

The Acts of the Apostles

chapters 1-12

Expository sermons

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Volume two- The Acts

Acts 1:1-5

(Scripture quotes from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated)

How did you manage with that huge ballot paper at the recent elections? I had trouble reading it within the confines of the polling booth. Imagine if all our books were huge scrolls like that! Actually, they were in NT times. People wrote on papyrus scrolls. These were limited in size for logistical reasons. Some think the gospels writers were limited by the length of these scrolls. This was the case with Luke because he had to start a new scroll. He begins the second referring to his 'former account' (1:1). You may recall indications that he was abbreviating some things as he drew his gospel to a close. We noted some overlap in content between the end of the gospel according to Luke, and the beginning of the Book of Acts.

The second volume in Luke's two-volume work probably had no separate title. It came to be labelled simply as 'Acts' or 'Acts of the Apostles'. Some suggest it should be 'Acts of the Holy Spirit' or 'Acts of Jesus Christ'. Jesus is risen, and he appeared to Saul in a vision on the Damascus road about one third of the way through this book. The Holy Spirit appears in chapter two. The whole book is about the gospel being taken to all the nations, according to the final command Jesus gave his disciples; 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (Mat 28:19-20).

We do not get to the end of the age in this book because this has not yet come. But we do see the gospel being taken to all the nations of the known world as we read the Book of Acts. In fact, a clear outline is given by the risen Jesus in the first chapter; 'You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (1:8). The book begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome- all roads led to Rome in those days.

Since this is the second volume of Luke's work we must briefly refer to his former account. This was also written to Theophilus (1:1, Luke 1:3). This name means, 'one who loves God'. It was a specific person and not a general term meaning 'Christian reader'. He is called 'most excellent Theophilus' in the prologue to Luke's gospel, leading some to think he was Luke's patron, responsible for seeing Luke's writings were copied and distributed. F. F. Bruce suggests he was 'a representative member of the intelligent middle-class public at Rome whom Luke wished to win over to a less prejudicial and more favourable opinion of Christianity than that which was common among them'.

Christians were a despised lot in those days; they did not even have idols to worship! Luke carefully and valiantly puts forwards the historical credentials of the faith, particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The growth of the church was based on this historical truth, and was in itself further evidence of the validity of the Christian faith, even though it was so different to the myths and philosophies of other religions. The Christians did not simply hold to the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth- they clung to the historical truths of his death and resurrection.

Luke was from a Gentile background and probably from the city of Antioch. He was a physician or doctor, but also an historian - or more specifically, a biographer. His research was not done in libraries but with eyewitnesses and ministers of the word (Luke 1:2). In the Book of Acts, Luke gives long accounts of sermons and speeches because the message of the gospel is central to its spread. There is no evidence of coercion, either by brainwashing or by physical violence, in this book. What

we see is violence been used against Christians, or followers of the Way. This is how the church began and this is how it continues today. Jesus said, 'If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you' (John 15:18). The apostle Paul, who experienced such hatred from the world, wrote, 'all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution' (2Tim 3:12). Luke not only consulted eyewitnesses, he was one himself. In a number of places in this book he writes 'we', indicating that he was with the apostle Paul at the time. This was on his second missionary journey (16:10), and again on his trip by ship to Rome (27:1). Luke was with Paul in Rome when Paul wrote what was probably his last letter (2Tim 4:11).

Luke refers to his 'former account' about the works and words of Jesus as, 'all that Jesus began to both do and to teach' (1:1). The former account was just the beginning. It was all that Jesus did and taught before he rose from the dead. The risen Jesus continues to minister to his disciples, and through them to the world of harassed and hopeless people- people who are like 'sheep without a shepherd' (Mat 9:36). Jesus is no longer present in the flesh, but he is present in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit would come upon them and they would be witnesses to Jesus in all the world. The last days had begun. They will end with the return of Jesus (1:11).

2. Proofs of the resurrection

In the gospel Luke records the resurrection of Jesus, and a number of appearances to his disciples. He appeared to Mary Magdalene, to Peter, to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and to the whole gathering behind locked doors, all on the day of his resurrection- the first Lord's day. A week later he appeared to the group again for the benefit of 'doubting' Thomas. Seeing the risen Jesus, this sceptic declared, 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28). There were other appearances as recorded by Paul, including a post-ascension appearance to himself on the Damascus road (1Cor 15:8). Apart from this appearance to Paul, all the resurrection appearances occurred over a period of forty days (1:3).

Luke writes, 'He also presented himself alive after his suffering by many infallible/ unmistakable proofs, being seen by them during forty days' (1:3). The suffering of Jesus refers to his death on the cross. All that Jesus did in his life was heal and help people. He healed lepers and restored the sight of the blind. He cast out evil spirits and even raised the dead. He spoke about the kingdom of God. All that Jesus said and did was good, yet he was taken by men and crucified. But God, who Jesus called 'My Father' and of whom he said, 'I and my Father are one' (John 10:30); God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day. Jesus was condemned because he confessed to being the Son of God (Luke 22:70). His resurrection was a vindication of all that he said about himself, and the kingdom of God.

Without the resurrection there would be no gospel- no good news. The disciples were completely broken and lost after the death of Jesus. Despite what he told them they were not in the least expecting to see him alive again? The women went to the grave of Jesus to anoint his dead body, not to check if he was still there. It was Jesus who came to them; 'Jesus presented himself alive after his suffering' (1:3). They were not searching for Jesus. When Jesus did present himself to them alive they struggled to believe what they saw. Jesus invited them to touch him. He ate with them. They were not seeing a ghost of some sort.

Luke the physician believed these eyewitness accounts; there were many of them and they were consistent. There is no record of Luke seeing the risen Jesus, although Paul says over five hundred

brethren saw Him on one occasion. Luke carefully listened to people's accounts and assessed them as adding up to 'many infallible proofs' (1:3). 'Proof' is a strong word. In science it means giving all the details of an experiment so it can be repeated. In biography 'proof' means checking out what is said by eyewitnesses or contemporary reports. Luke found no evidence whatsoever to deny the resurrection. The authorities claimed the body was stolen but no one produced the dead body of Jesus- even to this day! There is no other explanation for the empty grave. Every bit of evidence points to Jesus being risen from the dead.

After forty days the disciples accompanied the risen Jesus to the Mount of Olives from where they saw him taken up. They returned with joy to Jerusalem to worship God (Luke 24:52). No doubts remained in the hearts of these men and women. They were totally convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was alive.

3. Prepare the apostles

In his resurrection appearances Jesus spoke to his disciples about the kingdom of God and gave them commands to carry out. It was not just a matter of, 'here I am back, so everything is the same again'. Jesus was the same, yet not the same. He was ready to return to heaven, having completed the work he was sent to do in this world. After forty days he would be taken up into heaven. Yet the work of Jesus in preaching the kingdom of God would continue. It would continue through his chosen apostles and through the church, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus began his ministry he said, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel' (Mark 1:15). John the Baptist was calling people to repent and be baptised before Jesus began his ministry. John actually baptised Jesus with water and saw the Holy Spirit come upon him. John prophesied of One coming who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16). Through the Holy Spirit the risen Jesus gave commandments to his apostles (1:2). He told them that the Holy Spirit would come upon them with power so that they would continue to preach the kingdom of God (1:4-5).

Jesus was with them, probably eating with them, when he told them not to depart from Jerusalem until they had received 'the Promise of the Father' (1:4). Here is an overlap between Acts and the gospel of Luke (Luke 24:49). In Acts he makes it clear that the Promise of the Father is the Holy Spirit referred to by John. They would be 'baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now' (1:5). It was just ten days from his ascension to Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus not only promised the Holy Spirit would come upon them, empowering them to preach the gospel. He not only commanded them to wait in Jerusalem until this happened. But in his resurrection appearances he continued teaching them, 'speaking of things pertaining to the kingdom of God' (1:3). Their ministry would not simply entail demonstrations of the Spirit's power. Signs and wonders would be there, but the important thing was to preach the kingdom of God, just as Jesus had done.

They heard Jesus teaching in Galilee and in Jerusalem before he was crucified, but failed to understand what he was saying. After his resurrection he explained to them in all the Scriptures things concerning himself. He opened their understanding to all that was written in the Scriptures (Luke 24:27, 45). They now understood what the kingdom of God is. Do you?

Jesus is king in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not of this world. 'My kingdom is not of this world' said Jesus (John 18:36). Some Christians do not understand this. Some even say, 'I tried Christianity but it did not work for me'. They thought Jesus would give them all they wanted in this world, but there is not such promise in the gospel. If this is the gospel you heard, and you believe, you will be disappointed. Other Christians think they must go out and change this world by preventing disease, empowering the poor and protesting against governments and big business. But this is not what Jesus did, and not what he told the apostles to do. Go in the power of the Spirit; but go preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Repent and believe the gospel. The kingdom of God is within you (Luke 17:21). We pray, 'your kingdom come, your will be done'. This must first happen in your life. You must become a new creation in Christ Jesus; you must become a citizen of heaven, if you are to be a witness for Jesus, and see his kingdom come.

Power to witness

Acts 1:6-8

Luke's second volume of all that Jesus did and taught begins with the resurrected Jesus speaking to his disciples. It overlaps with his first volume, the Gospel according to Luke, in its historical detail. In fact, his gospel ends with Jesus being taken up into heaven (Luke 24:18), the same event recorded here in Acts 1:9. The risen Jesus appeared to various individuals and the gathered disciples during forty days, and then he ascended into heaven. During these appearances he not only proved that he was resurrected but also spoke about the kingdom of God (1:3). He told them to stay in Jerusalem until they were baptised with the Holy Spirit, 'not many days from now' (1:5).

On this occasion, or maybe at another appearance to the assembled group, they asked him a question about Israel and the kingdom of God. In answering this question Jesus directed their attention back to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the great responsibility they now had to be witnesses of Jesus Christ in all the world. Jesus was going away but his ministry of reconciling men and women to God would continue (2Cor 5:18). It would continue through Spirit-empowered believers; and so it continues to this today.

1. When- the kingdom of God

When Jesus began preaching in Galilee he said, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand' (Mark 1:15). The Jewish nation was under Roman occupation; there was heightened expectation among the Jews of the coming of Messiah. They thought Messiah would deliver them from Roman oppression. It was with this expectation that a great crowd, including the disciples, welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. 'They thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately' (Luke 19:11). Everything changed when Jesus was crucified on the Friday. All hope of Jesus throwing out the Romans and restoring the kingdom to Israel was lost.

But when Jesus rose from the dead this expectation was momentarily rekindled. Jesus explained that, as it was written, the Christ or Messiah had to 'suffer and rise from the dead on the third day' (Luke 24:46). The kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about was not centred on Jerusalem at this point in time. Indeed, it was not even a kingdom of this world. We are not told exactly what he said when he spoke about 'things pertaining to the kingdom of God' (1:3), but clearly he was not raising expectations of restoring Israel to the glory days of King David. Keener writes, "Luke-Acts portrays Jesus as heir to David's throne, but the nature of his royalty is not immediately a 'political, this-worldly restoration' or 're-establishment of the monarchy', dramatically affecting the empire's political situation. It redefines their hope and especially their immediate focus".

The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon the disciples. They were still struggling to understand all that the risen Jesus was explaining to them from the Scriptures. It was hard to dislodge this deeply entrenched and basically selfish idea about the restoration of Israel; not that the idea was totally wrong- it was just misdirected. When they asked Jesus if he was going to restore the kingdom to Israel at this time he did not simply answer 'No'. The kingdom of God is real- very real. It is just that it does not belong to this world (John 18:36). The kingdom of God is not about the restoration of the earthly Jerusalem; it is about the heavenly Jerusalem. When Jesus returns, as the angels will shortly affirm, it will be in the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Jesus does not go into any description of the kingdom of God at this point; he just warns the disciples against speculating as to the time of its coming. Like many today they were eager to know when the

kingdom of God would come in its fullness. Jesus said that this time is not for us to know; it belongs to the authority of God the Father (1:7). The kingdom will come, and we must keep this truth in mind, but in the meantime we have work to do. We are not to sit around speculating as to when but are to focus on the command the Lord has given us to go into all the world and preach the gospel. Jesus directs the minds of the disciples to this work, a work they will do when the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

2. What- promise and command

With his disciples assembled before him Jesus spoke to them for the last time. He gave them a promise and a command. He gave them their marching orders we might say. He was sending them into battle with clear instructions as to what they were to do and where they were to go. He had trained them over some three years, with an intensive course in the last forty days. The battle they were entering was a spiritual battle so they would need spiritual resources and weapons, namely the power of the Holy Spirit. The disciples had Jesus to guide and help them while he was with them but he was about to leave and return to heaven. He promised to send the Holy Spirit to be with them and empower them in carrying out his command.

At the end of Matthew's gospel Jesus gives essentially the same command. He says, 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' (Mat 28:19). Baptism presumes they have heard the gospel and responded by confession of sin and faith in Jesus Christ. In Matthew 28:20 Jesus said, 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age'. What he means is he is with them by his Spirit- the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is spoken of as the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. Jesus was taken from them in body but the Spirit would come upon them giving them power to accomplish the task given them by the risen Jesus. We will see in Acts 2 how the Holy Spirit transformed men huddled together in fear into men boldly preaching the gospel on the streets of Jerusalem.

The coming of the Holy Spirit is integral to the new covenant and the coming of the kingdom of God; as Jesus said, 'The kingdom of God is with you or in your midst' (Luke 17:21). The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove (Luke 3:22). The Holy Spirit descended on the apostles as tongues of fire. This is referred to as baptism with the Holy Spirit. When anyone repents and believes in Jesus they receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). It is not a later 'second blessing'. Water baptism symbolises the gift of the Holy Spirit; it is not of course, the means by which the Holy Spirit is given. The Holy Spirit is given by God when a person truly believes. If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he does not belong to Christ' (Rom 8:9 NIV).

The Holy Spirit empowers us to stand firm in the faith and to go out proclaiming the gospel into a hostile world. The Christian life is not a life of comfort- much less a life of having and enjoying all the things of this world. If you have heard such a gospel and believe it you have been deceived. The so-called 'prosperity gospel has many followers- for obvious reasons! The true gospel has few followers because it involves suffering. But we do not suffer alone. We do not fight alone. We have been given the Holy Spirit, the power of God. Paul said, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me' (Phil 4:13). Can you say this?

With the promise of power came the command to obey. 'You shall be witnesses to me' (1:8). In Greek the word is '*martyrs*'- from which we get the word 'martyrs'. Many witnesses of Jesus became martyrs. Jesus said, 'whoever confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my Father

who is in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, him I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven' (Mat 10:32-33). Let us keep these words in mind. Every believer is called to be a witness for Jesus, a witness through deeds and words. Being silent when you should be witnessing is tantamount to denial is it not? This world is a fallen world, a world of sin and death. It is full of people who are lost, people without God and without hope. They do not necessarily see they are lost, and do not necessarily like being found, but if you love people as God loves them you will be witnessing to them as Jesus commands us.

3. Where-to the end of the earth

'Witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (1:8). This verse is often seen as giving the outline for the book of Acts. The apostles were in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit was given to them and they began witnessing in this city; the city that had recently taken Jesus of Nazareth and crucified him. Jesus did not say witness for him would be easy or that they would not suffer. He said they would have the power of the Holy Spirit. They were arrested and beaten by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, and Stephen was taken and martyred, but not before the whole city heard the gospel and thousands believed in Jesus.

The NT church began in Jerusalem among the Jews, the people prepared by God. It was the Jews who first heard the gospel and believed. How then can anyone say the Jews have not yet heard the gospel? Some quote Paul saying, 'to the Jew first', and then say this had not been done. For sure there is a dynamic in mission with generations coming and going, but the record of Acts is that Jerusalem heard the gospel before it was taken further afield according to the command of Christ Jesus.

The second phase of witness was in Judea and Samaria: chapters 8-11:18. Great persecution broke out after Stephen's murder and the church was scattered (8:1). Phillip went down to Samaria and preached Christ. He later went, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the very south of Judea to witness to the Ethiopian at Gaza. Peter was summoned to Caesarea where he saw the Holy Spirit come upon Gentiles who believed the gospel he preached to them. A huge barrier was broken down, the ethnic or racial barrier between Jew and Gentile. All was set for the gospel to be taken to the end of the earth.

The third phase of witness was just that- taking the gospel to the end of the earth, as it was then known. This began in chapter 13 with the Paul and Barnabas being sent by the Holy Spirit to Cyprus and Asia Minor (Turkey). Actually, this phase can be traced back to the persecution after Stephen's death also (11:18). Converted Jews went to Antioch and preached to Hellenists or Greek speaking Jews. Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to help in the exploding church at Antioch and to bring Saul of Tarsus, the apostle Paul, onto the scene. Along with the three-fold division of Acts outlined here in verse 8 we can also see a two-fold division between the acts of Peter and the acts of Paul.

The book of Acts ends with Paul in the imperial capital, Rome, witnessing to lots of people who came to him in his prison cell (28:23). Did the disciples who saw the risen Jesus complete the task given to them by Jesus? Did they witness to the end of the earth? Some say that since Rome was the capital of the empire, the world empire, that the gospel was now effectively taken to the end of the earth as it was known at the time. Paul spoke of going to Spain to preach the gospel, after visiting the church in Rome (Rom 15:24). He said he had fully preached the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Rom 15:19). Paul was obeying this command of Christ. It was not that he had preached

to every individual in the region but he preached and established churches in strategic centres. These in turn would preach the gospel in the local area.

Therefore, in one sense we can say the task or mission given by Jesus to the Twelve was accomplished. They obeyed the command given them and preached the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. The gospel was taken to the Jews and the Gentiles. It was taken from Jerusalem to Rome. Yet the task of preaching the gospel to all the nations remains. The command Jesus gave is a command for us today, just as the promise of the Holy Spirit is for us today. In the first place, the known world is much greater. Even if the apostle Thomas got to India, as many believe, he did not get to Australia. The task of bringing the gospel to this country did not begin until the arrival of the First Fleet. Secondly, mission is dynamic, such that some lands in which Paul preached and established churches need to be re-evangelized.

Each generation of Christians has the task of preaching the gospel to all the nations or to all ethnic people groups. In the study of missions these groups are identified and targeted with the aim of bringing the gospel to every people group. This is good as long as we remember the dynamic; William Carey and fellow missionaries did not consider Europe as a mission field, as we do today. The command of Christ remains and his promise of the Holy Spirit remains. There is also his promise that 'the gospel of the Kingdom will be preached into all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come' (Mat 24:14). Are you busy in this mighty work that Jesus gave to his disciples, and to you and me?

Ascension and return of Jesus

Acts 1:9-11

The Apostle's Creed is a confession of faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In it we confess Jesus as 'conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell; the third day rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there he shall come to judge the quick and the dead'. Like his virgin birth, death, and resurrection, the ascension of Jesus and his return in judgment are fundamental truths of the gospel. We dare not remove any of these elements just because they are supernatural or unscientific.

Many celebrate the birth of Jesus, as well as his death and resurrection. Indeed, there are public holidays to do so. But what about the ascension of Jesus? Do you celebrate Ascension Day? I was surprised to find that Ascension Day is a public holiday in much of Europe and in Indonesia. If we are going to celebrate Christmas and Easter then should we not celebrate Ascension Day also? Not that we have any commandment in the Bible to be celebrating any of these days. Every Lord's Day we remember the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. When we partake of the Lord's Supper we remember Jesus' death and resurrection as well as his promise to return. We 'proclaim the Lord's death till he come' (1Cor 11:26).

1. Risen Jesus taken up

In his first volume Luke writes that Jesus led his disciples out to Bethany, and while lifting up his hands to bless them he was 'carried up into heaven' (Luke 24:50-51) - here in Acts he has them returning from Mt Olivet on which Bethany was located (1:12). He recounts the ascension of Jesus in similar simplicity here in his second volume; 'He was taken up, and a cloud received him out of their sight' (1:9). In the following two verses he also tells us that Jesus was taken up, adding that he was taken up into heaven.

We are left in no doubt that Jesus was taken up and out of this world. The risen Jesus had appeared and disappeared over a period of forty days. It was important for them to see him finally depart from this earth and not be expecting him to reappear as he had been doing. He must depart and send the promised Holy Spirit. 'If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you' (John 16:7). Jesus was carried up into heaven before their eyes. This was not a vision or a dream; it was a physical reality- note the words 'watched', 'looked', 'gazed', 'saw'.

If the disciples were expecting Jesus to return while they were watching him taken up, the two men in white apparel set them straight. These are two angels who appear and speak. In a mild rebuke they ask why these men of Galilee, the twelve disciples minus Judas, are gazing into heaven. The implication is that they should be preparing to carry out the command Jesus had just given them. This appearance of two angels reminds us of what happened at the tomb on the morning after the Sabbath. They told the women standing outside the empty tomb, 'He is not here, He is risen'. Jesus is no longer in the grave. The risen Jesus is no longer on this earth. He has ascended to heaven and is seated on the throne of God (Ps 110:1, Col 3:1, Rev 5:13). Jesus told the Jewish Council that he was going to sit at the right hand of the power of God' (Luke 22:69). As Stephen was about to be stoned, he looked into heaven and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56).

'He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight' (1:9). What was the nature of this cloud? Was it a rain cloud that blew along? Larkin writes, 'The cloud probably refers to the Shekinah

glory, which at once manifests and hides the divine presence'. A cloud appeared on Mt Sinai, along with thunder, smoke and fire, when God came down to speak with Moses (Exod 19:16). When Jesus was transfigured on the mountain in the presence of Peter, John and James, a cloud came over them and they heard a voice come out of the cloud saying, 'This is my beloved Son. Hear him' (Luke 9:35).

This cloud on Mt Olivet seems to be such a cloud. It is utter foolishness, but a not uncommon idea, to think that Jesus can be found in the clouds today. Worldly people who cannot comprehend, or choose not to comprehend anything beyond the physical harbour such ideas. Jesus was physically taken up but he went out of their sight because he went into heaven. Heaven is a real place but that does not mean you will find it if you go searching beyond the clouds and to the end of the universe. The universe is created by God; he is not part of his creation. Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world'. This present world or universe is passing away but the kingdom of God will remain.

2. Return of Jesus

David sang of the Messiah ('my Lord') sitting on the throne in heaven ruling over the nations of the world (Ps 110). Daniel had a vision of the Ancient of Days seated on a throne in heaven, and one like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven (Dan 7:9,13-14). Jesus adopted the title 'Son of Man', and also spoke of coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Luke 21:27, Mat 24:30). He was speaking about his return; his coming down out of heaven to judge the nations and save his people. He urged his disciples to watch for his return but told them no one knows when this will be except God the Father. In ignorance, and failing to understand the nature of the kingdom of God, they asked the risen Jesus again when he would return (1:6).

No one knows or will know when Jesus will return until he does return- only God knows. The important thing for the disciples to be doing, and for us to be doing still today, is to be proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ because only those who believe in Christ will be saved on judgment day. An essential part of the gospel is the fact of Jesus' return. In Athens the apostle Paul called for the people to repent, 'because he (God) had appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the Man he has ordained' (Acts 17:31). This 'Man' is Jesus Christ of Nazareth. We must remember this 'other world' aspect of the gospel and preach this truth without fear. 'If only in this life we have hope in Jesus we are to most pitied' (1Cor 15:19). If we preach a gospel that fails to mention the ascension and future return of Jesus we preach an impotent gospel and indeed a false gospel. When churches claim to preach the full gospel I hope this is what they mean; too many preach a gospel that is focussed entirely on this world.

While we do not know the day of Jesus' return, we are told about the nature of his return. He will return in the same manner as he was taken up into heaven after his resurrection (1:11). He will come with clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him' (Rev 1:7). This indicates that all the dead will be raised when Jesus returns. Jesus will not come in such a manner that people will say, 'Look, he is in the desert' or, 'Look, he is in the inner room' (Mat 24:26). As lightning flashes across the sky, 'so will be the coming of the Son of Man' (Mat 24:27). His coming will be sudden, and such that every eye will see him; moreover angels will appear and trumpets sound from heaven. Jesus will appear in a cloud, in dazzling Shekinah glory.

I hope you are not like the Christian I met some years ago who thought Jesus will return to the earthly Jerusalem and use satellite TV to announce his return to this world. Maybe you think he will use the internet or announce his return by Twitter! Let me assure you that Jesus will not need any

such man-made means to announce his return. Anyway, all such things will disappear at his coming. When Jesus returns the whole earth and the works in it will be burned up (2Peter 3:10, 12). There is no indication that the 'like manner' in which Jesus will return includes the place from which he ascended; despite what Keener writes. He writes, 'he left from Mt Olivet (Acts 1:12), which would also be the place where the Lord would come'. We agree with Keener to the extent that he concludes, 'this future coming of the king would coincide with the consummation of the kingdom (1:6-7) and the completion of the witness to the ends of the earth (1:8).

We who believe in Jesus Christ look forward to this great day, the Day of the Lord. It will be the completion of our salvation. It will be the end of the race and the receiving of the 'crown of righteousness' 'for all who have loved his appearing' (2Tim 4:8). We will be ushered into heavenly glory. This is the uniquely wonderful hope the children of God have even as they endure suffering and persecution in this present world.

Those who live as faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ will suffer. Paul writes, 'All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution' (2Tim 3:12). When Jesus commanded his disciples to be his witnesses to the end of the earth he did not promise it would be an easy task. He promised them the power of the Holy Spirit. He told them before he died that they would be hated by the world just as he was hated by the world (John 15:18). As we read on in this book of Acts we will see how much they suffered as they took the gospel into all the world. But they did not give up. They preached and they prayed. They prayed, 'O Lord, come' (1Cor 16:22). This is how the early Christians lived and prayed. Is it how Christians live and pray today? Is it how you live and pray? 'O Lord, come!'

United in prayer

Acts 1:12-14

'There has never been a revival in any country that has not begun in united prayer, and no revival has ever continued beyond the duration of those prayer meetings' so wrote Orr in a book about revival. Boice writes, 'When God sends revival he almost always does it by leading his people to pray'. A small prayer meeting can be the beginning of a great revival. A revival comes with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. A revival is evidenced by widespread repentance and confession of sin. Men and women, young and old, weep over their sin and cry to the Lord for forgiveness and for new life in Jesus Christ. Are you praying for revival? Is there a concern for continual united prayer among us today?

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was a unique event. It was promised by Jesus before his ascension. But this did not mean the disciples were not praying for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told them in 'not many days'; they did not know exactly when. Although this was a unique coming of the Holy Spirit it does not mean there are no special outpourings of the Holy Spirit today. Revivals continue to take place. Our land is really in need of spiritual revival. Is this our prayer? Are we prepared for an outpouring of the Spirit of God?

1. Obedience

After seeing Jesus taken up into heaven, the disciples returned to Jerusalem because Jesus told them to wait there 'for the promise of the Father' (1:4). They returned to Jerusalem with great joy, praising and blessing God (Luke 24:52, 53). These men had come to believe in Jesus. Seeing the risen Jesus, Thomas confessed, 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28).

When Jesus was arrested these men ran away in fear. Peter denied Jesus. After Jesus was crucified and buried they were huddled together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. But then Jesus appeared to them. They not only saw the risen Jesus but they listened to him explain all that was written about him in the Bible. It was all true, all that was written and all that Jesus said. They understood why he had to die and rise again. It was all about the grace of God in forgiving our sin. So when Jesus told them the Holy Spirit would come upon them, they believed him. They saw him ascend into heaven, and then went back to Jerusalem to await the fulfilment of this promise.

In his first volume Luke writes that Jesus went as far as Bethany before he blessed his disciples and ascended into heaven (Luke 24:50-51). Bethany is on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives, about 3km from Jerusalem. Here in Acts, Luke does not directly refer to the place of the ascension. He simply writes, 'They returned from the mount called Olivet' (1:12). He explains that this is 'near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey'. The Jews legislated that the maximum distance they could walk or travel on the Sabbath day was c. 1.2km. This does not mean it was the Sabbath day when Jesus ascended- it was simply a measure of distance known to every Jew.

2. Fellowship

In Jerusalem they went to the upper room where they were staying (1:13). This may well have been the same upper room where they sat with Jesus for the Last Supper. That was called 'a large upper room' (Luke 22:12). It was probably the room in which they were gathered when Jesus appeared to them on the day of his resurrection. Not that they were still huddled together behind locked doors here in Acts. They were now filled with joy and hope, and worshipping God openly, although they did not yet have the power of the Holy Spirit to be boldly witnessing of Jesus to the world.

As Luke begins his second volume, and the story of the apostles taking the gospel to the end of the earth, he reminds us of the men chosen by Jesus to be apostles. Jesus chose twelve men to be apostles at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 6:12f). The list here in Acts is the same, apart from a slight reordering and the omission of Judas Iscariot. Jesus did not establish any hierarchy among the apostles, although he did have an inner group consisting of Peter, James and John (Luke 9:28), and Peter took on the role of spokesman on most occasions. The number twelve related to the twelve tribes of Israel. After Judas' betrayal and suicide, the eleven remaining disciples saw the need to replace Judas and keep the number at twelve- as we see in the following passage.

This gathering in the upper room included another group of people, namely 'the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus' (1:14). Who were these women and what was their place in this gathering? One of them is named as Mary the mother of Jesus. John tells us that Mary stood by the cross of Jesus (John 19:25). Although blessed in being the mother of Jesus, the Son of God, and although a good mother who loved her children, Mary was still a sinful human being. She was saved by the grace of God- indeed by the precious blood of her Son, the sinless Son of God.

The other women in this gathering in the upper room may have included the wives of the apostles (1Cor 9:5), but Luke is probably referring to the women who ministered to Jesus, especially in Galilee. These women were at the cross watching Jesus die and watching where he was buried. They prepared spices to anoint his body after the Sabbath (Luke 23:55-56). Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James are named, along with others unnamed. These women told the eleven that the tomb of Jesus was empty (Luke 24:10).

These women loved Jesus and served him most faithfully. Jesus gladly taught women about the kingdom of God and accepted their worship. It was these women who attended to Jesus till the end; after Peter denied Jesus and the rest ran away- apart from John. That these women were with the apostles praying 'with one accord' shows how much the apostles were influenced by Jesus' attitude towards women. They took their place as equals in the sight of God and in the fellowship of believers. 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for all are one in Christ Jesus'- so wrote the apostle Paul who is sometimes accused of being a misogynist (Gal 3:28).

This being said, it might also be noted that all the apostles were men and it was a man who was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot. Equality does not mean identity. Larkin's comment that, 'barriers of gender are abolished among those who will participate in the churches witness of power', is not the best way of putting this inclusion of women. We hope gender differences remain in the church, as in families! While equal before the Lord, men and women have different roles in family and church. The role of leadership in family and church is given to men, as seen with the apostles and with elders in the NT church.

This gathering in the upper room also included the brothers of Jesus. These are mentioned in the same sentence as Mary the mother of Jesus (1:14). In the absence of the Roman Catholic dogma of the perpetual virginity of Mary, the straightforward understanding of 'brothers' is additional sons born to Mary. Those who hold to the dogma/ false teaching, are forced to say these 'brothers' are cousins of Jesus. As Bruce writes, Jesus had 'uterine brothers and sisters' as indicated in other parts of the Bible (Luke 2:7, Mark 6:3- Mark names four brothers as well as sisters of Jesus).

The blood brothers of Jesus who did not believe in him before the cross (John 7:5) are found among the disciples here in the upper room. The risen Jesus appeared to James (1Cor 15:7). James is the most prominent of his brothers; he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem (15:13f, 21:18), and is probably the writer of the letter of James. The letter of Jude was written by 'Jude, a bondservant of Jesus Christ and brother of James' (Jude 1:1). He was probably the brother called Judas in Mark 6:3.

3. Prayer

The eleven apostles, the brothers of Jesus, and the women 'all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication' (1:14). What a mixed bunch of people; we might recall the diverse backgrounds of the apostles themselves. All they had in common was Jesus. When they were together they engaged in prayer- they united in prayer. Prayer has the wonderful effect of uniting the people of God. Have you noticed this?

It is said that the family that prays together stays together. Have found this to be true? Whenever we see a family in disarray we can be sure they are not praying together. The very act of calling upon the Lord humbles us before the Lord. When we see the Lord as he is, high and lifted up, and when we confess our sins, we are drawing closer to the Lord and closer to those praying with us. When we pray, 'forgive us our sins', we also pray, 'as we forgive those who sin against us'.

Prayer is not just an exercise in humility of course. Prayer is powerful and effective because we pray to a powerful God. 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them' (Mat 18:20). 'If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land' (2Chron 7:14). This is the promise of God regarding prayer. We spoke at the beginning about earnest, united prayer preceding any outpouring of the Holy Spirit in revival. If you want revival in your life, in your family life, in your church and in your land then pray.

Jesus told his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Having been told they were to be witnesses to the end of the earth they might have thought they should get on with the job. We see people who are eager to 'win people for Christ' making plans and studying hard- often young people. This is commendable but we must also learn to wait upon the Lord in prayer. Candidates for mission often want to be on the field tomorrow- they get disgruntled when told to wait upon the Lord.

The apostles were full of wonderful knowledge that Jesus taught them. But they patiently waited, as Jesus told them. They did not go in their own strength but waited for power from on high. One thing they had learnt from Jesus was the importance of prayer. Prayer would be as much the foundation of their mission as the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Holy Spirit leads us to pray and helps us to pray (Rom 8:24). One scholar notes that Jesus was praying when the Holy Spirit came upon him in Luke 3:21, and says this illustrates Luke's 'repeated doctrine that the grand object of prayer is the gift of the Spirit'. This is not to say that the Holy Spirit is repeatedly given to a believer, but that the once-given Spirit can be neglected, 'grieved' or 'quenched'. In prayer we ask the Lord to counsel us, guide us, and empower us by his Spirit. Too often we act without giving thought to the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

The fact that God had promised to send the Holy Spirit did not mean there was no need to pray about this. Some people say that if God is doing his will anyway why pray. It does not work like this.

God delights in our prayer. We should delight in talking to God in prayer, just as we delight in reading his word. We are not told what the apostles and women were praying about. Boice points to the ACTS acrostic about prayer- Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication.

We know they were full of joy and praising God after the ascension of Jesus (Luke 24:52). Anytime, and all the time, is the right time to be praising God for his grace and goodness. We always have sins to confess. The apostles had failed Jesus miserably when he was arrested. That the risen Jesus graciously forgave them was reason for heart felt thanksgiving. The promise of Holy Spirit was reason for supplication, as was the promise of Jesus' return. 'Come Lord Jesus' was the constant prayer of the NT church.

Jesus said people should 'always pray and not lose heart' (Luke 18:1). The apostle Paul said, 'continue steadfastly in prayer' (Rom 12:12). Are you discouraged? Are you tempted to lose heart? We get discouraged at times. The question is, what we do when this happens. The old hymn says, 'Take it to the Lord in prayer' when we are in trouble or sorrow or feel betrayed by friends. Jesus says, 'Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest' (Mat 11:28 NIV). Oh, the blessing of prayer!

If you can share your discouragement in prayer with a fellow believer all the better. Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another (James 5:16). How blessed we would be if we really availed ourselves of the privilege of prayer. There are some churches in which prayer meetings attract more people than BBQs. Let us be such a church.

A replacement for Judas

Acts 1:15-26

The apostles had returned to Jerusalem after seeing Jesus taken up into heaven. Jesus told them to wait in the city for the Promise of the Father; to wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. When the Holy Spirit came they would be empowered to go forth as witnesses of Jesus to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and the end of the earth. As it turned out this wait would be just ten days, but they did not know this. What did they do in the interim? They went to the upper room to join in prayer. 'They all continued in one accord with prayer and supplication' (1:14). They were joined by 'the women' who followed Jesus and by Jesus' own brothers. What else did they do in those days? They studied the Scriptures, as indicated in the passage before us today.

As Jews, the apostles heard the Bible read in the synagogue and the home. They sang the Psalms as we do. Some of the Psalms were considered messianic- they referred to the coming of Messiah. But the Jews failed to understand the person and work of Messiah. Even after following Jesus for three years and listening to his teaching they still did not understand. There are people today who have listened to the gospel for many years and still do not understand that salvation is by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ, and not by works.

When Jesus rose from the dead 'according to the Scriptures' and explained to the disciples in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself, they finally understood that Jesus, the Son of God, had to suffer and die, and rise again. This is the good news, the gospel that they now believed and which they were ready to preach in all the world- repentance and forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:46). It was all there in the OT, the Bible of their day. The risen Jesus had taught them how to read the Bible- the whole Bible. The Bible is the inerrant and unchanging word of God- the God who is the beginning and the end. God did not send his only begotten Son into this world as an afterthought. It was his plan from the beginning, so we expect God to speak about his Son from the beginning. This was an eye opener for the apostles. May the eyes of the Jews, and even Christians, be opened to this truth today? May we understand what is written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. All Scripture is written for our 'instruction in righteousness', as well as our correction and reproof (1Tim 3:16).

1. Concerning Judas

After Jesus died and was buried his core group of followers ran off; some went back to their fishing. Cleopas and a fellow disciple were heading home to Emmaus when the risen Jesus appeared to them and they believed; they returned to Jerusalem. Eleven of the apostles were there to see Jesus taken up into heaven forty days after his resurrection. The women were there; five are named and others unnamed. Jesus' mother and brothers were there also in the upper room praying. Maybe 25-30 were gathered in the room, or maybe it was 120 if the room was large enough. In the next verse we read that the group numbered 'about a hundred and twenty' (1:15). Who else had joined the group? We can only speculate, but the names of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus come to mind, as do Mary, Martha and Lazarus from Bethany. Cleopas and his friend from Emmaus were there. This was the infant church of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem.

Peter stood up and spoke to this church, addressing them as men and brethren; spiritual brethren includes women. He had been reading the Scriptures, the Psalms in particular. He had learnt from Jesus that Scripture pointed to Jesus and the kingdom of God. He learnt that this same Scripture had to be fulfilled (1:16). Much of it was fulfilled in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

They were waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled- we will see in the next chapter that Peter was familiar with what the prophet Joel wrote regarding the Holy Spirit.

What Peter noticed in his reading of the Bible was prophetic words regarding the wicked, especially those who falsely accuse the upright. He saw that this referred to the man who betrayed Jesus, namely Judas Iscariot, one of the apostles. Such betrayal must have deeply affected the apostles. They could not believe that a betrayer was in their group. When Judas left the Last Supper early they did not suspect anything (John 13:22, 29). But shortly afterwards in Gethsemane they saw Judas guiding some armed guards who arrested Jesus.

Matthew tells us in his gospel that Judas was later filled with remorse and returned the 'blood money' given to him by the chief priests and elders (Mat 27:3f). They could not put such money in the temple treasury, so bought the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. Luke did not record this detail in his first volume so inserts it into Peter's speech so as to make clear to the reader what Peter was referring to; Peter's listeners were aware of the tragic end of Judas. Whether Judas bought the field himself or it was purchased for him is not important. What is important, and what Matthew and Luke both state, is that Judas committed suicide and the place was called 'Field of Blood', or 'Akel Dama' in Aramaic. Matthew says that Judas hanged himself (Mat 27:5), while Luke gives more gruesome details, saying he fell and burst open in the middle, spilling out his intestines (1:18). His body may have been decomposing before it fell and/or maybe he was cut down.

Looking at what David wrote in the Psalms under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter saw this reference to Judas. Judas was one of their number, one of the Twelve who were so blessed to be part of the ministry of Jesus. Yet he became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; he betrayed Jesus (1:16, 17). Peter did not go into what happened to Judas because the people knew; so Luke put this detail in parenthesis for our benefit (1:18, 19). Peter quotes from Psalm 69, a recognised messianic Psalm. He quotes words that point to the dwelling place of Judas being left desolate. This verse refers to the Field of Blood which Judas owned becoming a cemetery for strangers (Mat 27:7). It also significant that the vacancy in the apostolate was by apostasy not just death. Judas was the predestined 'son of perdition' (John 17:12). When the apostle James was martyred he was not replaced (12:2); nor were the places of any of the other apostles. There is no suggestion of apostolic succession in this passage.

The second quote is from Psalm 109, where David utters a string of curses against his enemy and wishes that someone else may take over his occupation. 'This reference is used as justification for handing over the office of Judas to someone else' (Marshall). Peter was also aware that the twelve apostles corresponded to the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:30).

2. Close associate

Having deduced from Scripture that the vacancy left by Judas should be fulfilled, Peter sets out the qualifications for the position. The original apostles were chosen by Jesus after a night of prayer. Jesus was no longer with them (even so, they saw the casting of lots as divine determination). When Jesus was with them he said they were to be his witnesses in all the earth (1:8). A witness is a person who speaks from experience. So this replacement apostle had to be a man who was closely associated with Jesus from the time he was baptized by John until he was taken up into heaven. Most importantly he had to be, 'a witness with us of His resurrection' (1:22).

Who within this gathering met these qualifications? Cleopas and his friend saw the risen Jesus but had they followed Jesus since his baptism? James, the brother of Jesus, did not qualify because he had not always followed Jesus either. Those who qualified must have been among the crowds that came to be baptized by John on the Jordan. They may have been among the seventy sent out to heal the sick and preach the kingdom of God (Luke 10). Looking at the gathering, only two men qualified: Joseph called Barsabas, or Son of the Sabbath, and Matthias (1:23). There is no other reference to either of these men elsewhere in the Bible, even after Matthias was chosen.

3. Cast lots

Two men qualified, but there was only one vacancy, that created by Judas' betrayal and death. How were they to choose between these two? They first prayed. While both men qualified outwardly, only the Lord knows the heart (1:24) - this is not to say that only one man's heart was right before the Lord. They asked the Lord to show which of the two was his choice. Judas fell into grievous sin, the sin of greed, the sin of putting money above everything else, even the wellbeing of a friend. That Judas was chosen by Jesus and that he ate with Jesus is a solemn reminder that we live in a fallen world in which Satan is active and powerful. Jesus knew what Judas was doing in secret but did not stop him. Judas made a choice; it was the wrong choice and a tragic choice. In doing so he went 'to his own place' (1:25). Keener writes, 'His place then is in the first case his office, but in the second, the field he bought where he met his gory end'. But as he footnotes, this can mean 'one's place of final destiny'; this seems to be the meaning here. Judas was the 'son of perdition/ destruction'.

