paul is a man of action and decision. Having become convinced of what he believes, he practises it with courage and full commitment. The debate that ensues is shot through with this underlying distinction – between ideas for ideas’ sake, and a message that radically transforms a life.

Finally, we also see how Paul adapts his approach to this august, educated group. The contrast between his previous sermons and this one in Athens is quite marked. He does get to Jesus eventually – but he establishes a number of cultural connection points first, and even quotes their own culture back to them – the altar ‘to an unknown God’ (v23) and the philosophers Epimenides and Aratus (v28 – more on that tomorrow).

Critically, what Paul wants to achieve is a bigger vision of God in the minds of his listeners. J.B. Phillips (he of the New Testament translation) once wrote a book called ‘Your God is too small’ – and this could have been written exactly for Paul’s audience today. So often, we human beings tend to create god or gods in our image, not the other way round: which means they’re always too small, and need to be followed with particular rules and rituals in order to connect them with our lives. It effectively allows us to assume that our lives are still our own, and this god or these gods get as much of it as we’re prepared to let them.

For Paul, on the other hand, his God, our God, the one true God, is not like this: (v24) ‘The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth.’ Our God is a great big God – he made the whole world, the whole universe is suffused with his presence. As a result, notice the radical implications: first, ‘He does not live in temples built by human hands.’ How could he? How could any building be big enough to house this God? Second, he doesn’t need anything. Or as Paul says: (v25) ‘He is not served by human hands.’ He doesn’t need our libations or rituals to appease him or impress him. He is complete and whole within himself. We do all that stuff to try and make ourselves feel better, not God.

This God is universal, everywhere. The whole world belongs to the Lord. Or, to paraphrase the Dutch statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper: there is no place on earth where Jesus can’t say, ‘This is mine.’ This is the ‘unknown’ God that Paul wants his hearers to know, worship and love. This is the Lord we know, worship and love. Today, offer your awe and praise to our great big God. And pray with faith, knowing that his capacity to hear and act is boundless. He is the Lord of life. Amen.

Day 92 – Acts 17:24-28 ‘Life and breath and everything else’

Today we pick up where we left yesterday; and at this point in Paul’s remarkable address to the philosophers, Paul takes the chance to stretch their thinking towards the implications of some of their own philosophy. Revealing his own (formidable) education, he quotes some famous Greek texts back to them: (v28) “‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.””

What Paul is doing here is quite brilliant: he is teaching his audience in language they ‘get’. It turns out that, embedded in their own culture, are ideas about the greatness of God, the fact that we bear the image of God, as well as the capacity of us humans to relate at a deep level to this God – all of which are foundational to the good news Paul is sharing with them.

The true God is not limited to certain places or rituals or buildings, to certain boxes and compartments in our lives. He fills the whole universe, and all of our lives matter to him – every breath, every thought, everything that matters to us matters to Him as well. Or as Paul summarises beautifully: (v25) ‘He gives everyone life and breath and everything else.’

Imagine a life where every moment is filled with God’s presence; where he is with us the whole time. We can bring every worry to him, we can cry every tear with him, we can share every joy with him, we can celebrate every blessing knowing that he is smiling with us. This is not fiction or pie in the sky: it is the reality of what Jesus came to bring us.

So much of our Christian thinking focuses on the benefits of forgiveness and eternal life, and believe me those are amazing, and rightly get attention. But there is another blessing which underpins them: it is that God comes close to us, we can experience what it is like to truly live with him in our lives all the time. What you might call the with-God life.

This is the life which Paul holds out to the Athenians, just as he did to his hearers wherever he went. ‘All nations’ have the opportunity ‘to seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.’ (v27)

He is not far from you. Take a moment today to reach out, and find – and be found by – Him.

Day 93 – Acts 17:24-34 ‘Proof to everyone’

I’m a natural fence-sitter, to be honest. In part that’s my peace-able nature, which prefers to avoid taking controversial positions which upset other people. In part that’s because I can usually see all sides of an argument, so I tend not to jump quickly to a conclusion. Almost certainly it’s sometimes just cowardice. As someone once quipped about a famous teaching of Jesus: the meek shall inherit the earth... if that’s alright with the rest of you. I think they wrote that about me.

But there is, thankfully, one area of my life where I have been decisive, and that is when it comes to what I believe about Jesus. Granted, it took me a while to get there (what else would you expect?) – but, having jumped down off the fence, it has long been my deep and firm conviction, and something I have dedicated my life to, however falteringly.

In Athens, Paul encounters a rare phenomenon – for him. He’s used to polarising people: if you look at most of his mission encounters in the various places to which he’s travelled, people fairly quickly either come to believe, or come to oppose. There’s not much in between.

Athens is different. Its intellectual culture loved debates, for their own sake. Ideas were exciting, but mostly that – ideas. You didn’t necessarily have to *do* anything as a result. It must have been a shock when Paul moved his discourse deftly from philosophical reflection to a call to change. If we’ve looked, over the last two days, at what was different about Paul’s sermon in Athens, today we can see what doesn’t change – the heart of his message: Jesus, the resurrection, the call to repent (change). True, it’s couched in different language, but the ‘proof... to everyone’ is that Jesus rose from the dead (v31). The God who made us in his image (the first part of his sermon), has now saved us by bearing our image. A real, flesh-and-blood God to worship and follow, not an article made of gold, silver or stone.

Nevertheless, it’s ultimately little surprise that the response to Paul’s address includes not only mockery, but a request to ‘hear you again on this subject.’ (v32) No coming down off the fence for us, please! Much better to sit up on top of it, nice and high, far above contradiction or action.

Paul can see he’s not going to get very far here; they might not be throwing rocks at him or putting him in jail, but this is perhaps the hardest spiritual ground he’s encountered. There is some fruit – Luke names at least two people who respond – but it’s a fraction of what he’s seen elsewhere. Sadly, there’s no letter to the church in Athens written later in the New Testament...

Praise God he brought me down off my fence! Praise God that he did that for you, too. As we leave Athens (with Paul), give thanks that God came near to us in Christ, that the resurrection is real, and that we bear the image of the One who saves us – becoming the transformed people we were made to be. Amen.