

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

WEEK ONE

CHAPTERS 1 AND 2



Introduction

Luke is Greek, not Jewish. He's writing probably around 80-90 AD, as a sequel to the gospel he wrote earlier. He says he is writing it to give "full confidence" (*asphaleia*) to readers by telling the story "in sequence" (*kathexes*). You could say therefore that it is history written for a specific purpose; to defend God's activity in the world, to give "confidence" to all who read it.

Read with your heart

How are you feeling this morning? How did you sleep? As you listen, how do you feel about the story Luke is telling? Pay attention to what catches you or makes you curious, relieved, confused, disturbed – whatever it is, notice it and feel it. As you find your way into the story, listen with your heart – does it change your perceptions or feelings? If so how?

Read with your head

Chapter 1: This chapter makes the transition from the gospel to this follow-on narrative. Luke starts by re-capitulating what he has already said in his gospel (Chapter 24.36-53 Jesus disappearing from his disciples in what has become known as the Ascension).

Chapter 1 is reiterating the themes of Luke's gospel. That humans have a choice between two kingdoms. Jesus says this again right at the beginning of Acts; chapter 1 verse 3. In 1.7, Jesus's response to the disciples' questions is nuanced - he deflects speculation "it is not for you to know the times and the periods". The point is being made that this concept of the "kingdom of God" is not a territory or a realm – it is God's rule over human hearts, irrespective of ethnicity, identity etc. Jesus redefines categories -and this sets the tone for the main theme of Acts which is that the message and presence of Jesus is for all people not just the Jewish people.

Right at the beginning of Acts, Jesus has therefore responded (somewhat mysteriously) to the most pressing question of disciples and readers. The logic is that Jesus has announced the kingdom, and then goes. The Holy Spirit is then poured out on "all flesh" (cf the prophet Joel). The Holy Spirit is "powerful" cf 1.8

Luke's interpretation of the ascension of Jesus is that he's not a resuscitated corpse but as one living in power. Spiritual power and its use, and effect, is a recurring theme of Acts introduced here too.

Matthew and Luke differ a lot about Judas and how he is treated. In Matthew Judas tries to say sorry and returns the money before hanging himself. Luke is much more harsh – spiritual dissatisfaction is symbolised by physical acquisitiveness. Luke is keen to show that the number of disciples is back up to 12 before the Holy Spirit is given.

Chapter 2: We have heard about this "Holy Spirit" quite a few times now – so we have been built up to expect something. They are celebrating the Jewish Feast of Weeks, one of the 3 great pilgrimage feasts of ancient Israel. "Pentecost" has been such a powerful influence over Christianity and

Christian practice – but it's important to notice how short and undetailed an account it is of the event itself. Only 4 verses. And is really very circumspect. The sound is *compared to* a rushing wind and the tongues that appear are *compared to* fire. Luke's point therefore is not the *pyrotechnics of theophany* but spiritual transformation. Luke is not emphasising the strange happenings but their effects, which he spends much more time describing. The real "event" of Pentecost is the empowerment of the disciples and the widening of the mission to include people from the whole world. Hence the detailed description of the nations listening to Peter and the detailed account of his speech. Peter's speech is a sophisticated piece of rhetoric. He uses the prophet Joel to programmatise what might have looked like a chaotic event. And the main points that are being made to the crowd are: a) change your perception of Jesus and his followers b) share in the meaning of the conviction that Jesus is the one who was to come c) take part in the experience of the prophetic Spirit being poured out.

A key theme of Acts is being introduced: that *humans are challenged to respond to God's activity in their midst*. In 2.37 there is a very dramatic moment – the crowd "cut to the heart" and said "what shall we do?" .

Chapter 2.38 Peter is saying very straightforwardly "repent" and be baptised. In Greek, this is "metanoia" which means change of heart/mind, change of direction and perspective. In the words of the baptism service, it is "turn to Christ".

Luke's image of the first community of believers is idealised – along the lines of other Hellenistic writers – eg Ovid's description of the "Golden Age" – and it's not long before he describes vividly all the arguing and controversy – but still he is saying that the Spirit inspired a community which realised the highest ideals of human longing– unity, peace, joy, and the praise of God.

There are 4 distinct elements: a) the teaching of the apostles (which inspires "awe"), b) "fellowship", in Greek *koinonia*, which here is described in generosity with material possessions, c) breaking of bread – sharing meals together and d) prayers – in terms of attendance at the Temple and praising God.

Read with your feet

During the coming week, let these Scripture stories live with you, and see where the connections are in everyday life. Perhaps in your prayers, ask God to give you the eyes of faith so you can discern more of the presence of the Holy Spirit. In everyday living do you sense the stirrings of the Holy Spirit? Where and what does that look like?

In Acts, it seems that one way in which you can notice the Holy Spirit is where we are challenged to change our perceptions? Where in my day am I prompted to do something differently, challenged in a thought, or words; is there anything or anyone that particularly encourages me?

