

Acts 1:12-26

CC 9 & 10.30 4th Sept 2016

Today we start a new series in the Acts of the Apostles. As we continue to reflect upon our verse for the year, "As you come to him the living stone, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:4&5). The verse actually continues "offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

This term we are thinking about what it means for us to be 'a holy priesthood' and how we offer 'spiritual sacrifices'.

To help us with this we turn to the early church where we don't see a blueprint for the church in every age but we do see how God's people offered him prayer, worship, and service in other words they acted as 'a holy priesthood'.

If you can bear with me waggling on the tee just a bit longer before we get into the passage, we need to ask what Acts is all about?

We get a big clue if we look at the end of the first book Luke wrote. In Luke 24:46-47 we see Jesus speaking to the disciples just before the ascension. He said, ""This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

If we look at v46 we get a summary of what Luke has been writing about in the first book – the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Then if we look at v47 we see a summary of what he will write about in the second book, the spread of the gospel to all nations.

What he was saying to Theophilus was, be certain that Jesus died and rose again and it is God's purpose that this should be proclaimed.

To that end we should note that it is as much God's purpose that v47 be fulfilled as v46.

If we want one verse to sum up Acts it would probably be 1:8, "you will be my witnesses". What we see in Acts is ceaseless preaching of the gospel and ceaseless increase in the church.

So we come to Acts and not to chapter one verse one but to the passage we have had read today. Jesus has ascended to heaven but before he went he had given the disciples the charge to be his witnesses but he'd also used an unpleasant four letter word, "wait". Acts 1:4 "wait for the gift my Father promised".

These verses tell us a bit about the church of Jesus in the waiting period between the ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

So what do you do while you are waiting?

Being an activist I'm not easy with wasted time. If I waiting in the dentists I'm reading.

But let's imagine you are on a train journey and approaching your destination. Are you fast asleep with perhaps a notice on you saying "wake me up at Basingstoke" or are you ready with your bags round you to get off quickly when the train stops?

These disciples and others gathered with them in the upper room were told to wait. They were waiting for the next event in salvation history but, as we shall see they didn't waste the time.

Friends we are waiting. We are waiting for the next event in salvation history which is.... The return of Jesus but we too should not be wasting time.

So what was going on while they were waiting and what can we learn from it?

1. They were focussed on Jesus

Basically Jesus had said "go back to Jerusalem and wait for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit" and they did. This was what Jesus had said. This was what Jesus had promised and they did what he said and waited trusting in his promise. It was all about Jesus. Friends this is key for us as we look at this book. It is called the Acts of the Apostles and we do see what they did but the focus is upon Jesus. He was the one who had called them to be Apostles and it was the gospel about his death and resurrection that they would be witnesses to.

As they waited they were thinking of what he had said and promised and that was ruling their lives. Jesus has made it clear that he will one day return. He has called us to follow him and told us to wait until that promised return and as we wait it is Jesus who should be our focus.

2. They were prayerful v14

They came back to Jerusalem and they committed themselves together to prayer. Presumably their prayer was for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised he would come so they prayed "Come Holy Spirit come". They did it together and they did it with persistence. We might be tempted to think that because Jesus had promised there was no need to pray but as John Stott points out, "on the contrary, it is only his promises which give us the warrant to pray and the confidence that he will hear and answer."

What is it that we should do as those whom God has called to be "a holy priesthood". We should like priests offer up a sacrifice and here is a sacrifice we can offer. The sacrifice of prayer. This was what the Psalmist spoke about when he said, "May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice." (Psalm 141:2)

The new school term begins this week and teachers will go back to work. Many will say they have been working through the summer getting lesson plans sorted etc. Many teachers get concerned by how much they have to do outside of the classroom when they know that the main part of their job is to teach. Friends as Christian disciples there are many aspects to our role but surely prayer has to be central doesn't it?

As we wait we pray and yes we pray “Come Holy Spirit come” but we pray much more as well. The reason they were praying “Come Holy Spirit come” was because of the task that lay ahead of them which was to be witnesses to Jesus. Surely we need to pray for that too don’t we?

Richard Bewes in his book ‘Talking about Prayer’ writes the following:

‘There is a town called Jinja in the centre of Africa. It is a significant place and for one reason only – it straddles the very source of the Nile where the waters of Lake Victoria have for centuries boiled out with unimaginable power into a narrow channel..... These waters were harnessed in the mid 1950’s when the prestigious Jinja dam was completed providing Uganda with millions of kilowatts of generated electricity. “Jinja to me is a parable” said John Wilson a Ugandan Christian leader. “In Uganda’s infancy we Africans regarded that place at Jinja with superstitious fear. It was a place to walk past quickly, a place of fear. But then we found it to be a source of power. It provided for our lighting, our heating, our cooking and our industry. It took us a long time to realise the potential of that place! It is the same with the driving power behind Christianity. All too easily we walk past it, not realising what it represents. Only in recent decades have we in Africa tasted the power of the gospel and living prayer. Meanwhile many of you in the west have largely forgotten it.”

