



Anglican Diocese of Ballarat

- JUNE 2022 -

BIBLE READING

Challenge



This year based on
The Acts of the Apostles

The graphic features a dark teal background with a subtle bokeh effect. At the bottom, an open Bible with aged, yellowed pages lies on a light-colored wooden surface. The text is centered and uses a mix of bold, white, sans-serif fonts and a white, elegant script font for the word 'Challenge'.

Questions to reflect on the week and the bible study

The book of Acts is primarily concerned with the notion of transformation, be that personally, within communities of faith, and the broader socio-political world. While for many of us Paul and his understanding of doctrine, feminised bodies and voices, and redemption can be divisive, he nevertheless was transformed by his acceptance of Jesus Christ as his redeemer.

1. How has God been transformative in your life.
2. Journey, delay, and set back are all aspects of life, what have these moments in your life taught you about yourself and your relationship with God?
3. As this bible challenge concludes was there a particular story, theme, or activity that resonated with you? Why?
4. Has this study changed you practice or approach to reading the book of Acts?

Prayer

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all evermore. Amen

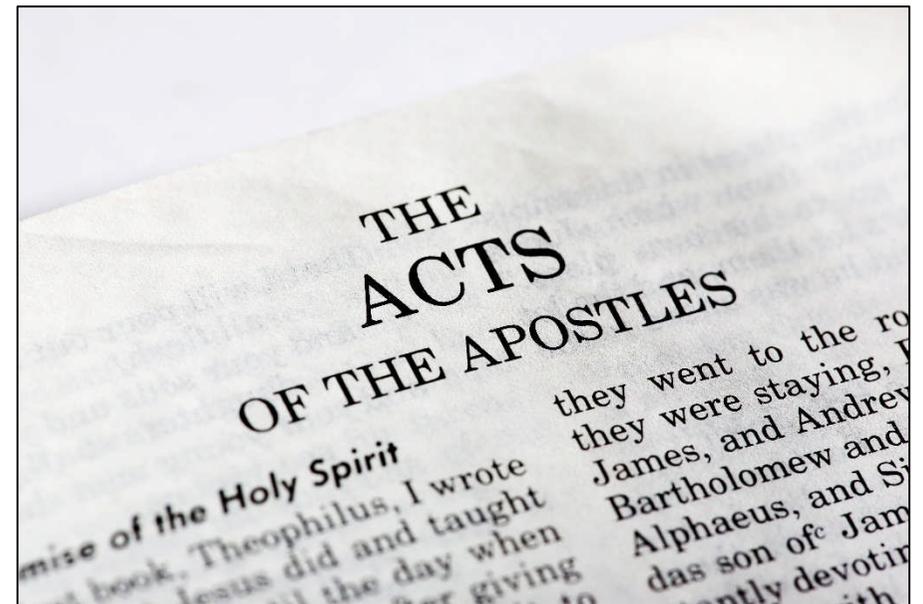
Introduction

The book of Acts deals with the early history of the Christian church and its expansion in ever-widening circles touching Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome – the most influential cities in the western world at the time. Acts also portrays the mighty miracles and testimonies of the heroes and martyrs of the burgeoning church – Peter, Barnabas, Stephen, James, Paul. All the ministry was prompted and held together by the Holy Spirit working in the lives of ordinary people – merchants, travellers, slaves, jailers, church leaders, males, females, Gentiles, Jews, rich, poor. The book of Acts ends abruptly precisely because the work of the Spirit and the church was continued by many unsung heroes of the faith in succeeding generations. Of which you are one. We as Christians are likewise commissioned to take the same message as Paul out into the world so that others might hear the teachings of the Gospel.

Points for consideration

Reflect on some of the most difficult circumstances you've been through in your life.

1. What did you learn from them?
2. How did the Lord bring you through them?
3. What's next for you? because your story is not over.



Welcome to the Bible Challenge for 2022. This year you're invited to explore a whole book, the Acts of the Apostles. Don't be daunted. We encourage you to read on so that you can acquire a sense of the whole story of the early church.

Each day there will be readings, some questions and a prayer to guide you into a deeper understanding of this uniquely important book and to know yourself and God better. There are perhaps two themes that you might like to consider as you spend time in the study.

1. The directive to go "to the ends of the earth."
2. Living an abundant life with integrity.

Keywords to look for as you read are - believe, spirit, witness, word and save¹

The book of Acts is the record of the early church. We see the apostles moved by Holy Spirit and propelled into the world to witness². The Kingdom of heaven is not promised just for the future but made available in the here and now³. Luke writes about the historical events with an attention to detail intuitive to his background as a physician and takes considerable pains to connect the historical events of Christ on earth with the contemporary experiences of the time. His purpose is to bring assurance to God's people, the faithful church, through the ages that we can be transformed in heart and mind through the power of Holy Spirit at work in us in our present day⁴. Luke indicates a direct relationship between the human acts of the apostles and the divine work of Holy Spirit as the continuing work of Jesus on the earth; the same work we are called to do [1 John 3:8].

Dr Kay Job

¹ (1995) *The International Inductive Study Bible*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1923.

² Stott, J. (1990) *The Message of Acts*. Leicester, UK: Intervarsity Press, 10.

³ Church, Rev. L.F. (ed.) (1960) *Matthew Henry's Commentary of the Whole Bible in One Volume*. London, UK: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 434.

⁴ Stott, (1990) *The Message of Acts*, 22.

Thursday 30 June

Acts 28

Prayer

Loving God

Thank you for the love that you have revealed in our lives, and for the love we share together as your body.

We pray for all the words you have sown in our hearts throughout this bible challenge, may they take root and produce wonderful things.

As we finish this study, walk with us so that we may be alert to your promptings and live in your endless love.

For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, in this age and every age. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is the best ending to a story, movie, bible challenge you have read or seen?
2. Do you think Luke's final chapter of Acts is a suitable resolution of the book? Why?

Acts 28:1-31.

In Paul's earlier trials he is delivered through argument, the verdict of the judge or that of the crowd. Now as Paul and his travelling companions reach the safety of dry land all know the blessing of God. If the dramatic and favourable ending of the storm was not enough evidence for the divine approval of Paul, Luke adds yet another tale of his miraculous deliverance when Paul is bitten by the viper in Malta. In this final chapter Luke wishes to note that although we all face real challenges and suffering in our life, and while the world is often an inhospitable place for the gospel and its witness the Spirit is nevertheless always active in our lives.

Roman soldier of the imminent perils of the journey, the soldier put in charge of this expedition votes with the majority, and they set sail for Rome. Robert Wall notes that the “church often makes the mistake of thinking that one’s spiritual maturity transfers to all matters of life, or conversely, that the person who builds a successful business will be able to build strong believers as a congregational leader.” The special kind of expertise that enables one to lead a faith community is similar to an experienced ship’s captain who has the ability to read the changing weather patterns. In this way Paul while not the ship’s captain is still concerned with his pagan companions physical and spiritual salvation, he notes

“Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.” So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. (Acts 27:24-25)

This chapter is therefore meant as a reminder to the church of every age that we must never rely solely on our own wisdom or skill. Similarly, it is equally wrong to sit and do nothing, especially when something can still be done to overcome certain problems. Finally, we must also trust in the Spirit to do its part.

Question for Reflection

What does this passage teach us about God?

Dr Kay Job

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Wednesday 1 June

Acts 1

The first chapter bridges the gap between his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles by explaining the process of growth of the church; from worshipping God at the end of the Gospels to establishing the church in Rome.⁵

The story begins at the ascension of Christ and the coming of Holy Spirit. Here, Jesus promises the presence of Holy Spirit to empower the apostles to witness to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and all the earth (v8). In essence Jesus is saying that the apostles will be witnesses south of and north of Jerusalem *and* places beyond. It was a call to move beyond their comfortable known experience, perhaps even beyond their understanding.

Questions for reflection

1. What are the instructions and promises of Jesus?
2. What do you learn about Holy Spirit from this chapter?

Is God challenging you to be His witness beyond your comfort zone; whether that is a physical move or to be open to new understanding of God, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit? What is your response to God? You

⁵ Weirsbe, W.W. (1989) *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 1*. Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, 402.

may like to read through the prayer below and contemplate what it is that you want to say to God.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,

You have promised Holy Spirit to empower me
to continue your work.

Today I ask for the courage to be a witness for you.

Whenever you call on me to do so, help me to be fearless.

Wherever you call me to go, help me to be undaunted.