An idea is to have a notebook and write, draw, find images, pictures that tell your story of the journey with Acts ...reflect on what you hear, see, think, question, doubt, feel.....

Come next week at 9. 15am to share together (as in Acts *koinonia, fellowship*) as much or as little as you like.



ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

WEEK TWO

THE HOLY SPIRIT II



Introduction

Luke is Greek, not Jewish. He's writing probably around 80-90 AD, as a sequel to the gospel he wrote earlier. He says he is writing it to give "full confidence" (*asphaleia*) to readers by telling the story "in sequence" (*kathexes*). You could say therefore that it is history written for a specific purpose; to defend God's activity in the world, to give "confidence" to all who read it.

Read with your heart

Listen with your imagination and senses and notice what stirs inside you, what you are feeling as you hear the story being told. Excited, interested,

bored, impatient. What happens in your heart? Where are your sympathies aroused, in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus? Do you feel closer to the ones who people flock to hear the good news and long to hear more, or are consumed with anger and jealousy and want to kill the disciples? Let your life experience guide you as you react to this story with your heart.

Read with your head

In these passages, we are learning more about what the early disciples are calling the “Holy Spirit”. Luke has already shown us that the effects of this spirit are that individuals become very courageous in speaking out to the crowd (Peter in chapter 2) and that *koinonia* (fellowship) is inspired by a shared experience of the spirit. Today’s chapters show that the movement of the spirit also brings the apostles into conflict with authority.

Chapter 5: we are in Jerusalem, in Solomon’s portico. Luke repeats several times that they were standing in the temple. He is emphasising that they are truly inheritors of the twelve tribes of Israel. They belong in the temple teaching. We then read about the second trial before the Sanhedrin (the first trial was in chapter 4). Luke uses very strong language. The Sanhedrin are full of authority and pomp (v21) but are completely impotent. It is perhaps intended to be comic. But then the very serious descriptions of violent intent “filled with jealousy” (v 17), rage that leads them to want to murder the apostles (v33). Difficult exchange between the chief priest who charges Peter with bringing the death of Jesus on the heads of the Sanhedrin (v 28) but Peter immediately repeats the charge “you hanged him on a tree” (v30). We meet Gamaliel a Pharisee. Luke’s attitude towards Gamaliel is complex. Gamaliel is a senior member of the Sanhedrin, and as such was one of the ones who condemned Jesus to death (Luke 22.66-73). In Chapter 4, he has already confronted Peter and John and has seen a man healed in front of him. So now, with the apostles on trial again, he sends them out of the room and advises his colleagues to “wait and see”. His point is to reduce Jesus to the other would-be prophets Theudas and Judas the Galilean.

Chapter 13: we are now in Antioch of Pisidia. The apostles arrived by boat and started speaking publicly in the synagogue. In v 45, Luke uses the same phrase as in chapter 5 about the Sanhedrin; they were “full of jealousy”.

Jealousy is the source of both Peter and Paul's suffering. V46, Luke is repeating that the effect of the Holy Spirit is to make the apostles "bold". Key movement in v46 as they say they are "turning to the Gentiles". In verse 50, the same pattern is repeated as in chapter 5: jealousy turns into incitement to rage and murder. But "joy and the Holy Spirit" is a repeated phrase too (v52) which is an indication for Luke that this foundation of the church is authentic.

Chapter 19: we are now in Ephesus. A discussion about the Holy Spirit enables Luke to finally make the distinction between John the Baptist and Jesus. John apparently has disciples 20 years after his death; Luke is emphasising that he is an important religious figure, but that there is a distinction to be made. So eventually these disciples are baptised again by Paul. But it is when Paul "lays hands on them" that they "receive the Holy Spirit", not, it seems, at the baptism itself. One of the effects in this instance is *glossolalia* which we translate at "speaking in tongues". This experience is found in other places in the New Testament – once in the gospels (Mark 16.17 who talks about "new tongues". Paul mentions it in his long discussion in his letter to Corinthian Christian communities (1 Corinthians 12-14). This kind of ecstatic experience is mentioned in Cicero and Plutarch as something they were familiar with. Luke's view seems to be, from his description of Pentecost, that these ecstatic experiences are sometimes a consequence of the Holy Spirit's movement but that the emphasis is on what effect that has: boldness, courage, no fear of conflict, and a deep connection to one another (*koinonia*).

Read with your feet

These early communities saw conflict, imprisonment, flogging, death. These experiences were consequences of living the gospel. Along with joy. What's your reaction to the gospel? Would you discern the Holy Spirit present and active in your life, community and what effects do you see? People, cities are polarised by what is being said. Where do you take sides in day to day life, perhaps making someone else 'other'. Is there anything in what you've heard today that challenges what you believe or think about the spiritual life?

The effect of the Holy Spirit was to make the apostles bold and courageous. For what do Christians need courage today? For what do you need courage?

Do you feel that you have a voice to speak about these things? Being given a voice was one of the main effects of the Spirit. What does it mean for you in everyday life to be “filled with the spirit”, be “led by the spirit”, to live a Christ-shaped life?