After praying they, 'cast their lots and the lot fell to Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles' (1:26). This casting of lots may have been done by putting each name on a stone and shaking the container till one fell out. However it was done it was seen as the way to find the will of God; it was done with prayer. In Israel the high priest kept the Urim and Thummim which were used to determine the will of God- as in the distribution of the land in Canaan by Joshua and Eleazar. It is interesting that the apostles take this role of the high priest upon themselves. But it is more interesting to note that this is the last time casting of lots was practiced- just in case you think this appropriate for Christians today. This was a unique period in that Jesus was no longer with them and the Holy Spirit had not yet been given to them. After the coming of the Holy Spirit the will of God was determined by prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit- as for example when Paul and Barnabas were set apart as missionaries (13:2).

In the light of Paul being called by Jesus to be an apostle, some suggest that this election of Matthias was not proper. It was done before the Holy Spirit was given and Matthias is not mentioned again. But it was done on the basis of Scripture and with prayer. Marshall writes, 'The most that might be said is that in this period before Pentecost the church had to seek other means of divine guidance than the aid of the Spirit, but the method which is adopted (prayer and casting of lots) was entirely proper'. F.F. Bruce says this suggestion is 'a complete mistake' because Paul did not qualify anyway, and his apostleship was 'unique in character, as he himself maintains'.

Larkin draws a lesson from this procedure. He writes, 'restoration of integrity within the body of Christ is essential to preparation for revival'. Indeed, the church must examine itself to see if it is conforming to the word of God with regard to worship and discipline. It must be united in every way, especially in prayer. Revival comes after earnest prayer and when the Holy Spirit is poured out in abundance. Those who are saved in a revival need a revived church to attend, a church where the people are living and worshipping according to the word of God. Is your church such a church?

The Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost

Acts 2:1-4

The gospel according to Mark begins with John the Baptist at the Jordan baptising people who repented of their sin. Jesus of Nazareth came to be baptised. As Jesus came up from the water the Holy Spirit came down on him from heaven, descending upon him like a dove. Luke begins with the birth of Jesus, but includes this same baptism narrative in chapter 3. Jesus returned from the Jordan, 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (Luke 4:1); and so began the ministry of Jesus. The second volume written by Luke begins with the Holy Spirit coming down upon the disciples. The Spirit's coming was associated with a fierce wind and with tongues of fire. The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, and so began the ministry of the disciples of Jesus and the establishment of the church. Jesus was taken back to heaven but his disciples received power to be his witnesses to the end of the earth.

The risen Jesus told his disciples that while John baptised with water, they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit (1:5). There is no evidence that John baptised people a second time, and there is no evidence that baptism with the Holy Spirit was a 'second baptism', apart from the unique cases in Acts 8 and 19. We will read about the disciples being filled with the Holy Spirit on other occasions (4:8, 31), but this is different to the initial baptism of the Holy Spirit. Here at Pentecost they were baptised and also filled the Holy Spirit (1:5, 2:4). Jesus said this would happen, 'not many days from now' (1:5). It was fifty days after his resurrection, and just ten days after his ascension, that the Holy Spirit came upon them. It was the day of Pentecost.

1. Festival

A few decades ago the word 'Pentecost' was rarely heard. Nowadays we hear the word 'Pentecostal' on a regular basis. I just heard my wife telling someone on the phone about a Pentecostal church. Such churches adopted, or were given this name (I am not sure which) because of the association of speaking in tongues with the Day of Pentecost, as we see here in Acts 2.

Fifty days after Passover was another Jewish festival called the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost. It was a harvest festival, the end of the grain harvest. In later Judaism it came to be associated with the giving of the Law at Sinai. Pentecost was one of three annual festivals that all adult, male Jews were required to celebrate in the temple at Jerusalem. This is the reason Jews from all over the world were in Jerusalem at this time. Luke writes that, 'Pentecost had fully come' (2:1), a reference it would seem to the fulfilment of prophecy. Isaiah writes. 'Until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high' (Isa 32:15). Peter will refer to the prophet Joel. This would be the Pentecost to end all Pentecosts, just as the Passover Jesus celebrated with his disciples in the upper room was the Passover to end all Passovers; it was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

'On this day they were all with one accord in one place' (2:1). This takes us back to verse 14 in the previous chapter, where the apostles, the women and the brothers of Jesus were praying together in the upper room. Probably all one hundred and twenty believers were here together (1:15). Some think that the gathering was in the temple. The temple could be called a house, the house of God, and in Luke 24:53 we read that after the ascension the disciples were in the temple to praising God. Keener writes, 'The evidence seems almost evenly divided between the temple and a private home, presumably the one with the upper room'. Notwithstanding, in verse 2 we read that they were sitting in a house, not standing in the temple. Whichever place it was we are left to fill in some logistical detail.

2. Fierce wind

While sitting quietly, or maybe praying together in this house on this special Sabbath Day, a rushing, violent wind suddenly came upon them (2:2). We cannot see the wind of course; although we may see its effects. But we can hear the wind as it whistles around us or makes an eerie sound, if it is a gale force wind. The sound of such a fierce or mighty wind came to the ears of the disciples as they sat in this room. We might even think of a whirlwind, but the text does not allow such an identification; it simply says 'a sound from heaven as of or like a rushing, mighty wind' (2:2). This sound filled the whole house. The disciples were not experiencing a natural phenomenon but something supernatural. They were experiencing the coming of the Holy Spirit. The word translated 'wind' here is not the usual Greek '*pneuma*' but a related word. We get our English word 'pneumatic' from this Greek word. The same word is translated as 'breath' and as 'spirit'. The Holy Spirit is '*hagios pneumatos*'. It is used in the LXX of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, and of God breathing into man's nostrils the breath of life, in Genesis 1:2 and 2:7 respectively. In Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, flesh came upon the bones but there was no breath in them. Ezekiel prophesied and breath came into them and they lived (Ezek 37:10).

Wind or breath is linked to life. Jesus told Nicodemus he must be born again (John 3:7). Nicodemus had no idea what Jesus was talking about- just as unbelievers today have no idea about the Holy Spirit. Jesus explained that the Spirit is like the wind. If Nicodemus was in the upper room at Pentecost he might have remembered these words of Jesus. Here at Pentecost God was breathing on the disciples the new life of the Holy Spirit. He was giving them the Holy Spirit. They had previously believed in Jesus and were told to wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit came to abide with them for ever (John 14:16).

We live in the post-Pentecost era. It is the Holy Spirit who quickens our dead hearts, making us alive in Christ -what is called regeneration or being born again (Eph 2:5). So when we repent and are baptised we receive the Holy Spirit (2:38). 'If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he is not his' (Rom 8:9). Water baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is the sign and seal of being born again of the Spirit of God.

3. Fire

The second supernatural, yet objective and sensible phenomena in this house on the day of Pentecost was the appearance of tongues of fire that 'sat upon each of them' (2:3). Fire is a symbol of God's presence. God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. God led his people with a pillar of fire by night and pillar of cloud by day; the fire gave them light in the darkness of the desert. When the Lord came down on Mt Sinai the mountain burned with fire and he spoke out of the midst of the fire. 'The Lord your God is a consuming fire' (Deut 4:24, Heb 12:29). Seeing tongues of fire appear on each of them the disciples would have made this association. Indeed, they would have remembered what John the Baptist said about one coming who will 'baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire' (Luke 3:16)- although they probably thought of these words as referring to the end-time Day of Lord.

Fire is also a symbol of divine judgment; God is a consuming fire. Both wind and fire are powerful natural phenomena, entirely appropriate as symbols of the power of God. The coming of the Holy Spirit meant the disciples would receive power, the power of God to witness Jesus to the end of the earth. This power was often shown in signs and wonders, but it was primarily shown in boldness to preach the gospel (4:31, 14:3). The gospel they preached included the announcement of divine

judgment. 'God has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the Man he has ordained' (17:31). Preaching repentance and divine judgment requires supernatural power, as John, Jesus, and the apostles all knew.

4. Filled with the Holy Spirit

We are not told how the disciples responded to the sound of the gale force wind and what looked like tongues of fire on them. We might think they would be in shock and filled with fear. But this was not the case. They were filled with the Holy Spirit. They were empowered to tell every one of the wonderful works of God- and that in languages which they did not even know! They 'began to speak with other tongues (Greek = *glossolalia*), as the Spirit gave them utterance' (2:4).

Under the Old Covenant the Spirit of God came upon certain individuals; here at Pentecost the Spirit came upon all in the house; that is, all who believed in Jesus. In the OT the Spirit of the Lord could lead men to prophesy with boldness (1Sam 10:6, 2Chron 20:14). Here in the NT those filled with the Holy Spirit spoke in languages unknown to them. In the following verses we read how these disciples emerged from the house speaking in tongues which were actually languages that other people could understand. They heard these Spirit-filled people telling of the wonderful works of God in a language that they themselves did not know. This was amazing. This was a wonderful demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is wonderful to hear a child utter their first 'goo gahs', but more wonderful, I suggest, to hear them speak a language that can be understood, whatever language it might be. During a holiday we had a Pentecostal Christian living down stairs. Every morning we would hear him speaking in tongues, as he said. We did not understand a word he said, and as far as I know no one else understood what he was saying either. Was he speaking of the wonderful works of God or not?

This outward sign of being filled with the Holy Spirit occurred at other times; for instance when Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius and his Gentile friends, but again they spoke in tongues and magnified God (10:46). In Ephesus Paul laid hands on some disciples who had not heard about the Holy Spirit. Their baptism of repentance, John's baptism, was completed by baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus and by baptism in the Holy Spirit. They spoke in tongues and prophesied (19:6).

A question about spiritual gifts, about speaking in tongues or '*glossolalia*' in particular, arose in the church at Corinth. Some say this is a different phenomenon to what we see here in Acts- although the word is the same. It may be an unintelligible, ecstatic utterance that Paul refers to but his teaching is that the words should be intelligible and interpreted (1Cor 14:9). John writes of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth (John 14:17, 16:13). He is not just the Spirit of power, or of signs and wonders. As Bruce writes, 'The content is more important than the manner'. He further writes, 'The mere fact of glossolalia or any ecstatic utterance is no evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. In apostolic times it was necessary to provide criteria for deciding whether such utterances were of God or not, just as it had been necessary in OT times'.

At Pentecost the disciples of Jesus were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak, not in a tongue but in other tongues or other languages. Yet this ecstatic utterance was not the climax or the end of their ministry. It was just the beginning. They would soon see thousands of souls being born again, born of the Spirit of God. This happened by the power of the Holy Spirit as the apostles preached the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Speaking in our language

Acts 2:5-13

It was wonderful to have two brothers from India visiting us recently. They enjoyed seeing our country and sharing about the work of the Lord in India. But speaking in English all the time was not easy. When they were together they spoke in their mother tongue, Hindi. Their eyes lit up when we spoke to them in our rusty Hindi from time to time. Our ears are finely tuned to pick up our mother tongue or native language even if we converse in another language most of the time. Still today, men and women are out there translating the Bible in the language or dialect of even small people groups because people love to listen to, and read in, their mother tongue.

The Spirit-filled disciples at Pentecost began to speak with other tongues (2:4). They did not know what they were saying- their tongues were under the control of the Holy Spirit; not that they were in a trance and unaware of what they were doing. Although their words were not understood by them there were people in the crowd who understood what they were saying because they were speaking in their mother tongue. They were speaking of the mighty works of God.

1. Multitude

If, as seems to be the case, the disciples were in a large upper room or house when they suddenly heard a rushing, mighty wind, and saw tongues of fire settle on each of them, then they must have moved out of this place soon afterwards. The cacophony, the sound of people all speaking at once in different languages, attracted a crowd. The multitude came together and were confused (2:6). Jerusalem was full of visitors at this time. Jews from all the nations had come to the holy city for this important festival. The Feast of Weeks was one of three important annual festivals for the Jews. Jewish men were required to come and celebrate these festivals at the temple in Jerusalem. By this time in Jewish history there was a huge diaspora of Jews. The Assyrians took the northern kingdom of ten tribes in 722BC. Then in 586BC the Babylonians took the Jews from the Judea into exile. Some returned to Jerusalem after his exile but many continued living in these foreign lands. In the four hundred years between the Testaments, Jews had gone to live in all the nations of the known world.

Luke gives a surprisingly comprehensive list of the nations from which Jews had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. There were Jews from the east, from beyond the Tigris River and between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Mesopotamia) - the land of Iraq and Iran (2:9). We visited a Jewish synagogue in south India that dates from at least the 4th century. It may even be older than this because there is a strong tradition in the Mar Thoma church that the apostle Thomas visited the Malabar Coast of South India.

Luke next mentions Jews from Judea (2:9). This may seem obvious as Jerusalem was in the land of Judea, but this land technically included from the Euphrates River down to the River of Egypt. The also came from the region known today as Turkey, from Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia (2:9). Next comes a reference to Egypt. The city of Alexandria housed a huge Jewish population at that time- two of five city wards were Jewish. Beyond Egypt was Libya and the city of Cyrene with its Jewish population also represented at this Pentecost gathering.

Rome was the capital city of the Roman Empire and also the goal towards which this book of Acts is heading as the disciples take the gospel to the end of the earth. There were at least seven synagogues in Rome which were effective in proselytising the local Gentiles. Jews and proselytes came from Rome to this festival in Jerusalem (2:10). Proselytes were full converts to Judaism.

Gentiles were attracted to the monotheism and moral law of the Jews. If they were baptised, made a sacrifice, and were circumcised they would be admitted to full fellowship with the Jews. More women than men became proselytes; men were content to remain as God-fearers. The last two of the fifteen regions listed are Crete, an island in the Mediterranean and the desert region of Arabia.

This comprehensive list is significant in that men from at least fifteen languages/regions heard these Spirit filled disciples speaking in their mother tongue. It is also significant in that these men would have returned to their homes with the gospel message; most, if not all, would have been among the three thousand souls baptised that day. The church in Rome may well have been established by men returning from Jerusalem at this time.

2. Mother tongue

Coming back to the scene in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost in the year AD30, the disciples were out in public speaking in other tongues, which were in fact known languages. A crowd had gathered to see what was going on. People in the crowd were confused because they heard these Galileans speaking in their own mother tongue- the language of all the different regions just listed (2:6). They were all amazed and marvelled, not because these men were in a trance making strange noises but because they were speaking in languages they could understand. These men were Galileans who had never been to these distant places let alone learnt the language (2:7). Most of the disciples were from Galilee, and many were uneducated fishermen. They would know Aramaic and Greek but not Persian or Arabic. They were speaking in other tongues because the Spirit gave them utterance (2:4).

Some think of this gathering of men from all nations, all hearing the same message in their mother tongue as a reversal of what happened at the tower of Babel. When men got together to build a tower and make a name for themselves the Lord was not pleased. He confused their language so they could not understand one another (Gen 11:7). Here at Pentecost the Spirit of God gave the disciples the ability speak all the languages of the world; men from all nations heard the praise of God in their own language. F.F. Bruce writes, 'The event was surely nothing less than a reversal of the curse of Babel'. The word 'Babel' sounds like Hebrew for confused; we get the word 'babble' from this.

It was babble that was heard at the tower of Babel but not here at Pentecost. This Spirit filled utterance in so many languages was a confirmation of the task Jesus gave his disciples, namely to take the gospel to the end of the earth. Thousands of believers have learnt another language so they can preach the gospel to people who speak that language. On special occasions, so I have been told, a missionary has been empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak in another tongue. The gospel of Jesus Christ gloriously transcends all language and cultural barriers. People from all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues will be together before the throne in heaven (Rev 7:9).

3. Mighty works of God

Few commentators refer to what is said about the disciples speaking 'the wonderful works of God' (2:11). They point out that these men spoke in known languages and that this was a miracle of speaking not of hearing. Keener comments that the hearers recognised that they were praising God. They were praising God by declaring his mighty works. What were these mighty works? Were they God's mighty works in bringing his people out of Egypt and into the promised land, or were they the mighty works of Jesus, the Son of God, as recorded in the gospels? We cannot be certain but

since these hearers were Jews they were probably the works of God recorded in their Bible- our OT. Proclamation of the gospel included the miraculous signs of Jesus (2:22).

We should keep in mind that according to Jesus the Holy Spirit would give the power to be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth. Speaking in an unknown language was something to marvel at as a sign of being filled with the Spirit, but this gift of the Spirit went beyond something to marvel at. They not only spoke on other languages but some hearers could understand these languages and, furthermore, they heard men speaking of the mighty works of God.

It is not only the Holy Spirit who enables people to speak in tongues, as some understand this term. Evil spirits can put a person into a trance and make them utter strange things. John writes, 'test the spirits whether they are of God' (1John 4:1). 'Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God' (1John 4:2). Paul writes, 'no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit' (1Cor 12:3). It is important therefore to know just what people are saying when they speak in tongues.

4. Mocking

What might have been the outcome at Pentecost if the Spirit-filled disciples had not spoken in languages that were understood? People might have marvelled and asked what was going on. They would have had no reason to praise God if they did not know that these disciples were praising God. Paul says that an unbeliever coming into a meeting where "all speak with tongues without any interpretation, will say, 'you are out of your mind'" (1Cor 14:23). Even at Pentecost some responded by mocking the disciples. They said that they were full of new wine (2:13); Peter assured them this was not the case at nine in the morning! (2:15). We presume that these were people who did not understand any of the various languages being spoken. What they did not understand they mocked.

While this speaking with other tongues was spectacular, and was a sign of these men being filled with the Holy Spirit, we do not agree that speaking in other tongues is an essential sign of being filled with the Holy Spirit, or that this is a gift that believers should be seeking. I remember a fellow desperately trying to get this gift- this was back in the 1970's when the Pentecostalism was impacting the churches. What happened at Pentecost must be kept in context- the Pentecostal church derives its name from this context. What happened was exactly what Jesus said would happen, namely that in not many days they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit of power. Being filled with the Holy Spirit was evidenced in this spectacular way at this time- it was a unique time.

The disciples themselves knew the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit- they were not in some uncontrollable trance. They also knew that in this power they were to preach the gospel to all the nations. It was not a power for them to display for their own glory. A man called Simon learnt this the hard way with Peter telling him his heart was not right in the sight of God (8:21). While many Pentecostal churches today focus on the spectacular aspect of 'glossolalia', early Pentecostalism associated the gift of tongues with the Spirit's cross-cultural empowerment, as seen here in Acts. Pentecostalism flourishes in societies that have not long emerged from paganism. In some it is difficult to tell which spirit is empowering the people because of the focus on the spectacular and the failure to test the spirits, as the Bible says.

Peter's Pentecost sermon

Acts 2:14-24

Who is your favourite preacher? No, I am not looking for any compliments! Second question: why is he your favourite preacher? Is it that he is interesting? How is he interesting? Is it that he tells good stories or good jokes? Is it just that his sermons are short? Today we are looking at the first sermon preached in the NT church. It was preached by a man filled with the Holy Spirit. Does your favourite preacher give evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit? This man began with a passage of Scripture. Some preachers make no reference at all to a Bible passage. This preacher, the apostle Peter, refers to three Bible passages, with quotations making up half of his sermon. People have told me I should not quote Scripture so much in my sermons. Peter's sermon is often seen as a model sermon. We will look at his sermon today, noting that it was bold, biblical and Christ centred with a call to 'Behold, Jesus the Lord'.

1. Bold

Going back just fifty days before Pentecost we find Peter and the rest of the apostles huddled behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. Then the risen Jesus appeared to them. They were shocked but happy to see Jesus again, and listened to him explain from all the Scriptures what was written about him. He explained that it was necessary for the Messiah or Christ to suffer and die and rise again, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached in his name to all nations (Luke 24:46, 47). After the ascension of Jesus the apostles returned to Jerusalem with great joy and worshipped in the temple. The temple was a huge place with various courts in which people could gather. But the temple was still controlled by the chief priests and elders. Indeed, the whole city was under their control, as long as there were no disturbance that would bring the heavy hand of the Romans down on them.

At Pentecost the apostles and other believers were gathered together when the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began to speak with other tongues (2:4). As they moved out of the place where they were meeting a crowd gathered around them; they were all speaking at once in different languages. At a church in NE India people from various tribes came to worship. The service was in English but when it came to prayer they all prayed at the same time in their own language. It sounded strange to me; quite an experience.

While speaking in other tongues the disciples moved towards the temple- only the temple could accommodate the thousands who heard Peter preach (2:41). People in the crowd commented that they were hearing the disciples speaking of God's mighty works in the own language. They were asking what was going on. Some suggested they were all drunk. Peter stood up to answer these questions. He was now speaking in his own language, the language which everyone in Jerusalem could understand; although he was still filled with the Holy Spirit. In fact, the word translated 'voice' in verse 14 is the same as that for 'utterance' in verse 4. He was now preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit. Like the prophets of old he was declaring the word of God, which he now found in the Scriptures and was explaining under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The authority of a preacher today similarly comes from the Scriptures. A preacher who fails to read or refer to the Bible has no authority. A preacher's authority is not given to him by a letter from the king or queen, the acknowledged head of the church in some denominations. A preacher's authority is not given him by the Pope or the archbishop. A preacher's authority comes from the word of God- just as does the authority of the archbishop! If men preach what is contrary to the word of God, be

it an ancient church tradition or a new 'word of revelation', it has no authority. 'Though I speak with the tongues of men or of angels... or have the gift of prophecy ...and can remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing' (1Cor 13:1, 2). Love comes from Christ and we know Christ from the Scriptures.

Peter's boldness was not just in answering the mockers. It was in proclaiming Jesus as Messiah and Lord. This was the same Jesus who was condemned to death by the Jewish authorities and the Jewish crowd. Peter remind the crowd listening to him of this, telling them that they were responsible for crucifying Jesus of Nazareth (2:23). When the authorities heard about Peter's preaching they moved to arrest him, along with John (4:3). Not that this put them off preaching. They pressed on, speaking the word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit.

2. Biblical

Standing up with the eleven, Peter spoke to the men of Judea and all in Jerusalem (2:14). He spoke with boldness telling the people to hear and heed his words. He referred to the words of the prophet Joel, one of the Minor Prophets in their Bible. Joel spoke the word of God when a locust plague devastated the crops of Israel (Joel 1:4). I remember a locust plague in western NSW. I was out taking measurements in my crops one day. When I came back the next day to finish the work there was nothing left to measure? The paddock was bare. My work Ute was green and we used to joke that it would have gone too if I had left it in the paddock!

Joel spoke of the devastation as the judgment of God upon the land. He called upon the people to return to the Lord; he went on to speak about the final judgment on the day of the Lord. In this context he spoke about the day the Lord would pour out his spirit on all flesh and save his people (Joel 2:28). Peter not only knew the words of the prophet but saw them being fulfilled before his very eyes. Maybe Jesus had referred to Joel as he spoke of things pertaining the kingdom of God and the coming of the Holy Spirit (1:3).

In the last days, the days between the first coming and the second coming of Jesus, God said he would pour out his Spirit on all flesh. Prior to these last days the Spirit was only given to prophets, judges, princes and kings. The Spirit empowered them to speak the words of the Lord or to perform mighty deeds. Under the New Covenant in the Last Days men and women, young and old, would prophesy in the power of the Spirit- and soon it would be Gentiles as well as Jews. At Pentecost all the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit in accord with the promise of Jesus and in fulfilment of this Scripture.

Peter went on to read about wonders in heaven above and signs on the earth below before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord (2:19-20). Did he see these words as being fulfilled at the death of Jesus when darkness came over the earth for three hours and the earth shook? Was the full moon of Passover blood red that afternoon? Maybe he saw these words as also referring to the day when Jesus returns- the great day of the Lord.

The final words of the quotation from Joel refer to the salvation of God. 'Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' (2:21). It is amazing to read such words in the OT but there they are, words explaining the gospel of Jesus Christ from the mouth of a minor prophet. Note that Peter concludes his sermon saying the promise, the promise of salvation, is for all who are afar off (2:39). Today we have the canon of the NT but we do not ignore what is written in the OT. There are great

treasures to be found in both parts of the Bible. Finding any treasure takes effort but the rewards make it worthwhile.

3. Behold Jesus

Having quoted a passage of Scripture, Peter proceeds to explain the passage. Peter would have understood the need to explain Scripture from his reading of the OT itself. When the exiles returned from Babylon they got together and asked Ezra to bring the Book of the Law and read it. Ezra stood before the people and, with the help of the Levites, read the Book and explained it to the people (Neh 8:8). Exegesis or explanation means to bring out or declare the sense of the passage when it was written, but also as it relates to the present. Prophecy can speak to different periods of time. It may not be fulfilled for generations. Peter saw the words of the prophet Joel being fulfilled at Pentecost. He saw them being fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth who just seven weeks before was crucified in Jerusalem.

‘Men of Israel, hear these words’ he says again (2:22 cf.2:14). He speaks of Jesus, ‘a man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs’ (2:22). They were all aware of the mighty works done by Jesus. They were not just miracles but miraculous signs proving that Jesus was the Son of God. People had to make a decision: were they works of God or were they works of the devil or Beelzebub? (Mat 12:27). The Jewish leaders went for the second option. They branded Jesus a blasphemer and killed him, with the approval of the Jewish crowd. They were responsible for the lawless hands of the Romans crucifying Jesus.

Not for a moment does Peter excuse this wickedness, this condemning and crucifying of the sinless Son of God. But he adds another dimension to the crucifixion. God allowed his only begotten Son to suffer and die. In fact it was according to the foreknowledge and determined purpose of God (2:23). It was God’s plan and purpose for Jesus to die. Jesus himself said it was necessary for him to suffer and die. The death of Jesus is at the heart of the gospel; it was a substitutionary death, the death through which sinners can be forgiven.

Also at the heart of the gospel is the resurrection. Peter does not stop at the crucifixion; he goes on to say, ‘whom God raised’ (2:24). F.F Bruce writes, ‘If Messiah’s suffering was ordained by the determinate counsel of God, so was his resurrection and glory’. It was not possible for death to hold the Son of God, ‘the Prince of life’ (3:15). God raised him from the dead before his body decayed or corrupted. God vindicated his only begotten Son. Wicked men put him to death but God raised him from the dead. Those wicked men had failed to overcome the Prince of life. They were overcome by shame. Judas of course, had gone and hanged himself.

But while there is life there is hope- the hope of forgiveness and of salvation. Most of those listening to Peter were complicit, if not active, in getting Jesus crucified. Peter made them face up to this fact, but went on to tell them there was forgiveness of sin; this was the very reason Jesus had to die and rise again. ‘Repent, and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins’ is what Peter tells them to do (2:38). This is the best way, indeed the only way to deal with the guilt of sin and live. The old hymn of Fanny Crosby says, ‘the vilest offender who truly believes, that moment form Jesus a pardon receives’. Maybe it should say, ‘who truly repents and believes’, but the focus is on the pardon that is offered in the gospel of grace. Besides, Paul tells the Philippian jailer to, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved’ (16:31). The only question remaining is, ‘Have you repented and received forgiveness for your sin?’

Jesus both Lord and Christ

Acts 2:25-39

The apostle Peter began his Pentecost sermon quoting Scripture. His text was Joel 2: 28-32. From this text he explained what the people in Jerusalem were seeing and hearing, namely God pouring out his Spirit on all flesh in the last days. The last days had arrived with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. Just seven weeks before Pentecost Jesus had been crucified outside this very city. This was after some three years of ministry, of doing wonderful works and speaking wonderful words. But after being put to death many saw Jesus alive again. Reports of appearances of Jesus were circulating in the city. Peter was a witness to the resurrection, along with many others. They knew that Jesus had risen from the dead, just as he predicted. Peter will come to this (2:32), but he firstly goes to Scripture where he finds the resurrection of Jesus portrayed by none other than King David.

You may be asking why it is taking us two sermons to cover what Peter preached in one sermon. If so, look at verse 40; 'with many other words he testified and exhorted them'. This was not a ten minute sermon. We have noted how Peter based his sermon on Scripture. He exegetes or explains these passages as they point to Jesus of Nazareth. The people were listening to every word. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit was at work in his listeners. They were cut to the heart and asked Peter and the other apostles, 'What shall we do?' (2:37). Peter did not stumble around for an answer. He did not suggest more money would solve their problem, or that they should go and talk to the Romans. He did not send them off to a clinic for therapy or medication. They were 'cut to the heart' means they were stricken with guilt of their sin, and Peter had the only remedy for such guilt, the only cure for the sin-afflicted soul.

2. David and resurrection

Peter's audience knew that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified. Many of them had gone along with the chief priests and elders in condemning Jesus and demanding he be crucified. This same Jesus God raised from the dead on the third day. The tomb where he was buried was not far away, and it was empty. What had happened to the dead body of Jesus? The authorities were saying one thing and the disciples another. Peter again takes his listeners to the Scriptures, the indisputable word of God. In doing so he takes them to another tomb, the tomb of David.

Psalms 16 has the title, 'a Michtam of David'. Psalm titles are important although we do not know the meaning of the word 'Michtam'. David was asking the Lord to watch over him and preserve him in life. He rejoiced that the Lord had made known to him the path of life (2:28, Ps 16:11). David was a prophet and some of what he says in this Psalm is prophetic (2:30). He was speaking of Messiah, the greater Son of David. Having recited portion of Psalm 16, Peter turned to the crowd saying for the third time, 'Men and brethren' (2:39). He had something to say to the Jews about this Psalm. David was a patriarch and a great king, but he died around one thousand years before Pentecost. He was buried in a grave in the southern part of Jerusalem, near the pool of Siloam. His tomb was still there as Peter spoke. Anyone could go and see David's tomb. And if they opened it they would find the bones of King David.

So what was David talking when he said, 'You will not leave my soul in Sheol/Hades, nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption' (2:27); corruption means decay. Clearly he was not talking about himself. But on the other side of the city was another tomb, a tomb in which Jesus of Nazareth had been buried; that tomb was now empty. If they went to this tomb they would not find any bones. Why? Because Jesus was risen from the dead. Death, the greatest power on earth, could not

hold the one sent down from heaven (2:24). Jesus broke the bonds of death when God raised him up. Death could not hold God's only begotten Son. Not only was the tomb empty but Peter and the eleven standing with him had seen Jesus alive from the dead. Some might accuse Peter of dreaming or hallucinating but there were too many other witnesses to maintain this accusation. 'We are all witness that God has raised up this Jesus' (2:32).

2. David and exaltation

God had made a covenant or a promise to David that one of his descendants, one who will come from his own body, will sit on his throne forever (2Sam 7:13). In his first volume Luke showed how Jesus was a descendant of David. The apostle Paul clearly writes of Jesus, 'Who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh' (Rom 1:3). He goes on to say that by the resurrection Jesus was declared to be the Son of God with power. This is exactly what Peter is saying in this Pentecost sermon. As a prophet David knew that the Messiah of God would sit on his throne forever. It was God who put David on the throne in Jerusalem to rule over Israel. David knew that one of his descendants would be greater than him; he would sit on the greater throne in heaven ruling over the greater Israel.

Peter moves from the resurrection of Jesus to his exaltation in one breath. David spoke about God's Holy One, God's Messiah, not seeing decay. Jesus of Nazareth was risen from the dead. He was not in Sheol or Hades, the place of the dead, but was alive. Peter and many others had seen the resurrected Jesus; they saw him in the flesh, talking and eating in front of them. They had seen him taken up into heaven. Peter does not refer to the ascension; he goes straight to the exaltation of Jesus. He has another passage of Scripture which can only be explained as referring to being exalted to the right hand of God.

Before going into this passage Peter 'reconnects' with his listeners and the question they were asking. Seeing and hearing the disciples speaking on other tongues they asked, 'What does this mean?' It meant that God had poured out his Spirit on them, as Joel had prophesied. And since Jesus was risen and ascended into heaven it meant that Jesus was with the Father in heaven and that Jesus had, 'poured out what you now see and hear' (2:33). Everything the prophets spoke was connected -connected to Jesus. Jesus had come down from heaven and was now back in heaven, having accomplished the determined purpose of God.

Peter nails the great truth of Christ's exaltation with a quote from another of David's Psalms, a royal Psalm. He had been assisted in his interpretation of this Psalm by Jesus himself. Jesus asked the scribes and Pharisees to explain the first verse of Psalm 110 (Luke 20:41f); who is David calling 'my Lord'? In the Greek both 'Lords' are the same (*kurios*) but in Hebrew the first is '*Yahweh*' and the second '*adonai*'. David says Yahweh, the God of Israel, spoke to someone whom David calls 'my Lord', saying, 'sit at my right hand' (2:34). David was king. Who could he be calling 'my Lord' and saying he sits at the right hand of God?

The Jewish lawyers agreed that the Messiah would be the Son of David. Yet David is speaking of someone greater than him, one he calls 'my Lord'. He can only be referring to a descendant who is also the Son of God. Moreover, David did not ascend to heaven but this 'someone' did. Jesus ascended to heaven. Jesus sits at the right hand of God. God has made Jesus, this Jesus who the Jews crucified, both Lord and Christ (2:36). Some people do not like to say the Jews crucified Jesus; they think it is being anti-Semitic and not politically correct. But Peter was talking to Jews when he

said, 'Whom you crucified'. Having said this, it is also true that because we are all sinners we are all guilty of sending Jesus to the cross. If we were all righteous before God Jesus would not have had to die. If you were born righteous before God and have no sin, then and only then are you free from this guilt.

Why does Peter conclude that Jesus is both Lord and Christ? (2:36). He actually declares on oath that this is true and that all Israel must hear and understand. 'Christ' is the Greek word for 'Messiah', meaning 'anointed of God'. The Scriptures spoke of Messiah as the one who would deliver the people of God. Jesus was anointed at his baptism. He was anointed with the Holy Spirit. God spoke from heaven saying of Jesus, 'You are my beloved Son'. After returning to heaven Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon his disciples to continue the ministry which Jesus began (1:1).

Jesus is the promised Messiah. He is the One sent by God to deliver men and women and children from sin and death. Jesus is also Lord. As mentioned, in Psalm 110:1 the two words are the same in Greek- our NKJ version is not correct in putting the first in block capitals in this translation. Jesus was exalted not only as Messiah but as Lord. He is given 'the name that is above every name' (Phil 2:9). By calling him Lord, David is effectively making him equal with God- which is why the Jews could not or would not answer Jesus' question on this verse. 'Jesus is Lord' became the first creed or confession of the church (Rom 10:9, 1Cor 12:3, Phil 2:11).

3. Do this and live

Peter's Pentecost sermon concludes with the declaration, 'God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ'. The huge crowd had listened attentively. The Holy Spirit was touching their hearts as they heard the word preached. 'They were cut to the heart' (2:37). Peter may have remembered other words from the prophet Joel: 'rend your heart and not your garments' (Joel 2:13). There was no more mocking. There was no, 'I had nothing to do with crucifying Jesus' or other excuses. There was deep conviction of sin. The people asked Peter and the apostles, 'What shall we do?' (2:37). When the Philippian jailer was convicted of sin he asked Paul and Silas, 'What must I do to be saved?' (16:30). Have you ever asked this question of a preacher? It presumes, of course, that listen attentively to what the preacher says.

What did Peter tell them to do? They were convicted of their sin. They were responsible for murdering an innocent man, of killing the Prince of life, the Son of God (3:15). God would judge them. How could they be forgiven of such a terrible sin? Peter did not say they should go and hang themselves. This is what some do when they are overcome with guilt. Some see this as the honourable way, as in the Shinto religion, and even in secular humanism. No! Peter said, 'Repent!' Repent means turn around- turn your mind around and look to the one who is Christ the Lord. Look to the cross on which he died and understand that he went to the cross to make forgiveness possible. When you look to the cross God also looks to the cross and forgives you. No other religion or philosophy offers you this way of dealing with the guilt of sin. Peter does not add the words, 'believe on the Lord Jesus (cf. Paul in 16:31) because he has just declared Jesus to be Lord and Christ and they responded. Peter goes to the next step of baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (2:38).

John the Baptist had been baptising people who repented but such baptism now became baptism in the name of Jesus Christ because Jesus Christ had shed his blood for the forgiveness of sin (Heb 9:25). Like Joel before him, John spoke of the coming Holy Spirit. He spoke of baptism with the Holy

Spirit (Luke3:16). The baptism at Pentecost was in the name of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It was a sign and seal of believing in Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit. It was not the means by which Jesus saves or the means by which the Holy Spirit comes but an outward sign of this inner reality. Indeed, the Holy Spirit was active in convicting of sin and leading the sinner to repent.

Peter's final words in this sermon, before setting out to baptise three thousand souls, his final words we might say threw open the gates of salvation to all the world. He said the promise, the promise of new life in Christ, was not only for them but for their children, and all who are afar off (2:39). Luke was alert to Jesus' command to his disciples to be witnesses to the end of the earth (1:8). He probably saw Peter's words as signalling the inclusion of the Gentiles in this new body of believers in Jesus Christ; the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Entry into this body was not restricted to any gender, any age, any ethnic group or nation. It was not limited by any number either. How come? Because it is for as many as the Lord our God will call (2:39). No one enters apart from the call of God. God's call is effectual; it is followed by you calling on the name of the Lord. It means that 'whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' (2:21).

Faith and fellowship

Acts 2:40-47

In 1959 the Sydney showground was packed with over one hundred and fifty thousand people. People sat all over the playing field while Billy Graham preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the end of his sermon thousands of listeners came forward to make a commitment to Christ. What happened after they made this commitment? Thankfully they were not left to fend for themselves. Months and years before this crusade churches across the city and across the state were contacted. They were asked to pray and to send members for training as counsellors, so that when people went forward at the crusade they were put in contact with their local church. Many of them ended up joining their local church and becoming faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Too many evangelists make no provision for the ongoing life of believers. Once they baptise a convert they forget about them. This can be disastrous when a person goes back to a non-Christian community, as can happen in India or even in Australia.

‘Be saved from this perverse/crooked generation’ said the apostle Peter as he continued with his Pentecost sermon. The crowd of thousands listened to carefully to the Spirit -filled apostle proclaiming Jesus of Nazareth as both Lord and Christ. Peter urged them to repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ, and some three thousand were baptised that day. Some question the logistics of this baptism, but clearly all the apostles were involved (2:14) and the facilities of this huge temple complex made it all feasible. Peter’s words about this crooked or corrupt generation are similar to words spoken by Jesus of unbelieving Jews (Luke 9:41). The apostle Paul urges the children of God to be ‘without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world’ (Phil 2:15). This new community of believers that F. F. Bruce calls, ‘the faithful remnant of the old Israel and at the same time the nucleus of the new Israel, the Christian church’; this new community is a light shining into a dark world.

When a person is saved out of Hinduism or an animistic religion they stand out from the old community. They no longer participate in the worship of idols or ancestors and evil spirits. They become a shining light of truth and love. But what do we see in western society? We see men and women who claim to be believers living like unbelievers. Some Christians are eager not to be seen as different to the world. Sometimes preachers are at the forefront of popular culture, promoting women in the priesthood, abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage.

Peter said, ‘be saved from this crooked generation’ not ‘embrace this crooked generation’. Just as the Jews were blinded to the truth about Jesus, so the world in which we live is blinded to the truth, the truth about God and creation, as well as God and redemption- at least the blinded Jews believed in divine creation. If you listen to any media at all (particularly the ABC’s Q&A), you must see what a crooked and perverse society we live in. The apostle Peter urged his listeners to save themselves from the generation or society of corrupt and hopeless people, people who say telling lies is necessary, and that death is the end of our existence. I pray that you listen to his words and pay heed to them as you hear them today. Peter does not tell us to go off to live on some desert island or a monastery. What we see is the believers coming together in a fellowship or church for the purpose of worshipping God and supporting and encouraging one another (Heb 10:25).

‘And they continued steadfastly in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers’ (2:42). Men, women and children who repented and were baptised and received the Holy Spirit, came together in the church. Luke describes four activities of this fellowship, this

'koinonia': they listened to the apostles teaching, they had fellowship, they broke bread together, and they prayed together. Some see the last two activities as included under fellowship, making just three elements to the fellowship- but in light of the following verses we will look at four points.

1. Apostolic teaching

As Jesus began his ministry he chose twelve men to be his apostles. These men left everything to accompany Jesus wherever he went. They saw all the miraculous signs he performed and heard everything he taught. When they chose a man to replace Judas they said he had to be a man who had followed Jesus since the baptism of John and had been a witness to his resurrection. The apostles were blessed to see the risen Jesus and have him explain the Scriptures to them. They were empowered by the Holy Spirit to preach and teach the gospel.

The early church did not have the NT as we have it. The gospels had not yet been written. What they had was the personal presence of the apostles. These men taught what Jesus taught them. The Holy Spirit brought to remembrance all that Jesus said, and they were guided by the Holy Spirit into all truth (John 14:26, 16:13). The teaching of the apostles was the foundation of the church (Eph 2:20). The gospel according to Mark is probably based on the teaching of Peter. Peter wrote two letters that are included in the canon of Scripture. He himself indirectly refers to Paul's letters as Scripture (2Peter 3:16). The apostles authenticated their teaching by many wonders and signs just as Jesus did, and just as Jesus said they would (2:43, John 14:12).

Pentecost believers devoted themselves to the apostles teaching. 'Devoted' is a strong word, as is the translation 'continue steadfastly'. Is it a word that describes your attitude towards the Bible? They did not devote themselves to the apostles but to their teaching. The foundation of the church is not apostolic succession but apostolic teaching. The believers did not worship the apostles, they worshipped Jesus to whom their apostles gave witness. Godly preachers do not build up a personal following of their own; they build up a following for Christ. They teach these followers all they know and understand from the Scriptures; they did not keep secret things to themselves. The apostles were not cult leaders. They taught the Scriptures as fellow members of the church, the body of Christ.

2. Fellowship

Fellowship translates the Greek word *'koinonia'*; the root of this word means 'common'. Fellowship means holding things in common; it involves a willing and generous sharing. What these men and women had in common was Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. With him in common, 'commonality' flowed to everything in life. Fellowship is first and foremost with God and his Son, Jesus (1John 1:3). With this 'vertical' fellowship in place, we have fellowship with others who are in fellowship with God- a horizontal relationship. The new believers were filled with the Holy Spirit; they were 'daily with one accord' praising God (2:46, 47). They were drawn together in the bonds of the Spirit into the fellowship of believers.