I want to be a witness of your resurrection in this world.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Thursday 2 June

Acts 2

Imagine the scene... Crowds gathered from far and wide into Jerusalem to celebrate the Feasts of Israel. And then...there's violent wind, tongues (wide, flat blades) of fire, a multitude of people and languages. One thing that amazed the crowd was that these Galilean Jews were speaking in dialects they had never learned, yet everyone present could hear and understand their own language. And they asked, "What does this mean?" (12).

The church had waited, as Jesus had instructed. While they waited they had worshipped. And in v5, Holy Spirit baptizes. *Baptizo* means to submerge but *also* to identify with.⁶ Thus believers are identified, or visibly distinguished, by the presence of Holy Spirit as being under the headship of Jesus Christ. In this sense, the various languages represent a unified body that transcends race, nationality or other barriers⁷.

⁶ Weirsbe, (1989) *Bible Exposition*, 407.

⁷ Stott, (1990) *Message of Acts*, 68.

Wednesday 29 June

Acts 27

Prayer

O God, our heavenly Father,

whose glory fills the whole creation,

and whose presence we find wherever we go:

preserve those who travel.

Surround them with your loving care,

protect them from every danger,

and bring them in safety to their journey's end,

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Question for Reflection

What is the best and worst advice you have ever received?

Acts 27:1-44

The travels of Odysseus, Sinbad the sailor, Leif Erikson the Viking, to even the Disney representation of Moana, stories of peoples legendary exploits on the chaotic and uncontrollable sea have gripped the human imagination since the earliest of times. The scriptures likewise are no stranger to accounts of sea-voyages, Jonah was swallowed by a great fish on his way to Nineveh, the disciples crying out to the sleeping Jesus in the midst of a storm, and Jesus walking on water. It is because of the dark perils the deep abyss represents, and the threat of watery oblivion is the reason that the sea regularly appears in narratives portraying the tension between death and life.

Luke in the final two chapters of Acts narrates Paul's dramatic journey to the city where he will fulfill his earthly mission. Chapter 27 tells of the first stage of Paul's voyage; it is slow paced and reflective of the calm that precedes a storm. Yet, while the sea is understood as a symbol of chaos it is Paul's traveling companions who endanger the ship and its cargo. While Paul forewarns the reader and likewise the passengers and the

Banksy's Armoured Dove of Peace is a political message designed to criticise those who participate in the continued separation of Palestine and Israel. Painted on the concrete part of the West Bank Wall used to separate the two communities, the graffiti art features a white dove with its wings outstretched holding an olive branch in its beak. Banksy employs the dove of the first covenant and God's enduring peace (a symbol common to both Palestinian and Israeli) clad in an armoured vest with a target hovering over its heart. In an area where the political and social tension is at its greatest, the image of the armoured dove makes a bold artistic commentary on peace. Banksy observes that peace cannot be made when one or more people do not want it.

Acts 26:1-32

If Jesus is the Lamb, then Paul is Banksy's kevlar wearing peace dove. For in front Agrippa, Bernice, Festus, and all their military and political entourage who are privileged, educated, and well connected to power in the Hellenised world Paul presents his case. While this is not a trial, for Paul's appeal to Caesar in 25:21 has invalidated any further court action outside of Rome it is nevertheless a defence of his vocational calling, ministry, and message. For Paul has come to personify the very movement he now represents.

*What does the dove represent in Christian iconography?
Peace, love, salvation, Holy Spirit, divine witness, and baptism.*

I contend that in this moment Paul is performing the role of the dove as representative of peace and witness. In so far as he reveals that he is more concerned for the salvation of the gathered people than the removal of his own chains.

Point for consideration

Think back to how we encountered Saul in chapter 9 and reflect on his journey up to this point. Perhaps go back through some of the key readings, reflections, responses, prayers etc., and think how Paul how far he has come in his faith journey.

Questions for reflection

We belong to Christ, as a body, because of Holy Spirit. What God demonstrated was the availability of His love and forgiveness for the whole world.

1. How did the believers experience being together in fellowship?
2. What was the result? For the church? For individuals?
3. If you are visibly distinguished by the presence of Holy Spirit what do you believe others can see?

Prayer

Father God,
Because You sent Holy Spirit
You made the way for us to call you Father.
Like the believers in Acts,
I want to learn, love, worship and be a witness for You.
I submit myself to You today.
Transform me, I pray.
In the precious name of Jesus,
Amen.

Friday 3 June

Acts 3

In today's chapter we see the beginning of the persecution of the Christian community. There is direct opposition to the work of Holy Spirit. There is conflict within as much as there is pressure from outside. Despite difficult and even aggressive circumstances the call came, from Peter in 3:17, to repent in order to receive God's blessings.

The first section of the chapter reveals the power of the name of Jesus as Peter and John pray for the lame beggar. Peter operates in a boldness that he has not experienced before, specifically challenging the Jews present about their treatment of Jesus. Despite their attempts to

eliminate God's work in their midst, God ends the argument through the resurrection and ascension of Christ. His power is demonstrated in the healing of the beggar⁸.

Questions for reflection

1. Who or what is the healing power of God dependent on?
2. Have you experienced miraculous power of God demonstrated in your own life in some way? How?
3. What area of your life would you like to see healed and transformed by the power of God? Why?

Prayer:

Father,
I pray as Jeremiah prayed,
Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed;
save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise.
You are the only source of healing for my mind, my emotions, my spirit
and my body.
I come to you and ask for healing of _____
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

⁸ Weirsbe, (1989) *Bible Exposition*, 412.

Tuesday 28 June

Acts 26

Prayer

Good and loving God, our source of love and light -
Thank you for bringing us together today
in a spirit of generosity.
May we honour one another
by keeping an open mind.
May we voice our truth
and listen with an open heart.
May we discern your will
to unite in fruitful outcome.
We ask for your wisdom and grace,
to use our talents for the betterment of others.
With gratitude, we offer this prayer in your name. Amen

Artwork Reflection



Banksy. *Armoured Peace Dove*. (2007) West Bank Wall. Palestine.

But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel. Acts 9:15

Throughout these final chapters of Acts, we have watched Paul fulfill the words of Jesus as noted in Luke 21:12-13, but before Paul is to leave Jewish soil Luke sets the stage for one final dramatic scene. He does this by placing us in the midst of a confidential conversation between the Roman procurator Festus, the Palestinian ruler King Agrippa, and his sister Queen Bernice (25:13-22). In this chapter Luke combines a summary of the legal proceedings against Paul with the notorious reputation of the Herodian family whose reign during the days of Jesus (Matt 21; Mark 6; Luke 23) and his apostolic successors was bloody and brutal.

In combining these two elements the reader is placed in an oscillating middle space because Luke is wanting to call to mind how people have the capacity to change. This technique as Robert Wall explains functions as double vision. For example, Ananias in 9:10-17 is the one who opened Saul's blinded eyes, yet in 25:1-5 we hear the summary of the Jewish persecution of Paul of which Ananias was a key voice. Similarly, we hear at the end of the chapter that unlike his father, and grandfather King Agrippa II will find Paul not deserving of death. (26:32) Luke repeatedly employs the symbols of blindness and sight, the purpose of which is to highlight that one must have faith to perceive the grace, love, and hope of God's redemptive power.

Musical Interlude

Watch Gurrumul and Paul Kelly's cover of 'Amazing Grace' from Gurrumul's 'The Gospel Album'.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVORrx9jliE>

Consider the how blindness and sight are represented in this clip.

Saturday 4 June

Acts 4

Peter and John are arrested by guards, with the Sadducees not far away witnessing the event. Brought before the High Priest, Peter answers the allegations with boldness and clarity of argument. How could an uneducated man be able to speak with such authority and skill? They are eventually released and go back to the group and tell what had happened. The believers immediately praised God and ended with, "...now, Lord, take notice of the threats they have made, and allow us, your servants, to speak your message with all boldness." (v29) They determined they would not be silenced.

Questions for reflection

"the place where they were meeting was shaken."

When we decide to stand firmly on the promises of God we can experience our personal world being shaken in some way. Things that were comfortable are seemingly 'taken away' or things we have always thought were correct get challenged.

1. Have you experienced God shaking your world? When? What did you sense God was saying to you at that time? What about in hindsight?
2. Did that experience change your faith journey in any way? Did it bring a more abundant life?

Prayer

Lord, I do not always respond well when my world is shaken.

I want things to stay the same and comfortable.

But I hear you calling me to an abundance of life that I haven't yet experienced.

I ask for boldness to walk with integrity with what I say.

Show me your way to abundant life,

In Jesus name. Amen.