One of our congregation, Julia Wickham, is working for the UN in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This is a picture of people walking to Goma (fleeing regional fighting). Pope Francis and the UN have called for action after at least 36 Christians are hacked to death.

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Week Three: Chapters 5 and 6: The Early Church I



Introduction

In the first 2 weeks, we saw that Luke's teaching his readers that spotting the movement of the Holy Spirit involved noticing individual courage and boldness, breaking of bread together, fellowship (koinonia). The next 2 weeks are looking at how the group developed, what structures and actions it decided to put in place and how it grew.

Read with your heart

As we listen to scripture the words and stories that snag our attention are the entry point in the text for our story and experience in our life today – unique to each of us. What feelings are stirred in you as you listen to the descriptions of the communities of new believers and individuals in these passages? What strikes you most? What sort of reactions do you find in yourself? What emerges for you as we listen together?

Read with your head

Chapter 5: Luke is telling the story of the early church very skilfully and with intentional themes in these chapters. In contrast with Barnabas, a Levite named in chapter 4, who lays all his possessions “at the apostles’ feet”, Ananias and Sapphira are found wanting. Luke seems to have based his telling of this story on the story of Achan in the Book of Joshua (chapter 7). Their crime is conspiracy and deception. Luke emphasises that they were in it together right from the beginning (v2,3). This suggests almost a “counter community” of people who don’t deal openly with each other, in contrast to the Spirit-filled church which does. In verse 7, Sapphira comes “without knowing” which is a deliberate contrast: the conspiracy is broken by the spirit-filled reaction of the church.

The argument is framed in cosmic terms; Peter has the authority and contrasts the “Spirit” with “Satan” (v3). But also in human terms; Ananias and Sapphira are free to make the choices they make. Peter states this dual interpretation “you did not lie to us but to God” (v4)

Luke again makes the link between attitude towards possessions and openness to the Spirit – a theme of his gospel. It isn’t ownership of property which seems to be the fault – but the conspiracy to deceive – that threatens the church and the apostles’ authority.

Verse 11 is common in Luke’s gospel and Acts; fear and awe are common reactions. This is the first time Luke uses the Greek word *ekklesia* (from which we get “church”). He uses it after this – meaning *assembly*.

The apostles’ ability to heal is placed next. Luke puts them, again, in Solomon’s portico – in public and in a symbolic place in the Temple where they are clearly inheritors of the 12 tribes of Israel. Everything in this description is heightened and dramatic. In verse 13, the apostles

have become figures to be afraid of (not surprising given Ananias and Sapphira). They become almost numinous figures – and the healing in v. 15 is unlike anything in the rest of the gospels. Even Jesus didn't heal without touching people or addressing them directly.

The persecution of the apostles is placed next in the story by Luke. We looked at this second trial last week.

Chapter 6: “Grumbling” has begun between Hellenists (Greek Gentiles) and Hebrews (Jews) about whose widows are getting better treatment. Luke places this account here, perhaps to show that the rapid growth is causing difficulty. Needs are outstripping the administration. In verse 2, the word *plethos* is used to describe the assembly – this has more a sense of a meeting than just an assembly. It may be a representative body by now, rather than a more loose *ekklesia*. The apostles are starting to define different roles; they will devote themselves to prayer and to “serving the word” v 4. They will find others to fulfil “the daily service” *diakonia* (*from which we get deacons*). Although this account of the appointment of 7 helpers looks straightforward, it isn't really, because for the rest of Acts we don't hear of them except Stephen and Philip – and they are not really doing this practical service work, but more prophets and evangelists. The account is genuinely confusing if what we want to do is draw specific lessons about how roles are divided up in a community of believers.

Stephen is introduced quietly, as Barnabas was in chapter 4. He becomes a key and important figure, the first one to die for his Christian faith. We also meet Philip here, who later baptises an Ethiopian, and also brings the gospel to the controversial Samaria (chapter 8.29). NOTE These seven are men, and this account has been used to justify the all-male ordained ministry of the church. The same designation *diakonia* is used by Paul to introduce Phoebe, a key figure in the church in Corinth, who is trusted to take his letter to Christians in Rome. (Romans 16. 1-2). The contemporary church therefore

acknowledges both Stephen and Phoebe as model deacons in the early church. In verse 7, Luke again emphasises growth, this time in Jerusalem itself. Stephen is described as a prophet, because he is full of “grace and power” and “did great wonders and signs”. The sequence that Luke describes regarding Stephen’s arrest, being brought before the Sanhedrin, echoes the passion story of Jesus.

Read with your feet *‘The New Testament (and Acts) describes what happens when human beings are brought into relationship with Jesus Christ by faith as a community in which everyone’s gifts are set free for the service of others....’ Rowan Williams*

As we go out into the week are we encouraged/changed by having been together (*koinonia*), praying, breaking bread, teaching, giving. If so how? What is the impact on my life, relationships, thinking, feeling, the life decisions I make?