Eating together, and especially partaking of the Lord's Supper together, is a sign of this fellowship, as we will see. Praying together is also an element of this fellowship, as we will also see. What were the other features of this fellowship of new believers after Pentecost? When they met together they praised God (2:47). Most likely they sang Psalms as they had previously done in temple and synagogue worship. Jesus told them that the Psalms spoke about him (Luke 24:44). The Psalms tell

about God's creation, his power and his glory. They are part of the Holy Scriptures. The Psalms speak to us and they speak for us as we praise God.

All who believed were together, and had all things in common' (2:44). This was not communism. They were not forced to sell everything to the state or the church. It was not socialism with the rich being taxed to help the poor. This was voluntary, Spirit-inspired sharing. It was something we once saw when our society was more 'Christian'. It was the practical outworking of the inner change that took place in those who believed in Jesus. They understood the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. 'If God so loved us we ought also to love one another (1John 4:11). They were willing to give everything to God in thankfulness for the precious blood of Jesus Christ by which they had been cleansed of sin. They were giving to the Lord with glad and sincere hearts (2:46).

Can anyone who closes his heart and hands to the need of a brother really know the love of Jesus? (1John 3:17). Build up your treasure in heaven not on earth is what Jesus taught, and what the apostles taught. It is what the NT church believed and how they lived. Members of the fellowship sold their possessions and belongings and gave the proceeds to the apostles who then gave to those who were in need. No one was forced to sell anything- they did it willingly. We later read that houses and lands were sold in this demonstration of love for God and for fellowship believers (4:34).

Such was the profound change in the lives of these first believers, and such was the warmth of their fellowship that they found favour with all the people (2:47). Outsiders were taking note of the amazing fellowship. It was as Jesus said, 'by this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another' (John 13:25). Practical love, sharing and caring love, speaks volumes to a selfish world. Many a lost soul has responded to the Christ- motivated and Christ-like love of disciples of Jesus Christ.

3. Breaking of bread

Eating a meal together is the mark of close fellowship. You do not sit down to a meal with someone you hate. You do not sit down to eat with a complete stranger; do you sit down next to a stranger in a café and start sharing your meal? You eat with those with whom you have something in common- family, friends or fellow believers. Fellowship in the NT church included eating together. Do we encourage such fellowship in the church today? If not, why not?

The question arises as to the place of the Lord's Supper in this eating together and in this fellowship. Does 'breaking of bread' simply mean eating together or does it include the Lord's Supper? Most commentators agree that 'breaking bread' includes the Lord's Supper. F. F. Bruce writes, 'the regular observance of the Lord's Supper is no doubt indicated'. This NT scholar belonged to a church called the Brethren Assembly. Every Lord's Day members of this church shared the Lord's Supper together- much as we do four times a year. Marshall says that, "'breaking of bread' is Luke's term for what Paul calls 'the Lord's Supper'". Even so, breaking of bread was the way people spoke about taking a meal.

The NT church 'continued daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart' (2:46). The NIV study notes say, 'this was not the Lord's Supper' but this is not clear. We do not understand this to be just a family meal. Homes often had courtyards in which 15-20 people could eat together. The believers gathered in the temple daily to hear the apostle's teaching and to worship God. They would have gone to

various houses to have a fellowship meal and remember the Lord. This may have been daily; it was later done weekly (20:7). Meeting on the first day of the week became the norm, as did meeting in homes. When Paul went to the Gentiles he first went to the synagogue but when thrown out of there the church met in someone's house. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper he was in a house sharing a meal with his disciples. Paul writes about the Lord's Supper in Corinth being in the context of a meal- some were being gluttons and other were getting drunk (1Cor 11:21). Some refer to the 'love feast' associated with the Lord's Supper.

4. Prayer

The Pentecost believers were very focussed on prayer. Fellowship was not just about eating together. It was not just about sharing their possessions. These were men, women and children filled with the Holy Spirit. Whenever they went to the temple they prayed (3:1). Whenever they gathered in their homes they prayed. Whenever they ate together they prayed. Whenever they were alone they also prayed. Yet today some Christian families fail to pray at meal times. They fail to have family prayer. Some Christians do not attend prayer meetings in the church. Why?

In the NT church prayer was an essential element of any and all gatherings. All the believers were united in listening to the apostles teaching, in prayer, in the breaking of bread. They belonged to a fellowship they knew the fear of God as well as the love of God. Through this fellowship they impacted the world around them for good. 'And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved' (2:47). Do you long for such a church? Are you praying for such a church? Are you living for such a church?

Healing of a crippled beggar

Acts 3:1-10

If you attend a mainline church in an India city you will probably find beggars sitting around the gate as you go to worship. If crippled, they will be carried there or make their way on some sort of 'billy cart'. Some of the beggars will be maimed in other ways, some will be blind and some lepers. They hold out their hands or a small tin asking for alms. People going to church usually feel constrained to give them some coins.

After Pentecost the apostles and new believers continued in daily teaching sessions, prayer and breaking of bread together. The teaching and prayer was in the temple. All their life these Jews had worshipped God by bringing their sacrifices and offerings to the temple. They went to the temple with Jesus. After the death and resurrection of Jesus they no longer made sacrifices in the temple but kept going to the temple to pray. There was a morning prayer at 9am, an evening prayer at 3pm, and another at sunset. The believers, but not the apostles, would soon be forced to flee the city (8:1). It seems the apostles continued in the temple prayer and some rituals. Paul went to the temple for some purification ritual (21:26). All sacrifices and offerings ceased when the temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD70- and so it remains. After Pentecost many signs and wonders were done through the apostles (2:43). One such wonder or sign is detailed here in chapter 3. It is a miraculous sign, in keeping with a continuation of the ministry of Jesus.

1. Look at us

Peter and John were going to the temple for evening prayer. At the gate of the temple they came across a crippled man who was begging. He was born a cripple- he had never walked. Family or friends carried him to this place each day so he could beg from men and women going for prayer. The temple was a huge complex with some nine gates for entering the inner temple. The gate called Beautiful is thought to be one of these, allowing access from the outer court of the Gentiles into the court of women on the east side. It is thought to be the gate otherwise known as the Nicanor gate. This was intricately decorated in bronze.

The cripple saw Peter and John about to enter the temple and asked for alms. He hoped to hear a rattle in his tin as these men went on into the temple. But they stopped and stared at him- most people only gave him a passing glance. Peter said to him, 'Look at us' (3:4). 'What is going on?' he must have thought. Did they have something special to give him? He gave them his full attention. Peter told the beggar he did not have any money- any silver or gold. When they were with Jesus the apostles had a common purse- held by Judas. They may have kept on with this practice after Pentecost. In any case, Peter was not being dishonest.

Still Peter had something to give this poor cripple, something better than money. Peter had just been given the Holy Spirit. The risen and ascended Jesus had sent the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. 'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you' (1:8). They were empowered to be witnesses for Jesus. This healing must be seen within the context of witnessing to Jesus. It was an authentication of this divine gift of the Holy Spirit, much as the healings done by Jesus were an authentication of his coming down from heaven. Neither Jesus nor the apostles performed signs and wonders just for the sake of healing or impressing people.

2. Leaping and praising God

Peter looked at the cripple and the cripple looked at Peter. Peter said to him, 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk'. Peter took his hand, and as he lifted him up the man's feet and ankles got strong enough for him to stand on his own. He stood there in amazement, but not for long. He then walked on into the temple, into the court of women and the treasury. He walked and then he jumped. He jumped for joy, praising God as he went on through the temple. The man who was crippled from birth, the man who sat at the gate begging, was running through the temple praising God. Note that he was not just healed in one leg or healed so he could stand with a stick. Nor was he healed from a sore back or headache. This man was a cripple from birth. He was healed instantly and completely.

No one questioned the identity of this man. They all knew he was the cripple who sat at the gate Beautiful day after day, year after year, begging. They were simply filled with awe and amazement at what had happened to him. When Jesus healed the man born blind the Jewish leaders questioned the identity of this man (John 9). No one questioned the identity of this cripple. But this does not mean they understood how he was healed. Being filled with awe and amazement does not indicate any deep or lasting change of heart has taken place. People can go away from a so-called 'healing service' without any deep or lasting change of heart, even if they are healed. A girl told me how she went to such a service and came away without the pain she previously had in her arm. I did not question the validity of her healing, but asked her what she was going to do in response to this healing. She was from a Roman Catholic background, but started attending the evangelical student fellowship and became a believer in Jesus Christ.

3. Listen to the explanation

The lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John, as we might expect. He was most grateful to them for what they had done for him. He had heard Peter solemnly refer to the name 'Jesus Christ of Nazareth' as he healed him. Just what he understood about this name and how he was healed we are not told- the cripple man does not speak as such. But he knew he could walk again and he was praising God. And he was holding on to Peter and John ready to learn more.

In healing the man born blind, Jesus told him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. In faith he went and washed, and his eyes were opened. When the apostle Paul healed a cripple at Lystra he saw that he had faith to be healed (14:9). Peter told this cripple at the temple, 'Look at us'. Was he looking for faith in this man? Besides the faith of the cripple we might note the faith of Peter. The Holy Spirit had come upon him and he spoke in other languages. But to tell a cripple to rise up and walk required a lot of faith. Peter had, of course, been with Jesus, and seen Jesus heal a paralysed man set in front of him by four of his friends. Jesus said at that time that it was easier to say, 'rise up and walk' than to say, 'your sins are forgiven'. Peter will get to the matter of forgiveness. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, Peter acted in faith.

Peter healed the man in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, not in his own name or his own strength. He knew the Jesus whose name he uttered. He not only knew how Jesus healed people but knew that Jesus was risen from the dead. Jesus was alive. The power of Jesus was still present in this world. Peter knew the power of the resurrection, 'that exceedingly great power toward us who believe, according to the working of his mighty power which he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places' (Eph 1:19-20). Jesus once said, 'He who believes in me, the works I do he will also do and greater works than these he will do,

because I go to my Father' (John 14:12). It is amazing what we can do when we listen to Jesus and take him at his word.

How does Peter explain what happened at the Beautiful gate? It was something beautiful, more beautiful than the bronze decoration on the gate! In verse 16 he mentions faith, faith in a name. The name is the name 'Jesus of Nazareth'. The apostles often referred to Jesus this way. It reminded people that Jesus was from a town in Israel, a despised town at that. He was not a foreigner, not some mysterious outsider, and not an angel. We cannot speak of Jesus of Kashmir or Jesus of Kakadu; some people talk about Jesus in such ways. Jesus had a mother and brothers who were still around. In other religions the background of the leader or prophet is often shrouded in mystery—deliberately so. But not so with Jesus. Everything about Jesus' life is open and transparent. Search all you like and you will find no sin in him (John 8:46).

Peter refers to Jesus in various other ways as he addresses the 'Men of Israel' in this his second sermon in the NT church. The crowd ran after Peter and John and the man who was healed, until they came to a stop at Solomon's porch or colonnade. This was one of the porches around the inside of the temple wall. Peter immediately denied that he or John had any special power or godliness by which they had healed this man (3:12). In a similar situation Paul's Gentile audience started calling him a god (14:11).

With a Jewish audience Peter goes to the Bible, to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to identify the person behind this healing. He refers to God's 'Servant Jesus' (3:13). He goes on to speak about the Holy One and the Just or Righteous [One], and then the Prince or Author of life. The prophet Isaiah spoke of the Servant in the fourth Servant Song—'God's righteous servant shall justify many' (Isa 52:13, 53:11); Isaiah also prophesied of 'the lame leaping like a deer' (Isa 35:6). Not that the Jews saw Jesus as the servant referred to by Isaiah, but Peter did. He told them that, 'the God of our father's glorified his Servant Jesus' (3:13).

The Jews had taken Jesus to Pilate calling for him to be crucified, even when Pilate was convinced of his innocence, and had decided to let him go free. But they kept on in their denial (3:13, 14) and asked for a murderer named Barabbas to be released instead of Jesus, the Holy and Righteous One. The climax comes with Peter telling the Jewish crowd that they had killed the Prince/Author of life (3:15). They took the life of the very source of life or salvation. They were guilty of murdering an innocent man, a man who is the Son of God. But God raised Jesus from the dead; Peter and John and many others stood witness to this fact (3:15). This is the One, this is the name by which the crippled beggar was healed. No one could be mistaken or uncertain as to the One behind this amazing healing after hearing Peter's explanation.

Having unequivocally established the name and power behind the healing, Peter explains his involvement in the healing. He explains that this power became effective through faith in the name of Jesus. It was not just a matter of reciting the right words but of faith in the person of Jesus Christ. His name, the name of Jesus, 'through faith in his name, has made this man strong' (3:16). This faith comes through him, through Jesus. Faith is the gift of God (Eph 2:8). 'Faith is the manner and Jesus' name is the cause of the restoration' writes Kistemaker. Whether the faith was that of Peter or of the lame man is not specified, but clearly Peter had faith, and as already shown, the man had faith also. 'Without faith it is impossible to please God' (Heb 11:6), but with faith you can move mountains, according to Jesus (Mat 17:20).

Healing of crippled souls

Acts 3:11-26

With just five loaves and two small fish Jesus fed five thousand men. The crowd was amazed and followed Jesus all the way to Capernaum. Why? What were they looking for? Jesus said they following not because of the signs but because they ate bread and were filled. He told them, 'Do not labour for food that perishes but for food which endures unto eternal life' (John 6:27). Jesus did not want people coming to him just for physical bread or physical healing. He wanted them to taste the bread of life sent down from heaven. He wanted to heal their souls not just their bodies.

The apostles continued the ministry of Jesus, a ministry that included many wonders and signs. They also continued the teaching of Jesus, namely that these wonders or miracles were signs authenticating the presence of God. When Peter and John healed a cripple the people were amazed. Peter assured them that the power was not his but that of the Jesus of Nazareth. He assured them the man was not healed by some magic or form of words known only to Peter but by faith in the name of Jesus Christ.

This Jesus is the promised Servant of God, the Holy One, and the Righteous One, spoken of by the prophets. These are names associated with the Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth, whom they crucified but whom God raised from the dead, is the source of the power by which this cripple was healed. God vindicated Jesus, all his works and all his words, by raising him from the dead (3:15). A dead Jesus would have no power to heal a lame man. Through this miracle of healing Peter forced the people to re-evaluate what they had just done in killing Jesus, the Author of life.

1. Repent

The apostle Peter explained to the Jews in the temple how the crippled beggar came to be running through the temple praising God. It was through faith in His name, the name 'Jesus of Nazareth', God's servant Jesus that this man was given strength to walk. Peter told them this after reminding them that they had killed Jesus even when Pilate wanted to set him free. He told them that God had raised Jesus from the dead. We can almost hear the people saying to Peter and John, 'We made a huge mistake. We are guilty of innocent blood. What can we do?' This was their response after Peter's preaching the same gospel at Pentecost (2:37). Peter immediately told them to repent (2:38). On this occasion he tells them the same thing- 'Repent therefore' (3:19).

Before telling them to repent, Peter points to God's amazing grace and his sovereign purposes being fulfilled. In their failure to understand the grace of God, even under the old covenant, the Jews practiced an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (Mat 5:38). Having just be accused of killing an innocent man, in fact killing the Author of life, they might have been fearful of divine vengeance. Divine judgment was justly upon them. But God's judgment is not without mercy. Peter permits them to plead ignorance; actually he pleads for them saying, 'Brethren, I know you did it in ignorance, as also your rulers' (3:17).

The Jews would not accept Jesus as Messiah. In their blindness they turned on him and killed him. From the cross Jesus prayed, 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do' (Luke 23:34). In the gospel that Peter proclaims he offers forgiveness even to those responsible for the death of Jesus. F.F. Bruce writes, 'Here is a proclamation of divine generosity, offering a free pardon to all who took part in the death of Christ, if only they realise their error, confess their sin and turn to God in repentance'. He concludes, 'Here surely is the heart of the gospel of grace'.

In the words of the hymn, 'the vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives'. There are people who say they cannot be forgiven because they have been so wicked. They may not forgive themselves and other people may not be able to forgive them, but God can and will, if they repent. This does not mean murderers or drug dealers will be released from our prisons, but repentance will bring release from God's condemnation and eternal punishment.

Peter persists by explaining to the Jews that what he is saying is just what is written in Scripture. Though they stand guilty of killing Jesus it was in fact the 'determined purpose' of God that the Messiah or Christ would suffer (2:23, 3:18). All the prophets spoke about the suffering servant of God, Isaiah most clearly. Such prophecies were now fulfilled. They were fulfilled in the cross of Jesus. Peter will expand on what these prophets said in the following verses. Before this he issues the call to repent.

'Repent therefore and be converted' or turn again (3:19). Repent means to turn around- specifically to turn to God. Having heard the gospel, having heard the truth about Jesus and the offer of forgiveness in his name, they could no longer claim to be ignorant. 'Times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent' is what the apostle Paul preached to Gentiles (17:30). Surely this applied even more to Jews.

How tragic it will be to see men and women standing before the judgment throne of God pleading ignorance about Christ and salvation. Thousands will have come from Christian homes and churches, thousands will have lived down the street from a church, thousands will have said the Lord's Prayer, yet will claim ignorance of Christ the Lord. Now is the day of salvation! Repent therefore; turn away from sin and turn to the Lord, 'that your sins may be blotted out' (3:19).

Emails and texting on computers and mobile phones are making it increasingly difficult to erase sins. Gone are the days when letters could be burnt. More and more people are having their sins exposed- not that this is a bad thing. Let us remember that God knows not just everything we write but everything we think. And God is the ultimate judge, not the journalist or politician who delights in searching out the sins of others. 'Blotted out' does not belong to the vocabulary of the journalist, or any of us for that matter. We cannot forget sin- the sin of others or our own. But when you repent your sins are blotted out by God according to the apostle Peter.

Your sins are erased like chalk off the blackboard; they are washed away by the blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus Christ is powerful to cleanse us from all sin. When you repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ you truly get to start again with a clean slate as far as God is concerned. Jesus does not keep reminding you of your sin after he forgives. The only one who reminds you of your sin is Satan, the accuser of the brethren (Rev 12:10). He loves to remind us of our sin even after Jesus has forgiven us.

Paul writes of 'forgetting those things that are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead' (Phil 3:13). What great release and what great respite it is to leave our sinful past behind and press on toward the goal, the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:14). Peter speaks of 'times of refreshing' from the Lord (3:19). The word literally means recovery of breath or from the heat. Respite is from the fiery judgment of God. When the burden of sin is removed the peace of

God floods your heart, making for a real sense of relief and refreshment. Those who do not repent remain burdened by sin and guilt, and they remain under the wrath of God (John 3:36).

2. Restoration

Years ago we talked about 'looking to the future'. Nowadays almost every second sentence we hear includes the words 'moving forward' as either a prefix or a suffix. People love to talk about 'moving forward' but they have no idea which way is forward. They keep making the same mistakes; they end up moving in circles, not moving forward. Those who repent and believe in Jesus Christ know which way is forward, because God has appointed a day on which he will, 'judge the world in righteousness by the Man he has ordained' (17:31). The only certainty many have about the future is their own death- which they choose to ignore. The believer does not ignore death. We rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus. We enjoy times of refreshing and blessing from the Lord as we look forward to the coming of Jesus and times of restoration or fulfilment.

The risen Jesus returned to heaven. The apostles saw him taken up into heaven with their own eyes. But they were told that this same Jesus will return. He will return in glory and bring about the consummation of all things. He will bring a new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness. The prophets spoke of this coming kingdom before Jesus spoke about it. We might look to Isaiah who wrote about rejoicing, about no more crying or weeping, about the wolf and the lamb feeding together (Isa 65). But for the Jews, Moses and the earlier prophets were more highly regarded, so Peter refers to them as he presses home the truth of restoration or fulfilment. This would not be in an earthly kingdom (cf.1:6), but a heavenly kingdom. The risen and exalted Jesus is king over this kingdom for ever.

3. Raise up a prophet

Moses, the first of the prophets, looked forward to the coming of Christ. Jesus said even 'Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad' (John 8:56). Abraham and Moses would not have been blind to the coming of Messiah. Moses wrote of a Prophet like him being raised up by the Lord God, a man who knew and declared God's will (3:27, Deut 18:15). Indeed, the Jews expected the Messiah to be a second Moses. People did not speak against Moses because he spoke the words of God. What happened when Korah led a rebellion against Moses? The earth opened up and they were buried alive! So it will be for those who speak against the Prophet like Moses. Those who will not hear and pay heed to his words shall be utterly destroyed (3:23).

The time of restoration is also a time of judgment, judgment upon those who do not hear and heed the gospel of Jesus Christ. 'Do not just take it from me but take it from the mouth of Moses' says Peter in effect. Take it from the mouth of all the prophets, including Samuel and those coming after him. 'All the prophets were concerned with eschatological events and not simply with what was to happen in their own time' writes Marshall. All the prophets foretold the day of Christ. Samuel was next after Moses. He anointed David king of Israel. The Lord promised David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne for ever. Jesus descended from David. This Son of David, this Son of God, died and rose ago to sit on the throne of Israel, the new Israel, for ever.

After speaking of the Jews as 'sons of the prophets' who foretold the day of Jesus, Peter goes on to call them 'sons of the covenant' (3:25). The covenant was that which God made with Abraham when he told Abraham that in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3). Like Paul

after him, Peter understood 'seed' to be singular, and identified Jesus of Nazareth as this seed (3:25, Gal 3:16).

Peter's final words in this sermon following the healing of the lame man summarise what he has preached, namely that God raised up his Servant Jesus, whom they had crucified. Yet the gospel was not about God's vengeance; it was about God's grace. His call was to repent and believe, not to regret and despair. God's ultimate purpose was to bless not curse or destroy. By tuning away from sin and towards the Lord God they would be greatly blessed.

This amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ was coming 'to you first'; to the Jew first (3:26). To whom will it come second? To the Gentiles, of course! This promise is to 'all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call' (2:39). Peter's second sermon is the same as his first. In fact all his sermons, and all the sermons of the apostle Paul as the same. The gospel message is not something that changes or evolves. God does not change and neither does his word.

Peter and John arrested

Acts 4:1-22

Have you ever done a good deed only to be criticised and abused? Having seen someone fall down you may have helped them up, only to be told your help was neither needed nor appreciated. Some beggars in India do not want to be healed - or their 'owners' do not want them healed. They can earn a decent income through their begging. The lame man that Peter and John healed did not complain. He ran through the temple praising God. The crowd that gathered to hear Peter explain what they saw did not complain, even when Peter bluntly but graciously told them that they had killed the Christ, the Author of life. He called on them to repent that their sins may be blotted out. But some would complain about this 'good deed done to a helpless man', and about Peter's explanation of the miracle (4:9).

1. Arrest

Peter was speaking to the crowd gathered at Solomon's colonnade within the temple complex. The crowd numbered in the thousands. John was with him as well as the man who was healed. It was some time after three in the afternoon. 'As they spoke to the people'- maybe John and the lame man added to Peter's words- the temple authorities showed up (4:1). The priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees were either informed of the gathering or were present in the crowd. They appeared suddenly, grabbed Peter and John and took them into custody. It was too late in the day to put them before the court, so they locked them up for the night.

Who were these authorities and what was their problem? The priests were men who burned incense in the temple and made the sacrifices. They did this on a rotation. They came from the sect of the Sadducees. The captain of the temple guard was second in charge after the high priest, and responsible for keeping order in the temple. Other Sadducees were in this party that arrested Peter and John. These authorities may have been concerned about the large gathering getting unruly but there is no indication of this- everyone was listening intently to Peter. No, what the authorities were concerned about was the things Peter was saying. They were 'greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection of the dead' (4:2).

Peter and John were arrested for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection (Luke 20:27-40). They hated Jesus for teaching the resurrection. They joined with the Pharisees, and all Jerusalem, in clamouring for Jesus to be crucified. They thought they had done away with Jesus and all talk about the resurrection but here were a few of his followers preaching that Jesus is risen from the dead. Note that these authorities made no attempt to convince anyone that Jesus was still dead by producing his dead body, or offering another explanation for the empty tomb. Their religious objection was backed up by brute force and threats not by religious argument.

The arrest of Peter and John did nothing to stem the movement of the Holy Spirit among the crowd that listened to Peter preaching. Some two thousand men responded to his call to repent. The number of men alone in the church now totalled some five thousand (4:4). Through the preaching of the gospel, and the work of the Holy Spirit, the church was growing rapidly. The Jewish authorities had to consider such a body of believers- at least for the moment (4:21).

2. Arraigned

The following day Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jews. This was made up of rulers, elders and scribes. It was dominated by Sadducees, with an

influential minority of scribes or Pharisees- who did believe in the resurrection. The high priest presided over this court. At this time it was Annas who was high priest, although it was his son-in-law Caiaphas who was appointed and recognised by Rome. Many of Annas' family were there- John may be his son Jonathan who later became high priest. Alexander is not otherwise known. F.F. Bruce comments, 'Only a few weeks had passed since they had both (Annas and Caiaphas) taken a hand in the condemnation of Jesus'.

Peter and John were brought from the lock-up and set before them for questioning. They were asked by the high priest, 'By what power or by what name have you done this?' (4:7). He may have been pointing to the healed beggar standing there with Peter and John, although everyone knew that he was talking about what had happened in the temple the previous day. The court made no attempt to deny the miracle, in contrast to the Pharisees rejecting Jesus' healing of the man born blind (John 9). The council asked a question which Peter had already addressed before the crowd in the temple; but the men before him in the court were more hostile than that crowd.

3. Answer

Have you ever been in a court room? Dressed in robes and wearing a wig, the judge sits in a big chair behind a raised bench. He is meant to be, and he is, intimidating. The high priest wore a very ornate crown and gem studded robes. Around this court room sat seventy men in their robes, all staring at Peter and John. Anyone arraigned before this court would feel intimidated. But Jesus had told his disciples more than once that they would be brought before synagogues, magistrates and authorities (Luke 12:11, 21:12). He told them not to be afraid because the Holy Spirit would give them words to say at such times. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit as he spoke to their Sanhedrin (4:8). This was not a baptism of the Spirit but a special enabling of the Spirit already given to Peter, and all who believe.

After politely addressing the rulers and elders, Peter referred to the healing of the lame man as, 'a good deed done to a helpless man' (4:9). He was asked to explain this, which he does so with clarity and boldness as if preaching the gospel to the Sanhedrin. He addresses not only the rulers and elders present but all the people of Israel. The name by which this cripple was healed is none other than the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Yes! The man they had recently crucified, but whom God raised from the dead really is the promised Messiah of God. A verse from Scripture, the same verse used by Jesus himself, speaks of the stone, or the Messiah, being rejected by men before becoming the chief cornerstone (4:11, Ps 118:22, Mat 21:42).

Peter's answer-cum-sermon was brief but powerful. It was based on Scripture and historical truth. No one could deny that what he said was true. But a sermon is not just about facts of history; it is about impacting the hearts of those who hear, be they beggars or rulers and elders. The name by which this cripple was healed is the only name in all the universe and all ages by which men and women can be saved, 'for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (4:12). The only name by which you can be saved from sin and death is Jesus Christ of Nazareth. You must confess 'Jesus is Lord' to be saved.

The rulers and elders were somewhat dumbfounded by what Peter said, and especially by the boldness with which he spoke. This is just what Jesus said would happen (Luke 21:15). Peter and John were fishermen; they were not educated men. The 'only' training they had undertaken was with Jesus. 'Oh No! Not again!' the Jewish leaders must have thought, remembering the trouble

they had refuting the teaching of Jesus. Here was this well-known cripple standing before them with Peter claiming he was healed in the name of Jesus whom they had crucified. Dumbfounded, they adjourned the court (4:14).

The court put Peter and John outside while they conferred among themselves (4:15). With the miraculous healing as front-page news in the city, attempts to deny that it happened would be futile. Moreover, preaching was not illegal as long as there was no disturbance of the peace. All the council could do was issue a stern warning to these men not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus (4:18)

4. Authority

Did Peter and John accept the conditions placed upon them by the supreme court of the Jews? They might have considered themselves fortunate to be let off with a warning, and gone quietly. But Peter and John knew they had to answer to a higher authority. The risen Jesus had told them they would be his witness in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth (1:8). They had been given the Holy Spirit for this purpose. What this court of men was commanding them was contrary to what Jesus commanded. So they told the court that they could not comply with the warning; they had to obey God rather than men (cf.5:29). They could not stop speaking about Jesus, about his death and resurrection.

The court was not impressed with the apostle's response to their threat. They were not prepared for such conviction and such boldness. All they could do was make further threats and let them go. A crowd was outside praising God because a man who had been a cripple for over forty years was now running around praising God. Moreover, some five thousand men who had heard Peter preach the gospel had repented and believed in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Not that Peter and John were trusting in the crowd or the church to defend them. Even if they were the only ones who believed in Jesus they would still be saying, 'We must obey God rather than men. We cannot stop proclaiming the name of Jesus'. Why? 'Because there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved'. Is this the truth you know and believe? Will you follow the example of Peter and John in proclaiming the name of Jesus to the end of the earth, believing it is the name which men and women from any and every nation must hear if they are to be saved? What would it take to stop you from sharing the life-saving name of Jesus Christ?

Believers prayer for boldness

Acts 4:23-31

Prayer is fundamental to the Christian life. Prayer, Bible reading and corporate worship, including the sacraments, are fundamental to the Christian life. These are the three legs of a stool- if one is missing the stool will not stand. None of these practices is easy to maintain, but we neglect them at our peril. It is not easy to 'continue steadfastly in prayer', which is why the apostle Paul, and preachers like me, keep urging you to pray. What brings us to our knees, crying out to the Lord in prayer, is when we suffer in some way- sickness, separation, sacking or persecution. It is a wonder the Lord does not allow us to suffer more than he does!

Jesus gave his disciples a model prayer, which we call the Lord's Prayer. There are not many recorded prayers in the Bible, outside the Psalms. The prayer of Hannah, and that of Daniel, are two that come to mind, along with the prayer of Hezekiah. We learn from these how we should pray. While 'shooting up an arrow prayer', as in one of Colin Buchanan's songs, is not wrong, we should pause to consider the One we are speaking to in prayer. Hannah says, 'No one is holy like the Lord, for there is no one besides you' (1Sam 2:2). Daniel says, 'O Lord, great and awesome God' (Dan 9:4). Hezekiah says, 'You are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth' (Isa 37:16). Some people know very little about the One to whom they pray. Some have mistaken ideas about the One to whom they pray. Prayer assumes a knowledge of God. We get this from the Bible. Prayer and Bible study go hand in hand. So when you pray you should read your Bible, and when you read your Bible you should pray.

The prayer we are looking at today is one of just a few recorded prayers in the NT. Its context or occasion is the threats made by the Jewish authorities when demanding that Peter and John not preach or teach in the name of Jesus. They had not broken any law, but the Jewish leaders did not take kindly to the disciples telling everyone that Jesus, whom they crucified, was risen from the dead. Peter and John defiantly told the court they could not accept their order because it conflicted with the order given them by God. The men of the court were shocked and angry but could not legally detain them, so let them go.

Peter and John went back to their companions, probably the original one hundred and twenty believers that they prayed with at Pentecost. They told them what had happened after they were arrested. They told about the threats of the chief priest and elders, men from the sect of the Sadducees who controlled the Sanhedrin (4:23). In the power of the Holy Spirit, they told this court that they had to obey God rather than man. They were released with further threats. But how long would they remain free? If they stopped speaking about Jesus they would remain free, but this was not an option. They had a command from Jesus which they must obey (1:8). In this time of need they cried to the Lord. They came before the throne of grace for help in a time of need (Heb 4:16). They needed strength from the Lord to press on preaching the gospel. No one can preach without such strength. No one can preach without prayer.

We noted some common features in the prayers in the Bible. This prayer is no different. These believers begin by recalling the works and words of Almighty God. They knew God as the creator of all things. They knew God as the God who has revealed himself in the Scriptures; the Bible is the word of God. They knew God as sovereign Lord of all. In looking at this prayer we will note firstly, the sovereignty of God, secondly, their supplication or request and thirdly, the shaking of the place where they had gathered to pray.

1. Sovereign Lord

After hearing their report this gathering of believers united in crying out to God in prayer (4:24). They said, 'Sovereign Lord', which translates the Greek word *'despota'*. Our word 'despot' has negative connotations but the Greek refers to God as the supreme power or the sovereign. These believers acknowledged God's sovereign works and words as they called to him in prayer. They acknowledged God as creator of heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them (4:24). They believed everything that exists was made by God. 'Without Him nothing was made that was made' (John 1:3). This is what it means to be sovereign in creation. It is not certain just who or how many are saying this prayer. Most likely one person is praying on behalf of the gathering; the rest may have been repeating the words or just saying Amen.

We do not hear the word 'sovereign' so often these days. Why? Because many who pray do not really believe God is sovereign. They believe the earth appeared after a 'Big Bang', and that mankind slowly evolved from the apes long after this. Yes, even Christians believe such things, or some 'Christianised form' of the theory of evolution. These NT believers did not believe such a theory; and No! it was not that they did not know about it, it was that they believed the word of God. William Carey said, 'expect great things from God, attempt great things for God'. Do you expect great things from God? Many don't because their God is too small. They do not believe God is the all-powerful creator of all things. They do not believe he is sovereign over all his creation, including men and women made in his image.

The second thing they acknowledged about the sovereign God is that he has spoken. In a somewhat difficult Greek phrase, they say that through the mouth of David, God's servant and our father, the Holy Spirit spoke. They quote words from Psalm 2. Peter would later write that men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2Peter 1:21). 'In the past God spoke by the prophets; in the last days he has spoken by his Son' (Heb 1:1-2). These believers believed this Psalm of David, and all Scripture, to be God-breathed or inspired by God.

They quoted Scripture to God in prayer. Prayer is communication; two-way communication. These verses from Psalm 2 are God speaking to us. These believers had not yet made their request. They were establishing the basis for making a request, a request that goes beyond all human possibility. To expect great things from God we must believe he is sovereign, 'able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we can ask or think' (Eph 3:20). We understand that God is sovereign from reading the Bible.

Psalm 2 is a messianic Psalm. It speaks of the 'Lord's anointed' (in Hebrew= Messiah), and the Lord's Son, words spoken from heaven at the baptism of Jesus. He is more than an earthly king because his throne is in Zion and he rules all the nations. These believers understood this Psalm as messianic and as referring to Jesus of Nazareth. They draw clear parallels between what is said in this Psalm and what happened to Jesus. The Psalmist speaks of nations or Gentiles, and of people, of kings, and of rulers, all raging, plotting, and standing against the Lord and his Messiah/Christ. Those who oppose the holy servant of God are opposing God.

The kings and rulers who met together included Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate, respectively. These two men hated each other but joined together in opposing Jesus (Luke 23:12). Gentiles joined with the people of Israel, Romans joined with Jews, to crucify the anointed of God. Even today

people or groups who hate each other will unite in opposing Jesus. Hindu and Muslim hate each other but they will unite against Christians. In our society we find people from the left and right of politics opposing Biblical teaching. Sometimes church people join with atheists in opposing the truth of the Bible.

Jesus faced great opposition. No one stood with him against fierce and concerted opposition. But Jesus prevailed. Yes, he was killed and buried, but he rose from the dead in victory. As the rest of Psalm 2 declares, 'He who sits in heaven laughs' at man's foolish impotence. This Psalm reminded them that God is sovereign. His sovereignty was not compromised when Jesus was crucified. It was God's sovereign purpose, since the very beginning, to deal with sin in this way- the only way. Those who killed Jesus did, 'whatever your (God's) hand and your purpose determined before to be done' (4:28).

Just because it was God's plan for Jesus to die on the cross does not mean those who killed him are exonerated. They acted unjustly, with 'lawless hands' (2:23). Because of their treachery, the wrath of God was upon them. The truth of this prayer is summed up in the words of the Shorter Catechism Q7: 'The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath fore-ordained whatsoever comes to pass'.

2. Supplication

Having reminded themselves of God's power in creation, and of his revealed word and its fulfilment in Jesus, they make their request. They do not ask the Lord to deliver them from persecution, or to bring down those opposing them. Their focus is on obeying the command given them by Jesus. 'Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to your servants that with all boldness they may speak your word' (4:29). They prayed for boldness to preach the gospel despite opposition. God would deal with those who persecuted them - that is his business. Their task was to preach the gospel, not just in Jerusalem, but in Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth (1:8).

The apostles had been given a huge task- to preach the gospel to the end of the earth. In the power of the Holy Spirit they had taken a stand for the truth within the council of the Jews. That was one battle won; but as the saying goes, one battle does not win the war. They would face many battles, but they would do so in the strength of the Lord. We are still in the same war. If you are a servant of God you have been called to make the name of Jesus known in all the earth. Are you praying for strength and boldness to do this- or have you already given up?

Peter and John preached the gospel after healing a cripple in the name of Jesus. God gave the apostles power to perform signs and wonders as part of their ministry (2:43). They prayed that God would continue to stretch out his hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of Jesus (4:30). Such works would authenticate the word which they preached. The gospels had not yet been written. There was no NT. They preached Christ from the OT, and, like Jesus himself, they 'proved' their message by miracles. Some twenty five years later the apostle Paul would write, 'Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God', with no mention of miraculous signs (Rom 10:17). In the last letter Paul wrote, he instructed Timothy to, 'Preach the word!' (2Tim 4:2), with no mention of signs and wonders that are prayed for in this prayer shortly after Pentecost. Larkin writes of verse 30, 'When we realise that this statement is not a request but an assumption of what God can do, we are freed from both the presumption and subsequent anxiety which come with

demanding the miraculous from God'. Daniel's friends knew God could save them from the fiery furnace but they dared not demand this of God.

3. Shaken

Their prayer was no long. They raised their voice to the sovereign Lord of creation, of revelation, and of history. They made their request, not for personal security or comfort, but for God to be gloried through their preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Having called upon the Lord, they received an immediate and remarkable answer. 'And when they prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken' (4:31). Was this an earthquake? Just a couple of months before, an earthquake shook Jerusalem as Jesus cried out from the cross (Mat 27:51).

Furthermore, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, as at Pentecost. This time they did not speak in tongues but 'spoke the word of God with boldness' (4:31). They had all been given the Holy Spirit at Pentecost or when they believed (2:38). What occurred after this prayer was a fresh filling of the Spirit, not a fresh baptism?

Do you come to the Sovereign Lord in prayer as these believers did in the early church? Do you acknowledge God as the almighty creator and ruler over all? Do you pray, 'not my will but yours be done'? Do you come away from prayer with your faith and commitment to the Lord stronger than before?

All things in common

Acts 4:32-37

Down in Egypt the people of God were slaves. They were subject to Egyptian rulers. When the Lord brought them out of Egypt they were no longer subject to the law of Egypt. They became a nation under God, a nation like no other, a holy nation whose ruler was God. God made a covenant with his people and gave them laws, for both their individual and corporate life.

In any society people will fall upon hard times. The question then arises of how a society cares for its poor. As far as Israel was concerned, the Lord said, 'There shall be not poor among you' (Deut 15:4). In the Mosaic Law code were laws regarding the release of slaves every seven years, and the return of land to the original owner every fifty years – not that these laws were obeyed. Like all people, the children of Israel were sinful, hardhearted and selfish.

These laws were still on the books in the time of Jesus. Jesus came to fulfil the law, not to cancel it. Laws like the ceremonial laws were fulfilled in Jesus so no longer apply, but the moral law remains. 'There shall be no poor among you' remains. Jesus told about a rich man living in a big house and a beggar who sat at his gate, hoping to get a few crumbs to eat (Luke 16:19f). The rich man who ignored this beggar went to hell when he died. This is serious; this is scary! Jesus indicates that we ignore the poor at our peril!

At Pentecost three thousand souls believed in Jesus and were baptised. They met together for prayer and teaching, and for common meals. As Jews, their background was in the Law of Moses. The apostles also taught the people what Jesus had taught them, if they had not heard Jesus first hand. These believers formed a new community, a new Israel, a church under the headship of Jesus Christ. All shared the same faith in Jesus, in one baptism and in the Lord's Supper. This sharing, this '*koinonia*', this community, went beyond the spiritual to the physical. 'All the believers were together and had all things in common' (2:44).

The selling of possessions and bringing of the proceeds to the apostles began at Pentecost (2:25). Luke gives us another insight into this aspect of church life after Peter and John were arrested for preaching Jesus and the resurrection. They were released, returned to the community and united in prayer. They prayed for boldness to keep on preaching the gospel. This fellowship or church was vital to their ongoing witness in two ways. Firstly, because of its prayers and support, and secondly, because those who believed were added to this fellowship; 'the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved' (2:47).

The church should be the same today. It should be praying for and supporting those who are witnessing Jesus Christ. All in the church should be such witnesses, but some are called to be pastors and teachers and evangelists. The church should be a sharing and caring community, looking after widows and orphans, and making sure there are 'no poor among you'. The church is not meant to be an institution focussed on building committees, school boards and the election of bishops and archbishops.

While this passage is a digression from the ministry of the apostles- see Acts 5:12 where their public ministry resumes- it gives us this insight into the life of the church. It goes on to show Barnabas as an exemplary, positive member of this unified community. In the next passage we see a contrast with a couple of negative members who threaten the integrity and oneness of this community. After

this lengthy introduction let us now look at the oneness of this church, with Barnabas as an exemplary member, and its role in the witness of the apostles.

1. Oneness

All those who believed, a community of over five thousand by this time, 'were of one heart and one soul' (4:32). The Holy Trinity is three persons, and 'these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory' (Shorter Catechism Q6). It is one God and three persons. In the power of the Holy Spirit, the hearts of men and women were changed after they heard the gospel. The Holy Spirit indwells the heart of all believers making for a unity of the Spirit, a oneness of heart and mind.

Married couples are sometimes referred to as soul-mates. In the bonds of love they share all they are and all they have. It is amazing how two people can think the same thoughts. Years ago my wife was in Nepal and I was in India. We were booked to leave on the train for a conference, but she had not returned. What was I to do? I had no way of contacting her- it was before the days of mobile phones or any phones at all in India. I was asking myself what she would be expecting me to do; what would she be thinking. It's much the same nowadays because she never answers her phone!