Sunday 5 June

Acts 5

In verse 29 Peter declares, “we must obey God, not men.” They were willing to be punished by earthly authorities in the fulfilling of their call by God. Most of us don’t experience anything like this today. At least, not overtly usually. We are still, however, called to trust God with the consequences when we do speak up boldly for God⁹. We are called to be ambassadors for God, not diplomats! (2 Cor 5:20)

What’s the difference between the two? A diplomat is a representative of a power but operates to negotiate and keep peace. And ambassador goes with the authority to act on behalf of that power. An ambassador is a title, while diplomat is an occupation.¹⁰ In the Scriptures, the purpose of a title is to describe the authority, it labels the character and the consequence of the position held. Owning our role as ambassadors for Christ enables us to walk in the boldness and victory we need to be a witness in this world. We go in the authority of Jesus Christ in order to glorify the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit.

“[T]he purpose of life is to glorify God by the building of character through truth.”¹¹ Growing in godliness and yielding our own agenda to God and being willing to sacrifice time, energy, money, and strength to serve God is part of our earthly lives as believers.

⁹ Weirsbe, (1989) *Bible Exposition*, 425.

¹⁰ <http://www.differencebetween.info/difference-between-ambassador-and-diplomat>

¹¹ Weirsbe, (1989) *Bible Exposition*, 427.

Questions for reflection

1. When has following the teachings of Jesus cost you something?
2. Few things test our patience and faith like being forced to wait, which perhaps explains why we are so often forced into situations where we have no other choice. When have you been required to wait? And did it test your faith?
3. How do you administer your life, relationships, and community engagement through the movement of the Spirit?

Monday 27 June

Acts 25

Prayer

Holy, life-giving Spirit,
infuse in us your ability to remain present to your people.
Help us to be there,
for the people who need us.
There for young,
there for the elderly,
there for the broken hearted;
fire our hearts with your life-changing presence.
Even though we know you to be everywhere
and in everything,
give us the ability to be fully in one place at a time,
open and ready to love. Amen

Acts 25:1-27

Although two years had passed the Jewish leaders were still looking for a way to kill Paul, for as we witnessed in Acts 22, he is seen as a threat to law and order. What we witness in Acts 25 is the fulfilment of Paul’s commissioning on the Damascus road.

time in the Newcastle diocese as a youth and family worker. Bishop Brian Farren on a routine pastoral visit commented on the value of parish administrators this has always resonated with me, for as Bishop Farren outlined this ministry as important because if someone has reaches out to the church, the priest, the Op-Shop, playgroup, youth group, or pastoral care team they are waiting for a response. Therefore, a delayed response or no response at all is a decision against the Spirit. For if we wait for a convenient or the right time to respond, that response to the persons enquiry may be too late to help them or even damage the value of the church in their eyes. This is a lesson I still try to live by, although the business of life can and does get in the way at times.

Acts 24:1-27

Felix's delays, postponements, procrastination, and unkept promises in this chapter are counter balanced by Paul's self-control, willingness to share with others, and his faith in Jesus Christ. In allowing the case against Paul to drag on Felix is being no friend to his prisoner. His apparent kindness towards Paul, in allowing Paul's friends to attend him, is clouded by Luke's comments about Felix in 24:24-27. As it turns out Felix detains Paul in prison in the hopes that money would be given him by Paul (24:26). William Willimon notes that the pagan confusion regarding the power of Christians is "not the power of the purse," rather it is power given by the Spirit. This power is demonstrated by Paul even when he is in custody and his fate is being decided by another.

Paul in this chapter, like the prophets of Israel boldly proclaims the truth of God, despite the possible cost. He is able to speak bluntly to the high priest and he does not curb his tongue before Felix. Furthermore, Paul demonstrates his understanding of resurrection and the fairness of God's 'endtime' judgment (v.21) as emphasised also in Romans 2:1-11, 5:16,11:33, 13:11-14. Paul is not concerned with the judgment of Felix, rather he examines his own earthly words and deeds through the lens of God's eternal loving judgement.

Questions for reflection

T.B. Joshua commented that we can only experience victory in our lives when we walk in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.¹²

1. Have you been a diplomat or an ambassador for Christ?
2. What sacrifices have you made in order to serve God?
3. What is God asking you to change in order to walk in "victory...in the Spirit of Jesus Christ"?

Prayer

Father,

Your word declares that I have victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are days when I don't feel very victorious.

I get discouraged and disheartened.

Lift my eyes to You, Lord.

Help me to remember that the truth of your word,

That I have authority because of Jesus Christ,

And it isn't dependent on my feelings.

I thank you that you know me and understand me.

And that you love me

And want the best for me.

I chose to keep my eyes fixed on your truth

And to trust in you today.

In the name of Jesus. Amen

¹² <https://quotlr.com/quotes-about-walking-with-god>

Monday 6 June

Acts 6

The church is growing, expanding, multiplying. To the point where there weren't enough to serve the number who attended and so seven were chosen to serve. These men were known to be faithful, being honest in all their dealings, wise in life and in their faith journey, and imbued (which is a strange word for us today) with Holy Spirit.

Imbued means to be permeated with a quality and is based on the idea of being saturated. Being Ballarat I have experienced the concept of saturation firsthand. Being drenched in rain, my clothes get saturated. By the end of a typical winter, I walk up the backyard and the ground squelches underfoot, because it is saturated with water. Being saturated means that no more can be absorbed. So in this chapter, the apostles recognise those who are chosen to help as being saturated in the quality of Holy Spirit. What does that mean?

We know from Scripture that Holy Spirit is seen as a dove, as fire, as wind, and called the Comforter for starters. But what quality does Holy Spirit demonstrate that is significant to this situation? Holy Spirit yields to the Father to draw our attention to Jesus Christ. (John 16:13,14) To be a person of character we are urged to yield to God and be controlled by Holy Spirit, in all we do, think and say, in order to cause people's attention to be drawn to Jesus Christ. This is why Stephen is chosen in particular.

Activity

On a piece of paper trace around your hand. Inside the tracing write how you see yourself – strengths / weaknesses. Then, in the place around your hand write how God knows you, sees your strengths, and weaknesses. If there is a difference in perception – what can you do to move towards the way God sees you and out of the cycle of self-sabotage? Write down a way to actively practice becoming the person God knows you to be.

Sunday 26 June

Acts 24

Prayer

All-loving God,
awaken in us the patience to be incomplete,
to be in the process of becoming closer to you and to your people.
Help us to know that slow is real,
that gradual is divine
and keep gently asking for our participation in the work of salvation.
Give us ways to respond;
give us the energy to be actively engaged
in the lives around us
and the world you have given us. Amen.

Personal Reflection

The tragic subtext of Acts is that people often make decisions against the Spirit out of concern for financial, political status, social standing, or some other fleeting and socially prescribed measure of value. But a decision against God could be like that of Felix's greed for more money, more influence, or negligent administration. One of the most common decisions against God is being remiss in our own administration, be that returning emails, phone calls, or texts in a timely manner. I was introduced to the concept that administration is a ministry during my

In this moment we cannot help but admire how clever Paul is, he is not only an accomplished orator, but he also manages to manipulate the legal proceedings to his advantage. He inserts new information about himself at opportune moments, as he did when he noted that he was a Roman citizen (22:25) at the exact moment he was to be tortured. When appearing before the Sanhedrin he once again rescues himself from a difficult situation by turning the interrogation by capitalising on the competing factions within the council and pitting them against each other. In manipulating the legal proceedings to his benefit by persuasive rhetoric and crowd control, Paul seems to epitomise what Jesus cautioned his disciples to be in the midst of wolves. *"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."* (Matthew 10:16) However, I would suggest that Paul and the Sanhedrin are more representative of Proverbs 13:3-5.

Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives;
those who open wide their lips come to ruin.
The appetite of the lazy craves, and gets nothing,
while the appetite of the diligent is richly supplied.
The righteous hate falsehood,
but the wicked act shamefully and disgracefully. (Prov. 13:3-5)

Looking at Paul through the lens of Lamentations we can discern a few of his internal contradictions. Nevertheless, Paul's limitations and flaws demonstrates that God does not need us to be perfect, nor does God require us to demand perfection from others. Paul's dialogue with the Sanhedrin illustrates that God sees us, hears us, and knows our hearts and chooses us anyway.

Question for reflection

1. Do your flaws keep you from seeing yourself the way God does?

Questions for reflection

Everyone recognizes that Stephen was Spirit-filled when he was performing wonders. Yet, he was just as Spirit-filled when he was being stoned to death. - Leonard Ravenhill

1. What would be the most difficult situation for you to demonstrate qualities of Holy Spirit?
2. Do you think those qualities apply, even if you are not seeking to be in any particular role within your parish? Why or why not?