The power of living prayer.

Friends we are going to see over and over again in these early chapters of Acts just how important prayer was and how they did it together. They made the effort to come together to pray. Now as we will see later just because this is what they did doesn’t mean that this is what we have to do.

However as we go through the rest of the NT we see that God’s people praying together seems to have been a regular thing in the church. It was what Christians do. It doesn’t seem to be the pattern now. They had come to the living stone, they were being built together as a spiritual house and a key part of their spiritual sacrifice was to pray together. We can ignore this if we wish and give all kinds of reasons why we don’t come together to pray but we cannot say that God is not encouraging us to do this! If we are followers of Jesus then prayer is a huge aspect of the spiritual sacrifice we offer and it is as we pray together that we are being built into a spiritual house. So how are you going to do that? We have a prayer meeting most weeks. I know the homegroups pray together. Then there are prayer triplets of praying in pairs. There are plenty of ways to do it.

I leave it with each one of us to work through what God’s word has to say to us about praying together.

3. They were under the word of God v15-22

Uncomfortable or what. Come on Peter we are getting on OK having great times of prayer why on earth bring up Judas? Could we not just quietly forget about him?

Peter did what so few of us are happy to do and that is he brings a difficult thing out into the open. It gets dealt with and this group of Christians are able to move on. But he does it because he thinks this is what God through his word is saying.

Obviously I don't know what had been going on in Peter's mind. But it was probably only about six weeks or so since Judas had betrayed Jesus. What he did and what had happened to Judas, which is graphically set out here, must have been on Peter's mind and the minds of others there.

Perhaps as they prayed Peter was asking what shall we do about Judas and the gap he has left?

The decision he made was guided by God's word.

V16 Judas' action was a fulfilment of God's word. It doesn't exonerate him but through the actions he chose God's word was fulfilled.

V20a Peter gives a quote from Psalm 69:25 which shows that the field Judas had bought would, under God's word remain deserted and a reminder that no one can stand against God. But then in v20b we see Peter refer to Psalm 109:8 and refer it to seeking a replacement for Judas.

The point for us to note is that in trying to work out what to do in a difficult situation it was to God's word that Peter turned and that word was sufficient authority for others to agree with what he was saying. We seem the same thing as Paul writes to the churches. He uses the words "it is written" as the clinching argument. God's church was then under the authority of the word of God and that should be so today.

The reminder is there for us in 2 Tim 3:16&17 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

The Christian group there in Jerusalem listened as Peter spoke from the word of God and set out what they should do. Recently in our sermon series on Colossians we saw how the Christians there gathered together in the main room of Philemon's house called there by Tychicus and eager to hear what Paul had to say to them. God's word speaking to God's people. This is how the church of God grows. Paul in Ephesians 2:20 speaks of the church being "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" that is upon their word as it provides both shape and direction to the church of Jesus. My eldest grandson Caleb, like many youngsters his age is a whizz with Lego. But he knows he needs the instructions to build whatever it is. If we would build the church then the word of God is essential. The word helps us see Jesus as head and cornerstone. It helps us to view our fellow Christians in the right way. It enables us to know ourselves and see our role in the church. May God help us as Christians and as a church to hold to his word as our rule and guide.

4. they were ready to go v21-26

So sensing the need to replace Judas they set about the task looking for someone with the right qualifications v21-22 someone who had been with Jesus from his baptism to his ascension. Two stood out, Joseph and Matthias. They prayed and then they cast lots. Now that may not seem a very spiritual way but as either was suitable it was as good a way as any. If you are not sure I would refer you to the sermon I preached on guidance recently.

The main point was that Judas was replaced by someone who was right for the task as we see in v22, "For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection". That was the important thing and now with Matthias on board they were good to go. They were ready to be witnesses as Jesus had commanded. They had no idea when the Holy Spirit would come or when they would be required to be witnesses but they were through prayer and through the word of God waiting and ready.

I wonder if we are as ready to be witnesses. This it would strike me is another aspect of being a Holy priesthood that we witness to the greatness and goodness of our God. Peter reminded his readers in 1 Peter 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

It is a bit like being at the traffic lights with the car in gear ready to go.

These guys were ready for the task ahead with their focus on Jesus and through prayer and the word of God and through them just 120 of them at this point came the church of Jesus Christ which today has spread around the globe.

Today is the start of a new week in your life and the life of our church. I hope we are ready this week to be that holy priesthood serving God wherever we go fuelled up through prayer and the word and ready to be his witnesses as we do so who knows how God's church may grow and spread.