Oneness in the fellowship of believers cannot approach the oneness of the Trinity, or even the oneness of marriage, but it is good to reflect on such unity. There was oneness of heart and soul/mind in the early church. It was a oneness based in the Holy Spirit. It was a oneness based in a common past, namely sin, and a common purpose, namely to glorify God and enjoy him forever. It was not a oneness based on blood, on language, on skin colour, on gender, on age or on status. Is there any other gathering of people that cuts across all such divisions? When collecting our granddaughter from school, I meet lots of young mums- I don't actually talk to them because we have little in common. But in the church I have a lot in common with other people, even young mums. We share one faith, one Spirit, one Lord, one hope. In this unity of the gospel we care for one another. The grace of God is upon us all (4:33).

'They had all things in common' (4:32). In this first century fellowship, members did not regard any of their possessions as personal property (4:32). 'Wait a minute' you say. 'Are you going to preach communism?' Many scholars get defensive when they come to this passage, especially those from the USA. Even Calvin makes the point that they did not sell all their land- which is fair enough. But let us see where these people were coming from before seeing what they actually did.

Firstly, we have already mentioned the provisions under Mosaic Law for the poor. In Israel all land belonged to God (Lev 25:23). Families were allotted land to farm and feed themselves. Land was a resource, not a commodity to trade. Secondly, there was no welfare system in Israel, at least not like we have in Australia today. Our taxes go towards helping the poor. So before calling this practice in the NT church communism, remember your money is forcibly taken to support the poor, whereas they voluntarily sold their possessions to help those in need.

Thirdly, these people acknowledged the sovereign Lord, the maker of heaven and earth (4:24). Believing that God is sovereign, believing that he is the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17), believing that God supplies all our needs (Phil 4:19), they did not say, 'but if I sell all I have I will have nothing left for myself'. These believers gave themselves to the Lord totally, they gave their bodies (Rom 12:1), their jobs, and their possessions, because Jesus gave himself totally for them.

The NT church believed in the sovereignty of God. They believed what is written in the word of God. God said, 'there should be no poor among you', so they sold land and houses, and brought the proceeds to the apostles, so that 'there was no one among them who lacked' (4:34). The apostles saw to it that the proceeds were 'distributed to each, as anyone had need' (4:35). They gave to those who lacked the basic necessities of life- food, clothes, shelter. Would they have considered flat-screen TVs and smart phones basic necessities? Some might consider such things as basic needs, but is this how the church defines poverty- or the government for that matter? I remember a young man on welfare taking all his money out of the bank to buy the latest mobile phone!

The local church today may have members who are in genuine need. Many churches have a diaconal fund to assist such people. As the church in Jerusalem grew, the apostles delegated the responsibility of helping the poor to deacons, men full of the Holy Spirit and of good reputation. Many of the poor were widows, receiving 'meals on wheels' as it were. There was no widow's pension in those days. At a later time, churches in other cities sent aid to the church in Jerusalem.

Imagine what our society would be like without government welfare. You don't have to imagine; you can just go to Asia or Africa and see firsthand. There are more rich people in India than in Australia, yet there is poverty everywhere. Are people in Australia any different to other people? Are not people intent only on getting richer, with little concern for the genuine poor? The question is, 'is the church any different?' Is our church just like the society we live in, or is it like the NT church described in this passage?

2. Barnabas

Luke goes on to tell of one man who sold land and brought the money and laid it at the apostle's feet (4:36-37). He did not give the proceeds to help a poor family member. This he could rightly have done if someone in his family was in need. The Bible says that anyone who does not provide for his own, especially those of his own household, has denied the faith (1Tim 5:8). Helping the poor went beyond the family to the wider church family. Money was given to the church leaders to distribute as anyone had need. Our giving, beyond our tithe that is, or the giving of the church, can go even wider, but not at the neglect of church members: 'as we have opportunity let us do good to all, especially those of the household of faith' (Gal 6:10).

In all this remember, believers were not compelled to sell anything- unless they consider the Holy Spirit compelling them. They all examined their hearts and their pockets, and sold what they could to help brothers and sisters in need. Some point out that the mother of John Mark still owned a house in Jerusalem (12:12). This was not a political move- there are Christians who think it was. It was not a ban on private ownership, nor was it a 'Moonies-style', sell everything for the end is near.

The apostles gave one believer, a Levite from Cyprus, the name Barnabas, meaning 'son of encouragement' (4:36). As a Levite, he should not have owned a field, but maybe this was in Cyprus or came to him through his wife. How ever he came to have a field is not important; what he did with this field is important. He sold it and brought the money to the apostles. Barnabas is mentioned as an example of what believers in this church were doing in response to the blessing they had received in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the needs of the poor among them. Barnabas was later sent to Antioch where he encouraged the church, and was instrumental in bringing the apostle Paul into this church (11:22f).

3. Witness

You may have noticed we skipped over verse 33, a very important verse. We read here that, 'great grace was upon them all'. All that was going on in this church was because God's grace was upon them all. They were not given rules about selling property. They were not even urged to sell by the apostles. It was because of God's grace that they did these things.

God's grace was upon this church, not just to share and care for one another, but also to witness Jesus to the world. 'With great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus' (4:33). The apostles were members of this church; they were leaders. They were empowered to preach by the Holy Spirit, but also depended on this church which prayed for them and supported them. When they preached the gospel and the Holy Spirit saved souls, these souls were brought into the church, to be built up in their knowledge and love of the Lord Jesus. The church took seriously the commands of Jesus, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.

Ananias and Sapphira

Acts 5:1-11

When the children of Israel came into the wilderness, God gave Moses instructions about life and worship in this new community, this holy nation. A tabernacle was set up as the place of worship, and priests were appointed to conduct worship; Aaron and his four sons were consecrated. Two of his sons, Nadab and Abihu, offered profane fire before the Lord, which the Lord had not commanded. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them and they died. The Lord said, 'By those who come near me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified' (Lev 10:1-3).

When the children of Israel entered Canaan they were told that everything was to be utterly destroyed; gems and precious metals were to be put into the treasury of the Lord. After the battle of Jericho, Achan kept some of the 'devoted things', hiding them in his tent. Achan was found out and stoned to death (Josh 7:25). When David became king of Israel he decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. In doing so, 'Uzzah put out his hand to the Ark of God and took hold of it ...and God struck him there' (2Sam 6:6-7). God's anger was aroused at Nadab and Abihu, at Achan, and at Uzzah. They did not pay due regard to the holiness of God. They did not fear God as they should.

When we come to the NT we read about Jesus, about the grace of God and the forgiveness of sin. We do not expect to see men being struck down because they have made God angry. 'Such things belong to the God of the OT' people say, 'the NT is different'. But then we read of what happened to this married couple in the NT church not long after Pentecost. This story is just as chilling as that of Achan; it has many parallels to that account in Joshua, even to the extent of similar words being used in the LXX and this NT account. How can this be?

The God of the OT is a holy God. Moses took off his shoes as he stood on holy ground. The Ark was holy because it represented God's presence among his people. The God of the NT is the same holy God. It is in the NT that we read, 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God', 'For our God is a consuming fire' (Heb 10:31, 12:29). It is the apostle Paul who writes, 'God is not mocked' (Gal 6:7). God has revealed his love in Jesus Christ, and offers forgiveness because of the cross, but this does not mean God had changed. God does not change. God is still holy. God is still to be feared.

1. Grace upon all

When Peter preached the gospel of Jesus Christ at Pentecost the people were cut to the heart. Thousands confessed their sin and were baptised. They came together to be taught by the apostles, to pray and break bread. In the unity of the Holy Spirit they 'had all things in common' (2:44). Under the great grace of God, and the wonderful unity of the Spirit, they shared and cared for one another. Those who owned land and houses sold them and brought the proceeds to the apostles for distribution among the needy in the fellowship.

A paragraph heading in my Bible says, 'a vital church grows'. This infant church was growing rapidly. It was having an impact on the lives of many, both inside and outside the community. This church was vital. It was central to the witness of the gospel (4:33). It was essential that this church maintain both unity and integrity. It was already under external attack from the Jewish leaders who hated Jesus. It was about to come under internal attack from the unseen but active and powerful enemy of God's people, namely Satan.

Luke put forward Barnabas as an example of a church member who sold land and brought the money to the apostles (4:37). He was not compelled to do this; he was not even told to do this. It was purely voluntary. It was an outward expression of love for God and love for one another. This love expressed itself in each one freely giving what they could towards the needs of others in the fellowship of God's people.

2. God not mocked

'But a certain man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a possession' (5:1). This couple stand in contrast to Barnabas, 'son of encouragement'. Ananias means, 'the Lord is gracious' and Sapphira means, 'beautiful', names not as appropriate as that of Barnabas- and not often given to children today! This couple are contrasted to Barnabas because although they sold their land they colluded to keep part of the sale money for themselves. They 'kept back part of the proceeds' (5:2).

Achan took some of the devoted things from Jericho. 'Why should this stuff be burned?' he thought. Covetousness overcame Achan as he kept some silver and gold, and hid it in his tent. If he had waited he could have openly taken plunder from later battles (Josh 11:14). But he could not wait. He could not trust the Lord to supply his needs -or was it greed? Failing to trust the Lord, he decided to help himself. In helping himself he turned to secrecy and deceit. He did not have Psalm 19 to sing, but Ananias and Sapphira did: 'Cleanse me from secret sins' (Ps 19:12). This Psalm concludes: 'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer'.

What were Ananias and Sapphira thinking when they kept part of the money? Did they worry that they might be left short? If so, they could have openly kept some and given the rest to the apostles. Peter told Ananias it was his money to do with as he pleased (5:4). But Ananias came with the money, supposedly the proceeds of the sale of his land, and gave it to the apostles (5:2). It seems he made out his gift was all the money from the sale. If not actually saying this, he was pretending that it was the total money from the sale. Why? Why was he trying to deceive Peter or anyone about this? Even if they could not trust God to supply their needs they did not have to hide this matter. Was Ananias afraid of not being seen as a generous man like Barnabas? Was it pride that led him to this deception?

Satan loves to play with our pride. Pride is part of our sinful nature. Pride leads men and women to exalt themselves, not only over other people but over God. It is the opposite of a fear of God. 'Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall' (Prov 16:18). 'Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought' warns the apostle Paul in Romans 12. Whatever the reason for Ananias trying to deceive Peter and the church it was, like all sin, against God. 'You have not lied to men but to God' said Peter (5:4).

You might be asking how Peter knew about this secret of Ananias and Sapphira. When Ananias came to Peter, Peter confronted him saying, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?' How did Peter know that they had sold the land for more? Was it by Spirit-empowered insight, by reading Ananias' face, or from hearsay? Ananias must have sold the land to someone, so another person besides his wife knew the sale price. These days such information would be all over the internet in minutes. The so-called 'grapevine' was quite effective in small communities. We are not told how Peter knew, but he knew.

It was folly to think that such a matter could be kept secret within this community, and utter foolishness to try and keep it from God.

Sin against God, which is all sin, will be judged by God unless we repent. God determines what that judgment will be- he has told us in the Bible; 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom 6:23). God also determines when his judgment will be carried out. Judgment cannot be avoided, but God in his mercy may delay it. God examines each person's heart before judgment; his judgment is just. Telling lies or trying to deceive is a sin, a serious sin when you are lying to God. With Ananias, God's judgment was immediate. 'Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last' (5:5). Ananias suddenly expired; 'the Greek word being used primarily in accounts of death as a result of divine judgment' writes Larkin. Young men came and took his dead body, wrapped it up and gave him a dishonourable burial. Scholars find it hard to accept that his wife was not informed (5:7). In a hot climate burial cannot be delayed, but in this case the haste and lack of mourning was probably on account of it being a divine judgment.

Sapphira, the wife of Ananias, came looking for her husband, wondering why he was delayed. Three hours had passed since he went to the apostles with the money (5:7). Peter confronted her about the gift her husband brought: 'Tell me whether you sold the land for so much' (5:8). The sum is not indicated but presumably it was the sale price minus what they had embezzled. 'Yes', she answered. She was unaware that her husband had been struck down for lying. She had agreed to the lie and persisted with the lie when confronted by Peter.

Some readers get concerned that Ananias was not encouraged or given opportunity to repent. Peter did not pronounce the death sentence on Ananias, the Lord did. Peter might have been as surprised as anyone at the sudden death. Seeing this judgment of God, Peter sat in judgment on Sapphira. He gave her opportunity to tell the truth, but there was no repentance. Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?' (5:9). She was guilty of the same sin as her husband. She would suffer the same punishment. Peter told her the young men who had just buried her husband stood ready to bury her. She immediately dropped dead. Whether or not she died from the shock of this news is not important. It was divine judgment- she fell down at the feet of Peter and breathed her last, exactly the same words as used to describe the death of her husband just three hours before.

3. Great fear

What a chilling story! Remember, this is not the OT; this did not happen in some previous, primitive religious regime. This is the post- Pentecost church, the church that continues to this day. Moreover, this was not a church carrying out its own judicial executions; it was God who took the life of these two sinners, sinners in the church. Not that the church had no role in the discipline of these members who were mocking God, and threatening the unity of the church. The apostle Peter exposed this husband and wife deception. In some churches it is not just husband and wife but children and other relatives who sometimes conspire to threaten the unity of the church. Peter later condemned Simon the sorcerer. The apostle Paul told the church in Corinth to deliver to Satan, for destruction of the flesh, an unrepentant immoral man (1Cor 5:5).

What would have happened in the church if Ananias and Sapphira had been allowed to continue with their deception? 'When the deception became known, not only would dishonesty appear profitable, but the conclusion that the Spirit could be deceived would follow. It was important to

set the course properly at the outset in order to leave no doubt that God will not tolerate such hypocrisy and deceit' (NIV study notes).

The church is the body of Christ. How can this body mock its head, or any person in the Godhead, with impunity? Yet this occurs all too often. Men and women in the church mock Christ by their words and actions, and by their blatant disregard for the words of Holy Scripture. What do we say about a church that promotes homosexuality? What do we say about a church whose head is called the Vicar of Christ, and this head announces next year as a year of mercy. What mockery to say that if you repent between such and such dates you will be forgiven by God!

When Ananias dropped dead in front of Peter, great fear came upon all who heard about it (5:5). Then his wife dropped dead. Great fear came upon all the church and those outside also (5:11). Luke calls this fellowship the 'church' (Greek =*ekklesia*) for the first time. The fear of God flooded the hearts of all believers. No one else dared join them (5:13). No one was in the church under false pretences- for profit, for prestige or for power. Those in the church examined their hearts and lives to see if they, like this couple, were harbouring secret sins. They prayed, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart today... and see if there is any wicked way in me' (Ps 139:23-24). Should we not be praying this same prayer?

Marks of the church: faith and fear

Acts 5:12-16

What is a church? For many it is an institution; an institution for the administration of religious rituals, especially the sacraments. Through these rituals people think their sins will be forgiven and they will be saved. For others the church is an institution for social welfare. For still others the church is a place for fun and entertainment. The word 'church' translates the Greek '*ekklesia*' which simply means 'congregation' or 'assembly'. Luke calls this gathering of believers in Jerusalem the church when telling about the great fear that came upon everyone after the sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (5:11). But the NT church began back at Pentecost; the congregation of God's people existed in the OT so this church is in a sense the continuation of the OT 'church'. At Pentecost, people who believed in Jesus and repented were baptised and assembled together. They came together to hear the apostles teaching and to pray, to fellowship and to partake of the sacraments. There was no formal structure at this stage. The apostles, men who had been with Jesus and witnessed the resurrection, were leading this church.

As Luke writes of the growth of the church he focusses on two things, its life and its witness. They were all with one accord in one place when the Holy Spirit came upon them. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter preached the gospel and gave witness to Jesus, as commanded by Jesus (1:8). Three thousand believed and joined the church. In the church they were taught and they prayed, they shared their possessions and cared for one another. Through a miraculous healing, Peter and John gave further witness to Jesus on Solomon's porch, and the church grew to five thousand men.

The church faced opposition from the authorities, but they prayed for strength to continue witnessing through signs and wonders done in the name of Jesus. The church enjoyed great grace (4:33). Their love for God was reflected in a love for people- rather than love for possessions and property. People worshipping God and loving one another made the church a threat to Satan and his kingdom. Satan's kingdom was dealt its death blow in the resurrection, but Satan kept up the fight against Jesus and his followers, now the church of Jesus Christ. He attacked the church from without and within. An attack from within was thwarted with the severe discipline and sudden death of Ananias and his wife. Great fear came upon all in the church and all who heard these things (5:11).

1. Solomon's porch

Two members of the church who tried to deceive the leaders, and indeed lied to God, were struck down by God. This shocked everyone in the church. The fear of God came upon each and every one in the church. Did anyone leave? Yes and no. Those who truly believed continued. They continued meeting with one accord in Solomon's porch. But those who were loosely associated with church, those pretending to believe, or those who were there to find fault, no longer joined them. 'The rest' who 'dared not join them' were probably these unbelievers, not necessarily the Jewish rulers (5:13). 'Unbelievers kept away from the Christians and left them alone' writes Marshall.

What do we see as we look at the church today? Do we see a church that instils fear into the hearts of those outside the church? If not, why not? Is the opposition greater today that it was in this NT church? Is it that the signs and wonders ministry of this church made people fear God? No. It was the discipline, the refusal to accept lies and immorality that made outsiders respect the church. They saw the church as a community upholding high standards of honesty, integrity and morality.

People do not respect a church in which ‘anything goes’, a church in which everyone does what he or she likes. They already belong to a society like this- to gatherings in which everyone does what they like and look out for their own interests. The NT church was a gathering in which people looked to the interests of others, and above all to the interests of Jesus Christ- at least at this early stage, except for Ananias and his wife (cf. Phil 2:4,21).

While no one dared join them, the people esteemed them highly and believers were increasingly added to the Lord (5:13, 14). How do we explain this apparent paradox: No one dared join them but more and more believed and were added to the church? We understand that it was the Lord who added to the church as the Holy Spirit touched hearts through the preached word (2:47). But it was also that, although outsiders were fearful of joining, they at the same time esteemed the church highly. A church practising love and discipline is both respected by and attractive to unbelievers. It is a bit like a family. Love and discipline make a family attractive. Children look for both. Where there is no discipline the children become delinquents. Where there is no love the children do not learn how the love. Children from a family of love and discipline will impact the world for good, just as the NT church was impacting Jerusalem for good.

2. Sick healed

Before we look at the ongoing witness of the church, we will note how the prayer of chapter 4:29-30 was answered. We can connect verse 12 back to that passage. The church asked the sovereign Lord to stretch out his hand to heal as they preached the gospel. ‘Through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done’ (5:12). People brought their sick to the apostles that they might be healed. Peter and John had already healed a cripple at the temple in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. In the context of the sending of the Holy Spirit, Jesus told them that, ‘he who believes will do greater works than him’ (John 14:12). These miracles validated the apostle’s message. They were a tangible demonstration of God’s power and authority upon their preaching, an authority which the Jewish rulers could not answer.

People carried the sick into the streets on their beds, hoping that at least the shadow of Peter might fall on them as he passed by (5:15). What are we to make of this? Some say that in the ancient world people had the idea that shadows had magical powers, both good and bad. But what do we glean from the rest of Scripture? People had the idea that by touching Jesus or his dress they would be healed- and they were. Luke do not say that Peter’s shadow actually healed anyone, but he does say that through handkerchiefs brought from Paul sick people were healed and unclean spirits exorcised (19:12). Luke called these extraordinary or unusual miracles by the hand of Paul (19:11).

Clearly, these were extraordinary times. Satan was out with his big guns, as it were, but in the power of the Holy Spirit the apostles were ready. They asked for signs and wonders to be done in the name of Jesus and they were. In considering a signs and wonders ministry today we need to ask if we are living in extraordinary times. We need to remember how these signs and wonders were for the authentication of the gospel, not for the needs of people in the church. Such needs are addressed in James 5:13f.

3. Surrounding cities

Jesus commanded his apostles to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (1:8). This is the broad template for the book of Acts- the taking of the gospel in to all the world, resulting in the growth of the church. The church would include men and women from

all nations or all people groups. Note in verse 14 the first mention of women among those joining the church- not that women were excluded up till this point in time. There were women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the group praying prior to Pentecost. The ministry of the apostles, accompanied as it was with healing the sick and casting out demons, extended into towns and villages outside Jerusalem- that is in Judea. They did not exactly go as witnesses into all Judea (cf.1:8), but this was a beginning. The people of Judea brought sick people and those tormented by unclean spirits. They came in great number, and all were healed (5:16).

Under the Old Covenant, Israel was to be a light to the nations. As the apple of God's eye (Zech 2:8) they were to be feared by other nations, but at the same time attractive to other nations because of their holiness. This rarely happened, although the Queen of Sheba came to King Solomon seeking wisdom. Scholars refer to this as centripetal mission, in contrast to centrifugal mission. The Great Commission is to go into all the world and preach the gospel, but sometimes God brings unbelievers into our country. We can be witnesses of Jesus Christ in our own backyard!

A mission strategy like this must be seriously considered today. Unbelievers are entering Europe in droves; thousands are coming to our country. What a great opportunity we have to reach people from other nations with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must pray and be active, both individually and through our church. Look out for refugees or immigrants in your workplace or at your school. Think about how we as a church can reach them with the gospel.

The church in Jerusalem was not yet reaching out to Gentiles; this came when Peter was convicted by God in a vision to go and preach the gospel in the house of Cornelius. The church today is post-Pentecost and post the book of Acts. It is a church in which Jew and Gentile come together as one in Jesus Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). The glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, this good news of salvation from sin and the gift of eternal life, is for everyone in our neighbourhood no matter their language or colour, their religion, their fame or their infamy.

4. Sadducees

The great fear that came upon all in the church and all who heard how Ananias and Sapphira were suddenly struck down by God, did not extend to the Jewish rulers. The high priest and his sect of Sadducees continued to harass the apostles (5:17). They arrested Peter and John after healing the cripple in the temple but had to let them go with a warning. The apostles could not stop preaching the gospel; they prayed for boldness to keep on preaching. Further opposition and persecution was expected, and soon came.

When Jesus commanded them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem and to the end of the earth he did not promise them an easy task. The command to preach the gospel to all nations remains today. It remains for every follower of Christ. There is no promise that it will be an easy task, and no promise of success. The promise of Jesus is that he will be with us; 'lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (Mat 28:20). The task of mission is undertaken with the authority of Jesus, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. We need to learn from the apostles and the early church about the necessity and priority of witnessing Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, and the coming judgment, to the lost of our day. Let us be doing good to all; let us witness Jesus Christ in word and in deed. We have a church which they can join, so pray and invite them to come. May the Lord be pleased to add to this church those who are being saved?

Apostles in jail again

Acts 5:17-32

In our recent distribution of tracts a fellow came out of his house, looked at the tract, and started screaming me as I walked down the road. What experiences did you have in this ministry? What other experiences have you had when telling people about Jesus? Do people tell you to keep your religion to yourself, or do they just walk away? In some countries preaching the gospel, or even giving someone Bible, is against the law. Many believers are in prison today for breaking such laws.

The apostles knew the cost of telling people about Jesus. Peter and John spent a night in jail after healing a cripple in the name of Jesus. When released, they kept on preaching the gospel because, 'there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (4:12). Do you believe this profound truth! People must hear the name of Jesus if they are to be saved from the fires of hell. Moreover, do you understand that you may be the person the Lord is sending to tell a certain person? Sitting on a bus or train India, this solemn thought would enter my mind; if I do not speak about Jesus the person next to me may never hear this name. With such thoughts I prayed and offered the fellow passenger, or two, a tract or gospel portion. Dear friend, it is getting to be like this in our so-called Christian country.

1. Bound in prison

After Peter and John were released with a warning not to speak again in the name of Jesus, they joined the fellowship in praying for boldness to do this very thing. They had been commanded by the risen Jesus to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth (1:8). As they did this, the church grew and the Jewish authorities got jealous (5:17- in the NKJV we have 'they were filled with indignation'). They were indignant, indeed furious, that their traditions were being trashed by these men claiming that Jesus, whom they had crucified, was the Messiah or Christ of God. These Jews were zealous but their zeal was without knowledge (Rom 10:2; it 'devolved into jealousy' writes Larkin).

Still today we see zeal for the things of God degenerating in personal jealousy and vendettas. Larkin makes the comment that zeal not grounded in truth but mixed with pride, 'can easily become personal jealousy masquerading as piety'. He goes on, 'Such misguided zeal can do great harm to those who are the real messengers of God's truth'. Recently I was forwarded an email highlighting how new versions of the Bible had departed from the KJV but there was no reference at all to the Greek text; zeal without knowledge?

In their fiery, misguided zeal, the High Priest, either Annas or Caiaphas, and all his mates among the Sadducees, grabbed the apostles and locked them up. This time all the apostles were arrested, not just Peter and John. The Sadducees controlled the Sanhedrin or Jewish Council, with the Pharisees being in a minority. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, another reason for them to hate the apostles, who were telling everyone that Jesus was risen from the dead.

The apostles did not spend the whole night in jail. At some time during the night, 'an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out' (5:19). The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection or in angels. They were like liberal theologians of our own day who think that this escape was an inside job by a disaffected member, or even Christian sympathiser, of the prison guard. But Luke's credibility as a historian cannot be so easily dismissed. When he writes, 'an angel

of the Lord opened the prison doors' we accept it. Angels are messengers of God; they are found throughout Scripture.

God sends angels to do his will and speak his words. After opening the prison doors, this angel of the Lord told the apostles to go and stand in the temple and tell the people 'all the words of this life' (5:20). It becomes apparent that the doors of the prison were still locked in the morning and no one knew the apostles were missing. When the High Priest convened the Sanhedrin the next morning they sent officers to bring the prisoners. These officers found the prison doors bolted and the guards on duty as expected, but when they opened the doors no prisoners were found (5:23).

The High Priest, captain of the temple and chief priests were surprised to say the least. They wondered what could have happened and what the outcome would be (5:24). Not for a moment did they consider divine intervention, although Pharisees like Gamaliel may have done so. The High Priest and captain of the temple were focused on who was to blame and where the apostles had gone to hide. It is hard to read this passage without a smile, which was probably shared by Luke as he wrote the account. As the proverb says, man proposes but God disposes.

2. Boldly preaching Jesus

The Jewish leaders did not have to search very far to find the apostles. Still perplexed about their escape, and wondering what they should do, someone came and informed their meeting that the apostles were in the temple teaching the people (5:25). It was as if nothing had happened to them. Threats and imprisonment did not deter them from preaching Jesus as the Christ. The angel of the Lord who opened the prison doors told them to go to the temple and speak 'all the words of this life'; this they did without delay. They did not stop to consider the danger of doing this. They knew they would be arrested again, but kept on preaching anyway.

The apostles were speaking 'all the words this life'; an interesting yet wonderfully illuminating way of describing the gospel. This is how the angel of the Lord described the gospel. The gospel of Jesus is about 'this life', this life including eternal life. 'This phrase captures the truth that by God's Word the blessed life in covenant relationship is now appropriated, and that beyond death there is life in which God's salvation will be fully known forever' (Larkin). Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life'. If you want to live a life worth living, both in this world and the next, then Jesus is the name you need to hear and hold onto 'for dear life'.

The apostles were locked up for preaching the gospel, but the very day they got out of prison they were back preaching Jesus. How could they be so bold? Are we simply to admire them, saying they were special men of God? They were special, but so are you who believe, because you have been given the same Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit that made them bold. Every believer is called to be a bold witness for Jesus Christ, declaring the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light. If you truly know what the angel meant by 'the words of this life' you will be sharing this good news with those around you.

What we learn from the apostles is not that they were 'super' men but that they believed what God said. Jesus had told them that when they were brought before authorities the Holy Spirit would give them words to say (Luke 12:11-12). The risen Jesus told them, 'Lo, I am with you, even to the end of the age'. If we focus on these promises, as we hear the command to go into all the world and preach the gospel, we will not be silenced by threats and violence from mere men.

3. Before the council

The High Priest and his henchmen were bewildered or perplexed about the apostle's escape, and even more perplexed when told that they were back preaching in the temple. They had to do something to save face and stop these men teaching every one about Jesus. The captain went with his officers to re-arrest them. They had to be careful not to cause a riot. There was a danger that the people listening to the apostles might turn on these officers and stone them (5:26). Volatile crowds can be dangerous, as some visitors to India have discovered; one well-meaning tourist was killed when he tried to stop a public dispute. To the captain's relief, the apostles came quietly- just as Jesus did when he was arrested. They entrusted themselves into the hands of God (1Peter 2:23). You can do the same when you are doing his will and when you are telling people about Jesus.

Again they stood before the Jewish council to be questioned. 'Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name?' (5:28). Note how they avoid mentioning the name 'Jesus'. They hated to hear this name and refused to utter it. The apostles, on the other hand, could not stop praising and preaching the name Jesus. The High Priest accused the apostles of 'filling Jerusalem' with their teaching, with the intention of making them guilty of Jesus' blood (5:28). Were they meant to feel sorry for these men who murdered Jesus? Recall, if you will, that these men said to Pilate at the trial of Jesus just weeks before, 'His blood be on us and on our children' (Mat 27:25). 'He who digs a pit will fall into it' (Prov 26:27).

It was not the apostle's intention to bring the blood of Jesus on their heads. They intended to make them feel guilty, yes, but that in their guilt they might repent and be forgiven. But these hard-hearted men thought only of their position and power in society. They could not repent while ever they were filled with pride. Their method of dealing with guilt was to destroy the person who made them feel guilty rather than confess and be forgiven. Is this the way you deal with guilt? Do you run away rather than confess?

Answering the High Priest on behalf of the apostles, Peter boldly declared, 'We ought to obey God rather than men' (5:29). This was the same answer he gave when previously arrested (4:19). When the commands or laws of men conflict with the laws of God, the laws of God always take priority. John Stott writes, 'If the authority concerned misuses its God-given power to command what he forbids or forbid what he commands, then the Christian's duty is to disobey the human authority in order to obey God's'. It may be laws about preaching the gospel, laws about abortion, or laws about divorce. Just because we escape the judgment of men does not mean we will escape the judgment of God. At the same time, we must not take this truth out of context in attempting to avoid prosecution by the state for breaking valid laws of the state.

Peter continued answering the High Priest saying, 'the God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree' (5:30). Peter believed in the God of the OT. It was this God who sent Jesus into this world. While it is possible to interpret 'raised up' as a reference to the resurrection, as in the NIV, which adds the words 'from the dead', it is best to understand this as the incarnation, as Jesus entering the stage of human history (Bruce, Larkin). This Jesus whom God raised up was taken by this High Priest and his fellow Jews and 'murdered by hanging on a tree' (5:30). In the Bible, 'cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' (Gal 3:13).

But this was not the end of Jesus that they had planned. God exalted Jesus to 'his right hand to be Prince and Saviour' or Leader and Saviour (5:31). The exaltation of Jesus presupposes his resurrection. The risen and exalted Jesus is the first one, the pioneer, the firstborn from the dead. Through his death and resurrection he has opened the way for Israel and all to be saved. He offers life or salvation, and he does so freely. He gives repentance and forgiveness of sins. Salvation cannot be earned; it is the gift of God. Those who repent will be forgiven because of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Peter concludes by emphasising two things; firstly, he tells these Jewish leaders once again that he and his fellow apostles were witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. They had seen him alive after he was buried. They had seen him taken up into heaven (5:32, 4:20). Secondly, there was the witness of the Holy Spirit. It was in the power of the Holy Spirit that they performed signs and wonders, but most notably it was the indwelling Holy Spirit that gave them the boldness to preach the gospel, as these men had previously noted (4:13).

May we be more aware of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives; he is given to all who truly believe and obey Jesus. The reason the Lord gives us the Holy Spirit is that we might be bold witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and what this means for every living human being. It means we do not have to go searching in outer space or in our DNA to discover what life is. Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. The angel of the Lord told the apostles to tell the people 'all the words of this life'. This is what the name Jesus means; abundant and eternal life to all who repent and believe in him.

Gamaliel's advice

Acts 5:33-42

'Who knows whether you have come to this kingdom for such a time as this?' Who spoke these words and to whom were they spoken? Why were they spoken? The Jews were in grave danger of being wiped out because Haman, who hated the Jews, had persuaded the king to issue an order for all Jews to be killed. Mordecai spoke these words to Esther, who had become queen in the Persian Empire. Believing in the providence of God, Mordecai reckoned that God had made Esther queen for this very purpose- to save the Jews. The providence of God is explained in the Shorter Catechism Q11: 'God's works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions'- note, it is all God's creatures not just all who believe in God.

The apostles, and all believers, were hated by the leaders of the Jews. They hated Jesus and now they hated his followers. These leaders were powerful men. They had murdered Jesus, but the apostles were now proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. They had already arrested the apostles and ordered them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus (4:18). The apostles refused to comply with this order saying, 'we must obey God rather than men' (5:29). This made the High Priest and his fellow Sadducees furious. They were so furious that they wanted to kill them (5:33). Not so long before this they got enraged with Jesus (Luke 6:11) and killed him.

The Sadducees were not interested in listening to the apostles, who were telling them for the second time that the man they crucified was the Messiah of God and was risen from the dead. Peter told them about forgiveness and salvation in the name of Jesus. But they were not really listening. They were not ready to examine and debate the facts. 'They resorted to naked authority and force' as Boice says. They were wary of the crowd that was listening to the apostles teaching, but in their rage they could overcome this obstacle; they did it with Jesus. What charge would they bring against the apostles, if such a thing mattered? The apostles had disobeyed the council's order; but was this a capital offence? Why didn't the Jews go through with their plan to kill the apostles? Who, or what, made them change their mind?

1. Reason prevails

'Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people' (5:34). Who would have thought that a Pharisee would come to the defence of the disciples of Jesus? Was it God who moved this Pharisee to speak up at this time? Was he, like Esther, the one God had put here for this very purpose? We know others in the Sanhedrin became secret disciples of Jesus, (Nicodemus and Joseph), but we do not know about Gamaliel. He was a learned and pious man, the head of the famous school of Hillel, a moderate group among the Pharisees. The Pharisees were in a minority in the Sanhedrin but they were influential as teachers and as lawyers - especially this famous lawyer called Gamaliel. They differed from the Sadducees in that they believed in the resurrection and in angels, matters that were pertinent to this trial. The Sadducees were like politicians, lusting after power and raging against any who threatened their power.

As the council debated what to do with the apostles, this respected member rose to his feet to address the meeting. He called for the apostles to be put outside while he spoke- as was the practice (cf.4:15). Gamaliel said, 'Men of Israel, carefully consider what you intend to do to these men' (5:35 NIV). They had begun talking about how they would get rid of these men- in front of them, it would seem. Gamaliel urged caution. Why did he intervene at this time? He had seen and heard what was

happening in the city, the miracles done by the apostles, the crowds listening them and believing in Jesus, and most recently the embarrassing and unexplained escape from jail. Gamaliel may have accepted that Jesus was risen from the dead, in which case the Sanhedrin's effort to crush this movement had failed. He did not want to be part of a fight against God (5:39).

Boice says that Gamaliel should have gone further and called for an examination of the facts, raising the possibility that the apostles were teaching the truth. But he probably knew what we said earlier; the Sadducees were not interested in the truth. Whatever Gamaliel's reason for intervening, we know that God can move men, even unbelievers, to do his will. Isaiah tells us that God moved King Cyrus 'to perform his pleasure' (Isa 44:28).

Gamaliel spoke of a man called Theudas who thought he was someone important; maybe a prophet or messiah of some kind. He got about four hundred men to follow him, but then he was killed, probably by the Romans. His followers then dispersed and the movement he started came to nothing (5:36). We do not know of this man apart from what Gamaliel says. After Theudas another self-styled prophet or messiah came on the scene. Judas the Galilean appeared during the time of the census in AD6. This is the second census recorded in the NT; the first was by Quirinius around 4BC (Luke 2:2). The Romans conducted this census after they took over direct rule of Judea. This census was the basis for a new taxation system, which the Jews hated for both political and religious reasons. Judas of Galilee led many people in a rebellion against the Romans for imposing this tax, but they must have caught him and killed him. Gamaliel says, 'he also perished and all who obeyed him were dispersed' (5:37). Josephus, the Jewish historian, writes about this Judas, saying the movement he started led to the party of the Zealots. Judas was bit like Peter in saying, 'we must obey God rather than men', but his concern was money, not life. Zeal is not always a good thing.

From these two historical accounts Gamaliel showed that movements started by men are bound to fail. Give them enough rope and they will hang themselves, as we say. So the Sanhedrin should not go after the apostles but should let them alone and watch the church die with them. This was worldly wisdom, good as far as it went, or good for the short term. It is not always applicable, and even in this case the leader, who the apostles were proclaiming, was dead- or was he risen from the dead? Sometimes evil movements do prevail and need to be nipped in the bud. But for dealing with the apostles, the advice of Gamaliel made sense, and thankfully was followed.

Gamaliel had a second string to his bow, as we say. He warned that if the movement the apostles were leading was of God, then mere men could not stop it. If they tried they would find themselves fighting against God (5:39). The Sadducees thought men alone directed history while 'the Pharisees affirmed the hand of both human beings and God' (Larkin). But the Sadducees were sufficiently concerned about fighting against God to take Gamaliel's advice seriously and adopt a wait-and-see approach.

It was a close call for the apostles- they were close to being stoned to death. Clearly, the unseen hand of God was upon this meeting of the Sanhedrin. They decided to let the apostles go free, but not before again ordering them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and having them flogged. This would have been the Jewish 'forty lashes minus one'. Although Bruce calls this a 'minor penalty', it sometimes led to death- 'minor' compared to being stoned maybe!

It was some time after this that a pupil of Gamaliel called Saul came on the scene. He took a different approach to his teacher. He joined in a brutal wave of persecution directed at the church, but not the apostles (8:1,3). This led to the second phase of the witness commanded by Jesus, witness to Judea and Samaria (1:8).

2. Rejoice in suffering

The apostles left the council rejoicing despite having been flogged. Their bodies may have been bleeding but their hearts were rejoicing. How amazing! Can you understand this? It seems humanly impossible; indeed it is humanly impossible, but these were men filled with the Holy Spirit. We just mentioned a later wave of persecution. Persecution is a feature of the church down through the ages. Students of history have learnt that persecuting Christians promotes church growth. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. We find the first Christian martyr in chapter 7.

The apostles were rejoicing because 'they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name' (5:41). Suffering for preaching Jesus is to be expected. Jesus said, 'know that it (the world) hated me before it hated you' (John 15:18). They saw their suffering as proof that they were following Jesus and doing what he told them. Suffering for the name of Jesus has the effect of drawing us closer to Christ. Have you noticed this? As believers we rejoice in our salvation and the salvation of others; the other thing we rejoice in is our suffering, in 'the honour of being dishonoured for Jesus' sake', as Larkin writes. What is it that makes your heart rejoice in the Lord?

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, 'blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Mat 5:10). Peter, who was flogged at this council meeting, later wrote to the church, 'rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings' (1Peter 4:13). The apostle Paul was in prison when he wrote, 'I now rejoice in my sufferings for you' (Col 1:24). He also declared that, 'all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution' (2Tim 3:12). We should not be asking why we suffer as Christians, but why we are not suffering persecution for being a Christian. If you are trying to be friends with the world you are not walking as Jesus and his apostles did.

3. Return to witnessing

After their first arrest, trial, and release, Peter and John went back to the fellowship and prayed. They prayed for boldness to speak the word of God. After this second arrest, trial, flogging and release they returned to the task given them by the risen Lord, namely to speak the word of God. An angel of the Lord had encouraged them in this task (5:20). Incarceration and flogging did nothing to deter them from this God-given task.

For the first time we are told that they went from house to house evangelising and teaching, although breaking bread from house to house could be seen to include this (5:42 cf. 2:46). The authorities could do nothing to stop such 'private' ministry. But they continued daily in the temple also (5:42). In the providence of God the authorities left them alone for the present time. They knew that time was short so they were out every day evangelising and teaching Jesus as Christ and Lord.

We do not really think of the apostles tramping the streets and knocking on doors to tell people about Jesus. I wonder if they passed by doors that said, 'No hawkers' or post boxes that said, 'No junk mail'? There is a mission called, 'Every home crusade'. What an enormous task these missionaries have as they attempt to take the gospel to every home in India. One such missionary

told us about walking through slums and finding people behind all manner of doors; the consolation was that in India people open the door and speak politely.

The apostles were not like some popular preachers today who only take the stage when there are hundreds of people to speak to. Sure they spoke to thousands at one time, but they also spoke to a handful of people. Let us not despise the day of small things. Let us remember that every soul is precious to God, be they ninety or nine years of age, be they rich or poor, Jew or Gentile.

The days of preaching in the temple would soon come to an end- the temple was destroyed in AD70. The disciples were scattered even before this time. Paul went and preached in synagogues, and then in halls and houses. He even preached in his prison cell. Let us not think that only in church can we talk about Jesus. We should be inviting people to church but should also be going out to tell the gospel wherever people may be- knocking on doors if necessary.

Seven chosen to serve

Acts 6:1-7

After Pentecost the apostles were twice arrested by the Jewish leaders for preaching Jesus and his resurrection but they refused to comply with their order to stop. A Pharisee called Gamaliel advised the council of the Jews to leave these men alone, and they did. The apostles kept on preaching and the church kept growing. At last count it was five thousand men, but that was some time before this (4:4). Here in chapter 6 we get another update on the growth of the church. Numbers are not given but details in this chapter point to a church in the tens of thousands. It seems, in fact, that there were different congregations based on language differences. With language differences come cultural differences, and also potential misunderstandings.

1. Problem

In Egypt the children of Israel suffered at the hands of their Egyptian masters. In his mercy, the Lord God sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt. They rejoiced when they crossed the Red Sea and finally escaped this oppression. But then what happened? They started complaining to Moses. What did they complain about? At first it was water; later about the leeks and garlic they enjoyed back in Egypt. Nothing gets people complaining like food- and that even in the church. Money comes a close second as a matter for complaint and division. Such trivial matters can lead to huge problems. So are we surprised that in this infant NT church, or now adolescent church, a complaint arose about who was getting the most food? The text says, 'daily distribution', which almost certainly included food (6:1).

The Jews had a system for distributing food to the poor, and even strangers in their community. But when Jews became Christians they were probably excluded from this system. The believers took on the task of caring for the poor in the church. People sold land and houses and brought the proceeds to the apostles so that no one lacked the necessities of life (4:34). Widows were prominent among the needy in the church. The apostles were in charge of the distribution, but as the church grew they could not give this matter the attention required. A complaint arose from one section of the church that their widows were being neglected in this daily distribution.