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
Despite my best attempts,
I am aware that I do not reflect your character consistently.
There are so many things that cause me to operate in ways
That are not healthy or helpful or caring or compassionate.
I get tied up in my own stuff and forget to ask
What it is that you may want.
I ask for your forgiveness.
I seek to yield to you
And be controlled by Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tuesday 7 June

Acts 7:1:30

These verses are the start of a long defence from Stephen as he stands before the council. He is respectful while he reminds the Jewish people of their history with God, from Abraham to Moses. Stephen reminds the council that God appeared to Abraham *before* he was in a sacred place¹³. He also infers the number of times that, as God's Chosen

¹³ Meyer, F.B. Through the Bible Day by Day. In e-Sword (2016) *Stephen's Defense: God's First Called Ones*.

People, they denied and rejected God's directives and went their own way. He basically accuses them of being rebellious, stubborn, and hypocritical, even in that present moment.

What has all that history to do with us, here in the 21st century? Perhaps when we look at the behaviour of the Israelites throughout history, we can catch a glimpse of our own hearts. Rejecting or denying God's call, ignoring his guidance, rebelliously wanting our own way, being stubborn and not allowing God his way if we can't get ours, judging others while behaving in ways that are less than with integrity. The Israelites, and the Jews Stephen is facing, wanted all the privileges that God offered without the cost of fulfilling that for which they were responsible.

Questions for reflection

1. What is God asking of you today? What is your responsibility to fulfill so that you can experience his blessings?
2. In what area of your life might you be rejecting God, ignoring his guidance, or being rebellious? Do you want that to change?

Prayer

Lord,
This is a simple prayer that comes from my heart.
Teach me how to yield to you.
How to accept what you are speaking to me,
Noticing when you speak,
And to be obedient and devoted to you.
In the name of Jesus. Amen.

e-Sword: Free Bible Study for the PC. <https://www.e-sword.net>

the crowd employing Paul's mission and ministry as a boundary marker by which the community defines itself and regulates its membership?

Musical Reflection

Listen or look at the lyrics to the 'Hurricane' by Bob Dylan.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSmjDNWDdBs>

Questions for Reflection

1. What are the similarities and differences between the Paul, Rubin Carter, the crowd, and the police in the 'Hurricane'?

Saturday 25 June

Acts 23

Prayer

Help us, Father, to remain steadfast,
to be faithful and to endure.

We may desire happiness, comfort, approval, and blessings,
but they may not be ours at this time.

Just as Jesus endured,

help us to stand firm knowing that his story
did not end at the cross and neither will ours. Amen.

Acts 23:1-35

"He is simply a shiver looking for a spine." (Paul Keating)

Retort is a term used in fencing and means 'a counterattack made immediately after successfully parrying the opponents lunge.' A verbal retort is a quick, sharp, or witty reply, especially one that turns the words of the previous speaker back upon that speaker. Chapter 23 contains my favourite of Paul's shrewd and piercing one-liners. '*God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!*' (v.3) What a fabulous response to Ananias who just ordered him to be struck, you can almost hear Paul's mocking disdain for Ananias, his frustration at the Pharisees, Sadducees, and all those standing nearby.

message are in line with God's redemptive purposes for a repentant Israel according to the Scriptures. In this regard, his family background (22:3-5), his personal experiences (22:6-11), and the testimony of relevant others (Ananias) in support of his vocation (22:12-16) coupled with his own testimony (22:17-21) provide the basis of Paul's vocational conviction.

Yet, what are we witnessing exactly as we read this chapter? Consider the definition of witness above, how many examples of witness are present in this passage? Furthermore, what is Paul being charged with by the gathered crowd?

Today, instead of focusing on Paul's testimony, rather I will examine how the crowd responds to Paul's story of conversion. The purpose of drawing attention to the crowd in this passage is to focus on why the people listening to Paul's testimony are so adamant in their condemnation of him.

The late French literary theorist and philosopher of social sciences René Girard probably is not the first person that comes to mind when we think of Paul, however Girard's notion of the sacrificial scapegoat is a useful lens for chapter 22. The ritual violence involved in persecuting a scapegoat is evident in the crowd's behaviour in this passage. The nature of persecution logic such as this relates to three types of taboo-based crimes: violent, sexual, and religious. However, for a taboo to be publicly accepted and adhered to, the communal consciousness must be convinced that the taboo has the capacity to undermine and damage the status-quo and safety of the entire group.

Persecution logic therefore comes into play when a community believes that their cultural order has been affected by one or more of these crimes. Consequently, the persecutors will convince themselves that a small number of people, or even an individual, is extremely harmful to the whole of society, despite the relative weakness of the victim or victims. Therefore, in the case of this reading what we are witnessing? Is

Reflection on the week:

Day 1

Being a witness

Sometimes we can find ourselves feeling uncomfortable with what God has before us. We always have a choice. Do we want to move forward with God, or not?

Day 2

Holy Spirit

Having waited and prayed, the infant church underwent a major transformation as Holy Spirit, the promised power of the resurrected Christ, was released. Jesus promised that power through the ages, even now.

Day 3

Opposition

"There is direct opposition to the work of Holy Spirit. There is conflict within as much as there is pressure from outside." God is greater and his healing work continues.

Day 4:

Shaken but not stirred

Our world can be shaken by all kinds of events or circumstances. Sometimes its external other times its internal. Whatever the case, we can experience life in abundance by staying committed regardless of circumstances.

Day 5

Ambassadors for Christ

We operate in an authority that is given to us, because of the work of Christ, through Holy Spirit. We can walk boldly as a witness to the world and trust God as we seek to serve him.

Day 6:

Who are you?

...when no-one is looking?¹⁴ The test of character is consistency despite circumstances. Holy Spirit was given to empower us to live an abundant life.

Day 7:

Rejecting God

We reject God at our own peril, as we can rationalise any behaviour or thought as being the truth. We can judge and condemn others while ignoring God's conviction in our own hearts.

There are so many seemingly disparate messages from this week's readings. And yet we are constantly brought back to the story of Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and the coming of Holy Spirit to empower believers. Whether it is about trying to be bold in our witness, coping with difficulties and trials, or serving God with an integrity of character, it is the promised Holy Spirit who emboldens, comforts, strengthens and authorises.

¹⁴ Hybels, B. (2010) *Who are you when no-one is looking?* IVP Books, Title.

Friday 24 June 2022

Acts 22

Prayer

Holy God, you said to us,
"Look, I make all things new."
Grant us, we pray the vision to see
You at work in our world
healing our brokenness and making us new.
Grant us the wisdom to hear your voice through
the noise that surrounds us.
And grant us the courage to bring to
fruition the world you are creating. Amen.

Definition

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary the term witness means:

1. attestation of a fact or event: TESTIMONY
2. one that gives evidence specifically: one who testifies in a cause or before a judicial tribunal
3. one asked to be present at a transaction so as to be able to testify to its having taken place
4. one who has personal knowledge of something
5. something serving as evidence or proof: SIGN
6. public affirmation by word or example of usually religious faith or conviction

Acts 22:1-30

"Brothers and fathers, listen to the defence that I now make before you."
(22:1) In the reading today we hear Paul's defence of his ministry to the Gentiles. While the subtext of his speech is theological, its details are biographical. Paul offers his story as evidence that his mission and

purpose of Luke demonstrating this style of passive temptation is to reveal that not all temptation comes from a place of negativity or malice. Instead, Luke is noting that sometimes to do nothing, to stagnate, or ignore ones responsibility can cause harm to those for whom we love, have care for, or employ.

The second example of temptation is anchored in this very human fear of change, and in particular institutional change. In order to expose the temptation to remain unquestioningly attached to tradition Luke examines how James and the council of elders react to Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. This time the group of people advising Paul are not so much concerned for his safety rather their counsel is rooted in the fear of innovation, making a mistake, or worse the loss of power, prestige, and authority in the eyes of the people. The elders succumb to the temptation for maintaining their status by suggesting to Paul that he undergo the rite of purification as an external show of support for the Mosaic Law and to undermine Paul's own standing with the Gentiles.

Finally, Luke closes the chapter by describing how Paul's decision not to be tempted at its opening, combined with the elders temptation to manipulate his public image results in unrest in the wider community. Thereby, inciting the mob to surrender to their own fear due to the lack of resolve and foresight of their leaders. When leaders, particularly spiritual leaders capitulate to their fears they rupture the social fabric of their community which undermines the way the people respond to perceived threats. (v. 27-36)

Activity

When next you go to church, buy a coffee, or meet a friend ask the person serving you, sitting next you, or across from you about their story.