With great wisdom the apostles listened and dealt with this complaint immediately. Wo- betide the minister or church leader who does not take seriously, and immediately deal with, seemingly trivial complaints. It is often the case that a trivial complaint has deep roots, and this may well have been the case in the Jerusalem church. Not only did they deal with the complaint immediately but they made no attempt to blame anyone, nor did they come down in a heavy-handed way; it was not a matter of doctrine.

The church in Jerusalem comprised only Jews- or proselytes (6:5). But among the Jews were those whose mother tongue was Greek and others whose mother tongue was Aramaic or Hebrew. The apostles came from the latter group. The Hellenists, or Greek speaking Jews, were mostly from the Jewish diaspora. They came back to Jerusalem for festivals, and older folk probably came back to their homeland to retire. Some suggest the Hellenist widows were over represented on the list of widows.

On the southern tip of India is the state of Kerala. It has a higher than average Christian population, and a higher than average literacy rate. People from this state move out to get work and settle all over the world. But when they retire they often move back to their family home, so the average age

of the population in Kerala is much higher than the national average- a bit like Port Macquarie in NSW!

The language difference between the two groups of Jewish converts was accompanied by cultural differences. Those who lived outside Jerusalem lived in a different culture. They would have imbibed this culture to some extent. Although we are all one in Christ, cultural differences exist and have to be accommodated in the church, as can be seen in this case in the NT church.

2. Proposed solution

The apostles are here called 'the twelve' by Luke, not 'the eleven' as in 2:14; he will soon be referring to another group of seven. The apostles summoned all the disciples or believers to deal with this complaint. They told the brethren in this meeting of the congregation to choose seven men from among them, and they would appoint these men over this business (6:3 -the word is 'men' as in 'males'). Why did they delegate this task to others? Why did they get the people to choose these men? What directions did they give in choosing these men? Clearly, we get directions for governing the church today from the way the apostles dealt with this matter- although some only accept these details as guidelines that can be modified by an evolving church.

Why did the apostles not give more of their own time and effort to this business? Is not care for the poor the most important business of the church? In some churches the minister spends more of his time ministering to the poor than he does in ministering the word. Both ministries are important, as the apostles and the church recognised. But the apostles, knowing their limitations and their priorities said, 'it is not desirable that we should leave the word of God to serve tables' (6:2). Again in verse 4 they say they will give themselves to the ministry of the word and prayer. The word for 'minister' in this verse is actually the same Greek word as that translated 'serve' in 'serve tables' (6:2 - *diaconia*). In fact, the word 'distribution' in 'daily distribution' is the same word also.

The apostles were called by Jesus to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (1:8). As this task expanded, and as this complaint came to them, they realised it was time to delegate some responsibility. They did not regard 'serving tables' as any less important; indeed they called for men of the highest spiritual quality to be appointed to this task.

Before we look at these qualifications, we had the question of why they got the people to choose seven men rather than choose them themselves. Surely the twelve could have sat down and prayerfully chosen seven godly men from the congregation. In some churches it is the church hierarchy, the bishops and elders, who choose men to sit in church courts. Indeed, in the past it was the king or queen who did the choosing. But the apostles asked the congregation to choose seven men of good reputation. They prayed but also trusted the congregation to make the right choices. The people were greatly encouraged at being given this responsibility, and at being included rather than excluded from the business of the church. They would have 'owned' these seven, as one commentator said.

What directions did the apostles give to the congregation in choosing seven men to 'serve tables'? Firstly, select men of 'good reputation' (6:3). In the active sense this word (*martureo*) means 'witness'; in the passive, as here, it means reputation. As Paul later wrote to Timothy, he should rule his own house well, he should be known in the church as reverent and faithful, and even have a good reputation among outsiders (1Tim 3:7). But the man must have more than a good reputation.

Secondly, he must be full of the Holy Spirit. Every believer has been given the Holy Spirit, but some quench the Spirit to some extent. They do not walk in the Spirit as they should. The men chosen for this ministry should be spiritual men; yes, even for the ministry of serving tables. They need strength and perseverance for such ministry, and the Holy Spirit is the source of strength. They need wisdom for such ministry, and the Holy Spirit is the source of wisdom. It is not just men with knowledge of administration and leadership, but men with wisdom to go with this knowledge that are required. There is no requirement that these men be able to teach, although we will see two of them become effective evangelists.

We see here a division of responsibilities in the church. These seven men would be entrusted with the administration of funds, particularly in regard to the needy members of the church. The twelve would focus on prayer and ministry of the word. No where do we see one man as the leader- apostles and deacons are both collegiate bodies. Commentators are quick to point out that these seven are not called deacons, but they closely match the sort of men the apostle Paul told Timothy to look out for as deacons.

3. Positive response

The whole congregation was pleased with the apostle's response to the problem, even those making the complaint (6:5). There were no further complaints or other suggestions. They moved to select seven men as proposed. These men were chosen in accordance with the qualifications proposed. There may have been a ballot but this is not stated. Maybe only seven men stepped forward or were nominated. No one suggests this as the basis of the number seven; they suggest that Jewish boards had seven men or that there were seven wards in the municipality.

Those selected have Greek rather than Hebrew names, suggesting they were mostly from the Hellenist group in the church. Stephen and Phillip are the only two that we hear more about. Stephen was, 'a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit' as required (6:5). In the power of the Holy Spirit he led in gospel witness in the Greek speaking synagogue. Phillip became an evangelist in Samaria. Nicolas is described as a proselyte, a Gentile who converted to Judaism, and now to Christ. He was from Antioch, thought to be Luke's home city and also the city from which the third phase of witness in Acts will be launched.

The congregation accepted the apostle's proposal, and now the apostles accept their choice. Respect all round averted a potential crisis. The seven men were brought before the apostles, who prayed for them and laid hands on them (6:6). This is how Moses ordained Joshua (Num 27:23). By laying on hands they were not imparting any spiritual gift, nor were they passing on apostolic authority. They were ordaining these men, setting them apart for this particular ministry in the church- which, despite the protests of scholars, looks very much like the office of a deacon. The church ordains men to an office that they might serve, not for reason of status or power.

4. Priests join the church

The crisis is over and the church returns to its business with renewed vigour; and the blessing of the Lord. The apostles pressed on in prayer and ministry of the word. The congregation listened to their teaching and joined in the prayer. They kept on breaking bread together and fellowshiping in their homes. The seven attended to the needs of the widows, ensuring an equitable distribution of diaconal aid.

The Lord kept adding to the church in Jerusalem (6:7). The witness of the word by the apostles, and the unity and harmony of the church, was such that many of the priests were obedient to the faith. Jerusalem was full of priests who performed their duties in the temple on rotation. We read a lot about the high priest and the chief priests who sat in the Sanhedrin, but there were other regular priests also. They may have been somewhat disaffected by the way the chief priests treated them. That a great many of these priests were, 'obedient to the faith' or believed in Jesus (6:7) marked a significant advance of the gospel within Jerusalem. They entered the church like everyone else, and took their place alongside other members in the church which practiced the priesthood of all believers.

Face of an angel

Acts 6:8-15

Moses was on the mountain with the Lord for forty days while the Lord wrote the words of the covenant on tablets of stone. When he came down the skin on his face shone (Exod 34:29). He had to put a veil on his face when he spoke to the people. As Stephen stood in the council of the Jews, having been charged with blasphemy, his face shone as the face of an angel (6:15). What is the face of an angel like? Angels are messengers of God. The angel Gabriel stood in the presence of God (Luke 1:19). The glory of the Lord shone around the angels in Luke 2:9.

As Stephen stood in the Sanhedrin, seventy pairs of eyes were fixed on him. These eyes saw something 'angelic' in the face of this servant of the Lord. Was his face shining like that of Moses? Was there a serenity or a peace not usually seen in the face of men dragged into this court? What they saw in the face of Stephen indicated that here was a man so close to God that he was reflecting the glory of God. Not that this indication of God's presence stopped them from falsely accusing and condemning Stephen to death by stoning. Just a few weeks before this they had the very Son of God in their court and they condemned him to death, death on the cross.

1. Unable to answer

Stephen was one of seven deacons chosen by the church in Jerusalem to attend to the distribution of diaconal aid to the widows and needy in the church. He is described as 'a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit'. He was ordained by the apostles laying hands on him. Stephen, like the rest of the seven, was from the Greek-speaking section of the church. Stephen undertook his ministry in the grace and power of God. In the power of the Holy Spirit he did great wonders and signs among the people, just like the apostles (6:8, cf.2:43). His fellow deacon, Phillip, also performed miracles of healing and casting our demons (8:6-7).

Stephen's mother tongue was Greek so he attended a Greek speaking synagogue in the city; Saul probably attended the same synagogue since he was from Tarsus, a city in the province of Cilicia (6:9). This 'Synagogue of the Freedmen' as it was called, was attended by Jews from Cyrene and Alexandria in North Africa, as well as Jews from the Roman provinces of Cilicia and Asia, in what is now Turkey. Some suggest that the Jews from these different places each had their own synagogue, but only one is indicated the text, 'the Synagogue of the Freedmen' (6:9). 'Freedmen' were just that; Jews who were once slaves but we now free. The Roman general, Pompey, took many Jews to Rome as prisoners; when later released these men may have ended up in Jerusalem and given the name 'Freedmen' to this synagogue.

Stephen would have attended this synagogue for worship and witness. The apostles gave themselves to the witness of the word, while the seven, including Stephen, ministered on tables. But this did not preclude Stephen from ministering the word. Every believer is to be a witness of Jesus Christ. Stephen got busy preaching Jesus in this synagogue. His preaching led to discussions and disputes with the Jews in this synagogue. They became frustrated because 'they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke (6:10). This reminds us of the Pharisees and Sadducees trying to dispute with Jesus. They failed to land any theological or philosophical blows, so turned to lies and politics to land a physical blow.

Stephen was not yet standing in court, but was in the synagogue disputing the truth of the gospel. This may have taken the form of a somewhat formal debate. In the power of the Holy Spirit, Stephen

spoke with wisdom, wisdom that the Jews could not answer. When Jesus told his disciples about tribulations and persecutions that would come their way he said, 'I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist' (Luke 21:15). Stephen was an example of this promise being fulfilled. The promise is still valid today. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus will give you words to say when men or women rise up to oppose you and the gospel you preach.

Jesus himself came under spiritual attack. In answering the temptations of Satan he quoted Scripture. The Scriptures are the power of God for salvation, and for destroying the devil's arguments. The Spirit reminds us of these words, and gives us the boldness to open our mouths and speak. Too many Christians rely on their own wisdom and human arguments when they get engaged in disputes about the truth of the gospel. Too many Christians start using the language of opponents of the gospel, who are very clever at using words to twist the truth; e.g. 'marriage equality' instead of 'homosexual marriage' and, 'death with dignity' instead of 'assisted suicide', and 'termination of pregnancy' instead of 'abortion of a fetus'. Some theologians are also clever at finding words that allow them to hide the truth of the Bible; e.g. 'The true Jesus is behind the words of the Bible' or, 'system of doctrine' instead of 'doctrine'.

2. Accusation and arrest

Failing to resist the wisdom and Spirit by which Stephen spoke, the Jews in this synagogue turned to underhanded means to silence Stephen. When you have no answer to someone's argument you might stop and reconsider your position. There may have been some in the synagogue who reconsidered their theological position and believed in Jesus, but we are not told about them. We are told about the 'some' (6:9) who, failing to win the argument, 'secretly induced men' to make false accusations against Stephen (6:11). They got these men to say that they had heard Stephen 'speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God (6:11), or against the law and the temple/holy place (6:13). At a later time, blasphemy became the profane use of God's name, as in the third commandment. But at this time, speaking against Moses or the temple was regarded as blasphemy. Jesus was charged with blasphemy when he confessed to being the Christ, the Son of God.

While these charges were false, they must have had some basis in fact. We will understand more of this when we hear Stephen's defence in the Sanhedrin. It is interesting that these charges were similar to those brought against Jesus. Jesus once said, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up' (Jn2:19). John says he was speaking of the temple of his body (Jn 2:21), but the Jews twisted his words to accuse Jesus of saying, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God' (Mat 26:61). Stephen, who now understood the truth of what Jesus said, may have been explaining this to the Jews in the synagogue.

It is also interesting that the apostles, as yet, were not charged with blasphemy. Is it possible that the Hellenist Jews were more fanatical than the Hebrews? It was the Jews from Asia who led in the assault upon Paul when he returned to Jerusalem and went into the temple (21:27). Sometimes men on the fringes of a tradition cling to that tradition more strongly than those at the centre; like British people and Anglo-Indians still living in India.

It is also true that as time passed the believers in the church had to make decisions about the place of the temple in life and worship. Jesus instituted a new covenant, meaning the old one was obsolete

(Heb 8:13). Jesus came to fulfil the law, so much of the law was now obsolete- laws about sacrifices and about food, to name just two categories. Looking at the magnificent temple, Jesus told his disciples that the day was coming when, 'not one stone would be left upon another' (Luke 21:6). Jesus spoke about his body as the temple- he would be bodily resurrected. The church is later referred to as the body of Christ (Eph 1:22-23).

Understanding such things, Stephen may have begun to explain them to the believers, in the hearing of the Jews. He raises these matters before the Jews in the next chapter because it impacted them. He takes the big-picture approach in outlining God's purpose for Jew and Gentile- for the whole world. 'The Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands' he said (7:48). The new community of God's people, the church, is the fulfilment of God's purposes for Jew and Gentile. God's purpose was not that the temple and the church continue side by side.

The second accusation was that Stephen was saying that, 'Jesus of Nazareth will... change customs which Moses delivered to us' (6:14). The word 'customs' in this charge is a giveaway! The Jews made lots of additions to the Law of Moses, and held that these additions were of equal status with Mosaic Law. Jesus kept on pointing this out to the scribes and Pharisees. The Law of Moses, as found in the first five books of the Bible, is called the Torah. But there was lots of oral traditions, especially regarding the Sabbath. These were later written down in the Mishnah. Jesus and his followers in the church did not hold to the oral traditions. Just what traditions or customs these Jews were accusing Stephen of breaking is not specified.

The Jews in this synagogue secretly induced men to make these allegations against Stephen- were they bribed? They made these allegations publically to stir up the people, the elders and the scribes (6:12). Nothing stirred up the Jews like a threat, or hint of a threat, of the temple being desecrated or destroyed. With the people fired up, they grabbed Stephen and marched him off to the Sanhedrin. In this council, false witnesses came forward to repeat the lies, and charge Stephen with blasphemy.

3. Face of an angel

We began this sermon gazing on the face of Stephen as he stood in the dock of the Sanhedrin, and we will leave with the same picture. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen was not going to cringe in fear of men. The radiance of his face told of the inspiration within, his clear eyes burning with inner light. The Holy Spirit gave the apostles boldness when they stood in the same dock. Stephen had the same boldness. He entrusted himself to him who judges justly, just as Jesus did (1Peter 2:23).

Does the Holy Spirit give you the same peace and serenity when you stand before those who oppose the gospel of Jesus Christ? Does the Holy Spirit give you the same boldness to witness the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Does your face, and your demeanour, reflect the glory of the Lord? Are you, as the Bible says (2Cor 3:18 NIV), being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit?

Stephen speaks in the Sanhedrin-1

Acts 7:1-36

Stephen was a Jew who heard the apostles preaching the gospel and believed in Jesus Christ. He was baptised and received the gift of the Holy Spirit. He was a faithful member of the Greek-speaking section of the church. When there was complaint about the daily distribution of food in the church, Stephen was chosen by the congregation and ordained by the apostles to assist in this ministry, along with six other men. Stephen is described as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit (6:5).

Stephen went on to minister the word in the Synagogue of the Freedmen (6:9). It was here that he encountered opposition to the gospel of Jesus Christ. His preaching was so wise and powerful that the Jewish leaders could not stand against him. Some decided to make up a charge of blasphemy and bring him to the Jewish council. Nothing sets off religious fanatics like the word 'blasphemy'. The word 'apostasy' comes a close second.

Stephen was put in the dock, with the seventy members of the Sanhedrin staring at him. The false witnesses accused him of speaking against the holy place or temple, and against the law or customs of Moses, saying that Jesus would destroy both (6:13-14). The high priest, probably Caiaphas, then asked the defendant if these accusations were true (7:1). Stephen obliged, but not with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. It was not just him on trial but the gospel itself, and so he proceeds to defend the gospel of Jesus Christ in what we might call an apologetic. The apostles had stood in the same place and made known the gospel to these men before, but not so comprehensively as Stephen. Their desire, and Stephen's desire, was that these religious leaders would repent and believe in Jesus as they had.

Stephen was speaking to the people whom God had prepared to receive Jesus as the promised Messiah. These were the people who had the covenants, the law, the promises and the true worship of God. These were the people of the patriarchs, from whom the Messiah or the Christ came, 'who is over all, the eternally blessed God' (Rom 9:5). Stephen respectfully addresses them as 'brethren and fathers', but also urges them to listen carefully to what he, in the power of the Holy Spirit, has to say. Stephen begins by reminding them of their history, the history of God calling Abraham, and of raising up Moses to deliver them from slavery and give them the law and the tabernacle. We should keep in mind that Stephen was charged with speaking against the temple, and against Moses.

1. Abraham and Joseph

'The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia' (7:2). The title, 'God of glory', is not so common; 'God of Israel' or 'God of our fathers' are more common. But God is not just the God of Israel; he is the God of all nations and all creation. 'He is Lord of heaven and earth and does not dwell in temples made with hands' said Paul (Acts 17:24). Stephen calls God the 'God of glory' because he focuses on God's appearing and speaking; he is not an unknowable God.

God appeared to the father of the Jews before he came into the holy land of Canaan, or even into Haran. He appeared to Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia, between the rivers, in Ur of the Chaldeans- what today is southern Iraq. As a man of faith, Abraham obeyed God and left Ur and later, after the death of his father, left Haran to go to the land God promised, the land in which Stephen and the Jewish people now lived (7:4). But Abraham never possessed this land, not even a foothold, just a plot land to bury his wife.

God's promise of land was accompanied by the promise of a family. But Abraham had no family either- his wife Sarah was barren. After Abraham moved into Canaan with his wife and nephew Lot, God again appeared to him, saying that his descendants would live in a foreign land as slaves for four hundred years. After this God would bring them out and into this Promised Land (7:6-7). Stephen again quotes from the Torah, where it is written that God will judge the nation that enslaved Abraham's descendants.

God heard the cries of his people from Egypt and came to deliver them. He sent Moses to bring them out and into 'this place' (7:7). But before moving on to Moses, Stephen has a few more things to say about Abraham and the patriarchs. God again appeared to Abraham, giving him the covenant of circumcision. God was committing himself to being Abraham's God, and the God of his descendants. Abraham believed God and obeyed him. So the covenant was in place, and Abraham was worshipping God, before there was any holy place, and even before he possessed any of the holy land.

Stephen was selective in reminding the Jews of their history, as recorded in the Scriptures- he also telescopes some details. He mentions Isaac's circumcision, and Jacob and his twelve sons. The Jews were descendants of these twelve patriarchs- the twelve tribes of Israel. But these fathers were not upright, godly men that they could be proud of. They were jealous of their little brother and sold him into Egypt. 'But God was with him' (7:9). Again, God was with a person, not tied to a place. God made Joseph prosper in Egypt until he became governor over Egypt. God gave Joseph favour and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh. He was giving Stephen grace and wisdom in the presence of the Jewish leaders- although it was Jesus whom Stephen was covertly comparing with Joseph.

The patriarchs were jealous of Joseph and tried to get rid of him. But God was with him and, in the providence of God, Joseph saved Jacob/Israel from perishing in a famine. God told Joseph in a dream that there would be a huge famine, so for seven years food must be stored up. It was this food that brought Jacob and his family, seventy-five in all, to Egypt to settle and prosper for many years (7:14). The number seventy-five comes for the LXX- the Hebrew text has seventy (Exod 1:5) because Joseph's sons were born in Egypt. When Joseph made himself known to his brothers they were scared of what he might do to them, but he graciously forgave them. He treated them well, and in fact, saved them.

Jacob and the patriarchs died in Egypt. Jacob's body was taken up to Canaan and buried at Mamre. Joseph gave orders for his bones to be taken up also. Joshua buried these at Shechem. They still did not possess the land but believed the promise given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. At the time of Stephen, Shechem was in Samaritan territory. Samaritans were hated by the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea- yet Samaria was the next place assigned by the Jesus to hear the gospel (1:8).

2. Moses- God's deliverer

God's promise to Abraham had not changed. He told Abraham that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land (Egypt) for four hundred years. Living in the region of Goshen, they multiplied and prospered. As this period of time came to an end, a new king came to power in Egypt. This king did not know about Joseph. All he saw was the threat posed by these multiplying Hebrews. He made them his slaves, and then made a law that all their baby boys be exposed- effectively killed.

In this time of great distress Moses was born. God put his hand upon this baby boy. His parents, at great risk, hid him for three months, but then they 'exposed' him. In the providence of God, the Pharaoh's daughter found Moses; she drew him out of the water and raised him as her son. Moses was educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians. He became mighty in words and deeds (7:22). Any believers listening to Stephen, and there probably were some in the Sanhedrin, would see a likeness to Jesus- what is called a 'typology'. 'Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man' (Luke 2:52). In preaching Jesus, Peter called him, 'a man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs which God did through him' (Acts 2:22).

The life of Moses is made up of three periods of forty years. The first forty were in the palace. When he was forty years old he was moved to visit his Hebrew brethren. He saw their suffering at the hand of the Egyptians, and took it upon himself to avenge his brethren. He killed an Egyptian slave-master and buried him in the sand. The next day he saw two Hebrews fighting and told them to stop: 'you are brothers; why do you wrong one another' (7:26). To Moses dismay, the bully turned on him saying, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us' (7:27).

Moses was shocked to learn that they had seen him kill the Egyptian, although he thought they would have approved of him doing so, and would have seen Moses as their hero. Moses had come to help his brothers and deliver them from bondage, but they did not understand (7:25). Even if Moses was not necessarily sent by God on this occasion, Stephen's point is that the people of Israel rejected Moses when he came to deliver them from oppression. Moses was forced to flee to the land of Midian, where he married and lived for forty years.

After this second period of forty years, an Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses on Mt Sinai. The Lord spoke to Moses from the burning bush- the bush that was not consumed (7:30). Stephen's condensed history becomes a bit more detailed, with more direct quotations from Scripture- verses he must have memorised. He is making the point, **firstly**, that God was not tied to Palestine or to Jerusalem. God had spoken to Abraham in Mesopotamia, and now he spoke to Moses in another Gentile land.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God the Jews sitting in the Sanhedrin claimed to be worshipping, appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai. He told Moses he was standing on holy ground (7:33). It was here that God responded to the cries of his people and came down to deliver them. The Jews revered Moses, and the law that God gave to Moses in another theophany on this mountain. God appeared to Moses, and Moses worshipped God on holy ground, long before the holy place was built in Jerusalem. Let no one think that God is confined to a house made by men.

Stephens' **second** point is that, although their forefathers rejected Moses when he came to deliver them, he was in fact the man God had chosen to deliver them. In verse 35 Stephen breaks off from his history lesson to emphasise this point. They rejected Moses saying, 'who made you ruler and judge over us'- words that ironically proved to be prophetic. He was the very man God sent to be ruler and deliverer, with the endorsement of the Angel of the Lord who spoke from the burning bush. Moses went back to Egypt, performed many signs and wonders, and then brought them out through the Red Sea.

The typology is clear; Stephen was using language that he and the apostles were using in preaching the gospel. He had not mentioned the name of Jesus as yet, but his emphasis on Moses being

rejected by their forefathers (7:27, 35), must have raised some suspicions in the minds of the learned men in the Sanhedrin- some of them at least. His emphasis on theophanies or appearances of God in Mesopotamia, and in the wilderness of Sinai (7:30, 35), may have got some thinking about what they believed concerning the temple or 'this holy place' (6:13). How could they maintain that God's presence was confined to this place when clearly he had revealed himself in these other places, and been worshipped in these places by none other than Abraham and Moses!

May we never think that God is confined to any place or building or shrine? Let us leave pilgrimages to holy places to those who follow gods of their own imagination. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is in heaven, and Jesus is there with him. As Stephen breathed his last he said, 'Look, I see heaven open and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God' (7:56).

In the book of Hebrews we are told that Abraham looked forward to a heavenly homeland, to a heavenly country and a city whose builder and maker is God (Heb 11:8-16). Abraham understood, and Stephen understood, that God does not dwell in houses built by man, but that his throne is in heaven. Stephen wanted the Jews to understand this and to believe that Jesus is the way to heaven, to the enduring and glorious city of God.

Stephen speaks in the Sanhedrin-2

Acts 7:37-53

Stephen was a deacon in the church in Jerusalem. In the Greek-speaking 'Synagogue of the Freedmen', he got into a debate with some Jews about Jesus of Nazareth and what he taught. They were not able to defend their position because Stephen spoke with wisdom and power from the Holy Spirit. In frustration and anger they got some men who were willing to tell lies to accuse Stephen of blasphemy, of speaking against Moses and God. In the Sanhedrin they accused Stephen of saying that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs given by Moses (6:11-14).

For the Jews these were serious, even blasphemous, accusations. They regarded themselves as custodians of the holy place or temple, and experts in the Mosaic Law. But Jesus spoke of his body as the temple (John 2:21). Jesus said that he came to fulfil the law (Mat 5:17). So Jesus' death and resurrection made his followers see the temple and the law in a new light. Would the men in the Sanhedrin see these things in this new light? The light in which they currently saw the temple and the law was not light at all- it was darkness. God never intended these things to be seen in the way demanded by the Jews. Stephen pointed to Abraham, to Joseph and to Moses, who all worshipped God in foreign lands because God appeared to them in those places. They worshipped God before there was a temple, and before God gave the law to Moses.

For all their reverence of Moses, the Jews, or their forefathers, actually rejected Moses. They rejected him saying, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us' when he came as the prince of Egypt to deliver them from oppression. Despite this rejection, Moses led them out of bondage in Egypt and through the wilderness for forty years. Before detailing this period of forty years in the wilderness, Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin of the prophetic words of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15, about the Lord raising up a prophet like Moses from among their brethren, and saying, 'him you shall hear' (7:37). Who was this prophet like Moses? The followers of Jesus had the answer and were listening to Jesus, but the Jews were rejecting him. Peter used the same text when preaching in the temple; he included the following verse warning any who do not listen to the Prophet (3:23).

1. Turned back to Egypt

The Jews rejected Moses down in Egypt, and again rejected him in the wilderness. Stephen would not let them forget the terrible apostasy of the people when Moses was on Mt Sinai. He was on the mountain receiving the law, the oracles or living words of God through the Angel (7:38). The people in the meantime were already dreaming about being back in Egypt. 'In their hearts they turned back to Egypt' (7:39). They gave up on Moses and asked Aaron to make a golden calf for them to worship. Their first attempt to make an object through which to worship God, or a god, was condemned by Moses. 'They rejoiced in the work of their own hands' (7:41) and worshipped like pagans.

So God gave them up to worship like the pagans. They turned from God so God turned from them and gave them up to worship the host of heaven (7:42). The apostle Paul reminds us of this terrible truth in Romans 1: they 'changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man - and birds and animals and reptiles... so God gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonour their bodies among themselves' (Rom 1:23-24). God does not change.

Stephen jumps ahead to Israel dwelling in the land of Canaan. Again and again they turned away to worship foreign gods. Eventually, in 722BC, the Lord gave the northern kingdom into the hands of

their enemies, the Assyrians. This is the time spoken of by the prophet Amos (7:43-43). The people persisted in worshipping images they made. They may have claimed to be worshipping the Lord also, but God will not have his people worshipping other gods. If they thought they were worshipping the Lord they were not following the commands he gave about worship, and about living as his holy people in the holy land.

Stephen was speaking to Jews living in Jerusalem, to Jews from the southern kingdom who were taken in exile to Babylon in 586BC. The words of Amos was just as applicable to these Jews, so he replaces Damascus with Babylon in this quotation from the prophet (7:43). In their hearts the Jews turned back to Egypt. They did not go back but the Lord eventually sent them into exile in Babylon to worship the foreign gods they lusted after. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.

2. Tabernacle and temple

On the mountain the Lord gave Moses the covenant commands, through the agency of angels, according to 7:53 and Galatians 3:19. He also gave Moses instructions about how his people were to worship God. Included in these instructions was the plan for construction of the tabernacle (7:44). This tabernacle was a portable structure because they were living in tents as they travelled through the wilderness. Joshua brought this tabernacle, with the Ark of the Covenant as its centrepiece, into the land of Canaan.

David eventually defeated all their enemies and brought peace in the land. God's favour rested on David, but when he wanted to build a permanent dwelling for God he was told 'No'. Instead the Lord made a covenant with David promising to make him a house and an everlasting throne. David's descendants would continue his rule until the true Son of David came to establish his kingdom forever (2Sam 7:13-16). So it was Solomon who built the first temple in Jerusalem. That temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. The temple that Jesus frequented was built by Herod. Solomon's temple was a magnificent structure and so was Herod's, having taken forty six years to build.

'However' (7:48). In his speech to the Sanhedrin, Stephen comes to the point where he will launch his attack on the Jewish leaders for making the temple into an idol. They accused him of speaking against God and the holy place; he accuses them of making the holy place their god. They accused Stephen of blasphemy, but it was they who were blaspheming the name of God. 'You shall, have no other gods before me' is the first commandment. The second is, 'you shall not make any graven images'. They had made the magnificent temple built by Herod in to an image to worship.

Today we see Jews and Muslims fighting over their places of worship in Jerusalem, even killing one another in their effort to worship their gods. Christians also get involved in this struggle. Down through the ages the church has also focussed on the beauty of man-made buildings and lost sight of the fact that God does not dwell in temples made by hands. Some churches spend more time and money on maintaining beautiful old buildings, or constructing new ones, than they do on taking the message of Jesus to the lost.

3. Throne in heaven

The God of Jacob is the Most High God. He is the only true God, the God of all nations, Lord of heaven and earth. How is it possible that such a God dwell in a house made by hands? How can the Jews think God is confined to their temple in Jerusalem? The prophet Isaiah understood such basics when he wrote, "'what house will you build for me?' says the Lord" (7:49, Isa 66:49). He was writing

as an inspired prophet, and as such should be listened to. 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool' says the Lord (7:49). God made the whole world. He made the timber and the gold that adorned the temple. God's creation is much more magnificent and impressive than anything man can make.

At a campsite near Forster on the north coast of NSW, there is a church set up among the trees, overlooking the lake. All it has is seats among the trees. You do not look at stained glass windows in this 'cathedral'; you look at the wonder of God's creation. In many poorer nations God's people gather under nothing more than a thatched or tin roof to worship God. God is present wherever his people gather to worship him. This was the case in the wilderness. The 'assembly' or '*ekklesia*' (7:38) was the key; is this why the believers adopted this term, also translated 'church'.

In another place Isaiah writes of the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity saying, 'I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a humble and contrite heart' (Isa 57:15). Stephen may have remembered these words, as well as the words he quoted- 'Heaven is my throne'- as he felt the stones crashing into his body shortly after this. When they raged against him he saw the glory of God in heaven, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God (7:56). He was not looking to the temple in Jerusalem because this temple was passing away. God was not in that temple; he was on the throne in heaven.

The high priest and members of the Sanhedrin had been listening to Stephen as he made his defence- but not for much longer! Far from cowering in fear, or pleading for mercy, Stephen tells them the truth. 'You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears' (7:51). They were proud, obstinate people; we might say pig-headed. They were not even listening to Moses and the prophets they revered. They were circumcised in the flesh but not in the heart. They were still like uncircumcised Gentiles when it came to understanding and living in obedience to God's word. They had God's word but were not listening. They were resisting the Holy Spirit, who opens hearts to listen. God sends the Holy Spirit to convict of sin and righteousness, and to guide us in all truth (John 16:8, 13).

They were just like their forefathers who refused to listen to the prophets. Indeed, they persecuted the prophets and even killed them. Stephen reminded them of Joseph whom they tried to kill, and Moses whom they rejected. He did not mention prophets like Micaiah and Jeremiah. In fact, he asks which of the prophets they did **not** persecute (7:52). The prophets spoke of the coming of the Just/Righteous One but they rejected and killed these messengers of God (7:55). Stephen does not mention the name of Jesus but it is clear he is referring to Jesus. He was speaking in the language of the OT, language that these Jews might understand.

Stephen told them that the Just One had come and that they had betrayed him. Not only had they betrayed the anointed of God, the Messiah, but they had murdered him. They had taken him to Pilate shouting, 'crucify him, and crucify him' and they got their demand. Peter similarly told the Jews in the temple that they had, 'denied the Holy One and the Just... and killed the Prince of life' (3:14-15). Peter told the Sanhedrin that they had crucified Jesus Christ of Nazareth, but God raised him from the dead. Stephen did not get to speak about the resurrection of Jesus, although his vision of the risen Jesus in heaven made them rage against him even more (7:56).

Stephen's careful exegesis of the Scriptures led to the men in the Sanhedrin being cut to the heart. Stephen did not hold back, of course; he wanted them to be cut to the heart. There is no easy or soft way of presenting the gospel. People must be told the truth. They must be told that they have failed to keep God's holy law, told that they have sinned, and that Jesus is the only way of salvation. People must be personally challenged to respond to this truth. What their response will be, only God knows; God and you, as far as your heart is concerned.

Stephen martyred

Acts 7:54-60

Not long after Stephen was elected and ordained as a deacon in the Jerusalem church, he was dead. He was killed by the Jews. He was killed for his outspoken faith in Jesus Christ. He was martyred - a word which comes from the Greek word for 'witness'. Members of the church in Jerusalem soon faced the reality of death, death at the hands of men who hated Jesus. Jesus had told them that they would be hated by the world because the world hated him (John 15:18) - unless, of course, they became friends of the world. How many of us understand and accept this reality, the reality of being hated by the world because we truly believe in Jesus Christ? How many are ready to die for Christ, to die rather than deny Christ?

Stephen was the first to be killed for his faith in Christ. That was by Jews in the first century. Many Reformers were martyred by 'Christians' in the sixteenth century. Jim Elliot was martyred by animists in South America in 1956, Graham Staines by Hindus in India in 1999, and more recently men from the church in Egypt by Muslims, to name a few in the twentieth century. Still today men and women are being martyred. And yes, the Jews are still ready to kill men who profess faith in Jesus Christ.

Stephen preached Jesus in the 'Synagogue of the Freedmen' in Jerusalem. As a Greek-speaking synagogue, Saul of Tarsus may well have worshipped in the same place. But the Jews rejected Stephen's message. He spoke with such wisdom and spiritual power that they could not counter his teaching. They would have to silence him by other means. They got some men to falsely accuse him of speaking against the temple and the customs of Moses. Then they dragged Stephen into the Council of the Jews to answer these accusations.

When asked to defend himself, Stephen spoke in defence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He explained to the Jews how their forefathers worshipped God long before the temple was built, and how Moses, in fact, prophesied of a future prophet like him who they must listen to. He reminded them of how their forefathers actually rejected Moses - and all the prophets, even killing some. They rejected the word of God spoken by the prophets, just as the Jews in the Sanhedrin were rejecting the Righteous One spoken of by the prophets, namely Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Messiah.

The Jewish leaders listened to Stephen as he spoke about their history. They probably got a bit agitated as he highlighted how their fathers had rejected Moses, and the words of the prophet that God does not dwell in temples made with hands. Stephen accused them of being just like their fathers in rejecting the Just One who is Jesus of Nazareth. He accused them of being 'stiff-necked, and uncircumcised in hearts and ears' (7:51). This did not go down well, although it was true, and proved to be so.

1. Cut to the heart

When the men in the Council heard these things 'they were cut to the heart' (7:54). While our translation is the same as in Acts 2:37, the word in the original is different. Here in chapter 7 the literal meaning is 'divide with a saw'. Tragically, being 'cut to the heart' did not lead to repentance, as it did at Pentecost, but to rage and fury. They gnashed their teeth at Stephen for having the audacity to turn the charge of blasphemy back upon them, the respected - or not so respected - leaders of Israel. We might reflect on 'how quickly a dignified court was transformed into a lynch mob' and how 'thin can be the veneer of civility and judicial order in society', as one commentator

wrote. We frequently see learned and powerful men and women get very vindictive when confronted with the truth of the gospel. Courts of learned men have been responsible for making Christian martyrs.

2. Gaze into heaven

Stephen was not moved by their threatening behaviour. He looked to the Lord for strength. The Lord had given him words to say in answer to the charges, in the presence of the authorities (Luke 12:11-12). He spoke in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the fullness of the Holy Spirit he gazed into heaven while standing in the dock of the Sanhedrin. They were all gazing at him, seeing the face of an angel (6:15), but he was gazing in heaven where he saw 'the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God' (7:55). What an amazing vision the Lord gave Stephen at this time. It reminds us of the vision given to the apostle John when he saw into heaven (Rev 4:1f). As the men of the Sanhedrin gnashed their teeth at Stephen, he calmly gazed upon the Lord, the risen Lord Jesus at the right hand of God in heaven. The 'glory of God' may be something like 'the Shekinah glory that both reveals and conceals the divine presence or nature'. We might compare it to the theophany on Mt Sinai, or the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain.

The main feature of what Stephen saw was Jesus standing at the right hand of God in the glory of heaven. The apostles had seen the risen Jesus- maybe Stephen saw him also (1Cor 15:6). The apostles saw Jesus taken up in the clouds- they gazed into heaven as he went up (1:11). They were told that Jesus was taken into heaven. This is what the apostles, and what Stephen, believed. This is what they preached, the cross and resurrection, the ascension and the return of Jesus.

Stephen exclaimed, 'Look! I see heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' (7:56). To the Jews this was indeed blasphemy. How could the Jesus they crucified possibly be in heaven, let alone at the right hand of God- most of the Council did not even believe in the resurrection. The right hand is a position of honour and glory and power; it was tantamount to being of equal status with the One on the throne. Jesus himself had claimed equality with God in confessing to the Council that he was the Son of God (Luke 22:70). Just before this he spoke to them of the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of the power of God (Luke 22:69). Stephen's words must have reminded them of those words spoken by Jesus shortly before they condemned him to death.

Stephen may have remembered these words also. He used the same title for Jesus- the Son of Man- maybe with the intention of reminding them of Jesus' words. This is the only instance of someone other than Jesus using this title. Jesus used it to both reveal and conceal his identity as Messiah. It comes from the prophecy of Daniel in the OT and in the context of a divine being coming from heaven (Dan 7:13). This person is a king whose dominion is everlasting and universal; it is not limited to Israel and the Jews. Even more than the apostles, Stephen seems to have seen a passing from temple worship to Jesus worship, from earthly worship to heavenly worship. He saw that in Jesus we have access to God the Father. As Jesus was dying on the cross the huge curtain in the temple was torn in two signifying access to the Most Holy Place, which ultimately is heaven itself.

What is the significance of Jesus standing rather than sitting at the right hand of God- if any? (7:55, cf. Ps 110:1, Luke 22:69). People have different ideas. We do not agree with dispensational views that Jesus' standing indicates he was giving the Jews a final opportunity to repent. Many suggest he is standing as Stephen's advocate with the Father; 'Stephen had been confessing Christ before men and now he sees Christ confessing His servant before God' (Bruce). Stephen might be condemned

in the highest court on earth but not in the supreme court in heaven. Do remember that being condemned in a human court does not mean you will be condemned before God. Remember also, that being acquitted in a human court does not mean you will be acquitted before God, because the laws of the state are not the same as God's laws.

Stephen's majestic and glorious description of heaven served to enrage the Jews even further. They tried to drown him out with their shouting. They stopped their ears so as not to hear what, to them, was blasphemy (7:57). They had long since stopped their hearts, their uncircumcised hearts and ears, to the truth of Jesus. They ran towards Stephen with one accord and threw him out of the chamber.

3. Cast out and stoned

They not only threw Stephen out of their Council, but right out of the city to stone him to death (7:58). Where was Pilate, the Roman Governor you might ask? How come the Jews were allowed this capital punishment? (John 18:31). Some think Pilate was out of town, others think he just turned a blind eye, while others say it was more of a mob lynching. It looked like the latter as they left the Council, but at the place of execution they followed Jewish law, with the witnesses casting the first stone. The witnesses came forward and laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Saul was at least in his mid- twenties. He was complicit in the stoning of Stephen, even if he wasn't a member of the Sanhedrin (cf. 26:10). Luke tells us plainly in the next chapter that, 'Saul was consenting to his death' (8:1). He in fact, took a leading role in persecuting the church, before the risen Jesus stopped him on the road to Damascus.

4. Calling on God

As they stoned Stephen he was not crying for mercy, or for vengeance on those stoning him to death. He was calling on God saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit' (7:59). He had seen Jesus in heaven, and knew that he would soon be joining him there. He knew that while his body would soon be broken, his spirit would be with Jesus. As our Catechism says, 'The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory' (Shorter Catechism Q37). Jesus told the penitent thief of the cross next to him, 'Today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43).

Stephen's dying words, addressed to the Lord Jesus, must have had a profound effect on those observing his death, including the young man Saul- who later became Paul the apostle. May they continue to have a profound effect upon us today! What will your dying words be? Stephen's other dying words were equally profound and moving. With heavy paving stones crashing upon him, Stephen knelt down, and with a loud voice said, 'Lord, do not charge them with this sin' (7:60). He prayed for the Lord to forgive the men who were killing him, just as Jesus prayed for those who killed him saying, 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). Notice that Stephen prayed to Jesus, just as Jesus prayed to the Father.

They were stoning Stephen because they hated hearing the truth about their sin, and the offer of forgiveness in the blood of Jesus Christ. Stephen prayed that their eyes would be opened to see the amazing grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the gift of eternal life in him. Wonderfully his prayer was answered when Saul's eyes were opened, both physically and spiritually, by the risen Jesus. It was Augustine who said, 'The church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen'. Others have said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Such is the mystery that is the church of God (Eph 3:9-12).

Persecution and progress of the gospel

Acts 8:1-8

Have you ever poked a stick into an ants nest? Maybe you were bitten by an ant and thought you would get back at them by poking a stick in their nest. Maybe you wanted to kill all the ants in the nest. All you do, of course, is to stir them up. They come running out of the nest and you need to run fast before they bite you again. Various rulers, down through history, have hated the church and tried to destroy it, only to see it flourish.

The risen Jesus told his disciples shortly before his ascension that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8). To do this they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit. No timetable was given, apart from waiting for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. This happened at Pentecost, and the church in Jerusalem grew rapidly through the preaching of the gospel- and with persecutions. The church was led by the twelve apostles. Seven deacons were elected and ordained. Jews from all over the world were at the feast of Pentecost. Many of these probably heard Peter preach and believed. Jews from around Jerusalem later came with their sick for Peter to heal (5:16). But as yet none of the apostles had moved out of Jerusalem. The second phase of the geographical progress of the gospel had not yet begun. What would be the signal or the stimulus for the apostles to move out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria?

1. Persecution by Saul

Luke makes a special note of the young man Saul being present at the stoning of Stephen (7:58). Stephen was one of the deacons in the Jerusalem church. He was from the Greek-speaking section of the church. Saul of Tarsus may well have attended the same synagogue as Stephen. The Jews in this synagogue opposed Stephen's preaching of the gospel. They conspired to bring him before the Sanhedrin on charges of blasphemy, hiring false witnesses to bring the charges. In the Sanhedrin, Stephen did not hold back. He told the Jewish leaders that they were like their forefathers in rejecting Moses and the prophets; they had rejected and killed the chief Prophet, the Messiah of God. While being stoned for his faith in Jesus, Stephen prayed that his enemies would turn to the Lord for forgiveness (7:60).

Godly men, probably believers, came forward and took the body of Stephen for burial (8:2). The church must have been shocked by this brutal attack. They remembered what Jesus told them about persecution. They mourned deeply as they buried the first martyr in the church. These were not only devout men but also brave. It was against Jewish law to mourn for a blasphemer. These men were not afraid; they did not just mourn but mourned deeply.

The young man Saul probably heard Stephen pray as he died, but his heart was in no way touched by his prayer- at least for now. Saul gave full consent to the stoning of Stephen (8:1). He was fired up to find more people like Stephen, followers of the Way, as they were called. He proceeded to make havoc of the church, grabbing men and women who believed in Jesus and throwing them into prison. He must have had the approval of the Council to do this. Saul was young and zealous; he was relentless in this persecution. Persecution is about harassing or forcing someone to give up their religion, about attacking someone just because of their religious beliefs. Saul would have known many of the believers if he was member of the synagogue where Stephen went. Locking women up shows the extent of the brutality of this persecution. What happened to the children? Saul was not concerned about such detail. For him this pernicious evil had to be stamped out, and that without delay. Saul's approach was quite different to that of his teacher, Gamaliel, who advised the Jews

against attacking the apostles lest they be found to fight against God (5:39). Saul had no doubts and showed no such caution.

This persecution was the trigger for believers to scatter. They were not safe in Jerusalem with men like Saul on the rampage. They fled from the city to the regions of Judea and Samaria (8:1). Luke mentions this detail in the first verse because it marks the second phase of witness, as prescribed by the risen Jesus (1:8). Who would have thought that persecution would have led to the advance of the church? Certainly not Saul!

Had the apostles forgotten the command of Jesus? There is no indication of this. The Lord knew what he was doing. In all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28). The Lord can and does bring good out of suffering and persecution. The apostles were not caught up in this persecution and flight from the city (8:1). Why? It seems the Greek-speaking section of the church was the main target of Saul, a Hellenist Jew. The deacons were from this section of the church; Stephen and Phillip receive special mention. While the apostles were not the initiators or witnesses in this progress of the gospel, they soon appear and give it their apostolic approval.

2. Preaching of Phillip

The believers who were scattered because of the persecution went in all directions (8:4). Jerusalem was in the region of Judea; to the north was the region of Samaria. This northern region dates back to the division of Israel after King Solomon. At that time they set up alternate places of worship. When the Assyrians overran the northern kingdom in 722BC they expelled many Jews and brought in foreigners. Worship was corrupted through syncretism, the bringing in of pagan ideas, but was still largely Jewish. Mt Gerizim became the central place of worship for Samaritans (John 4:20). It was here that Joshua assembled the people of Israel to read the law, as commanded by Moses. The Samaritans were expecting Messiah, or the 'restorer', to come. The woman Jesus met at the well near Sychar spoke of Messiah who will 'tell us all things' (John 4:25f). She believed Jesus when he told her he was the Christ, and went home to tell all her Samaritan friends, who also believed.

Jews had no dealing with Samaritans (John 4:9). Samaritans were not pure Jews; they were half-breeds. They were despised by pure Jews in the south- and the feeling were mutual. When Jesus and his disciples were travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem the Samaritans refused them passage. James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to burn them up (Luke 9:53-54). Such was the animosity between the Jews and Samaritans. This same John will return to Samaria later in this chapter.

Jesus had sown the seed in Samaria but it was Phillip who went and preached the gospel there for the first time. Like many believers, he fled from the persecution in Jerusalem. These believers preached the word wherever they went (8:4). What a wonderful testimony to these persecuted believers. Persecution did not lead them to complain or to doubt. It moved them to preach the word of Jesus. How do you respond to trials and difficulties? Some start to doubt, especially those taught that nothing bad ever happens when you become a Christian. Some fall away. But true Christians respond with joy. 'Count it all joy when you fall into various trials' (James 1:2). They respond with assurance of faith, knowing that God will make a way of escape (1Cor 10:13).

The believers down in Samaria were thankful to be alive, although, like the apostles would have rejoiced that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for His name (5:41). Wherever they went they worshipped God. They no longer needed a temple. They met together and worshipped in their homes. The local people saw them and asked questions like, 'Why have you come here?' What a great invitation this would have been to preach the gospel. The local people often asked us why we had come to India. It was an opportunity to tell them about Jesus. An evangelist here in Sydney loved being asked about his job. He would reply, 'My job is telling people about Jesus. Have you heard about Jesus?' Are you telling people about Jesus? When people ask you what you do on Sundays what do you say? Do you take the opportunity to tell them about Jesus, and invite them to come and worship Jesus?

'Phillip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them' (8:5). Samaria was the main city in the region of Samaria. It was renamed Sebaste by Herod the Great, and today is called Nablus. Some translations have 'a' city rather than 'the' city; so scholars speculate that it was Shechem or Gitta, the birthplace of Simon. Phillip was a deacon and as such was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. His preaching of Christ was accompanied by miracles, like casting out unclean spirits, and healing lame and paralysed people (8:6-7). It was a 'signs and wonders' ministry, just like the apostles (2:43, 5:12f). Do note it was 'signs and wonders', not just 'wonders'; and that signs point to something beyond themselves. Evil spirits cried out as they were exorcised by Phillip in the power of the Holy Spirit- the spirit cried out, not the person. The lame were healed such that they could walk again, like the beggar at the temple gate.

This was a complete ministry; the people not only saw miracles but heard the word, and 'there was great joy in that city' (8:8). There was joy in seeing people healed and released from the power of Satan. There was joy in sins forgiven and new life in Christ. The gospel has the power to bring joy to the heart of any and every person. Joy in the heart overflows to those around us. This city, as we will see, lived in superstitious fear. The people could not trust one another, and they hated foreigners. Phillip came and preached the truth of Jesus. Their hearts and lives were transformed. Samaritan and Jew found unity, not in mutual acceptance of each other's beliefs but in a new way, the one way of Jesus. Common faith in Jesus unites all sorts of people, even the greatest of enemies.

Jesus came across a lot of demon possessed people in his ministry. Was it that Satan was making a concerted effort to oppose Jesus? The apostles also faced such opposition. Paul was troubled by a demon possessed girl in Philippi. This girl was 'managed' for her fortune-telling abilities. Does demon possession still occur today? There is nothing to indicate it does not. Pioneer missionaries who go to unreached peoples may be confronted by this phenomena, and by the power of sorcerers and witch doctors. They enter enemy territory, as it were, and the enemy does not want to leave. They face the spiritual powers of darkness, but know that the power of the Spirit of God is greater.

We were not in a pioneering situation but often saw the evil power behind Hinduism. A new Christian came to our house one day with a type of nut that was holy to Hindus. It was given to her by a holy man. She was troubled by this thing. We took it away and prayed with her. Evil spirits must flee in the name of Jesus because Jesus defeated their boss on the cross. We must not view the Christian life as a battle between good spirits and evil spirits. The victory has been won by Jesus.

Simon the sorcerer

Acts 8:9-25

You may never have heard of Sathya Sai Baba; he was a famous Indian guru. Hundreds of thousands of Indians worshipped him, as did thousands of Westerners. People from Sydney went to visit him in his ashram in southern India, until he died just five years ago (2011). He claimed to be the reincarnation of Sai Baba, and later claimed to be an incarnation of god. He was a guru, and a godman. He was famous for his materialisations of holy ash and other small objects, like rings and watches, as well as miraculous healings. His followers saw such 'powers' as signs of his divinity, but Vishal Mangalwadi, and others, showed him to be a trickster or magician- as well as a sexual pervert. By the way, the man who brought Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Yoga to the West was another godman from India. Other cultures have had their own godmen, including the Samaritans in the first century, so it seems. Down in Samaria, Phillip, the deacon and evangelist from Jerusalem, met a man called Simon who was a sorcerer or magician. The people called him, 'the power of God, that is called Great' (8:10 ESV).

1. Practiced sorcery

The Bible tells us that Simon was a sorcerer who kept people spellbound by his magic. He enjoyed the power that he had over the people, and their contributions to his bank account, no doubt. Everyone in the city, from the least to the greatest, gave him their attention, and praised him saying, 'This man is the great power of God' (8:10). Simon did not disapprove of being thought of, and called, a godman. He claimed to be someone great. Justin Martyr, a Christian apologist of the second century, came from Samaria. He writes of this Simon as Simon Magnus, who moved to Rome and was later associated with the heresy of Gnosticism.

When Phillip came to Samaria preaching Christ, and healing people in the name of Christ, the people switched their allegiance to him. They believed Phillip and the things he preached, namely the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (8:12). The locals followed a form of Judaism mixed with paganism. They believed in a Messiah but at the same time believed in sorcery, even though it was forbidden under Mosaic law- in the very same chapter that speaks of the coming Prophet, in fact (Deut 18).

We should not be surprised to find their beliefs and their practices out of sync. Many who claim to be 'good Christians' and to know the Bible, believe and do things contrary to the Bible. We all bring our own background and understanding to the Bible, often finding it difficult to let go of such backgrounds and traditions when confronted with the clear teaching of the Bible. The church in Africa struggles with polygamy. The church in India struggles with bribery. The church in the west struggles with feminism and other 'isms'. When the Bible says, 'I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man' (1Tim 2:12), some accuse the apostle Paul of cultural bias, but they do not question their own cultural background. The Samaritans removed things from the Bible they did not agree with. They removed any reference to the temple in Jerusalem, so all they were left with was the five books of Moses. Some Christians remove all the letters of Paul, being left with the four gospels and Acts.

2. Profession of faith

'Simon himself also believed' and was baptised (8:13). This chapter of Acts deals with a number of difficult issues in the church. One of these we touched on last time, namely a signs and wonders ministry. We saw that Phillip performed signs and wonders as part of his ministry. He was not an

apostle but he did belong to the apostolic era, and he did have a pioneering ministry. Phillip was a member of the apostolic church in Jerusalem, in which people repented and believed and were baptized in the name of Jesus and received the Holy Spirit (2:38). Phillip was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit (7:3). He was a Trinitarian, yet he only baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (8:16). There was a reason for this, as we will see.

Simon the sorcerer believed and was baptized. He became a close associate of Phillip. We presume he left his sorcery, although, as we will see, he seems to have seen Phillip's ministry through his 'old eyes', as it were. He was really taken by the miracles which Phillip did (8:13). Was his faith real? Was he truly regenerate? We will come to this, but for now his faith was judged genuine by Phillip, and he was baptized. He must have given a credible profession of faith.

3. Prayer to receive the Holy Spirit

The apostles back in Jerusalem became aware of what was happening in Samaria. They sent 'senior' apostles, Peter and John, to check things out. Phillip's ministry of word and deed bore fruit in terms of a worshipping community among these schismatic half-breeds in Samaria. Did being in Samaria bring back memories for John? (Luke 9:54). This was not a Gentile city- the barrier of taking the gospel to the Gentiles had not yet been crossed, but this was a barrier none the less, a step towards that greater barrier. The gospel of Jesus Christ overcomes all barriers.

When Peter and John arrived, they prayed for those who were baptized that they might receive the Holy Spirit- 'for as yet He had fallen upon none of them' (8:16). Then they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. This may look like a 'second blessing', the receiving of the Holy Spirit after being baptized in the name of the Trinity, as claimed by Pentecostal folk. But it is clearly stated that they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (8:16, cf.19:1-7). Why they had not been baptized in the name of the Trinity is hard to understand, but the answer may lie in Pentecost. Some call this a 'Samaritan Pentecost', an experience that served to confirm to both the apostles and the Samaritans, that they were part of one church, the church which is the body of Christ, as Paul later taught. It was not that the Samaritans had not truly believed, or that the laying on of apostolic hands was necessary to receive the Holy Spirit. 'This was an extraordinary rather than normative event' writes Larkin.

4. Poisoned heart

Simon was baptized and followed Phillip everywhere (8:13). He was impressed by the miracles which Phillip did as part of his ministry. Simon used to perform 'miracles' by sleight of hand, but what Phillip did was for real- although Simon saw these as miracles only and not miraculous signs. Many fall into this error today as they conduct healing services, or signs and wonders ministries. They focus on the 'miracle' and their ability to perform it, but lose focus on Jesus and the gospel, apart from using his name in their rituals.

When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given by the laying on of hands, he offered the apostles money if they gave him this power (8:18-19). What was he thinking! How could he even think like this, let alone actually ask to buy a spiritual blessing? This is the Spirit of God we are talking about. Here is a man thinking he can buy God's favour, indeed, God's power! The Christian life is about God powerfully controlling our life, not about us controlling God and his power.

How could anyone think that with money they can buy their way to heaven? Oh, I forgot about the indulgence boxes carried around by priests in the days of Martin Luther. I forgot about those who continue to buy prayers for loved ones in purgatory. I forgot about money sent to tele-evangelists to buy prayers for healing. Such practices are called 'simony' in memory of this Simon who offered money to the apostles in return for power to bestow the Holy Spirit.

Peter answered Simon's request with a curse: 'May your money perish with you' (8:20). Strong words, you may say, but deserved, I hope you will agree. Peter had previously cursed Ananias for lying to the Holy Spirit about money- and Ananias dropped dead. He called upon Simon to immediately repent and hope God would forgive him (8:22). The love of money is such a curse. It kept the rich young ruler from following Jesus- presumably he perished with his money. The word 'perish' means destruction. It is the word we find in John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life'. Perish is the opposite of life; it is destruction and hell. Jesus is God's gift. The Holy Spirit is the gift of God. Salvation and eternal life are the gift of God. As with all good works, money has no place in salvation- apart from endangering the gift itself.

Simon's heart was not right in the sight of God (8:21). He was still captive to sin. He was baptized but not saved. He was still captive to the love of money, and all the bitterness of such love. Simon was probably rich from having so many Samaritans under his spell. He was accustomed to getting whatever he wanted with money. Love is the antithesis of money- true love that is. Would money buy your love? If so, it is cheap, self-serving love. The love of God cannot be bought- to even think like this is sin. Anyone who thinks like this has no place in the kingdom of God.

Peter urged Simon to repent and pray for forgiveness. 'Simon's repentance must cast him totally on the mercy of God'. Simon responded by asking Peter to pray to the Lord for him- which was not what Peter said (8:24). He told **him** to pray to God. It is not wrong to ask someone to pray for you, but not as a substitute for your own prayer. Was this true repentance or just remorse? We are not told if Simon repented and prayed, or if he was forgiven. The writings of the church fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, indicate otherwise.

5. Preaching the word

The church in Samaria was established in unity with the church in Jerusalem. Like the church in Jerusalem it was threatened at the very outset by satanic attack, attack through men and their money. Both times the attack was thwarted by the apostle Peter. We are not told that great fear came upon the church in Samaria (cf.5:11), but Simon was left in a state of fear. So the church was unified and purified.

When the apostles had preached the word of the Lord in Samaria they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in village after village on the way- Samaritan villages. With the help of Phillip, they saw the second phase of their divinely-given mission completed- 'you will be my witnesses in all Judea and Samaria' (1:8). The third and final phase will be accomplished primarily by Saul, who became the apostle Paul. It is to this phase that we, as Gentiles from far flung places, are thankful. It is this phase that continues today as the gospel is taken to people groups that have yet to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and be saved.

Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch

Acts 8:26-40

The story in a mission magazine was titled, 'chocolate evangelism'. Greg and his wife Janet wrote of sharing a bar of chocolate with two men as they camped behind a country hall. In sharing the chocolate, she found out that one of the men was an auto electrician. The missionaries went on to visit a farmer there in western Queensland. The farmer was not well. While talking with him his wife came in from the paddock to say the tractor had broken down. She was not much interested in people talking about religion, but when Greg offered to help with the tractor she changed her tune. Greg had been a mechanic. He managed to get the tractor back to the shed but it was in need of serious repair to its electrical system.

Greg could not fix the electric, and being a Landini, an old Italian-made tractor, it looked as if they would have to send it off to the city for repairs. Then Janet remembered one of the men she met at the hall was an auto electrician. She went looking for them and found them down by the river fishing. As it turned out, in the providence of God, the auto electrician had his tools, and had once worked on this particular make of tractor. The farmer was very pleased to have his tractor going again, and remarked at the loving Christian help of Greg and Janet. He was a bit closer to the kingdom of God.

Phillip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza was a most unlikely encounter. When the Lord told Phillip to go south, to the desert road leading to Gaza, he must have wondered what was going on. He had a successful mission in the north, in Samaria. Why should he go south? In this amazing story of personal evangelism in the early church, we will note firstly the angel of the Lord, then the Spirit of the Lord, then Scripture and finally the sacrament.

1. Angel of the Lord

Phillip was a deacon in the Jerusalem church. He was forced to flee to Samaria because of persecution led by Saul. In Samaria he preached Christ. He saw many believe and be baptised. Did Phillip return to Jerusalem with Peter and John or did he stay in Samaria? We are not told, but there is no indication that persecution by Greek-speaking Jews had abated. What we are told is that an angel of the Lord spoke to Phillip (8:26).

Angels are created by God and are his messengers. An angel appeared and spoke to Zacharias, and to Joseph prior to the birth of Jesus. Here in the book of Acts an angel appeared and spoke to Peter and John in prison (5:19-20). Do angels continue as God's messengers today? There is nothing in the Bible to say they don't, but, as we see in this very passage, God speaks to us through Scripture and moves us by his Spirit. This is how the Lord led me and my family to the mission field in 1983.

The section of the road from Jerusalem to Gaza traverses the desert as it gets near Gaza. Phillip might have wondered who or what he would find on this deserted section of road. But he did not question the divine command- it was a command not a suggestion or an idea. When the Lord speaks, be it through an angel, through his Spirit or through Scripture, it is not our place to question 'why'? Our place is to obey, just like Phillip. This does not mean we are mindless robots. It means we acknowledge that the Lord knows best; indeed, as Sovereign Lord, he knows the future. If you have obeyed the Lord, as I hope you have and you do, you will have proved that God's word is true. This is what the Bible says: 'be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God' (Rom 12:2).

So Phillip arose and went (8:27). Meanwhile, God was preparing the heart of another man to receive the gospel. Who was this man? He was a 'great authority' from Ethiopia. He was the treasurer of that nation. He was responsible to Candace, the title given to the queen of Ethiopia. The king or queen was considered a god, and as such not to be bothered with mundane administration of the state. This Ethiopia is not the same as the Ethiopia of today. It was a rich land, south of Aswan in Egypt, stretching down to Khartoum in Sudan; the region of the Nubian Hills.

This man of great authority is called a 'eunuch'. This term commonly refers to a castrated male. Jesus spoke of eunuchs who were born this way and eunuchs 'made by men' (Mat 19:12). A servant in the queen's palace was often a physical eunuch, although the term may refer to such a servant whether he is emasculated or not. Larkin thinks this man was a high official who was not castrated. He writes, 'In what sense the Ethiopian was a eunuch has great bearing on his religious status in Israel, for physical eunuchs could not become proselytes (Deut 23:1)'. This situation was prophesied to change under the new covenant (Isa 56:4-5).

The Ethiopian eunuch had come to Jerusalem to worship (8:27). Jerusalem was the place where Jews came to worship. Was this man a proselyte, a converted and baptised Gentile, or was he a God-fearer, a man who followed Judaism without full conversion? This depends to some extent on the nature of his being a eunuch. We are not told which he was, but he was a worshipper of the true God. Moreover, he had a copy of the Scriptures, at least the scroll of Isaiah, which he was able to read- so he was serious worshipper. In coming all the way from Sudan he must have been serious. Travel in those days was not easy. He was sitting in his chariot or wagon, slowly making his way home when Phillip came up to him.

2. Spirit of the Lord

The Spirit told Phillip to draw alongside the chariot (8:29). He was able to run alongside the vehicle, and as he did so he heard someone reading from the book of Isaiah. It was the Ethiopian eunuch reading aloud, as was common in those days. It is still important to read the Bible aloud- indeed a blessing is promised to those who read and hear the words of the Bible (Rev 1:3). We should not be saying, 'We know this passage so will not bother to read it' or, 'I assume you have read this passage'.

The Ethiopian was reading the Bible but did not understand what he was reading (8:30). We all know that feeling! But not all of us admit it as this Ethiopian did when asked by Phillip. He admitted his need for someone to guide him. So he invited Phillip to join him in his chariot (8:31). Can you picture this? Here was man from the palace, no doubt dressed in semi- royal robes and riding in an expensive vehicle, asking a stranger running along the road to join him in his chariot. And not only that, but to instruct him in the Scriptures. Royal and political protocols often prevent men and women from hearing the gospel. A celebrity culture, such as we have, is dangerous idolatry- dangerous to the celebrity and those who follow them.

The truth is, 'God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak things of the world to shame the things that are mighty' (1Cor 1:27). This has never been more true than it is today. I hope you understand who you are in Christ, and, like Phillip, are willing and ready to speak to whomever the Lord leads you to. The apostle Paul was told he would be a witness to kings, among Gentiles and Jews (9:15).

3. Scripture

As we said, the Lord was preparing the Ethiopian to hear the gospel and believe. He was already a monotheist and was reading the Scripture. He was reading a passage that few understood in those days, and even today. Learned Jews still do not understand Isaiah 53 and tend to avoid this passage. The Ethiopian did not avoid it; he asked the right question of the passage- 'Who is the prophet talking about?'(8:34). Isaiah wrote of someone being led like a lamb to the slaughter, though innocent of any wrongdoing. Clearly this 'suffering servant' was not Israel, as some try to tell us. Phillip knew the passage and he knew what it was about; he had been taught by the apostles, who had been taught by Jesus. Phillip did not try to convince the Ethiopian of a great insight or revelation that he had had. He did not share his own wisdom. Sometimes preachers fall into this trap. I have seen church leaders fall into this trap in TV interviews. They put forward their own ideas instead of words from the Bible. Preachers think they have to come up with new ideas, or at least new techniques of getting the message across. Phillip simply took the passage, and beginning with this portion of Scripture preached Jesus (8:35).

Phillip told the Ethiopian that the prophet was speaking about Jesus of Nazareth, recently crucified outside Jerusalem. Presumably he went on to the end of this passage to explain why Jesus was crucified: 'He bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors' (Isa 53:12). We also presume that he called upon this high official to repent and believe and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Gospel preaching in the NT always ended with the call to repent and believe in Jesus. Preaching was not about how to live a good life, or how to get God's blessing on your projects. It was about repentance and the forgiveness of sin.

4. Sacrament

'As they went down the road they came to some water' (8:36). Scholars try to locate this body of water; was it a running stream or a water hole? All that we are told is that there was some water; enough for a baptism. The Ethiopian pointed to the water and asked to be baptized. He stopped his wagon and they 'went down into the water and he baptized him' (8:38). Baptism became a holy ordinance or sacrament at Pentecost. Water was used to baptise those who repented and believed in Jesus. Often whole families were baptized together (17:33). The mode of baptism, immersion or effusion, cannot be determined from what is written here- or in any other passage for that matter. Sure, this was a case of adult baptism, but we cannot conclude it was immersion. What we can conclude is that baptism was a simple sacrament for those who believe in Jesus. Sadly, it is complicated, abused, and even avoided by some.

When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Phillip away (8; 39). Was he translated by supernatural means to Azotus, where he was later found? He was at least snatched away such that the Ethiopian 'saw him no more' (8:39). This reminds us of Elijah being carried away (1Kings 18:12). In Azotus, the old Philistine city of Ashdod, Phillip preached the gospel. He continued preaching all the way to Caesarea, where he we find him again some twenty years later. (21:8-9).

The Ethiopian 'went on his way rejoicing' (8:39). He was a changed man. He was a new creation in Christ Jesus. His sins were forgiven and he had received the Holy Spirit. Why else would he be rejoicing? We hear no more of this man but presume he was still rejoicing when he reached home, and that he preached Jesus to all and sundry in Ethiopia. Anyone who is truly saved will go on their way rejoicing. If you are not rejoicing in the Lord as you go on your way today, ask yourself, 'am I truly saved?', and if so, ask yourself if you are walking in obedience to the commands of Christ.

Saul's conversion- Damascus road

Acts 9:1-9

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus was a defining moment or a watershed moment in the history of the church. It was first and foremost a defining moment in this man's life, of course, as with your conversion if you are now a believer in Jesus Christ. It occurred some two thousand years ago, but its effects are still being seen today. Firstly, it was this converted Jew who took the gospel to the Gentile world. He travelled around the Roman world preaching the gospel and establishing churches. Although most of these churches no longer exist, they were the base for the gospel to spread into Europe, and more recently into Africa and Asia, and the rest of the world. The risen Jesus commanded his apostles to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (1:8).

Saul the Jew was, by default, instrumental in the gospel being taken to Samaria; when he began persecuting the church the Christians scattered and preached the gospel wherever they went. But one day, as he was travelling down the road to Damascus, Saul's life changed dramatically. When Saul the persecutor became Paul the preacher, the church grew rapidly and spread across the known world.

The second impact this converted Jew had upon the church -indeed upon the world- is through his divinely inspired writings, as recorded in the NT. Larkin writes, 'If Saul had remained a Jewish rabbi, we would be missing 13 of 27 book of the NT'. We would also be missing 18 of the 28 chapters in this book of Acts. We must be careful, however, in saying the apostle Paul was the greatest Christian who ever lived. The apostles faithfully preached the gospel and suffered greatly, as have many Christians down through the ages. It is faithfulness that counts with the Lord. Paul acknowledges many who served with him in the ministry, people like Luke, the writer of this book. Moreover, Paul calls himself the 'chief of sinners', and, 'the least of the apostles', acknowledging that it was only by the grace of God that he achieved what he did (1Tim 1:15, 1Cor 15:9).

The conversion of Saul was certainly dramatic; a demonstration of the power of the Lord to change human hearts. Paul never forgot this experience on the Damascus road. He testifies of his conversion on two occasions in this book itself. Luke probably heard it firsthand from his friend Paul- it is Luke's account that we have here in this chapter. In some circles Christians talk about a, 'Damascus road conversion'. Can such conversions still occur? Sadhu Sundar Singh testifies of a similar conversion in 1903 in India. He was a Hindu- a Sikh actually- who hated Christians. He threw stones at preachers and tore up a copy of the NT just days before his conversion. He was praying in his room when a bright light filled the room and he saw the form of a man. He was ready to bow down to a Hindu incarnation, but it Jesus who spoke to him saying, 'How long will you persecute me? I have come to save you; you were praying to know the right way'. He fell to his knees. Peace and joy filled his soul. He had been planning to jump in front of a train the next morning. This Hindu convert preached the gospel throughout India and the world- even here in Australia. He tried crossing the snow-capped Himalayas to take the gospel into Tibet, but never returned.

People can be suddenly and dramatically converted, but many are converted in other ways. Some are privileged to grow up in a Christian family- not that this makes anyone a true Christian. No matter how we are converted, we must fall down before Jesus and receive him as Saviour and Lord. We must acknowledge God's grace and power in drawing us to himself, and changing our sinful hearts. We acknowledge that, 'He chose us in Him (Christ) before the foundation of the world'. No

matter the manner of our conversion, the important thing is to be living in Christ today; He chose us that, 'we should be holy and without blame before him in love' (Eph 1:4).

1. Saul's mind and heart

While Saul's conversion was sudden and dramatic, it was not without divine preparation. We do not know exactly what was in his heart but he does tell us many things. We know he had heard the gospel. He knew what Jewish converts were preaching, and what they believed about Jesus. Saul was a Pharisee who believed in the resurrection, but he did not for a moment believe that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected. Jewish leaders said that the disciples had stolen his body and Saul probably believed this (Mat 28:13). He thought the apostles were deceiving men and women with their claim that Jesus was risen and that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. There are still people today, people like Richard Dawkins, who not only ridicule true Christians but say they are deceiving children when they preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. One day this man will know that Jesus is risen from the dead- may it be, as it was with Saul, before he dies.

The martyrdom of Stephen would have impacted Saul. He probably heard Stephen speaking at his trial in the Sanhedrin. Saul was a highly educated young man. Stephen spoke as an educated man also, a man who knew the Bible. Stephen believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and that he rose from dead after the Jews murdered him. He spoke of Jesus being exalted to the right hand of God in heaven. As Stephen was dying for his faith in Jesus, he asked the Lord to forgive those stoning him. Saul was giving his approval, but deep down his conscience bothered him. Jesus said to him, 'it is hard for you to kick against the goads' (26:14).

Saul was convinced that his understanding of the Bible was right. He had worked out that righteousness came through good works and that keeping the law was the way. He would not listen to men like Stephen who said Jesus was the right way. Christians were called followers of the Way because they proclaimed Jesus as the way, the only way of salvation (9:2). He would later confess that what he believed was rubbish, and that his law-keeping righteousness would never save him (Phil 3:8). Stephen called people like Saul stiff-necked. Today we would call him pig-headed. Many people are like Saul, people who have their own ideas about life and salvation, people who sit above the Bible saying, 'yes, I agree with that' and 'no, I don't agree with that'. Are you such a person? Remember, the Bible is the word of God not the word of men.

2. Stamp out the church

After killing Stephen, the Jews went on to persecute the rest of the church in Jerusalem. The Hellenist Jews were led by Saul in this pogrom. They dragged men and women from their homes and threw them into prison (8:3). Saul was determined to put a stop to this heresy as he saw it. We see his determination when we come to chapter 9. Here we see him on his way to Damascus, a city some 240km to the north of Jerusalem- a journey of four to six days. He was not going there to see the sights! He was going there to round up the Christians who had fled there to escape his pogrom in Jerusalem.

We have seen how Phillip and others fled to Samaria and preached the gospel there. We have also seen how Phillip witnessed to the Ethiopian, who went home rejoicing in the Lord. There was a large Jewish population in Damascus; some of these, like Ananias, joined the church after hearing the gospel from Jerusalem refugees. The church was spreading like wildfire. But Saul was fired up to try

and stop it. The wise words of Gamaliel do not seem to have come to the mind of Saul, his student, at this time: 'If it is of God you cannot overthrow it- lest you be found to fight against God' (5:39).

Various men and political regimes would have done well to heed these wise words. Saul was the first to try and destroy the church, but not the last. Even in our day, leaders of communist Russia failed. Cuban leaders are failing, and the leaders of North Korea will fail. Islam will fail in its attempt to destroy the church. Humanists like Dawkins will fail. Jesus said, 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it' (Mat 16:18).

Saul went to the high priest and asked for letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus (9:1-2). If he found any who were of the Way, men or women, he would arrest them and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. Saul was prepared to have people murdered for their faith in Jesus, although we are only told of one actual murder, that of Stephen. Just how many people he had managed to arrest and/or murder we are not told, but his plans for Damascus were thwarted, as we will see.

3. Stopped in his tracks

As Saul and his travelling companions, probably temple guards, neared Damascus around noon, a bright light suddenly shone around him (9:3). Was it a flash of lightning that knocked him to the ground? It may have been like lightning, but people do not hear voices speak out of lightning! No, this was the glory of the Lord suddenly coming from heaven. It remained long enough for a voice to speak. Peter, James and John saw something like this on the mountain; they saw the glory of Jesus, and a voice spoke to them (Luke 9:32).

Saul fell to the ground and heard a voice repeat his name; 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' (9:4). The blinding light, and solemn repetition of his name by this voice out of nowhere, stopped Saul in his tracks. It stopped him in body, and in heart. He had no time to think, but Samuel once heard his name being spoken by a voice, which turned out to be the voice of the Lord. Do listen and pay heed to the voice of the Lord when you hear him. He speaks to us from the Bible and by his Spirit.

'Why are you persecuting me?' This 'voice' knew Saul's name and knew what he was doing. Saul was persecuting men and women in the church. The 'voice' said, 'You are persecuting me'. Who is this 'me'? Prostrate and petrified, Saul asked, 'Who are you Lord?' (9:5). The solemn repetition of his name from heaven suggested that he was in the presence of God- although the Greek '*kurios*' can simply mean 'Sir'. The 'voice' answered his question; 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting' (9:5). The 'voice' was that of a person; it was the voice of none other than Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus spoke to Saul from this dazzling light. Did Saul see any bodily form? This was not an appearance like that given the apostles because Jesus had ascended to heaven. Yet Paul would later speak of Jesus being revealed to him, and of seeing Jesus (Gal 1:16, 1Cor 9:1, 15:8).

What impacted Saul was the fact that Jesus was alive. He had convinced himself that Jesus was dead; the disciples had stolen his body. But now he heard Jesus speak his name, and dead men don't speak. Moreover, Jesus said to Saul that he was persecuting him. Not only was Jesus alive but he was saying he was the church, he was the representative of all believers. The believers that he was persecuting had someone in heaven defending them. Saul's mind and heart were thrown into

turmoil. What was he going to do? Trembling and astonished, he asked Jesus, who told him to get up and go into the city and await further instructions (9:6).

Saul had a more immediate problem- he was blind. Not only was his inner being in turmoil, he was physically blind. He opened his eyes but could not see (9:8). Thankfully, his companions could still see, so they were able to lead Saul into the city. What did his companions witness of this theophany, this encounter with the risen Jesus? They were dumbfounded as they heard the voice, but saw no one (9:7). In another account of this encounter we read that they saw the light- so this was no dream or hallucination- but 'did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me' (22:9). It may be that the voice they heard was that of Saul, but more likely that they heard the voice from heaven but did not hear what was said. They did not see Jesus as Saul did before he was blinded. Knowing about Moses and his encounter with God in Exodus 33, Saul may well have been thankful that he was just blind and not dead!

Saul was taken to the house of Judas on Straight Street, Damascus. The street is still there, or was until the recent civil war. Saul neither ate nor drank for three days (9:9). Saul was in no state to be rounding up Christians. He had been brought low, very low, as he sat blind and helpless in this house. His physical blindness was a parable of the spiritual blindness that had ruled his life until this point in time. The foundations of his self-righteousness had been shattered. He would need a new foundation, a new righteousness.

Saul's conversion- Ananias

Acts 9:10-19

One of the principles which came out of the Reformation regarding Scripture is that of comparing Scripture to Scripture when trying to understand Scripture. In chapter 1.IX of the Westminster Confession of Faith we read: 'The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly'. The common practice had been to take a verse or two as a platform to launch into a story derived from nature or the preacher's own imagination. This is still done. We heard a sermon in India that was all about psychology. She didn't even launch into her sermon from a Bible verse; she in fact landed on one as an afterthought!

In our personal reading of the Bible, we consider what the verse says to us, but still we must not take verses out of context. If we have trouble understanding the verse, then look at other passages (a cross- referencing Bible is good), or look at commentaries. We have four gospels, so we can compare one with the others; there is even a 'Harmony of the Gospels' available. The conversion of Saul of Tarsus was a defining moment in the history of the church. We have three accounts of this here in the Book of Acts itself. We also have letters written by Paul in which he refers to his conversion. On the road to Damascus he was confronted by a vision, and the voice of the risen Jesus (9:5, 22:8, 26:15). The vision rendered him blind. He was led into Damascus by his companions. What happened after this? This is what we will find out today, under the headings: revelation to Ananias, restoration of sight, and reception of the Holy Spirit and baptism.

1. Revelation to Ananias

Who was Ananias? This was a common Jewish name. This Jew lived in Damascus, where he heard the gospel and believed in Jesus- Luke calls him a disciple (9:10). In testifying to Jews, Paul said Ananias was a devout man, respected by all the Jews (22:12). In a briefer testimony before King Agrippa he does not mention Ananias (26:16-18). The Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision- Marshall wrongly calls it a dream. We are not told the precise nature of this vision; the important thing is the words spoken to Ananias. When he heard his name called he replied, 'Here I am, Lord' (9:10). Unlike the boy Samuel, it did not take three calls before he realised who was calling him (1Sam 3). The Lord instructed Ananias to go to the street called Straight, to the house of Judas, and ask for a man called Saul of Tarsus (9:11).

The mention of this name sent shivers up the spine of Ananias. He had heard about this rabbi who hated Christians, and had done horrible things to the saints in Jerusalem (9:13). He had also heard that this 'terror' was coming to Damascus to track down and persecute Christians. He was coming with the authority of the chief priests, so who could stop him? (9:14). Ananias did not realise that Jesus had already stopped him- although in this vision the Lord told Ananias that Saul was praying, and that he was blind. He told Ananias that this man would be expecting him to put his hands on him and restore his sight.

Saul himself had had a vision to this effect. Some commentators refer to a 'double vision', a vision to Ananias and a vision to Saul; a bit like an angel appearing separately to Mary and to Joseph saying, 'call his name Jesus'. This was a critical moment in the infant church, the welcoming of the arch enemy of the church into the church. Understandably, Ananias was reluctant to go. He may well

have already gone into hiding to escape this violent man. Now, here was the Lord telling him to go to this man's house and pray for him to be healed!

Jesus said, 'Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do well to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you' (Mat 5:44). Can we really do this? Some people cannot even forgive a fellow believer, so how can they forgive and do well to an enemy? Our natural reaction is fight or flight- this is what the textbooks tell us. Jesus doesn't want to know about our natural feelings or inclinations. He tells us to forgive and forget the sins of others, to love and to bless those who hate us and do horrible things to us. There seems to have been an explosion of hatred and vitriolic language since social media came into our society. Natural feelings are there- the question is what we do with these feelings. The world of social media does away with self-control; it says, 'text whatever you feel and do it immediately'. One of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control (Gal 5:23). Jesus says, 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you'. If ever the world needed to hear the words of Jesus, it is today!

Ananias was surprised when the Lord spoke to him in a vision, and was reluctant to go and meet Saul of Tarsus. This man had done a lot of harm to 'Your saints in Jerusalem', and had come to Damascus to 'bind all who call on your name' (9:13, 14). Note how Ananias refers to the Christians. They are not as yet called 'Christians'; this label was first given to believers at Antioch- probably by people outside the church (11:26). Ananias calls them 'saints', literally 'holy ones' or 'God's holy people'. Holy has the sense of purity, of being consecrated to God. Is such a label fitting for you? Ananias then uses the label, 'those who call on your name'. These were people known for their praying. They called on the Lord, asking for grace and mercy as they confessed their sin, and sought strength to serve the Lord. Can such a label be applied to you?

I am reluctant to use the word 'Christian', as you may have noticed, because it has come to be a cultural, or even nationalistic label. Many who call themselves 'Christians' could not be labelled 'holy ones', or 'those who call on the name of the Lord'. Some people qualify the label 'Christian' with the adjective 'born again'. I tend to add a different adjective to say 'true Christians', or else use the label 'believer'.

2. Restoration of sight

What did the Lord graciously tell Ananias about this man Saul, as he told him to go and lay hands on him- not in the way that Saul had wanted to lay hands on him! He said Saul was his chosen vessel or chosen instrument (9:15). The Lord had chosen Saul to be his instrument, his hands if you like, in taking the name of Jesus to Gentiles, to kings and to the children of Israel. Actually, the word is 'bear' or 'carry my name', with the sense of bearing a burden or a load.

Jesus says to anyone who comes after him, 'let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Mat 16:24). Note that so-called 'gender neutral' translations are potentially confusing in this and other verses when they translate, 'must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Mat 16:24, NIV 2011). Jesus is referring to individuals, not a group taking up their cross. To be clear it should be, 'take up their individual crosses'.

The Lord, in a special way, would require Saul to bear his cross; 'he must suffer' many things for the Lord's sake (9:16). Every follower of Christ is called upon to suffer for his name's sake. If you are not prepared to suffer for the name of Christ, how can you call yourself by his name, a Christian? Every

convert needs to know that, 'to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake' (Phil 1:29). I read that in communist Russia this verse was solemnly addressed to all inquirers. As we read on in this book we will see how much the apostle Paul suffered as he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ (see 2Cor 11:22f).

Ananias told Saul what the Lord had spoken about him, about what Saul was called to do (22:15). The apostle Paul never forgot how the Lord clearly declared his will for him (26:17-18). The Lord told him he would carry the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul would lead the way in taking the gospel beyond Jerusalem, beyond Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (1:8). The apostle Peter would be instrumental in crossing the barrier between Jew and Gentile for the church, but Paul would be out on the front line carrying the gospel to the Gentiles. It was not that Paul would only preach to Gentiles. He usually went to the Jews first, and only after being thrown out of the synagogue went to the Gentiles. He would also bear witness before kings.

3. Reception of the Holy Spirit and baptism

When Ananias met this persecutor of the church he called him 'Brother Saul' (9:17). The Lord revealed to him that this man was no longer a danger to the church; he was now a member of the church, a brother in Christ. Ananias was not only given the task of laying hands on Saul that he might see again, but of baptising him into Christ. Although being 'filled with the Holy Spirit' is mentioned together with laying on of hands and receiving his sight (9:17), it is otherwise associated with baptism; repent and be baptised and receive the Holy Spirit (2:38). There is no indication of the Holy Spirit being given through the laying on of hands, especially not the hands of an apostle.