Questions to reflect on the week

1. What is the area that is the biggest challenge to you to move forward with God?
2. Do you experience the power of God, through Holy Spirit in your life?
3. In what aspect of your life would you desire God to bring healing?
4. Have you questioned God when he has asked for your obedience? What is holding you back?

Prayer

Come, O Spirit of God,
Fill us with your power
Transform our minds
Challenge our hearts
Invigorate our souls to learn your truth
And walk with integrity
Into the life of abundance that you have for us. Amen.

Part II

The Rev'd Mark Schnerring

Mark has been the Parish Priest for Buninyong for 16 years. He is married to Kate and has three children – Ben (12), Alex (10), and Lucy (8). He clearly loves long term ministry and getting to know both the people of the Church and the wider community. He enjoys spending time with his family in all sorts of ways, exercise and sport, and eating too much food! Those last two things don't go so well together. He also doesn't drink coffee!

Wednesday 8 June

Acts 7:31-60

Where is God found?

The Religious Leaders believed that God was found in the Temple and through obedience to the Law of Moses. That's why they were so upset with Stephen, he seemed to be speaking against these things, promoting a very different and dangerous idea about where God is found.

In response to the charges laid against him, Stephen gives a very lengthy speech (the first half of which you read yesterday). At first glance he appears to just be giving a history lesson, as if they didn't already know. But, he is trying to draw out things from their history that demonstrate his position about where God is and where he can be found; and that his view, far from being blasphemous, is consistent with the Scripture they claim to honour.

But, if they didn't get that he was speaking against their belief about where God was found, his accusation in verse 51 that they were a "stiff-necked people", sure would have made the connection for them, as well as the things he said after that to the end of verse 53.

sympathetic silence. Michael on the other hand sought to be strong, dependable, and patient with my grief journey. However, the temptation to which we both succumbed, was assuming that we knew what the other needed rather than sitting in the pain of loss together. In other words, for me temptation does not need to be an extra whisky or pair of shoes. Rather, in this case I was tempted to be closed off and angry with the one I needed most.

Acts 21:1-40

Stories connect us to people while providing an effective means to explore and navigate confusing, challenging, and changing situations. Today we encounter the final leg of Paul's pilgrimage back to Jerusalem for Pentecost. While we are once again reminded of the peril Paul will find himself in when he arrives at his destination the overarching image Luke employs is temptation. In this chapter Luke provides practical examples of how the temptation for power, greed, and theological dominance can undermine a communities God given purpose. The three examples of temptation Luke highlights begin with the personal, moving to the institutional, and finally Luke pans out to incorporate the wider social tapestry of Jerusalem.

Accordingly, chapter 21 opens with the reader still in close proximity with Paul, for Luke's use of the word 'we' brings us onto the boat bound for Phoenicia. The temptation illustrated in the first seventeen verses is linked to the various communities concern for Paul's safety and well-being. This is demonstrated in the two petitions by different groups for Paul to avoid returning to Jerusalem (v.4, 12) The first appeal comes from the disciples at Tyre, who told Paul not to go back through the power of the Spirit, but Paul did not heed their warning and proceeded on his way. The second attempt to persuade Paul is far more detailed and comes via the prophet Agabus. Once again Paul declines the offer to remain and instead chooses to return stating 'What are you doing, weeping, and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' (v.13) The

Thursday 23 June

Acts 21

Prayer

'Pray then in this way:

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.*

Your kingdom come.

*Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.*

Give us this day our daily bread.

*And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

*And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one. Amen*

Matthew 6:9-13

Questions for Reflection

1. What does the term temptation mean to you?
2. Have you experienced a 'time of trial' where you were tempted to ease your suffering in some way? In hindsight would you choose to ease your suffering in that way?

Personal Reflection

Many years ago, Michael and I experienced a mid-term miscarriage. While I had children from my former marriage, this pregnancy was to be the only child we would possibly have together. In the aftermath of this loss, I experienced a significant 'time of trial.' Not only did I confront the feeling that my body had betrayed me, but I also grieved the loss of Michael's hope for becoming a biological parent. This left me oscillating between anger with God and dealing with the guilt that I had somehow failed. Likewise, the people around me smothered me with their

In the end, Stephen was saying that Jesus, who had recently died and been raised from the dead, was God's promised Messiah, who had come to replace the Temple and fulfil the law, both of which bore witness to him. Stephen's accusers thought God was found in a place and by obedience to rules, but Stephen says that Scripture points to his presence in a person – Jesus Christ. And, for this belief, Stephen was prepared to die.

Questions for reflection

1. Where do you look to find God?
2. What do you say to others about where they can find God?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you that you are found in Jesus. Help us to be as convinced as Stephen was, and to tell others this wonderful news.

Thursday 9 June

Acts 8

How seriously do you take the Great Commission?

In Acts 1:8, the resurrected Jesus commissioned his disciples (then, and down through the ages) to be his "*witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" (cf. Matthew 28:16-20). So far in Acts, the believers had only witnessed in Jerusalem. But, following the killing of Stephen in chapter 7, we read at the start of chapter 8 that believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, and then in verse 4 that "*those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.*" We then hear about some of the interactions Philip had with people in Samaria (8:5-25), as well as with an Ethiopian (8:26-40), all of which resulted in people coming to faith in Jesus.

This is great news, that people beyond Jerusalem were finally getting to hear the Good News about Jesus. But, what did it take to make it happen, for the believers to go beyond Jerusalem to proclaim Jesus? It

took the death of Stephen and persecution! God had used the persecution of his people in Jerusalem to further the cause of the Great Commission beyond Jerusalem. As we continue on in Acts we will see God continue to pursue his goal of his people being his witnesses to the ends of the earth. And, he will use all sorts of things to achieve that.

God remains the same today and his commitment to the Great Commission has not changed. He still calls his people (us !) to do our part in fulfilling it, and he will use all sorts of things to get us out and doing it – even persecution !

Questions for reflection

1. How seriously do you take the Great Commission?
2. What small steps can you take to proclaim Jesus – today, this week, this month, this year?

Prayer

Dear God, please help us to take the Great Commission as seriously as you do, and to prayerfully seek your guidance about the people and places you want us to share Jesus with.

Friday 10 June

Acts 9

Is anyone beyond the work of God to bring to Christian conversion?

After the encouragement to see the gospel spread beyond Jerusalem in chapter 8, we are brought back to Jerusalem at the start of chapter 9, and to a man named Saul, who was involved in the death of Stephen and the subsequent persecution of believers. He is one angry and nasty man, and absolutely bent on wiping out any who follow Jesus.

But, on the road to Damascus, where he planned to persecute any followers of Jesus, he encounters Jesus, and is thoroughly converted to become a follower of Jesus. What a huge turnaround! What a change has occurred deep within Saul! And now, instead of trying to destroy

Yet, considering Paul's checked past as a follower of YHWH and then a polarising leader within the burgeoning Christian community, how is he going to convince people to overcome their arrogance and greed in order to avoid theological error so to serve the redemptive interests of God well after he has left? The answer is Paul needs to model honesty, authenticity, integrity, and love. He does this by acknowledging his flaws and vulnerabilities through revisiting people with whom he had previously struggled to communicate with and understand. This is demonstrated by Paul spending time in Philippi during the feast of the unleavened. (20:1-6) This is particularly pertinent considering he had been unceremoniously tossed out of the city by the magistrates. Nevertheless, even amongst all the animosity in the city Paul had left a small community behind.

In chapter 20, therefore we observe Paul providing a framework for leadership, teaching, relationship, conflict resolution, and succession planning that sought to organise and encourage fledgling communities through what would be challenging times.

Questions for reflection

1. Why is succession planning so important when building a team, church community, or small group?
2. Do you think that by the time Paul told the Ephesian elders (v.38) that he would not be back he had been honest, authentic, and acted with integrity?

Personal Reflection

My second-grade teacher Mrs. Misson was the teacher that had a significant impact on my young self. Mrs. Misson was patient, loving, and has a contagious passion for the arts. Her enthusiasm for my natural artistic abilities somewhat alleviated the nervousness brought on by my dyslexia and social anxiety. Mrs. Misson's teaching style was anchored in her innate ability to communicate directly and simply. She did not rely on external rewards to coerce or compel you to learn, rather Mrs. Misson inspired action and connection through her consistent honesty, authenticity, integrity, and most of all love. When Mrs. Misson was killed in a car accident ten years later so many of her former students attended her funeral. Not because she was gone, but because she left a legacy of relationships that could never die.