Baptism is the outward sign of an inner change of heart brought about by the Holy Spirit- we call this regeneration. Conversion normally follows repentance; 'repent therefore and be converted' (3:19). It is like repentance in that both words indicate a radical change of direction, a radical change of heart and of life. The inner change must be evidenced by an outer change. Saul was radically changed from a persecutor to a preacher, a change brought about by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit would also empower him for the ministry to which the Lord had called him.

Baptism was administered by a member of the church. It was, and is, a sacrament given to the church- we do not baptise ourselves. It was important that Saul be taken into the fellowship of the church. 'Saul spent some days with the disciples in Damascus' (9:19). When he began his God-given ministry he did not go out on his own; he was sent by the church in Antioch, with a partner called Barnabas. Paul not only remembered the prophetic words that Ananias spoke about his ministry; he also remembered how Ananias called him 'brother', a brother in Christ. Paul not only preached the gospel all over the known world, he also worked strenuously to maintain the unity of the church, to the glory of God.

Saul preaches Jesus, the Son of God

Acts 9:19-31

'My, you have changed' we often say to people we have not seen for a long time. Young people in particular change; and at the other end of the spectrum, old people change. We received a photo of a friend the other day and her hair was completely grey. She said she had stopped dying it! People change both outwardly and inwardly, but it is usually a gradual process. Do remember the chorus which says, 'People change but God don't change at all'. Sometimes people change suddenly. Politicians might change party. People change careers- one day a doctor and the next a farmer. Marriage can change people quickly. These days we hear of people being 'radicalised'. But in all this, it is hard to think of anyone changed so suddenly and completely as Saul of Tarsus.

People ask why and how this sudden change occurred. They may be suspicious of the reality of this change, and question the man's motives. Come to think of it, it is often spies or criminals who try to change into new people! When a Hindu or Muslim is converted, they may find it difficult to join a church because people are suspicious. In India we had people wanting to join the church for economic or social reasons. They wanted to get their child into a Christian school or medical college. Sadly, churches can become too cautious of converts from other religions. The truth of what the church member believes about a convert is revealed when it comes to marriage. We really admire a friend of ours who married a Hindu convert, because many church families will not let their child marry a 'convert'.

Saul was on his way to Damascus, breathing out threats and murder against Christians, when the Lord Jesus spoke to him in a vision. Saul was converted; he was changed inwardly, not just outwardly. His heart was changed by the Lord. Nothing else can change a person's heart. The heart of man is desperately wicked. No one, not even one's self, can change it. Only God in his grace, and by his Spirit, can change our heart. May it be true of each one of you today that your heart has been changed by the Lord, or will be before it is too late?

Ananias found it hard to believe that Saul was converted; so much so that the Lord had to speak to him in a vision. He obeyed and went to meet Saul and baptise him. Ananias introduced this new convert to the church in Damascus. But what happened when Saul's old Jewish friends heard him preaching the gospel? We will see as we look at this passage under four headings: preaches Jesus, plot to kill Saul, presented to the apostles, and preaching in the church.

1. Preaches Jesus

After his eyes were opened and he was baptised, Saul had something to eat and joined the believers or disciples. He spent 'some days' there in Damascus (9:19). Straightaway he began preaching Jesus in the synagogues. He was not there to arrest followers of the Way but to support them. He was there to proclaim the crucified and risen Jesus as Lord and Christ. Saul preached Jesus as the 'Son of God' (9:20). This title was not commonly used by Jesus or the apostles, although Mark's gospel begins, 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. This title is difficult for Muslims to understand or accept because they think of God as having a wife. The Jews regarded this title as blasphemous; it was the reason they killed Jesus (Luke 22:70). Jesus did not deny he was the Son of God, and neither did Paul (Rom 1:4). However, in preaching to Jews, Paul tended to focus on the promise of Messiah or anointed one. 'This Jesus whom I preach to you is both Lord and Christ' he said (9:22, 17:3).

All who heard Saul preaching 'Jesus is the Christ' were amazed- understandably so. They all knew the radical rabbi was coming to Damascus to round up all who dared to speak the name of Jesus, let alone say he was the Christ. Next thing they heard was this zealot preaching Jesus is the Christ. After the initial shock, they began to oppose Saul. This resulted in him being even more vigorous in proving that Jesus is the Christ. We recall Stephen, and the Jews in Jerusalem who tried to argue with him, Saul being one of these. They could not resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke (6:10). Saul had rejected Jesus as the Messiah and hated those who said that he was. Saul was still waiting for Messiah, just like Jews today. But being confronted by the risen Jesus on the Damascus road opened his eyes to see that Jesus of Nazareth truly is the Messiah. Scripture did not change; it was just Saul's understanding of it that changed.

Saul knew his Bible inside out- even if passages like Isaiah 53 troubled him. When Jesus appeared to him saying, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting', Paul did not throw his Bible away. He read the same words with spiritual enlightenment, and with eyes of faith. Everything fell into place as he proclaimed the truth about Christ and the Scriptures. As he later reflected on what, as a rabbi, he once believed, he must have wondered how he could have been so blind. In fact he tells us, with shame, about his life as a rabbi. He says how stupid he was and that all he believed back then was rubbish (Phil 3:8). He was thankful beyond measure for the grace of God in opening his eyes that day, enabling him to see that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

We must be humble as we come before the Lord and his word, the Bible. There are many who think they know the Bible but have never read it. There are people walking our streets carrying this Bible- or their version of it- but who are as blind as Saul was. They refuse to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. Others have judged the Bible by their scientific theories. They have been taught, and they believe, that science has disproved the Bible. People have been blinded by the teaching of evolution, which is a theory, not science. Scientific facts are there- the question is, 'what framework or theory do we use in understanding these facts'. All scientific facts can be understood within the biblical time frame; we do not have to talk about millions or billions of years of history. We do not have to deny the Bible in order to believe scientific facts; nor do not have to deny science when we believe the Bible. We just have to be discerning of what the facts are, and what framework or theory scientists fit to these facts.

The other day I heard an 'expert' say, 'Neanderthals were very closely related to modern humans - so closely that we shared our prehistoric beds with them- and yet clearly they were *not* humans'. He knew this because he had just discovered some 4% of human DNA is the same as that of Neanderthal man. His discovery clearly fits the truth we have in the Bible, that there is just one human species; in fact, God created one man, from whom all the races of man came- call him Neanderthal, Lucy, or whatever.

2. Plot to kill Saul

When 'experts' are confronted by the simple truth of the Bible they get upset. A lecturer was surprised to find that half his class did not believe in Darwinian evolution. He said that by the end of his course they would all believe; but even less believed in evolution at the end of the course! Richard Dawkins gets very worked up at Christians pointing out errors in the theory of evolution. It is almost like speaking against the book of Mohammed. When Jews think you are speaking against the Scriptures they also get upset- violently upset. Saul knew, because he had been such a violent man. So when the Jews in Damascus plotted to kill him, he was not surprised.

Luke tells us that this plot to kill Saul arose after 'many days were past' (9:23). As we compare Scripture to Scripture, we find that Paul himself referred to this period of time immediately after his conversion. Firstly, in 2 Corinthians he writes that the governor of Damascus, under Aretas the king, wanted to arrest him, so he had a garrison guarding the city (2Cor 11:32). Saul escaped by being let down in a basket from a window in the wall. Then in Galatians, Paul says that after three years he went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and stayed fifteen days, before going to the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Gal 1:18f). So we conclude that Luke's 'many days' amount to almost three years. To his 'some days' spent preaching in Damascus we must add 'many days' spent in Arabia, the region around Damascus ruled by King Aretas of the Nabatean Arab kingdom. Was he in Arabia on a spiritual retreat, or was he there preaching the gospel? From what he writes in Galatians, it seems that it was a time of study and prayer; but somehow he got the king and/or governor of Damascus off-side. It is hard to believe that Paul stopped preaching for any length of time.

Like the old Jericho, cities in NT times still had huge walls around them. Even today you can find cities with walls like this. An old city in India has walls with a road on the top, and houses built into the wall. So it was that Saul, just like the spies sent to Jericho, escaped through a window in the wall of the city because guards were waiting for him at the city gate. It was not a very dignified way to leave the city, being let down in a large basket in the middle of the night, but it was that or being killed by the Jews with the governor's approval. Saul never sought martyrdom. He sought to preach the gospel in all the world and establish the church. He was ready to die for Jesus, but also ready to escape death when possible, and without denying Christ or harming Christ's body, the church.

3. Presented to the apostles

'When Saul came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were afraid of him and did not believe that he was a disciple' (9:26). We might say, 'How come the Christians in Jerusalem were still afraid of Saul after three years? Surely they had heard about his conversion'. Even if they had, they were not inclined to believe it. In Jerusalem Saul has been wreaking havoc in the church; he entered Damascus as a disciple of Jesus. Think about the family of Stephen, and doubtless others, who saw loved ones killed or imprisoned. Memories would still be vivid after three years. Saul had been such a horror that memories faded slowly. So his return to Jerusalem as a disciple was treated with suspicion.

But Barnabas believed Saul's testimony and brought him to the apostles. Praise God for the 'Barnabases' of this world- his name means 'son of encouragement' (4:36). We need to be discerning, but not suspicious of people who come to worship with us. We must believe that a person's heart can be changed even if their clothes have not changed- or even if they are still covered with tattoos. Barnabas was a long-standing member of the church. He brought Saul to the apostles and told them of his conversion and subsequent ministry.

Saul was accepted by the church in Jerusalem and proceeded to preach Christ in the synagogue, the same synagogue where Stephen preached it seems. The Hellenists or Greek-speaking Jews opposed him as they had opposed Stephen- after their initial amazement that he had changed sides. They were soon trying to get hold of Saul to kill him (9:29) - the second attempt that was made to kill him for preaching the gospel. Preaching was a dangerous task in those days, and still is. If a preacher does not upset people he should question what he is preaching. Faithful preachers may see their congregation diminish, or find themselves thrown out. Saul was escorted from Jerusalem to

Caesarea, from where he was sent back to Tarsus. We do not hear about him again until the end of chapter 11.

4. Peace

The great persecution that broke out after the death of Stephen came to an end with the conversion of Saul. The Lord did not remove him; he changed him. We often pray for the Lord to remove or improve an enemy or a tyrant. The Lord chose to improve Saul by changing his heart, changing him from the inside out. What are you praying for those who oppose you, those who are your enemies?

Because of persecution, the church spread into Judea and Samaria and further. In a time of peace its foundations could be established through the teaching of the apostles. People were edified as they walked in the fear of God and comfort of the Holy Spirit (9:31). The church continued to grow. In peace or persecution, the church should be growing. If it is not growing in times of peace, beware- the Lord may send persecutions. Secular humanists, evolutionists and even religious fanatics may start attacking the church.

Miracles and salvation

Acts 9: 32-43

The book of Acts is about the apostles being witnesses of Jesus in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (1:8). They would carry out this work in the power of the Holy Spirit, who Jesus promised to send upon them. Was this witness to be to Jews only? What about the Gentiles. The reference to Samaria indicates half-bred Jews at least. The persecution led by Saul, after the murder of Stephen, resulted in Phillip going down to Samaria and the church being established there; Peter also went down to Samaria. This persecution came to an end with the conversion of Saul. Saul was told by the Lord that he would carry the name of Jesus to the Gentiles, as well as Jews (9:15). The gospel of Jesus Christ is to be preached in all the world to all people. In the end a great multitude from all nations, tribes, people and languages will be in heaven.

Saul was sent from Jerusalem to Tarsus for his own safety. Peter returns to the spotlight here in the passage before us. We find him travelling the countryside of Judea, teaching in the churches and preaching the gospel. Boice says that as the apostle to the Jews he was checking up on these Christian communities, communities of converted Jews in the main. His ministry of the word continued to be accompanied by signs and wonders. These miracles confirmed the word that he preached and led to many being saved, or, in the words of Luke, 'turning to the Lord' or 'believing on the Lord' (9:35,42).

1. Peter in Lydda

On his travels Peter came to a place called Lydda, some 40km to the north west of Jerusalem. This was the ancient city of Lod, and the location of modern Israel's international airport. From Lydda, the Plain of Sharon stretched out towards the Mediterranean Sea. Peter found a church in Lydda; he met with the saints or believers in this town (9:32). This church may have been started after Pentecost, after the persecution, or by the preaching of Phillip. Peter came across a man who had been paralysed for eight years. This man, called Aeneas, probably belonged to the church. Back in Jerusalem Peter and John had healed a lame man at the gate of the temple in the name of Jesus- the first recorded miracle of healing after Pentecost. Jesus had told the disciples before his death that those who believed in Him would do the same works as him, and greater (John 14:12).

When Peter saw Aeneas, he said to him, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed' (9:34). This paralysed man immediately got up from his bed. If this man was already a believer Peter did not have to tell him about Jesus, but still he made it clear to him, and any who were present, that it was Jesus Christ who had healed him. As Saul had recently discovered, Jesus is risen; Jesus is alive. Peter understood that Jesus, by his Spirit, was still able to heal sick people, and, as we will soon see, still able to raise people from the dead.

News of this paralysed man now being able to walk, spread across town and further afield. It is not clear if Sharon was a nearby town or the Plain of Sharon, which stretches from Joppa (modern Jaffa) to Caesarea (9:35). Lots of people heard about the healing of Aeneas and saw this former paralytic walking, and they turned to the Lord. They believed in Jesus, the Son of God. There is no mention of scepticism or unbelief, though such a response was no doubt present. Preaching of the gospel, even when accompanied with miracles, is always met with unbelief in the hearts of some. Remember the man born blind that Jesus healed (John 9). The Pharisees did all they could to explain away this miracle. It is a bit like the press today; anything done in the name of Jesus is ridiculed, or not reported at all. If today's press was active in Lydda, the healing of Aeneas would at best have

been second page news, after some scandal in the city. We need to be discerning when we hear or read the news today. We need to understand that news about sinners turning to the Lord, about people turning away from sin, from violence and corruption, from drugs and alcohol, from sexual immorality and adultery, does not make the popular news.

2. Peter in Joppa

While still in Lydda, Peter received some visitors from the church in Joppa, just 19km away (9:38). The church sent two men to plead with Peter to come immediately. The reason for the urgency is explained in verses 36-37, and probably told to Peter on the way. In this church at Joppa was a woman who was 'full of good works and acts of charity' (9:37 ESV). She made clothes for people in need. Widows and orphans were often left without basic needs like food and clothes. She did these works because she believed in Jesus, not in order to be saved. This woman's name means 'gazelle': 'Tabitha' in Hebrew or 'Dorcas' in Greek. We rarely stop to think about making our clothes today. Tailor shops have all but disappeared. But in Africa you will find tailor shops, with women making clothes for children and adults. In India a Christian friend runs a charity called 'Dorcas ministries'. She teaches women how to make clothes, and then employs them in making clothes for the poor.

Dorcas was well known for her charitable works. 'But it happened in those days that she became sick and died' (9:37). They washed her corpse and laid it in an upper room ready for embalming and burial. In Jerusalem dead bodies had to be buried the same day, but in the country they could wait three days. When Peter arrived from Lydda he was shown to the upper room where the washed, but not embalmed, body of Dorcas lay. What did they expect Peter to do? What did Peter plan to do? The people may have remembered how Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:41). Maybe the people recalled the words of the angel to Mary; 'with God nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). They had heard about the signs and wonders performed by the apostles, so they sent for Peter to come urgently. As for Peter, he was present when Jesus raised the little girl, telling the mourners to leave the room and then saying to the little girl, '*Talitha cumi*' meaning, 'Little girl, arise'. He may have remembered Jesus saying to his disciples, 'he who believes in me, the works that I do, he will do also' (John 14:12), if you ask in Jesus name.

In the upper room, the widows who Dorcas had helped stood around weeping. They showed Peter the clothes and underwear that Dorcas had made- they may have been wearing some of these. Peter told them to leave the room. He then knelt down and prayed. What did he pray? He must have prayed for the Lord to raise this woman from the dead. 'Ask and it will be given to you' said Jesus; and again 'Ask anything in my name and I will do' (Mat 7:7, John 14:14). If you do not ask you will not receive. How often have you failed to get a blessing because you have failed to ask? After praying, Peter turned to the dead body and spoke saying, 'Tabitha, arise' (9:40- just one letter different to what Jesus said). How amazing. Peter was a simple fisherman. He was a man who had denied Christ three times. Yet he had the faith to ask Jesus to raise this dead woman back to life- and it happened! Peter was an apostle, called and sent by Jesus, but still he was a man just like you and me. It was only after receiving the Holy Spirit that he did these signs and wonders. You who believe have received the same Holy Spirit. Do we need to pray, 'Lord, increase my faith'?

When Jesus said to the dead girl, 'Talitha, arise', he did not pray- he raised the girl in his own power. Peter prayed because he raised the dead woman in the power of Jesus. We do not read of people bowing down to worship Peter. Peter would not have allowed such adoration, adoration that is accepted by his so-called successor in Rome today. It is shameful how the Roman Catholic Church

looks for miracles done in the name of a (dead) person before they beatify that person and people start praying to them. Most of the people to whom Peter presented Dorcas alive were saints or believers who worshipped only Jesus (9:41). But news about this woman being raised from the dead spread across the town of Joppa. Again there is no mention of scepticism or unbelief. Rather, 'many believed on the Lord' (9:42).

Back in the OT we read of both Elijah and Elisha raising young men who had died (1Kings 17, 2Kings 4). They prayed and they also lay on the young man they raised. Peter simply prayed and then helped Dorcas up. When Jesus raised Lazarus it was after he had been in the grave for four days, denying even modern sceptics the opportunity to discount this miracle. The appropriate response to miracles done in the name of Jesus is belief, belief in the power of Jesus' name, power to heal and power to save. It seems that the church in Joppa was flooded with men and women wanting to be baptised into Christ, and to worship Him as their Saviour and Lord.

3. Peter stays with Simon the tanner

There may have been Gentiles joining the converted Jews in worshipping Jesus as Lord here in Joppa and in Lydda, although the signature ingrafting of Gentiles comes in the next chapter. The closing verse prepares us for the next chapter, in which we learn that Simon's house was by the sea (10:6). Joppa was the main sea port in Palestine. Here in verse 43, we read that Peter 'stayed many days in Joppa with Simon, a tanner'. The growing church would have kept him busy teaching new believers. The fact that this Simon is labelled a tanner may simply be to differentiate him from other Simons, but many scholars point to this profession as making Jews unclean. Was Peter running the risk of being unclean by staying with this man who touched dead animals, or was he beginning to disregard these ceremonial laws? Presumably he was no longer sacrificing animals in the temple.

In conclusion we might consider gospel ministry or mission work today. Has mission changed? Jesus told the apostles to be his witnesses to the end of the earth. In the power of the Holy Spirit, they preached the gospel and healed the sick- and even raised the dead. Before this, Jesus went around preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and disease (Mat 4:23, 9:35). Missionaries who go out preaching the gospel often find people who are helpless and hopeless, like sheep without a shepherd. They begin to help and to heal these people in simple ways. Sometimes they set up a hospital. People come to this hospital and are healed- they are healed in the name of Jesus proclaimed by hospital staff. The outcome is that many are not only healed but come to believe in Jesus. This is the same as the outcome achieved by Jesus, and by the apostles. Neither Peter nor Paul were healing people just to make them physically well. The apostles performed signs and wonders; the wonder of the healing was a sign confirming the gospel which they preached. Good works never save anyone, and in and of themselves never lead to anyone being saved. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.

Cornelius sends for Peter

Acts 10:1-23

When Jesus was born- or conceived- there was intense activity among the angels or God's messengers. An angel appeared and spoke to Mary. An angel appeared and spoke to Joseph. Angels appeared and spoke to the shepherds. The incarnation was the most significant event in human history- when taken together with the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Our salvation is based on this event, as well as our calendar.

In Acts chapter 10 we read of another significant event in human history, and in the history of the church. We might struggle to understand the huge barrier that separated Jew from Gentile in those days- and still today. It was a huge social and religious wall. The early church was predominantly Jewish. The Jews who believed in Christ continued to go to the temple. They continued to follow the laws and rituals given by Moses. Despite the words of the prophets, and of Simeon (Luke 2:32), no real consideration was given to having Gentiles in the church. To cross this barrier God sent an angel to speak to a Gentile called Cornelius, a vision and a voice from heaven to speak to Peter, and further spoke to Peter through the Holy Spirit. Before we consider these three divine initiatives we will consider an important point of theology that arises from the conversion of Cornelius.

The question, as put by Larkin, is 'Are genuine seekers after God saved if they have responded to the light they have been given, but have never heard the gospel?' Some even suggest that Cornelius was already regenerate or saved, and that Peter came to teach him more fully. We do not agree (see 11:14). As we will see, Cornelius was a devout man, a man who believed there was only one God. He was attracted to Judaism for this reason and also because of the moral and ethical standards of the Mosaic Law. He liked the Scriptures and the religious practices of the Jews. He was praying at three in the afternoon (10:3- the Jewish day started at 6am). The only thing that kept Cornelius from being a proselyte and having full recognition as a Jew was circumcision.

Were all Jews saved because they were Jews? No. They had to repent and believe in Jesus. For anyone, Jew or Gentile, to be saved they must hear the name of Jesus and believe in this name. 'Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God' (Rom 10:17). If Cornelius was already saved, if he already believed in Jesus, why did he need Peter to come and explain the gospel? Note that it was as Peter spoke of believing in Jesus and receiving forgiveness of sin that the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and those gathered in his house (10:43). This is what Peter never forgot; they believed in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit and were baptised in water in his presence. The question about responding to the light one has been given is a misleading question. This is a question relating to God's judgment, which we are not privy to. We are privy to the gospel which says, 'believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved' (Acts 16:31). No one can be saved if they have not heard this name (Rom 10:14).

What we learn from the story of Cornelius is how God 'arranges' for his elect, and for those seeking him, to hear the gospel. This 'arranging' we call providence, the providence of God. 'God works all things together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose' (Rom 8:28). We may not see God working as actively as in this case with Cornelius, with the vision of angels and the like. God was working even in bringing Peter to Joppa, and in other ways was preparing Peter to witness to Cornelius. Peter had already been to Samaria, and now he was staying with Simon the tanner. When God has one of his elect seeking him, he will ensure they hear the gospel. This does not mean we sit here and wait for people to come. We are called to go into all the world and preach the gospel. We who believe are called to tell everyone about Jesus. God knows

who is ready to listen and respond to the gospel. Remember, faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.

1. Cornelius' angelic vision

Cornelius was a centurion in the Roman Army- in the Italian Regiment. He was based in Caesarea with responsibility to maintain law and order in occupied Judea. Centurions, who led a regiment of around one hundred soldiers, seem to have been carefully selected for their integrity as well as their leadership abilities, judging by the ones we come across in the Bible. Jesus met a centurion in Capernaum who demonstrated amazing faith. He believed Jesus could heal his servant without even coming to his house. He felt unworthy, maybe as a Gentile, to have Jesus come to his house. At this time Jesus spoke of many coming from the east and west, from all over, to enter the kingdom of heaven (Mat 8:11).

Cornelius was a devout man. We see this in his commitment to prayer as well as giving to the needy. Unlike most other Romans, he believed in one God, the God of Israel. He not only believed but feared God as the judge of all people, the God who spoke and gave the commandments. He was known as a 'God-fearer' in a categorical sense. He worshipped with the Jews but separately because he was not a full convert or proselyte. He was not ready to take on the Jewish mark of circumcision. Women like Rahab and Ruth joined the people of God, even to be included in the genealogy of Jesus. Circumcision was a step not all male converts were prepared to take. And the question will soon come up as to whether they had to take it. The church, it seems, had adopted the practice of converts becoming Jews first and then Christians. But was this right? Was it the practice by tradition or by divine word? Peter will soon learn.

This centurion was praying at three in the afternoon when 'a vision of an angel of God' came and spoke to him, calling him 'Cornelius' (10:3). Cornelius was understandably shaken by the sudden appearance of this man in bright clothing (10:30). The angel went on to say that his prayers and giving to the needy had 'come up for a memorial before God' (10:4). What had Cornelius been praying for? We are not told, but God heard his prayers and saw his good deeds. Good works in themselves are of no value before God; God looks on the heart. But Cornelius feared God; he believed in God and worshipped God, which does not mean he was saved but was a sincere seeker. God took note of his prayers and was about to answer them in a most wonderful way. There can be no greater answer to prayer than the salvation of a precious soul. What is the state of your soul? Are you praying for precious souls in your family, or among your friends- that they will be saved?

The angel told Cornelius to send men to Joppa, almost 50km to the south, to call a man named Simon Peter (10:5-6). The angel gave instructions as to where Peter could be found; where we left Peter at the end of the previous chapter. Cornelius had worshipped God and given to the poor, but in order to be saved he needed to repent of his sin and believe in Jesus. He needed to hear the gospel, and Peter would be called by God to tell him the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the angel departed, Cornelius immediately called two trusted household servants and a devout soldier. They were probably God-fearers like him; otherwise they would not have understood when he explained to them what had happened. They were sent to Joppa to explain these things to Peter.

2. Peter's vision

God heard the prayers of Cornelius and sent an angel to prepare him for hearing the gospel. Did he know the apostle Peter? Probably not. Peter did not know Cornelius either. Peter was staying with Simon the tanner whose house was by the sea in Joppa. After his experience in Samaria, and now

staying with a man who touched dead bodies, Peter may have been starting to question Jewish laws about clean and unclean things- but not in regard to food laws. Food laws were fundamental to the practice of Judaism- then and now. They are fundamental to Hindu and Islamic religious practices also. Jews could not eat with Gentiles because they did not abide by Jewish food laws, which stated that only animals with a cloven hoof that chewed the cud, fish and certain birds were clean (Lev 14). Jews would not eat with Gentiles; they would not even enter the house of a Gentile. It is interesting that even after this experience with Cornelius, Peter fell back into old ways when he was at Antioch with Paul (Gal 2:11f). Dietary laws die a slow death.

The day after the angel appeared to Cornelius, Peter was on the flat roof of the tanner's house in Joppa. He went there to pray, maybe under the shelter of a tarpaulin of some kind. It would have been pleasant as the sea breeze began to blow. It was noon. Peter was waiting for the evening meal. He began to feel hungry- ravenous. He fell into a trance in which he saw a large sheet come down from heaven (10:10). Maybe the tarpaulin flapping in the wind like a large sheet stimulated this vision; even so, it was a God-induced trance because in it God spoke to Peter.

In the vision Peter saw this large sheet being let down in front of him. Inside were all kinds of animals, reptiles and birds- a veritable Noah's ark. There were clean and unclean animals. A voice spoke, telling Peter to 'get up, kill and eat' (10:13). Peter replied, speaking to the Lord. 'Not so Lord!' he said, 'I have never eaten anything unclean or common/defiled' (10:14). Peter was not a Pharisee but he was a law-abiding Jew. Even so, how could he say 'No' to the voice of Lord like this? He was in a trance remember, but it also shows how deeply entrenched these food laws were. They were written in the Scriptures under the Old Covenant, of course. Maybe Peter thought the Lord was testing him in some way. But the voice spoke to him a second time saying, 'What God has made clean you must not call unclean'. Just how Peter responded the second time, and then after a third time of seeing this vision and hearing this voice, we are not told- except that the words of the Lord stuck with him (10:28). While Peter was still reflecting on what this vision meant, he was disturbed by men at the front gate asking for a man called Simon Peter

3. Peter led by the Spirit

Sure enough, the three men sent by Cornelius had arrived at the house of Simon the tanner, the day after they had left Caesarea. They asked if a man called Simon Peter was staying here. The Holy Spirit moved Peter to go down and meet these men, and go with them. We read that the Spirit spoke to Peter after the vision, telling him to go with these visitors without hesitation because, 'I have sent them' (10:19). God was working through his angel and through his Spirit to bring about this meeting through which Cornelius would hear the gospel and be saved.

When Peter met the men he asked why they had come. They told him how Cornelius the centurion, a just man who fears God, was instructed by the holy angel to call Peter and listen to what he had to say (10:22). What a great opening for the gospel! Well, yes it was, but it would be a huge step for Peter who had never entered a Gentile's house before. Although Peter was now a Christian, he was still following Jewish practices. The Lord had prepared the heart of Cornelius to hear the gospel. Now he was preparing the heart of Peter to preach the gospel.

Is this not how it is with all evangelism? Why did that missionary couple go to that tribe in Africa? Because the Lord had prepared them to hear the gospel. Why did you speak to that friend at work? Because the Lord wanted him/her to hear the gospel from you.

Cornelius and his household hear about Jesus Acts 10:24-41

Living in an egalitarian society as we do, it is not easy to appreciate the huge social and religious barrier that existed between Peter and Cornelius -although some people are prone favouritism, even in the church. Some people almost worship politicians and powerful people- again, even in the church. Still, it is nothing like other societies. In England you might be rebuked for not acknowledging an earl or a lord. In India a class system is actually built into Hinduism in the form of the caste system. People are born into a particular caste and that is where they remain.

We had a low-caste village lady helping in our house. In many houses such a lady would face demands even from little children. She would sit on the floor in the kitchen to eat after the family had eaten. We did visit our helper's small hut in the village and drink tea while sitting on her floor. One day we wanted to talk with her- I think we were reading the Bible to her. We asked her to sit at the table but she felt very uneasy and just squatted on the floor; so we sat on the floor with her.

Peter the Jew was invited to the house of Cornelius the Gentile. He had never entered the house of a Gentile before because it was against Jewish law and custom. Gentiles ate unclean animals like pork, and meat with blood in it. Such things made the person and everything they touched unclean. One commentator wrote of Peter as he met Cornelius and prepared to enter his house, that he avoided two extremes, namely treating human beings as 'gods' or 'dogs'. It was a bit like this in India. High-caste Hindus were treated like gods and low-caste like dogs. Sadly it is becoming more like this in our society as we have politicians, celebrities and rich people saying, 'Don't you know who I am. I demand special treatment'.

Peter was faced with proclaiming the gospel to a Gentile. As a Jew he was not even inclined to talk to this man, let alone enter his defiled house. But God taught Peter through a vision not to regard anyone common or unclean. He learnt that God shows no partiality (10:34). If God shows no partiality or favouritism, then neither must we. God hates partiality; if you show favouritism you commit sin (James 2:9). God accepts men and women from every nation, from every race and every religion, who fear him. He accepts them on equal terms. I remember a big church in Dallas, Texas, where a number of African-American converts were paraded in front of the church and then paraded out- it was a totally white congregation.

In looking at this passage today we will do so under the headings: 1. Jew meets Gentile and 2. Jesus; Jesus being the focus of Peter's sermon in the house of Cornelius. Before we do this, do keep in mind the grand narrative of this book of Acts. The apostles were instructed by the risen Jesus to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (1:8). While Jesus did not specifically mention Gentiles, this could hardly be understood as just Jews to the end of the earth. Jesus also told them to go and make disciples of all nations- '*ethnos*' in Greek (Mat 28:19). The Jews did not have a problem with Gentiles who became proselytes or full converts to Judaism. What they had a problem with, and what was not envisaged even in the church, was Gentiles entering the church as equals without first becoming Jews by circumcision and acceptance of Jewish law.

1. Jew meets Gentile

The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with the men that Cornelius sent to Joppa. These visitors stayed in Simon's house for the night and the next day they set out for Caesarea. Peter took six brothers from the church with him- Jewish converts no doubt (10:23, 11:12). Did he take them as witnesses or just

traveling companions? They certainly became valuable witnesses, but it is unlikely Peter was thinking about witnesses at this point in time. Cornelius was waiting for his servants to return with Peter. How did he know Peter would come? Did he get a phone call or text message? No. The angel of the Lord had told him to send for Peter, and he believed the word of the Lord. Maybe Cornelius had calculated just when Peter should arrive, as commentators suggest, or maybe the people had been gathered for hours or days. There was great expectation in this household.

Finally, Peter showed up and Cornelius went out to meet him. He fell at Peter's feet and worshipped him (10:25). This was not just showing respect or reverence - and it was not to be accepted. Peter did not accept it as a mere cultural difference. Some customs are not impacted by the gospel, but some are. Peter did not accept anyone worshipping him, and neither did the apostle Paul. Only Jesus is to be worshipped. Jesus would not have lifted Cornelius up saying, 'I myself am only a man', but Peter did (10:26).

I am not sure if Peter's so-called successor in Rome would do the same thing. Church leaders need to be attentive regarding any such veneration- although in our present society they are more likely to be ridiculed than venerated! In India, touching of the feet is common, so it is necessary to gently lift people up and refuse such adoration, especially in the church: not gods and not dogs! It is disturbing to see even visiting Christians accept such veneration because they do not want to offend. Peter was not concerned about giving offence; he was concerned about truth in worship.

Peter talked with Cornelius man to man as they went into the assembly. This was probably in the courtyard of his house (10:27). What a surprise this must have been for Peter- not just the crowd but that he was in a Gentile's house for the first time. He did not hide the fact that he was breaking Jewish law - they all knew this anyway. He said that he had come because God had shown him in a vision that he should not call anyone unclean (10:28).

Imagine a preacher saying or suggesting that his audience were common or unclean people! He is more likely to say, 'Welcome, all you bright and beautiful people. You really are good people for coming along today'. Such a congregation might wonder just why they were there. In this case it was Peter who, in effect said, 'I have come. Now what is it that you want' (10:30). 'Did ever a preacher have a more promising audience than this?' writes F.F. Bruce. Peter was before the most attentive crowd in history, but was not exactly endearing himself to them.

Cornelius answered Peter's query as to what they were expecting from him. He recited his encounter with the angel of God, or 'man in bright clothing' (10:30). If the people had not heard this story before then they all heard it now, including Peter and his companions. The angel said to Cornelius, 'your prayer has been heard and your alms remembered in the sight of God' (10:31). We know Cornelius was a devout God-fearer. It was while he was fasting and praying that the angel appeared and spoke to him. Cornelius obediently sent for Peter, and now politely thanked him for coming at his divinely directed request.

Cornelius concluded by saying to Peter that they were all gathered in this place and 'before God, to hear all the things' God had commanded Peter to say (10:33). What a tremendous insight into the nature of Christian worship! Firstly, worship involves people gathered together before God, or in the presence of God. Our church regulations state that session or elders meetings must open and close with prayer. How much more should our worship be opened and closed in prayer. We do not

just come together as a club of like-minded people; we come together in the presence of Almighty God, our Father in heaven. We sing our praises to God, and we pray to God- at least I hope that is what you are doing. 'We are all present before God'. Secondly, Cornelius said they were gathered 'to hear'. They were not there to chat about their day and their problems. They were there to hear, to listen to God's word- all God's word, not just their favourite parts. And finally, Cornelius understood that what Peter spoke would be what God commanded him. Peter was not there to tell his own ideas about religion. He was there to tell them what God told him to say. Peter began his actual message with, 'The word which God sent to the children of Israel' (10:36).

The people were eager to hear all that God had commanded Peter to say. Is this your frame of mind when you come to worship? Are you eager to hear what God had commanded the preacher to say? The preacher is mindful of the word of God and the enabling of the Holy Spirit. It was Peter who wrote, 'If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ' (1Peter 4:11).

2. Jesus

Peter's sermon consists of a short introduction, the body of the sermon and a conclusion. Some say that he did not get to issue an invitation, but sermons in the Bible make no mention of an 'invitation'; this is a recent idea. The phrase 'opened his mouth' indicates a 'weighty utterance' (Bruce), as with the Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5:2). Peter admits how God had just revealed to him that 'God shows no favouritism' but accepts people from all nations, people who 'fear him and do what is right' (10:35 ESV). This means that people from any nation or any ethnic group can be saved. We clearly understand, I trust, that it does not mean that people who fear God and do what is right are saved. Cornelius was such a man but he was not yet saved; he was waiting to hear words by which he and all his household 'will be saved' (11:14). He was waiting to hear about Jesus.

God sent his word to the children of Israel, not because they were better than other nations but because he set his love on them; he chose them (Deut 7:7). To them he 'preached peace through Jesus Christ' (10:36). Isaiah spoke of the Prince of Peace; he spoke of Messiah who would be punished or 'chastised for our peace' (Isa 9:6, 53:5). When Jesus was born, 'peace on earth' was announced. The angel spoke of 'great joy... to all people' (Luke 2). Peace with God, in other words salvation, comes through Jesus Christ, and him alone. Peter had the sudden realisation or reminder that Jesus is 'Lord of all' (10:36- the Greek of this verse is awkward, and the NKJV is not the best translation. Some think Peter was speaking Aramaic with an interpreter). If Jesus is Lord of all, he is Lord of all the nations, and the gospel of Jesus Christ must for all the nations.

Peter goes on to tell the gathering about the things that happened in Judea, beginning in Galilee after the ministry of John the Baptist. It is interesting that Mark's gospel begins at this point also. They knew about these events that took place Palestine, but not in the context of the gospel (10:37). While Jesus was being baptised, God spoke from heaven, and the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus. God was setting his seal of approval on his Son. He was the Messiah, though this idea did not mean much to Gentiles; 'Lord of all' was more meaningful to them. Jesus then went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him (10:38). We know Jesus is God the Son, but keep in mind that Peter is speaking to Gentiles- it was the Jews who rejected Jesus as the Son of God.

In the power of God, Jesus healed sick people and people possessed by demons- both were often seen as being oppressed by the devil. Peter does not mention Jesus preaching the kingdom of God, unless this was included in Jesus 'doing good' (10:38). What Peter is doing is establishing the credentials of Jesus (cf. Mat 11:5). Peter personally witnessed all that Jesus did because he was always with Jesus. Peter quickly went on to the heart of the gospel- they killed Jesus by hanging him on a tree (10:39). This was a shameful way to die for a Roman, and a cursed way to die for a Jew. But then God raised Jesus from the dead, removing the shame and the curse. Peter presents the cross and the resurrection as historical facts- he was a witness. In fact Peter, along with a few others chosen by God, got to meet and eat with Jesus after he rose from the dead (10:41).

These are the simple, straightforward, undeniable facts about Jesus of Nazareth. What you do with these facts is another matter. But do be sure of these historical facts, witnessed not only by Peter and all the apostles but by hundreds of others. They are facts that no one has ever been able to prove wrong, despite many attempts over the last two thousand years.

Cornelius and his household believe in Jesus Acts 10:42-48

The title of this sermon says that Cornelius and his household believed. The text, however, does not exactly say this, as you may have noticed. Peter said, 'whoever believes in Him, will receive forgiveness of sins', not that Cornelius believed in Jesus (10:43). But I stand by my title because they received the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is only given to those who believe in Jesus. Besides, in a later retelling of this story Peter spoke of the Gentiles hearing the word of the gospel and believing (15:7). If you heard my last sermon on Acts 10 you may recall that we left off in the middle of Peter's sermon at the house of Cornelius. It is not good to leave off half way through a sermon, although some people do leave off, or drop off to sleep about this time! Actually, we were at the point where Peter had finished telling all that Jesus of Nazareth did, and all that was done to him. Peter witnessed all this, the wonderful works of Jesus, his horrible death and his glorious resurrection. We noted that the cross and the resurrection of Jesus are central to the gospel, and to people having peace with God through Jesus Christ.

As he preached, Peter realised that Jesus is Lord of all, not just of Jews. God chose to reveal Jesus through the Jewish nation, but he came to be the Saviour of the world (Jn 4:42, 1Jn 2:2). In saying this, we are not teaching universalism- the idea that everyone will be saved in the end. We say this because the Bible says this, and with the understanding that only the elect of God will be saved. Jesus said, 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him' (Jn 6:44). Some who don't actually hold to universalism still think the vast majority of people will be saved. Many see salvation as an 'opt out' proposition, rather than 'opt in'. Related to this is the idea that people will be saved according to the light that did not reach them. It is disturbing to read even evangelicals, in writing about acceptance of the gospel, adding in brackets, 'or had opportunity of hearing the gospel been provided' (Marshall). If there is one thing we learn from this story of Cornelius it is that God providentially arranges for those who sincerely seek him to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. While rejecting universalism, we also reject pluralism, a popular teaching of our day. Many think that anyone who is sincere in their search for god, any god, and in the practice of their religion, will be saved and go to heaven.

Cornelius, his family and friends were assembled listening to the apostle Peter tell what God had commanded him. Peter actually told them that God had commanded him 'to preach to the people', maybe meaning the Jews, that Jesus was the 'Judge of the living and the dead' (10:42, Jn 5:27). Peter was now telling the same truth to the Gentiles. Salvation is not universal, but truth is, and so is divine judgment. As we pick up at the conclusion of Peter's sermon, and what followed, we will take up three points: believing in Jesus, bestowing of the Holy Spirit, and baptism.

1. Believe in Jesus

Peter concluded with reference to Jesus as judge of the living and the dead. The apostle Paul, in preaching to Gentiles, similarly concluded by saying that God will judge the world in righteousness by the man he has ordained (17:31). Preachers in the past did not shy away from such teaching- but what about today? The moment a preacher mentions the judgment to come he is labelled a fire and brimstone preacher. People want preachers to soothe their troubled souls, or give them a pat on the back for their good deeds. They are happy hearing about the miracles and the parables; they are okay with the cross and the resurrection, but not happy to hear about Jesus the Judge. But if there is no judgment, what is the need for the cross? Peter preached the cross, the resurrection and the judgment to come. In the context of Jesus being 'Lord of all' (10:36), judgment extends to all

nations and all time. Larkin writes, 'Only one who has conquered the power of death is qualified to judge all humankind, living or dead, and render and execute verdicts of eternal life and death'.

Peter goes on to speak about the prophets witnessing to Jesus (10:43). You may ask about Abraham and David who lived long before Jesus died on the cross- are they saved, and how? Jesus said, 'Abraham saw my day and was glad' (Jn 8:56). These men were saved, not according to the light they were given but according to faith in Jesus - they believed and embraced the promises of God (Heb 11:13). The gospel was preached to them before (Heb 4:2, 1Peter 4:5-6).

After establishing the historical facts concerning Jesus, Peter told Cornelius and friends that the prophets also were witnesses to these things. The prophets spoke of God's judgment upon sin- and they were attacked for doing so. At the same time they called upon the people to repent and God would forgive them. They spoke of a time when God would forgive sin, a time when God would make a new covenant. That covenant was established by Jesus; 'this cup is a new covenant in my blood which is shed for you' (Luke 22:20). All that Jesus did, and all that happened to him, was foretold by the prophets. Peter did not go into detail at this point but may have later on. Jesus had taught him and the other apostles of all that was 'written in the Law of Moses, and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me' (Luke 24:44). Peter was a personal witness, and the prophets were also a witnesses to Jesus, to Jesus as judge of all the earth, but also the saviour of the world.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus is the Saviour. His death, his blood, is the means by which both Jew and Gentile can be saved. 'Saved' means to be saved from the judgment, judgment upon sin. It means to have peace with God, as Peter said in the beginning (10:36). 'Whoever believes in Him (Jesus) will receive forgiveness of sins' (10:43). This is the promise of the gospel, the promise to Jew and Gentile, the promise to men and women, the promise to you today. Peter preached the gospel and the Holy Spirit moved into action. Peter did not start pleading with them or 'inviting' them to come forward. We also note he did not say anything about circumcision, which everyone knew was required in order to become a Jew.

2. Bestowing the Holy Spirit

'While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word' (10:44). This was one powerful sermon! It was powerful, not because of the preacher's power of persuasion but because God's Spirit touched the hearts of those who heard. Faith comes by hearing, remember! Rarely is it that all who hear are touched, but this was a unique occasion. Peter was preaching to Gentiles for the first time. This was a crucial time for the church. Through the preaching of the gospel, Gentiles were about to come into the church- they would have to receive the Holy Spirit and be baptised of course.

How was this touching of the Holy Spirit seen? It was seen when they all began speaking in other languages (10:46). Peter and the six brothers from Joppa, who were Jewish converts, were astonished. This was just like Pentecost, as Peter realised- the Spirit has been poured out on Gentiles also- we could emphasize the 'also' (10:45). Later on in Jerusalem Peter explained that 'the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning' (11:15). When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the apostles they began to speak in other languages, such that people of other languages heard them speak in their own language; they spoke the 'wonderful works of God' (2:11). Here at Caesarea they spoke magnifying God (10:46). Just who it was who heard and understood what these people were saying we are not told; Caesarea was a cosmopolitan city. We do not have to say, 'It would have

been convincing if these Gentiles spoke in languages including Hebrew and Aramaic, which the Joppa believers could follow' (Larkin). There is no mistaking what happened in this meeting.

All who hear the gospel and believe receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, but the presence of the Holy Spirit is not always shown by speaking in tongues. Pentecost and this meeting with Cornelius were unique events in the history of the church. The presence of the Holy Spirit does not have to be shown by speaking in tongues. As Paul explains, tongues are just one gift of the Spirit: 'Do all speak with tongues?' is a rhetorical question (1Cor 12:30). Moreover, this speaking in tongues was not an ecstatic utterance because people understood what they said- they were magnifying God.

3. Baptism

'If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he is not His' (Rom 8:9). This experience with Cornelius is another proof of what Paul says here in Romans. Anyone and everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins and is given the Holy Spirit. There is no such thing as a believer who does not have the Holy Spirit. How this presence of the Holy Spirit is manifest is another matter. In speaking to Cornelius and his household, Peter was still preaching when the Holy Spirit came upon the people. Some comment that he did not get to issue an invitation, which seems to have become the norm in preaching today. There is no mention of such a thing in NT preaching. Peter's closing words were about the judgment- and we dare not question the effectiveness of this sermon! It is not the power of the preacher or of the song leader that changes hearts; it is the power of the Holy Spirit. Seeing people receive the Holy Spirit, Peter commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord (10:48). Was he commanding the new believers or his colleagues? It must have been these six believers with him, if not Peter himself, who proceeded to baptize Cornelius, his relatives and friends. At Pentecost Peter told the people-Jews on that occasion- to repent and be baptized and they would receive the Holy Spirit (2:38). Since these Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit Peter reasoned that they had repented and believed, and should be baptized.

Peter could not withhold the sacrament given to the church for those who believe. He could not show partiality. He could not demand circumcision, as was the custom, because the Holy Spirit had spoken definitively. Cornelius and his household entered the family of believers, the church, by believing in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sin. Nothing more and nothing less. They were not made to submit to any man-made regulations. Let us and all churches understand this. Cornelius asked Peter to stay on with them for a few days and presumably he did. There must have been rejoicing all round. Maybe the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (2:47). Certainly Peter would have been teaching a lot more about their Saviour and Lord, about all that Jesus did and taught before he went to the cross. He would have told them about the resurrection appearances, and how Jesus ascended into heaven with the promise to return. 'Jesus is Lord' was the confession of the early church, and 'Maranatha' or 'O, Lord Come' was also part of their confession and hope.

Peter reports to the Jerusalem church

Acts 11:1-18

The significance of the conversion and baptism of Cornelius and his household cannot be overstated. After Pentecost the church grew rapidly- three thousand at Pentecost and five thousand men shortly after. Persecution broke out and the believers were scattered. They preached the gospel and people believed, people as in Jews and proselytes. As more and more Jews believed the church would grow, but what about the rest of the world, what about those not born Jews? Was the church to be restricted to this small group of people? The matter of Gentiles entering the church was not seriously considered within the confines of the Jerusalem church where the Christians continued in the temple and rituals of the Mosaic Law. The early church was seen as a sect within Judaism (Acts 18:15). At synagogues outside Jerusalem and Judea many God-fearers worshipped the God of Israel. These Gentiles were attracted by monotheism and the moral law, but they were reluctant to undergo circumcision. The church seems to have followed Jewish practice in requiring circumcision for full membership. This presented a huge barrier to the growth of the church. This is why the events of Acts 10, the providential and supernatural working of God in bringing the apostle Peter to the house of the Roman centurion, is of such importance to the preaching of the gospel and the growth of the church.

How can you preach the gospel to someone to whom you cannot come near? How can you fellowship with someone whom you regard as unclean, someone whose house you cannot enter and whose food you cannot eat? There are some who see no problem here; they accept a church for Jews and a church for others, a church for Chinese and a church for Indians. The early church was one, and great effort was made to keep it as one. I recently read that in England, with its class conscious society, the church discouraged a high class man from going to a working class parish, and vice versa. Faithful preachers however, were able to preach the gospel in any parish. There is a mission to the Jews that accepts only Jewish converts as missionaries. I wonder what the apostle Peter or the apostle Paul would say about this. It is one thing to be sensitive to culture, but another to misrepresent the gospel.

When Peter arrived at the house of Cornelius he went in and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. He knew he was breaking Jewish law but God had spoken to him in a vision, a vision he never forgot: 'What God has cleansed you must not call common or unclean' (10:15, 28, 11:9). The outcome of that meeting, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, confirmed Peter's action in breaking Jewish law. But fellow Jews would not necessarily be convinced, even those in the church. In chapter 11 we find a retelling of this amazing story, this time before the church in Jerusalem, and directly through the eyes of Peter (Luke must have got his account from Peter, among others). We will look at this story again, and under the headings: Cornelius- the facts, consequences, and calm acceptance.

1. Cornelius- the facts

News of what happened in Caesarea reached Jerusalem before Peter. 'The apostles and brethren in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God' (11:1). Note the word 'also'. This was a huge departure from the norm, and a matter with far-reaching ramifications for the church. Peter, as an apostle, was based in Jerusalem; he was a leader of the church. So in due course he returned to Jerusalem (11:2). He would not have been surprised to find his visit to the house of a Gentile was the hot topic of conversation.

On his arrival he was confronted by 'those of the circumcision' (11:2, not 'circumcised believers' generally, as in NIV). These seem to be Jewish Christians who were especially zealous for the law.

Paul later speaks of men who came from James who were 'of the circumcision', and who refused to eat with Gentile believers (Gal 2:12). In chapter 10 we are not told that Peter actually ate with Cornelius, although in going into the house he probably ate something. This accusation shows the focus of the circumcision group; the fact that Gentiles had received the wonderful grace of God was not important to this group; they were still focused on the law.

Peter answered his critics with a straightforward presentation of the facts. He started at the beginning, as experienced by him, and proceeded 'in order' to explain what happened (11:4). In the house of Cornelius, Peter presented the facts of the gospel, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Here he presents the facts of how he came to be in this Gentile house, and what happened there. The facts of the gospel and the facts of church history stand on their own. We do not embellish the facts, or go beyond the facts as given in the Bible, as we seek to persuade men and women to repent and believe in Jesus. Peter and Cornelius experienced the supernatural, but the church in Jerusalem was not given any vision; they were given the facts. In writing his gospel, Luke seeks to present the facts in an 'orderly manner', that you may 'know with certainty', and that you might believe in Jesus Christ.

Peter told how he was praying when he saw a vision, a vision of a great sheet full of all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds; the details agree with Luke's previous account (11:5-7, 10:9-16). Peter heard a voice telling him to kill and eat, and then, after he protested, 'what God has cleansed you must not call unclean'. 'At that very moment' three men sent by Cornelius arrived at the gate (11:11). Peter took note of this 'divine coincidence' or providential ordering. Boice speculates on what would have been the case if these men had arrived a few hours earlier, or the next day. They would probably have been told to go away because Gentiles were not welcome in the house of a Jew. Peter recognised God's timing in the arrival of these men- the Spirit had also spoken to him telling him to go with these men without hesitation (11:12, 10:20). Peter went with the three men sent by Cornelius. He took with him six brothers from the church in Joppa (11:12). Only at this point do we learn that it was six brothers who accompanied him. From what Peter says here, these men also went with him to Jerusalem, where they no doubt proved to be valuable witnesses.

In terms of divine guidance, we see firstly that Peter was praying. It is when we are on our knees in prayer that God reveals his will to us; we are to pray in the Spirit. God in fact, has revealed his will in his word. So in seeking to know God's will we must be reading and studying our Bible. Boice says that Peter was having 'the equivalent of what we would call a Bible study'. He heard the voice of God. The Bible is how God speaks to us today (Heb 1:1-2). And then we see the 'divine coincidence' or divine ordering of circumstances. We must be alert to God's working in our life and the lives of those around us- but not depend solely on 'reading' the circumstances or signs, as some do.

Peter relates what Cornelius told him about his vision of an angel standing in his house; a man in bright clothing according to Cornelius (11:13, 10:30). Did Peter see any significance in an angel of God being in the house of Gentile? Cornelius said the angel told him to send for Peter who would speak to him; he expected Peter to tell him all that God had commanded him (10:32, 33). Peter is not going beyond the facts in saying, 'who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved' (11:14). Cornelius was not yet aware of salvation and 'salvation' language, but the church was. Cornelius was a God-fearer; he was a seeker after truth. He was looking for Peter to tell him the truth from God, and about God. We previously noted that even though Cornelius did many

good works, and prayed regularly, he was not yet saved. 'Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God' (Rom 10:17).

2. Consequences

Peter started speaking to Cornelius and all that had gathered in his house. He started telling them about Jesus, but before he had finished his message the Holy Spirit fell upon them, upon all those who heard the word (11:15, 10:44). Peter made a note of the fact that this is what happened to them, to the apostles, 'at the beginning' (11:15) - that is at Pentecost. There was no mistaking what happened in Caesarea. It was just like Pentecost, and he had six witnesses to this fact. Peter also remembered what Jesus said about baptism (11:16). Everyone knew that Peter had instructed these Gentiles who had received the Holy Spirit to be baptised with water- without demanding they first be circumcised. Peter could not be held responsible for their Holy Spirit baptism, but he was responsible for water baptism. For this he gave no apology because Jesus linked both baptisms. Jesus said, 'John baptised with water, but you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit (1:5). Baptism of the Holy Spirit is not always evidenced by spectacular gifts, as at Pentecost and at Caesarea, but it is associated with confession of faith and water baptism, as at Caesarea. Contrary to what is taught in some churches, baptism with the Holy Spirit is not something that occurs at a later time. Seeing that God had given these Gentiles the Holy Spirit, just as he had given them when they believed, Peter concluded that they had believed and should be baptised with water. He did not want to oppose God (11:17).

Such a sentiment is not much heard in the church these days, the sentiment of opposing God. Even Gamaliel, a Jew, was concerned not to be found fighting against God (5:39). When people in the church today are teaching something contrary to the word of God they express no fear. They say that what is written in the Bible cannot be trusted, or that times have changed. Some will even boldly say that God changed his mind, or that God made a mistake. The OT is clear about judgment upon false prophets. The NT condemns false apostles, saying, 'Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light' (2Cor 11:14). Jude writes of men infiltrating the church being like ignorant 'brute beasts', 'serving only themselves'.

3. Calm acceptance

'When they heard these things they became silent' (11:18). Peter presented the facts, with witnesses. What he did in going to the house of Cornelius, and in baptising him and his household, was done with compelling reason- he did not want to be opposing God. It was done with God's 'gracious prodding', with 'One who makes bold promises and keeps them, who finds a way even in the midst of human distinctions and partiality between persons'. It is not political declarations and laws condemning racism and discrimination that will unite people from different racial, ethnic, class and gender backgrounds; it is the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must ensure that the church makes no such distinctions but welcomes men and women from all such backgrounds as they repent of their sin and believe in Jesus Christ.

Those who came to question Peter about going to the house of an uncircumcised man were silenced. 'Their criticism ceased; their worship began' (Bruce). They all glorified God saying, 'God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance unto life' (11:18). In other words, God had accepted Gentiles who repented of their sin and believed in Jesus. He accepted them without the need to be circumcised, and with no demand to obey Jewish law. The door was opened for Gentiles to enter the church as full brothers and sisters in Christ, without first becoming Jews. When this policy was later challenged, Peter would remind the church of this great day in Caesarea.

The church in Antioch

Acts 11:19-30

Jesus told the eleven disciples, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' (Mat 28:19). Here in Acts, Peter had just baptized a Gentile called Cornelius and all his household. This was a turning point in the growth of the church. The church had been growing up to this time, now a few years after Pentecost, but only through Jewish converts. The church only accepted Gentile converts if they first became Jews; this meant circumcision and adherence to Jewish law. What happened at the house of Cornelius opened the door for Gentiles to enter the church directly through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ- by grace alone through faith alone. Water baptism, the sign and seal of faith, was administered by the church.

The apostles were told by the risen Jesus to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (1:8). Peter and John had been to Samaria, and Peter was down on the coast of Judea when he had the vision of the sheet, but the apostles seem to have spent most of their time in Jerusalem. It was Greek speaking believers, not apostles, who were forced to leave Jerusalem because of persecution following the stoning of Stephen. It was these Greek speakers who were at the forefront of gospel witness beyond Jerusalem. Phillip went down to Samaria and ended up at Caesarea- although he is not mentioned in the account of Peter's visit to Caesarea.

We pick up the story of the spread of the gospel here in the second half of Acts 11. The opening words of this passage refer to the scattering that occurred because of the persecution that came after the martyrdom of Stephen- compare these with the opening words of chapter 8. The difference is that the scattered believers are now beyond Judea and Samaria; they are as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (11:20). As we study this passage and learn from it we will do so under four headings: evangelisation of Greeks, encouragement by Barnabas, instruction by Saul, and helping the hungry. But before taking up these points let me give some background to the city of Antioch.

Antioch is found in a region I knew little about until I looked up maps and did some reading. It was a few miles upstream from the mouth of the Orontes River, in what today is Turkey; about 50 kms west of Aleppo in Syria. In NT times it was a huge city of half a million, with a large Jewish population. It was the third largest city in the Roman empire- after Rome and Alexandria. It was the gateway to the east, to the Persian and Arab world. As such it was a cosmopolitan, trading city, a city full of corruption and vice- not unlike Corinth, and our own city! It was named after the Greek ruler Antiochus.

1. Evangelisation of the Greeks

Believers who fled Jerusalem went up the coastal strip of Phoenicia, modern Lebanon, and across to the island of Cyprus which had a large Jewish population. They told the Jews about Jesus, and many believed. Their witness was probably associated with the synagogue and the Jewish community. Their witness was to 'the Jews only' (11:19). But it did not stay this way for long. Men from Cyprus and Cyrene, a city in Libya, ended up in Antioch. If they were traders they would have been rubbing shoulders with non-Jews, with Gentiles or Greeks. And so they told the Hellenists or Greeks about Jesus also (11:20).

These were just ordinary believers telling their neighbours and workmates about Jesus. Maybe they invited them to their meeting where they heard the gospel preached. We do not know the details

but we do know the outcome; the outcome was that ‘a great number believed and turned to the Lord’ (11:21). Actually, we are told the important details, namely that ‘the Lord was with them’ (11:21). Whether they distributed tracts, held evangelistic rallies, did one-to-one evangelism or invited friends to church, we are not told. We are not told of any signs and wonders ministry here in Antioch. We are told that the hand of the Lord was upon them, which means they were praying. They were not focussed on ‘how’ but on ‘who’; they were focussed on the Lord. The hand of the Lord was upon them. They were living as the Lord’s people, loving their neighbours and praising the Lord. The hand of the Lord was upon them. Is the hand of the Lord upon us? Are we living out our faith in Jesus? If not, why not? Do you want to see a great number believing and turning to the Lord?

F. F. Bruce writes of the population of Antioch, ‘Many were trying to find in various mystery cults a divine lord who could guarantee salvation and immortality to his devotees’. Let us remember that many in our city are lost and are searching for meaning in life. If they are searching in the wrong places, as many are, it is our job to show them the right place, to point them to Jesus, the only way, the truth, and the life.

2. Encouraged by Barnabas

News of the phenomenal growth of the church in Antioch reached Jerusalem. The church had an impact on the city of Antioch. We read that ‘the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch’ (11:26). It was probably the pagans who gave them the nickname ‘*Christos*’ or Christ-people, because they spoke this name so often. The believers did not use this name of themselves, preferring to call themselves believers, saints, or brothers.

Jerusalem took an interest in this growing church, as with the church in Samaria (8:14). They sent Peter and John to Samaria but this time they sent Barnabas, who was not an apostle. Things were changing in the church it seems; soon we will read about elders and about James, the Lord’s brother, being leader of the church. The church had already chosen deacons like Stephen and Phillip, and a man called Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch (6:5). Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus, was also in the Jerusalem church. He was called Barnabas by the apostles because he encouraged people. He was remembered for his generous donation towards the needs of the poor. Barnabas also took Saul under his wing when he came to Jerusalem as a new convert. He was probably among the brothers who escorted Saul to Caesarea and sent him off to his home town of Tarsus.

When news of the rapidly growing church in Antioch reached Jerusalem they sent Barnabas, not an apostle, to go and check things out (11:22). In the providence of God he was the right man. ‘He was a good man, full of faith and the Holy Spirit’ - just like Stephen (11:24). He was good, not in the sense of being without sin (Luke 18:19), but in the sense of doing good because he walked in the Spirit. Not only was Barnabas qualified to represent the church but he would encourage the infant church in Antioch. There were others who could have been sent, authoritarian, legalistic men who would have wreaked havoc in Antioch by demanding the Gentiles be circumcised and keep the Jewish law.

All that some men see in the church are traditions and rules, but not Barnabas. What did Barnabas see? He saw the grace of God and was glad (11:23). What an amazing man! Oh that we would have eyes to see the grace of God in each other and in the church today! Sometimes people only see problems, and sure there are problems. There were problems in the church at Antioch. If it was anything like the church at Corinth there were lots of problems- immorality, idolatry, divisions, misunderstanding of the sacraments. Prostitutes and perverts were probably entering the church,

along with white collar and blue collar criminals. Barnabas saw they needed a lot of teaching but he did not start laying down the law. He rejoiced in the grace of God. He encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their heart (11:23). They were probably having enough trouble with unbelieving family and friends. They needed encouragement not criticism, and Barnabas gave them encouragement.

The method of ministry adopted by Barnabas proved to be best. His ministry was most fruitful, 'a great many people were added to the Lord' (11:24). Success in ministry is not just measured by a head count. We do not want to be baptizing people and then forgetting about them. Some missions report hundreds of people being baptized, but when you go to see the church there is none. I have had people say to me that their job is to preach and baptize, not nurture the church. Barnabas was concerned that the church be nurtured, that new believers be taught how to live as God's people.

3. Instruction from Saul

As the church in Antioch grew, Barnabas realised he needed assistance in teaching the members. Again we take note of this amazing man of God. He was willing to delegate. He did not persist in doing everything himself. Many leaders in the church fail at this point. They see wonderful fruit from their ministry but they do not trust anyone else to shepherd the flock- some have been put off because of shepherds who undermine rather than support the work. At other times it is simply pride that keeps men from delegating, from trusting others to undertake certain tasks. Sure, they may see their delegate fail, but then again, they may see them flourish in the work.

Barnabas needed assistance in teaching the new believers in Antioch. As he thought and prayed about an assistant or partner, Saul of Tarsus came to mind. He was a dramatically converted Jew who boldly preached the gospel. Barnabas set off for Tarsus to find Saul (11:25). The way it is written indicates that he had some difficulty finding him; when he found him he brought back to Antioch (11:26). The year was probably AD 43, eight years after Saul's conversion. It is important for us to be thoroughly equipped for gospel ministry. Saul, who will become Paul (12:9), was a mature and knowledgeable believer by this time. Again we might note the providence of God in his being called by Barnabas. The Lord had told Saul that he would be his witness before Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel (9:15). He may well have been wondering when this would happen, but when Barnabas called him to Antioch he went willingly. For a whole year the church regularly assembled to be taught by Saul and Barnabas. What a great year this must have been; a year being taught how to read the Bible, the wonderful word of God. Do you yearn to learn more about the Lord?

4. Helping the hungry

Saul's teaching was not just head knowledge; not just doctrine. Doctrine or knowledge is necessary. If we don't get knowledge from the Bible we will get it from some other place. It is sad to see people, who know nothing about the Bible, speaking with great authority on matters of religion and morals. They have their own ideas and cling to these even when shown to be false. Saul taught from the Bible. Teaching doctrine leads to living out this doctrine. In the closing words of this chapter we see the practical outworking of his teaching. James writes, 'Faith without works is dead', and Paul would agree (Ja 2:20).

Some prophets came to Antioch from Jerusalem. Prophecy was one of the gifts of the Spirit in the days of the apostles. Prophets engaged in forth telling and also in foretelling on occasions. Some Christians say this gift still belongs to the church today, but the words of so-called prophets today

do not always come true; nor do they always agree with the Bible. Agabus stood up in the church in Antioch and 'by the Spirit' told of a great famine coming upon the world (11:28). Luke notes that this happened during the reign of Claudius Caesar (AD 41-54), and other sources report 'a succession of bad harvests and serious famine in various parts of the empire in this time'.

Prophecy is one thing- response to prophecy is another; just ask the OT prophets! A later prophecy by Agabus was noted by Paul but he did not change his plans (21:10-14). This time however, the church sprang into action. Each member determined to give as he was able towards a relief fund that would be sent to the brethren in Judea. Some readers ask if a Gentile church would really help a Jewish church, a church which called them unclean and common. But there was no Jewish church and Gentile church- this was the point of sending Barnabas to Antioch. There was one church and when one part of the church suffers the whole body suffers- and helps as they are able. The world may not understand this, then or now, but this is the very nature of the church, the body of Christ. 'As we have opportunity let us do good to all, especially to those of the household of faith' (Gal 6:10).

Barnabas and Saul carried this relief fund to the elders of the church in Jerusalem (11:30). We do not send help just hoping it will reach the people in need. We give generously but also responsibly, meaning we do what we can to see that our help reaches those in need, reaches them in the name of the Lord. If you cannot carry the gift yourself, make sure someone who is faithful does.

In the next chapter we will leave Antioch, but only for a short time. Antioch will become the centre for the final phase of gospel witness, witness to the end of the earth.

God is sovereign

Acts 12:1-17

Persecution is never far away from the church. The infant church in Jerusalem was immediately persecuted by the Jews. Peter and John were arrested twice; the second time they were set free by an angel of the Lord. On Gamaliel's advice the Jewish leaders stopped persecuting the followers of Jesus. Even so, the Greek-speaking Jews started a violent persecution after they stoned Stephen, and the believers fled the city. Persecution did nothing to stop the church growing; the number of believers actually multiplied (4:4, 9:31).

Here in chapter 12 we read of another episode of persecution, this time led by King Herod. He was a political figure but the Jews approved of his violence against the apostles. In later times the Roman Emperor instigated persecution of the church. And so the church has been persecuted by religious and political opponents down through the ages. It continues today, persecution and growth in the church, although the secular press does not tell you that the church is growing in many parts of the world.

We are almost half way through the book of Acts. We are coming towards the end of the second phase of apostolic witness, that of witness in Judea and Samaria. Barnabas has just brought Saul to Antioch and the final phase of witness will begin in the next chapter, witness to the end of the earth. This expansion of witness does not mean neglect of the church in Jerusalem. It does not mean this 'mother church' stopped growing. This chapter gives us a further glimpse into the Jerusalem church. Above all, it reminds us of the sovereignty of God in the growth of the church. Jesus told his disciples, 'You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth' (1:8). He also told them, 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth... and I am with you always' (Mat 28:18-20).

1. Accept suffering

In those days Herod was king in Judea. There was a King Herod when Jesus was born- Herod the Great. This king, called Agrippa I, was the grandson of Herod the Great, and apparently just as bloodthirsty. When Herod the Great died, the region of Palestine was divided between his three surviving sons. This grandson grew up in Rome but returned as tetrarch of Galilee and Perea when his uncle, Herod Antipas, was exiled. He was later made ruler over the whole region, just like his grandfather.

The Herods were half-Jews. They were men who understood Jewish ways and sentiments, unlike the Romans, yet they ruled under Roman authority. If Herod did not keep peace in the region Rome would not be pleased. To keep peace he had to keep the Jews happy; he was like a typical politician, trying to keep everyone happy. But more than this, and like some politicians, he was more concerned about his own position and power than anything else.

The Jews in Jerusalem, even some in the church, were concerned that Gentiles were entering the church in increasing numbers. The church had not yet made a complete break with temple worship. It was not just the number of Gentiles but the fact that they were not upholding Jewish traditions. Down in Caesarea, Peter baptized Gentiles who were not circumcised. At Antioch, Barnabas encouraged ministry among Gentiles, presumably not requiring them to be circumcised. Many Jews saw their traditions and religion as being under threat. If Barnabas and Saul were in the city at this

time handing over famine relief, news about the church in Antioch would have been circulating. 'Never mind the generous gift, what about our traditions!'

In this situation Herod may have seen an opportunity of furthering his political ambitions. He laid hands on some church leaders to harass and persecute them (12:1). Violent man that he was, he actually killed the apostle James, brother of the apostle John. He killed him with the sword-beheading him most probably, just as his uncle Antipas had done to John the Baptist. We are not told of the charges brought against James, or if there were any. Herod was gambling on the Jews approving his killing of the apostle, and his gamble paid off. To get more applause from the Jews he looked around for someone else from the church he could kill. And so he grabbed Peter and locked him up. Being the time of the Passover, Herod thought it best to join in the worship and resume his killing spree after the celebrations, the celebration of God's great mercy in delivering the Jews from persecution and bondage in Egypt. Religious practices can be full of irony and hypocrisy!

If God is sovereign, as our sermon title and the Bible declares, how come he allowed James to be killed in this way? We could have asked this question about Stephen; but we saw the way Stephen died, giving glory to God. He did not recant or plead for mercy but committed himself and his life into the hands of the Lord saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (7:59). James probably died saying the same prayer. He was one of the apostles that were closest to Jesus; the others being Peter and John his brother. We are not told much about James and his achievements, but in God's sovereign purposes he allowed James to die at this time. 'But surely as an apostle he would have been a great asset to the church' you might ask. You can ask, but remember God's ways are higher than our ways (Isa 55:9), so don't keep asking.

You might also have difficulty understanding why God allowed James to die, but so powerfully intervened to save Peter from the same death. Many ask this question, although apparently not the church at the time. Again, it is a matter of the sovereign purposes of God. God gives us no guarantees that we will not be persecuted for Jesus' sake- in fact he says the opposite. He gives us no guarantee that we will not die unjustly at the hand of persecutors. The only guarantee he gives is that, 'if we died with Him we will also live with him; if we endure we will also reign with him; if we deny Him, He will also deny us' (2Tim 2:11). The apostle Paul who, as a witness of Jesus suffered terribly, said, 'For me to live is Christ and to die is gain'. James and Peter would have said the same thing. What about you? Can you say, 'For me to live is Christ and to die is gain'?

2. Perfect prayer

In saying 'perfect prayer' I use the word 'perfect' as a verb rather than an adjective describing prayer. We will never be perfect but we should be striving to be so. We should be striving to improve our prayer life. How is your prayer life? When was the last time you asked God to do something impossible? When was the last time you stayed up all night praying? Men and women in the Jerusalem church were not perfect in prayer, but we can learn some things from what we read of them in this passage.

When Peter was locked up by Herod, 'constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church' (12:5). The first thing to note is that their prayer was 'offered to God'. 'This is obvious' you might say, at least for Christians. Pagans pray to other gods but we pray to the true God. But is this always the case, and is it always clear? Remember the Pharisee who stood and prayed a long, eloquent prayer? The text says, 'He prayed thus with himself' (Luke 18:11). We must be careful in public

prayer not to be making ourselves look good. We have public prayer in which the minister leads-prayer on behalf of the congregation; he is open to your input into this prayer. We have prayer meetings in which anyone can pray. It is encouraging to hear fellow believers in prayer. All our prayers must be directed to our Father in heaven, not to ourselves or to those listening. Furthermore, we should make it clear that we are praying to the God of creation and redemption, the God and Father of Jesus Christ. When some Christians pray it is not clear who they are praying to because they never say the name 'Jesus'.

The church in Jerusalem came together to pray for Peter. There are two further lessons in this text. They did not just pray for themselves, or their family. Such prayer is proper, but we see them praying for a member of their church. They were aware of Peter's predicament; some people like to suffer in silence making it difficult to pray for them. Are you ready to share your concerns with those in the fellowship who pray? May each of us pray and not gossip what is shared. The other thing we see in this text is the whole church praying. Prayer was made to God for Peter by the church (12:5). Does it look as if just a handful out of hundreds were praying together? 'Many were gathered together praying' in Mary's house praying (12:12).

This was in the night, probably the middle of the night because Peter was fast asleep when the angel came to bring him out of the prison. It was not safe to walk the streets at night so they probably spent the whole night in prayer here at Mary's house. There is nothing like suffering or persecution to get people praying. 'It was good for me that I have been afflicted' said the Psalmist (Ps 119:71). Why did he say this? 'That I might learn your statutes', and we might say, 'that I might pray more earnestly, and ask others to pray with me'.

3. Expect the impossible

It was hard to believe that Peter would escape execution. James did not escape. Peter was chained to two soldiers and a further two guarded his prison cell; four soldiers in four squads watched him around the clock. And then there was the huge front gate of the prison. He was probably in the Antonia barracks adjacent to the temple. The Christians could do nothing but pray, and pray they did. We should not say that all we can do is pray because prayer must be the first thing we do, not a last resort. 'If extended, fervent, united prayer is not a church's first resort in time of crisis the church reveals it is ultimately depending on something or someone other than God' writes Larkin. But did the church really believe God could set Peter free? Let us see what happened.

'Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood beside Peter' (12:7). A light shone in the prison cell but still Peter did not wake up- the angel had to slap him and get him up. Peter was sleeping soundly the night before he was to be executed, such was his faith in God, and such was the peace of Jesus in his heart. Peter stirred and put on his clothes and sandals as the angel told him; the chains had fallen off his hands. The angel told Peter to follow him as he led him past the guards and to the iron gate that lead into the city (12:10). This opened of its own accord, and out they went. Peter was in a daze; he thought he was dreaming (12:9); that was until the angel suddenly disappeared.

On the cold, dark street of Jerusalem Peter 'came to himself' and understood that the Lord had sent his angel to deliver him from the hand of Herod, and the Jews, who also wanted him dead (12:11). Peter hurried to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark and aunty of Barnabas (Col 4:10). Because Peter knocked 'at the door of the gate' people think this was a big house. This may be so, but houses in the east often have a locked gate before you get to the front door. Moreover, it is

usually a servant who comes to the gate. It is further thought that in this home was the upper room of the Last Supper, and where the apostles gathered to pray (1:13). It was the place where they were gathered to pray on this occasion, and the place which Peter regarded as home and/or church. Peter knew Herod would have soldiers out searching for him at daybreak, but he wanted to let James and the brethren know he was free before he departed for another place, a safer place no doubt- maybe Antioch (12:17).

We make two points in closing. Firstly, the comic situation that arose with Peter left banging on the gate, pleading to be let in. A girl called Rhoda was at the centre of this comedy. Do not be offended by my referring to this as a comedy. Whenever the story was retold I am sure the people found it funny. Christians are allowed to see the funny side of situations. We can enjoy humour even more than pagans who have to resort to rude and crude comedy.

When Peter knocked late at night Rhoda went to the gate. When she heard Peter's voice she was so excited she ran inside without letting him in. When she told the gathering that Peter was at the gate they did not believe her. They said she was crazy, but she insisted that it was so (12:15). So they said it was his angel. Scripture speaks of guardian angels (Mat 18:10), but not of these mimicking the human being they guard. Eventually someone had the bright idea of checking out the girl's story instead of harassing her! Peter was still there knocking when they finally opened the gate and let him in. When they saw Peter they were astonished (12:16). They could not believe their eyes. Did they apologise to the poor girl? Did they apologise to Peter for leaving him stranded? Looking back, it was all rather funny.

The second and closing point is the fact that those praying for Peter did not expect to see him alive. We presume they were asking the Lord to save his life. But when the Lord answered their prayer they were astonished. We are tempted to point the finger and say, 'O, you of little faith', but are there not three fingers pointing back at us? What do you ask for in prayer? Do you ever ask for what is impossible? Do you expect the impossible from the God who is sovereign over all creation and all people?

God is Judge

Acts 12:18-25

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, walked about the royal palace admiring great Babylon, 'that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honour of my majesty' (Dan 4:30). Boice calls this 'a classical statement of what we call secular humanism, the persuasion that everything in life is of man, by man and for man's glory'. Nebuchadnezzar was not the first to take pride in what he had done, and take all the glory to himself, and certainly was not the last- just look at King Herod. Just look around you and maybe at your own life. How much glory do you take to yourself and how much do you give to God?

In my second year at University I topped the year. I received a letter of congratulations from one of my lecturers. At the same time I read Psalm 115. I am glad I did not take the glory to myself, having since read of what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. The Lord struck him with madness. As for Herod, the Lord struck him with death- he was eaten by worms and died! Taking the glory due to God is dangerous!

King Herod, Agrippa 1, had been in charge of Palestine for four years. The Jewish historian, Josephus, writes quite a lot about this Herod, although he does not tell us about his murder of James. Herod was a half-Jew who joined in Jewish worship, but was also a friend of the Romans; he grew up with Gaius Caligula in Rome. He was charged with keeping peace in this troublesome Jewish province. Josephus says 'he took delight in giving, and rejoiced in living with good reputation'. He was a great builder, building a wall on the north side of Jerusalem. All this kept the Jews happy, and with them happy Rome was happy, and Herod got richer and more powerful.

Luke tells us here that Herod found another, more sinister way to keep the Jews happy - by killing the apostles of Jesus of Nazareth. He killed James with the sword. The blood of James cried out from the ground, like that of Abel towards Cain (Gen 4:10). Sooner or later God would avenge the blood of this martyr (Rev 6:10).

Seeing that killing James pleased the Jews, Herod grabbed Peter with the idea of killing him also. Herod was killing innocent men just to further his political ambitions. He was killing followers of Jesus because this pleased the Jews. The sovereign, all powerful God stepped in however, to deliver Peter from the hand of Herod and the approving Jews (12:11). Peter was delivered from death by an angel of the Lord. Today we read that an angel of the Lord struck Herod and he died. One angel of the Lord saved Peter, in answer to peoples prayers, while another struck Herod because he failed to give glory to God.

1. Violence backfires

When the Jews applauded Herod for killing James he arrested Peter with the idea of killing him also, after the Passover. But this plan backfired. On the morning of the public execution they found the prison cell empty. Herod had put extra guards in place but still Peter had escaped. How? There was a great stir among the soldiers as they searched for Peter. They knew what would happen to those who let him escape. Sure enough, after a search failed to find Peter, Herod questioned the guards and ordered their execution (12:19). Under Roman law guards who let their prisoner escape were given the punishment their prisoner faced- in this case death.

We might feel sorry for these guards because they were not guilty. Did Herod suspect them of taking a bribe, or was he perplexed, even fearful at what had happened. One thing is certain, Herod was embarrassed. His plan to make himself popular with the Jews fell flat. Peter's escape from a high security prison was extremely embarrassing. The fact that he could not be found made it worse. We are not told why Herod went from Jerusalem to Caesarea and stayed there (12:19) but this embarrassing situation must have been a contributing factor. His base for administration was in Caesarea, of course.

2. Voice of a god

Luke does not leave the story with Herod enjoying life. He follows Herod down to down in his palace in Caesarea, as does Josephus. Josephus gives more detail than Luke but this detail broadly agrees with what we find in the Bible. Some theologians get excited about such extra-Biblical records, even giving them more authority than the Bible. We must always give Scripture ultimate authority because it is the inspired and infallible word of God.

Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon (12:20). These people were not under his authority but they depended on grain from Galilee which was in Herod's jurisdiction. The reason for his anger is not given but we can imagine what little thing might have pricked the pride of this proud man. The people of Tyre and Sidon made friends with Blastus, the king's personal aide, in an effort to make peace with Herod. This man arranged a day for them to meet with Herod in Caesarea.

According to Josephus, the 'set day' was a huge festival in honour of Caesar- maybe his birthday. He goes on to describe the 'garment made wholly of silver' worn by Herod into the arena early in the morning. The morning sun 'shone out after a surprising manner' writes Josephus. Luke tells us that Herod sat on his throne, 'arrayed in royal apparel' and 'gave an oration to them' (12:21). The people were impressed. Those from Tyre and Sidon seized the opportunity to flatter Herod. Flattery works wonders with proud men like Herod. They shouted out, 'The voice of a god and not of a man' (12:22). It seems the huge crowd took up the chant and Herod did nothing to stop them. He basked in the praises and glory lavished upon him. Josephus records the same thing, writing that 'his flatterers cried out, one from one place and another from another (though not for his own good), that he was a god'.

3. Verdict of God

Josephus goes on to say of Herod, 'a severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a violent manner'. He writes that Herod was carried to his chamber where the pain in his belly continued for five days and he died, aged fifty four years. Josephus was a Jew, like Herod. He mentions 'Providence', as in the manner of fate, for letting the people call him a god. In the Biblical account Herod's death is clearly portrayed as the judgment of God. 'Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give glory to God' (12:23). While Herod was lapping up the praise of the crowd, to the extent of them calling him a god, the Lord struck him and he died.

After being struck by the angel of the Lord, Herod was eaten by worms and died (12:23). Trust Luke the doctor to include such gory detail. It was Luke who told us that Judas fell headlong and burst open, with his intestines spilling out (1:18). What Luke writes is not metaphorical; he is not referring to worms eating Herod's body in the grave. Some think a hydatid cyst ruptured. Others say he had a case of peritonitis from a burst appendix, in combination with roundworms in his gut.

Roundworms grow from 20-30cm. I have seen children vomit up such huge worms. Intestinal worms do not generally cause death but they were associated with the sudden death of Herod.

To Moses God declared, 'You shall have no other gods before me' and, 'you shall not bow down to them nor serve them' (Exod 20:3-5). God is a jealous God. He says, 'I will not give my glory to another' (Isa 48:11). Herod was guilty of breaking these commandments, and causing others to break them. Even before this he was guilty of breaking the sixth commandment, 'You shall not murder'. The wages of sin is death, meaning spiritual death, the opposite of eternal life. Those who die in their sin will be raised to condemnation. In the case of Herod, and numerous other wicked people, God's judgment is swift. Their life is cut short because of their wickedness.

Every day and every hour we have is because of God's mercy- his mercy in delaying judgment. God is longsuffering towards us, not willing that any should perish (2Peter 3:9). But the sins of some, like Herod, and Judas before him, are so heinous, so unforgivable, that God's judgment is not delayed. Luke also tells us of God's judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira. Does God still strike down men or women who are guilty of gross wickedness? Has God changed?

4. Victory for the church

'But the word of God grew and multiplied' (12:24). Once again the church of God prevails, and the enemies of God are defeated or destroyed. The chapter ends with Barnabas and Saul returning from Jerusalem, presumably to Antioch, after delivering the famine relief collected by the church in Antioch (11:28-30)- although some question if this is their ministry referred to in verse 25. Some think that this account of Herod's persecuting the church and his death should be placed before verse 27 of chapter 11. The reason for this is that Herod died in AD44 and the famine relief visit is dated at AD46. But Claudius Caesar, who was ruling during the famine (11:28), ruled from AD41 to AD54. So according to the Bible, the famine could have been before AD44, meaning that Saul and Barnabas could have been in Jerusalem at the same time as Herod. Indeed, their presence may have caused a stir among the Jews and the traditionalists in the church. James the brother of Jesus was already leading the Jerusalem church (12:17). He was somewhat of a traditionalist it seems (21:20f).

We should be encouraged by what we read in this passage, and we should encourage others, particularly those who are being persecuted. Still today, Christians are being persecuted in many countries, and this will continue. Persecution may well come upon us. With or without involvement by the authorities, Christians face ridicule, discrimination, harassment, violence, imprisonment and death. Churches are being burnt and destroyed, making it difficult for believers to meet for worship. But they continue to meet, in secret or in exile. At the same time evil and cruel leaders are being brought down. Communism has crumbled in many places giving victory to the church.

Such victories have come through prayer, just like the victory for the church in Jerusalem. It is right and proper to pray for rulers, to pray that they might be removed if they are evil- that they might be removed or improved, as a missionary lady once said to me. Daniel acknowledged that, 'God removes kings and raises up kings' (Dan 2:21). He saw this happen there in Babylon. Above all, he and his god-fearing friends decided they would never bow down to the king or an idol. Daniel never ceased praying to God. He and his friends prevailed against persecuting kings, just like the church in Jerusalem. As we read on in the Bible we find that the church of God always prevailed. It prevails still today, and will continue to do so because Jesus said, 'I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it' (Mat 16:18).

Satan and his agents started attacking the church from day one. The attacks continue, and will continue. However, be assured that the church of Christ, the true church, will prevail. Jesus defeated Satan when he died and rose again. We have the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1Cor 15:57). The word of God grew and multiplied, despite the attacks of the Jews, the attack of Herod and of other enemies of God. God's word is powerful, more powerful than anything in this world. We do not fight with the weapons of the world but with the word of God. We fight with the word of God and with prayer.

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