Acts 20:1-38

"Keep watch over yourselves and over your flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." (20:28 NRSV) There are few biblical passages more instructive to the role and character of church leaders than this one. In this statement Paul provides the church of every age an archetypal model of leadership training and discernment. In this chapter what we find is Paul beginning the long process of succession planning. Or more simply, Paul understands that for the Christian communities to become autonomous beyond the generation of the primary witnesses to Christ's earthly ministry, then he and the other Apostle's need to identify, develop, and support new leaders. Therefore, chapter 20 documents a pivotal turn in Paul's ministry. While this chapter may feel disjointed because Luke employs the contrasting motifs of haste and delay, narrated and direct speech, wide landscapes, and small rooms. The purpose of combining these competing images of Paul's ministry is not only to bring to mind the breadth of Paul's ministry but also the subtle nuances of leadership.

followers of Jesus, he is committed to making them. As soon as he could, he begins preaching in the synagogues of Damascus, that Jesus is the Son of God (9:20). And the rest of Acts now focusses mainly on Saul and his service to God of proclaiming him to both Jews and Gentiles (9:15).

And, although Saul (soon to be known as Paul – Acts 13:9) had a unique call to proclaim Jesus, we can't escape the fact that we continually hear of those who become believers, either being called to witness to Jesus, or going about doing just that. Bearing witness to Jesus is the burden and privilege of every believer.

Questions for reflection

1. Is there someone you know who isn't a believer in Jesus, that you have been praying for years, whom you are tempted to believe is beyond the work of God?
2. Will you prayerfully persist in praying for those who don't believe in Jesus, and ask for the help of his Spirit to enable to speak about Jesus to them?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you that in Saul, we are encouraged that no-one is beyond your ability to bring to faith in Jesus. Please help us persist in prayer for those we know who don't trust in him and give us courage and words to witness to them.

Saturday 11 June

Acts 10

Does God show favouritism?

Chapter 9 ended with a return to the Apostle Peter in a place called Joppa (around 60km's west of Jerusalem), after the dramatic events of Saul's conversion; where we read that Peter healed people and even raised someone from the dead!

At the start of chapter 10 we are introduced to a Gentile man named Cornelius. He was what was known as a "God fearer." (10:2). That means that he believed in God but didn't know him fully. One day he was praying when he was given a vision by God to send for Peter (10:5). A day later, we read that Peter also was praying and was given a vision by God. Peter, like all good Jews, knew that some animals were clean or ok to eat and others were considered unclean and not ok to eat. But in this vision from God, Peter was told to eat animals that were considered to be unclean. Peter objected, but God insisted that it was ok for him to eat these animals (10:15).

The point of the vision, as Peter expressed to Cornelius when he met him, was that *"God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."* (10:34). This was a water-shed moment for the Disciples and the Church generally. For so long the Jewish people had believed that everyone else was unclean and unacceptable to God. But, Peter learnt that every person from every nation is able to know God fully through faith in Jesus Christ. Just as chapter 9 showed that no-one is beyond redemption by God because of how bad they are, chapter 10 shows that no-one is beyond redemption because of their nationality.

Alex Banks

Alexandra (Alex) Banks is a contemporary glass artist and theologian who has recently relocated to Ballarat with her husband, the Dean of the Cathedral, Michael Davies. Alex's area of theological research is focused on the interdisciplinary field of theology, trauma, and the arts.

Wednesday 22 June

Acts 20

Prayer

All authority is Yours, but You have
given authority to leaders to protect and guide us.
Today, we ask that You give all leaders
wisdom, discernment, strength, and resolve.
Keep them healthy, safe, and rested
so that that they can guide us
as we continue to glorify Your name.
As leaders in our own communities, help us
to display courage, hope, generosity, and kindness,
so to inspire those around us to
love, honour, and respect each other. Amen.

Activity

As a warm-up, stop reading for a moment and visualise a teacher who had a positive impact on your learning, school community, or your life in general. Write down how they assisted you and if possible what characteristics were inherent in their teaching and relational manner.

himself, and using such 'leisure' as he had to argue and reason for the vital importance of faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Miracles accompanied this extended ministry (note the episode—meant to be humorous, by the way—with the sons of Sceva: the '...but who are you?' question is music hall funny), and many were seized by awe. Paul made his plans to report to the Jerusalem elders (via Macedonia), and then planned to 'see Rome'.

As much as an increase in the number of converts testified to the validity of the mission, so too did opposition; in this case, an economically-inspired riot that notionally concerned itself with the honour of the goddess Artemis (Diana in Roman mythology) and her statue (thought to have been carved from a meteor fragment). Some of the Asiarchs ('officials of the province') who were Paul's pals, urged him to stay out of the melee. (Luke notes wryly that, 'most of the mob didn't know why they had come together'.) A few wise words from the town clerk, the crowd dispersed, and the riot was soon forgotten.

But not this 'little Pentecost': Ephesus became a centre of Christian vitality, and no one remembers Demetrius the silversmith.

Questions for reflection

1. The Asiarchs were responsible for, among other things, the orderly worship of the city's deities; they were (in later terms), 'senior' pagans. Yet some of them were Paul's friends, concerned for his welfare. How confident are we to make and sustain friendships outside the circle of the Church?
2. Why is teaching 'the whole Gospel' important? What happens if we don't?

Questions for reflection

Is there any person or group of people that you believe are "unclean" and not able to be saved?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you that you accept all people who repent and believe in Jesus, regardless of their nationality or culture. Please help us to not put up barriers that Christ has pulled down.

Sunday 12 June

Acts 11

What are we known for?

The first part of chapter 11 (vs. 1-18) continues the story of chapter 10. The apostles and other believers heard what had happened, but some were concerned and criticized Peter for going into the house of a Gentile (11:3). Peter then explained what happened with Cornelius and his family, and the vision he had had from God about not calling anything impure that God has made clean. When they heard Peter's explanation, they were satisfied and praised God that *"even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."* (11:18).

Following this, we hear in vs 19 to 30, about the establishment of the church in Antioch, which was well and truly in Gentile territory, though we do hear that there were many Jews there also. But, it is here that the disciples were first called Christians (11:26), the name by which followers of Jesus are still known today. And, it appears that this term ascribed to the disciples was not something they gave themselves, but a name that the unbelieving public gave them. It seems that the unbelieving world could clearly tell that Jesus Christ was overwhelmingly the focus of what they proclaimed as believers.

Questions for reflection

1. Would the unbelieving world around you know that you and your church are on about Jesus Christ?
2. Would they know that he (and not something else) is the very heart or centre of your faith?
3. Is he what you and your church are known to believe and proclaim?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for the clear focus of the early church that caused others to call them Christ followers or Christians. Please help us and our churches to be just as clear in our focus on Jesus, that the world may be drawn to him through us.

Monday 13 June

Acts 12

Can the Great Commission be thwarted by the plans of people?

It seems that Acts fluctuates between some level of persecution and hardship for the first Christians, and them experiencing many favourable responses to the Good News of Jesus. So, following the establishment of a church in Antioch at the end of chapter 11, attention in chapter 12 turns back to the persecution of believers in Jerusalem, and in particular, their leader, Peter, who is arrested and put in prison to await a trial. It would have been a big concern for the fledgling church at the time and many may have felt that this could be the end of the church. But, we read on of the incredible account of how God got Peter out of prison and back to the band of believers who were both praying for Peter and hiding out of fear of the same thing happening to them.

Despite the fact that they had prayed for God to release Peter, they were shocked when he turned up! And, in doing so, proved once again that nothing can stop God from achieving his plans and purposes in the

Tuesday June 21

Acts 19

Déjà vu, as they say, isn't what it used to be. Yet some of the episodes in this long chapter look—and sound—very familiar. (Try reading out aloud in private on occasion and note the different effect the text can have.)

Apollos and Paul had swapped geography and assignments: Apollos (now a powerhouse!) to Corinth, Paul to Ephesus—possibly for Paul to assess the effects of Apollos's well-intentioned but deficient, earlier preaching. (One can be alight with enthusiasm, but still short of the mark.)

Paul encountered a group of 'disciples' (remembering that disciple = student, not follower), and discovered that their instruction had paused at John the baptiser's public ministry: they were baptised 'into John's baptism'. Hence, the story that attracted and held them was dangerously lacking, perhaps even lacking the centrality of the person of Jesus (they had never heard of the Holy Spirit). What followed—and Luke may have compressed time significantly, here—was further instruction, baptism 'into the name of the Lord Jesus', and Paul's laying on of his hands on each one. Another, local Pentecost followed: a repetition, complete with [foreign] tongues/languages and outbursts of prophecy—to demonstrate, it seems, that the Spirit is not constrained by time, space or ethnicity. 'Altogether', notes Luke rather artlessly, 'there were about twelve of them.'

What soon followed was a spectacular, sometimes riotous upheaval, familiar in its form: Paul in the synagogue (for about 3 months) arguing and debating; stubborn opposition and rumour-mongering; Paul's leaving, not the city, but the venue, for a new one—the hall of Tyrannus. (Such 'halls' were places of *leisure*—the root meaning of 'scholar'—where matters of religion, philosophy and politics could be discussed.) Paul set up shop here for *two years*, no doubt working to support

the visionary experienced accorded to Paul called for endurance, based on the Lord's assurance that there were 'many' in the city who were '[God's] people'.

The now-familiar pattern of argument and controversy led to strife, and Paul was arraigned before the proconsul, whose interest in the matter ('questions about words and names and your own law') could not have been any less.

On leaving Corinth, Paul, Priscilla and Aquila sailed for Syria, and Paul continued his strange, uncomfortable existence between two worlds (shaved hair/vow), leaving A & P in Ephesus where they schooled the eloquent, Alexandrian Jew, Apollos—with his 'burning enthusiasm'—in the 'Way of the Lord', as it was known.

Paul made his report to HQ in Jerusalem, but continued on his wandering rounds, 'strengthening the disciples'.

Questions for reflection

1. 'Faith' is now considered to be very much a 'private matter'. How would you approach a keen, energetic convert to Christ whose public statements were either deficient or just plain wrong?
2. How equipped do you feel to undertake such a task? Does it matter?

world, including fulfilling the Great Commission through his people. A prison cell, chains, four squads of four soldiers could not stop him. But, not only did God prove that such human measures cannot stop him, he then went on in the last few verses of the chapter to kill King Herod, the one who stood against him and was responsible for putting Peter in prison and persecuting other believers. And so, *"the word of God continued to spread and flourish."* (12:24)

Questions for reflection

1. Do you get discouraged that the church seems to be dying and that the world (the devil) seems to have the upper hand over God and Christians?
2. Is there any person or power that you believe is stronger than God?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you that nothing can thwart your plans for this world and the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Please help us to be encouraged by this and enthusiastically get on with the task you have given us of proclaiming Christ.

Tuesday 14 June

Acts 13:1-12

Where does the power to serve in God's mission come from?

At first glance there doesn't seem to be much different about the things that happen in these verses, but there is something that on closer inspection stands out and is repeated several times. As Luke describes Barnabas and Saul being sent off on their first missionary journey, and what happened at Cyprus, we certainly hear about Jesus being proclaimed, but three times we hear mention of the Holy Spirit (verses 2, 4, and 9). We have heard the promised Holy Spirit mentioned quite a bit since he came in power on the Day of Pentecost in chapter 2. However,

in these verses there seems to be an extra emphasis on his involvement and work to help and empower the disciples for the Great Commission.

In verse 2, in the context of worshipping the Lord, the Holy Spirit spoke and guided them to set apart Paul and Barnabas for the work to which he had called them. In verse 4, Barnabas and Saul were sent on their way by the Holy Spirit. And, in verse 9, Saul (now Paul) was filled with the Holy Spirit who enabled Paul to exercise judgement on one who opposed God. All this emphasis on the Holy Spirit helps us to see that the work God has called us to in the Great Commission is more than just a human endeavour, but one which needs the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit to do all that God calls us to do.

Questions for reflection

1. Do you create space for the Holy Spirit to work in and through you?
2. Do you rely on the Spirit and not just yourself to serve God?
3. Do you ask God to guide you by his Spirit?

Prayer

Dear God, thank you that you have not left your people alone, but have given us the Spirit of Jesus to guide and empower us to do our part in fulfilling the Great Commission. Help us to be encouraged by his presence and to seek his help for the work you can give us.

End of week questions for individuals and groups:

1. What has struck you from this week's readings?
2. What have you learnt about the Great Commission – its focus? Our part? God's part?
3. What is one particular thing that you will do with what you have learnt this week?

Monday 20 June

Acts 18

The drive along the Olimpia Odos A8/E94 motorway from Athens to Corinth takes about 56 minutes on a clear run, keeping the Megara Gulf on your left. Paul's trip (by undocumented means—how he travelled there was of no consequence to Luke) would have taken longer, perhaps 3 or 4 days, but the bustling seaport of Corinth would have presented a range of stark contrasts to the Athenian stopover. Corinth was known for many things, not least of which was its reputation as a welcome site for refreshment among the seafaring fraternity. The infinitive, 'to Corinthianise' became a byword for licentious behaviour (and was probably coined by the good burghers of Athens, who resented the Roman naming of Corinth as the administrative capital of Greece after its reconstruction in c 44BCE).

Paul's first listed contact was with an Italian refugee Jewish couple, Aquila (born in what is now Black Sea Turkey) and his wife, Priscilla (tentmakers, like Paul). Jews had been expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius for apparent breaches of the peace, although contemporary scholarship argues whether this was in the year 41, 49 or 51CE. The date to one side, it is clear that the Jewish faith was well established around the Empire: 'every sabbath', Paul argued in the synagogue, trying to 'convince Jews and Greeks'. (The latter were the *sebomanoi*, the God-fearers.) The dramatic denunciation by Paul ('I will go to the Gentiles!') did not happen overnight—he stayed in Corinth for 18 months. The walk-out from the synagogue wasn't *too* dramatic, however: he went *next door* to the synagogue, to the house of Titius Justus, a God-fearer who had accepted Paul's arguments about the person and place of Jesus.

This next door arrangement—compare setting up a small hardware store next to a giant green warehouse today!—bore fruit: no one less than Crispus, elected leader of the synagogue was convinced, believed and baptised. This upstart sect of Judaism (for this is how, for centuries, it was long regarded) made some significant converts, but at considerable cost;

The Athenian long weekend was not the huge success as is sometimes supposed: Paul, in his element in synagogue and *agora*, debated with Jewish, Epicurean and Stoic thinkers (the latter two giving Paul star billing at the Areopagus, the very centre of the philosophers' universe at the time). Paul's 'unknown god' speech was a generous and wise way into the local scene, but he was, for the most part, misunderstood: 'Jesus' and 'Anastasis' (a feminine noun, 'resurrection') were assumed to be 'foreign divinities'—just two more to add to the confusing range of gods from which to choose. Paul's speaking engagement received the ancient equivalent of 'Let's do lunch'—'We will hear you again about this'—and Luke's laconic, 'At that point Paul left them', says it all.

But many or few, some were added to heaven's list, one of whom was Dionysius the Areopagite (a magistrate), who is now the patron saint of Athens. Not a bad weekend, after all...

Questions for reflection

1. What are some other occasions when the Christian faith is set on a collision course with the powers of the day? What are the limits of Christian compromise and resistance?
2. How would you—and I—address our contemporaries, in our times and places, if we were given the chance?
3. Problems of language to one side, what does the Athenian reaction to the claim of 'resurrection' tell you about attitudes to death and life-after-death in the ancient world? How do our contemporaries think about it

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Wednesday 15 June

Acts 13:13-52

The 'setting apart' of Barnabas and Saul (13:2; note the order of precedence at this early stage, and the use of Paul's Hebrew name, translated into Greek as *Saulos*), and their being 'sent out by the Holy Spirit' (13:4) required some ordinary, practical outcomes. Travel to be organised, fares paid, packing a kit bag, and settling on an itinerary.

Barnabas and Saul (aka 'Paul', 13:9) sailed from Paphos in Cyprus and made land fall in Perga, a journey of about 152 nautical miles (Devonport is 273 nm from Melbourne), probably in a coastal trader that plied the route on a regular basis. From Perga it was on to Pisidian Antioch in Asia Minor (modern Turkey; not to be confused with the 'other Antioch', in Syria).

Paul and his companions (note the shift) then did something very ordinary, and attended synagogue on the next sabbath—as would have been their usual habit as observant Jews. Again, not unusually, as guests they were accorded the honour of addressing this lay gathering (no clergy here!), and Paul responded with a retelling of the 'salvation history' of the people that would be known as Israel. Again, a very

common method of introducing a new or controversial idea: it showed the speaker's familiarity with, and reverence for, the history of God's people. He spoke to the 'descendants of Abraham's family' and to the God-fearers (a term for those who had not formally converted to Judaism).

Paul easily introduced the idea of Jesus as *saviour*—a loaded, historical term—appointed by God and unrecognised by many 'in Jerusalem'. Paul declared God's mysterious plan, which required that Jesus should die—*why* is not explained here, nor *how* his death would change things—but that God raised him from death. The comparison with King David, dead, buried, returned to dust, is vital: Jesus 'experienced no corruption'. The centre of the message *is* the centre of the message: by 'this Jesus' people can be set free from the sins that the law of Moses could not deal with.

The effect was electric. Many were attracted by this message, whereas others—CAUTION: for 'the Jews', read 'Jewish religious authorities'—were moved by jealousy (*zelo*; 'ardour', 'jealousy'), and made life uncomfortable to the point of Paul & Co's hurried departure to Iconium, about 150 km along the Via Sebaste. Rather than feeling defeated in the face of opposition, the result was *joy*, and a 'filling with Holy Spirit'.

Questions for reflection

1. How do we discern the call of God in the ordinary and everyday?
2. What caution ought be taken when dealing with ancient texts? (The use of the term, 'the Jews' has a dark and deadly history.)
3. How do we wrestle with what is sometimes called 'double agency'—God's and human action (the latter of which is sometimes blameworthy, but seemingly a necessary part of the plan)?

Sunday 19 June

Acts 17

In a time of chronic travel-deprivation, Paul's short Athenian interlude can appear charming and make us wistful: reminiscences of the flea market in the *Plaka*; selfies at the Parthenon; ouzo in a taverna. But that would be to sidestep the peril and near-miss moment found, not in Athens, but in *Thessalonica*. Athens, by comparison, was a pleasant mid-term break for Paul.

Paul and Silas did their usual thing on three sabbath days and went and argued 'from the scriptures' with fellow Jews in the synagogue.

No surprises there, but when 'some' were persuaded—along with a 'great many' devout Greeks (the God-fearers) and a number of the city's leading women—then things turned nasty.

The NRSV translates as 'ruffians' a term to describe a group of men who were, in fact, something akin to guns-for-hire: 'vicious degenerates' is closer to the use of the term in other ancient literature. 'The mob' was an orchestrated action, and it used a political pretext to attack Paul and Silas. The word translated as 'world' is in other contexts, 'Empire'; the word for 'turned upside down' is a bad pun, a play on a word that means 'to raise from death' (it's used numerous times in John 11). The allegation is nothing less than sedition—even treason against the Emperor ('another king named Jesus!')—and the harmless 'city officials' were those with special responsibility for state security (a low-tech forerunner of MI5 or the FSB). Things were dire, and the only response was for local believers to risk a hasty operation to get Paul and Silas out of the city under cover of darkness.

Trouble followed them to nearby Beroea, so Paul was 'conducted' to Athens, in effect, by a bodyguard.

Next, there is the curious blocking of what seemed a good idea at the time: the mission to 'Asia' (Afghanistan, India and beyond). The Holy Spirit would not permit it (*koluo*, to prevent, hinder, put a stop to), however. The 'Spirit of Jesus' (note how the emerging understanding of the Trinity shines through the cracks) blocked their progress near Mysia (a different verb 'to forbid' is used), because Macedonia, not Asia, was Paul's designated task. Unnamed others would be detailed to the Asia mission.

At Philippi—a major trade and transport hub—there is the encounter with Lydia, a merchant from Thyatira and a 'God fearer', a technical term for someone who was attracted to Judaism but did not (and was not compelled to) come under the whole Mosaic law, and whose 'heart was opened' by God to believe and be baptised.

And then another 'opening', this time of the Philippian lock-up, courtesy of a *seismos*, a 'violent shaking' that sprung Paul and Silas's cell door; then, another dramatic baptism.

Finally, Paul at his stubborn best: come morning, he played his Roman citizenship card, and demanded a public apology and exoneration by the magistrates for the indignity suffered. A cup of tea at Lydia's, then on the road again...

Questions for reflection

1. What are some of the impediments or obstructions to being recognised as a Christian in your encounters with other people? When is it time to make legitimate compromises, and when is it time to dig in your heels?
2. Have you ever been stopped from 'doing the Lord's work' as you understood it, only to be nudged in a different direction?

Thursday 16 June

Acts 14

On the surface, this chapter gives a dizzying travelogue that resembles the worst of the *It's-Tuesday-it-must-be-Belgium* type of budget tourist experience. From Iconium, to Lystra, to Derbe; back to Lystra, then to Iconium again and to Pisidian Antioch; through the district of Pamphylia, a stopover in Perga, then catch the next ferry out of Attalia and sail across the top of Cyprus and come ashore in Syrian Antioch. The action is so compressed by Luke that detail can be lost. Taking a breath is necessary.

First, note that 'the same thing happened' in Iconium as occurred (more or less) in P Antioch: visits to the synagogue (note: 'they stayed a long time') and numerous opportunities to speak of Jesus and the resurrection; 'signs and wonders' (not described); much enthusiasm and much opposition from Jews and non-Jews alike. A city divided and a plot 'to stone' (*perhaps* to death, but not necessarily; 'to run out of town' could be an intended outcome).

In Lystra, an orthopaedic miracle—spectacularly misinterpreted by the locals (Barnabas = Zeus, Paul = Hermes)—and an attempt to correct people's perceptions. But a posse of opponents (again, caution with the term, 'Jews'), a local insurrection, and a near-death experience for Paul.

An 'apostolic conclusion' emerges: 'persecutions' becomes a theme (although 'troubles' is a less dramatic translation); elders (*presbyteroi*) are appointed in local assemblies, and the future of the Gospel is entrusted to God.

In 28 verses there is elation, aggravation, frustration, salvation; there is welcome and rejection; hospitality and the bum's rush; violence and comfort; doors opened and slammed shut; scars and determination. It's all here. Who said faith was dull?

Questions for reflection

1. How are people met 'where they are', when it comes to the question of faith?
2. What did/does '[God's] opening a door of faith for the Gentiles' mean?

Friday 17 June

Acts 15

Transitions are difficult. Sometimes they are painful; they are almost always costly, and often carry within them the possibility that the new position *could* be wrong. The Church of England (and in time, the Anglican Church of Australia) wrestled with this many years ago: birth control; the re-marriage of divorced persons; the ordination of women. These were resolved in the positive, and are all now (more or less) unremarkable—if not sometimes controversial. The matter of same-sex marriage is still a point of controversy and divided opinion.

But none of these can hold a candle to the momentous transition described in the long chapter 15 of Acts, the so-called 'Council of Jerusalem'. This chapter, though long and detailed, will repay careful, repeated and close scrutiny, because it was—and is—*momentous*. These notes cannot do it justice.

It concerns the full admission of Gentiles (non-Jews; for the most part, you and me) into the kingdom of heaven *without* their/our keeping the law of Moses. The debate was heated and divisive ('no small dissension' in Luke's understatement), because it was asserted by some that, unless 'they' were circumcised/kept the Law, then there could be *no* salvation. Nothing less than the universal effect of Christ's death and resurrection was on trial, here. James, the titular elder of the Jerusalem council, announced his and the council's decision; wrote a letter (more a 'decree', in fact); and ushered in the Age of the Holy Spirit (in administrative form, at least—the Spirit is not constrained by councils or synods!). Non-Jews

were now declared to be fully admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven: 'we' and 'they' will all be 'saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.' The letter was more or less the minimum requirement for Jews and Gentiles to gather at a common table to eat, not a grand theological statement.

Chapter 15 is the fulcrum of the book of Acts; with it, the Spirit has moved the world.

Questions for reflection

1. Are we required to resolve the tension that remains in the wake of the Council of Jerusalem's decision—that Judaism is alive and well, as is Christianity?
2. What does this Jew/Gentile settlement imply for relations between the Synagogue and the Church (the 'older' and 'younger' brothers of Luke 15, perhaps)?

Saturday 18 June

Acts 16

Like so much of Paul's life and mission, this chapter is varied and action-packed, and refuses efforts to be summarised in a few words. Hence, a highlights reel will have to do.

First, on backtracking: back in Lystra, Paul appears to return to a view that pre-dates the decision of the Jerusalem council. He has Timothy—a Jew, 'a disciple', like Paul—circumcised, in accordance with the Mosaic law. Not 'for salvation', however, but for practical reasons of Jewish conscience (for the conservative members of the Jerusalem council, perhaps, as much as for the Jewish religious leaders of the region); Timothy's father was a Greek, though his mother was Jewish. This move was all about doing whatever was legitimately acceptable in order to clear the path of cultural and religious debris so that the Good News could be declared with integrity and authority.