

Acts 1: Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus

Jesus is alive and working in the world today through ordinary people, powered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the ends of earth.

Intro

Is the church dying?

Fast forward 24 hours to this time tomorrow. Where will you be? Who will you be with? What if that person says ‘what did you get up to over the weekend?’ You pause a minute, swallow, think about the various things you could say, and come out with something like: “well I went to church on Sunday...” what would you expect them to think? Perhaps they’d be surprised? Or Confused, thinking “I didn’t have you down as a religious type.” Or maybe you tell them every week and they quickly change the subject...

I know when people ask me what I do for a living, and I say I’m a church minister, I often get something like ‘you don’t look like a church minister.’ What does that even mean? What should a church minister look like? Ok maybe they don’t think I look responsible enough. Or I’m not old enough. I think there are plenty of people who think of church as an old people’s thing. A dying out thing.

The Beatles wrote Eleanor Rigby in 1966, but I think it encapsulates how lots of people I know think of the church today. Not the first verse, which is about Eleanor Rigby, but the second one:

Father McKenzie, writing the words

*Of a sermon that no one will hear
 No one comes near
 Look at him working, darning his socks
 In the night when there's nobody there
 What does he care
 All the lonely people
 Where do they all come from?
 All the lonely people
 Where do they all belong?*

That's what people think it's like being a church minister. He's a lonely old man. His nightlife involves darning his socks. No-one goes to church any more, do they? The church is dying out. That's what the statistics say - in the UK anyway. Church attendance has more than halved between 1980 and 2010.¹ It's still going down.

In the same year as the Beatles recorded ER, John Lennon did an interview where he said that the Beatles were bigger than Jesus. I think what he meant was - no-one's interested in Jesus anymore - go to a church and it's dead. But look what happens when the Beatles turn up anywhere - you can't move for screaming fans. Here's what he actually said: "*Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I'll be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now.*"² That was his perception. And I think that's how a lot of people would see things today in our country and in our community. That's why when someone asks us tomorrow what we got up to at the weekend, a lot of us will at least hesitate before mentioning church.

¹ <http://www.brierleyconsultancy.com/where-is-the-church-going/>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/More_popular_than_Jesus

Intro to Acts

We're going to be spending time in the book of Acts this term, and Acts presents a different reality. Acts is the story of the early church. But it's not just a historical account of what happened. It has something to say about the reality that we live in now. What we're going to see today in Chapter 1 is going to challenge that idea that the church is dead or dying. We're going to see that the church isn't dead. Because Jesus isn't dead. There might be empty church buildings. But Jesus plan isn't centred on buildings. Jesus has a plan for this age, and for this generation today, and it's centred on ordinary people, empowered by his Spirit, to be his witnesses. That's where we're going today.

If you're a Christian I hope you'll be encouraged to see that you're part of something massive - something international. You're part of something powerful. You're part of something that is right at the top of God's agenda for now.

Or maybe you're just looking into Christian things - I hope that what we see together today will raise some questions for you, maybe it'll start to change the way you think about the church, and more importantly, how you think about Jesus.

Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus

The book of Acts starts like this:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote of all that Jesus began to do and to teach until he was taken up to heaven. (v1-2a)

Before we get to the big point I want you to see from this opening, here's a quick aside that's important as we start the book of Acts. You need to know

that Acts is a sequel. It's written by Luke, who also wrote Luke's gospel. If you want to make sense of Acts, it really makes sense to read Luke first - so I'm going to challenge you to read Luke this week. You might be able to read it in one sitting, or maybe a few. Instead of that boxset on Netflix, or instead of going to the canteen or whatever, give it a read, or use a bible app and listen to it. That's book 1. Acts is book 2.

His two books are both about the same length. Apparently they're about as long as a book could be about then - about the length of whole roll of kitchen roll. He introduces his first book by saying he was writing an orderly account, based on eyewitness evidence, so that Theophilus, who he's writing to could be certain of the things he had been taught. That was his aim, and that was his method, so we can assume that that carried on into his second book.

His first book was about Jesus' ministry on earth. Did you notice how Luke put it? There's one word here which is massive! Look at the word **BEGAN!**

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote of all that Jesus began to do and to teach (v1)

Do you see what he's implying? Book 1 is about what Jesus began to do and teach. What he's saying is that Jesus carried on doing and teaching even when he wasn't physically with his disciples on earth any more. Book 2 is the account of how the risen Lord Jesus carries on working in the world from his throne in heaven. Traditionally it's called ACTS or the ACTS OF THE APOSTLES. But really it should be called the ACTS OF THE RISEN LORD JESUS.

Jesus is alive! That's what sets Christianity apart from any other religion. All the other religions are based on the teaching of someone in the past who's dead now. But Jesus is alive, and he's at work in the world today. His ministry on earth was just the beginning of what he was going to do and teach.

After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. (v3)

Jesus was preparing his apostles for what was ahead. Jesus died, he rose, and he ascended up to heaven. And now he's carrying out his plan from his throne. But how does that work? And what his is plan? And what's it got to do with us? Well Acts 1:8 makes a start on answering those questions, and we're going to see how the rest of the chapter fleshes out and helps to understand what Jesus says in that key sentence

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you

Jesus said this in response to a question from the apostles. It's in v6:

"...they gathered round him and asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?'" (v6)

It's a very understandable question. I think it was probably said with a note of excitement. "Jesus this is brilliant! Now we know that you're alive, it's obvious that you're the Messiah! Let's get at them. We'll go to Jerusalem We'll show those Romans what's what! I know...you could live in the palace next to the temple, perfect! Let's make Israel great again!

But they'd got it all wrong. John Calvin says that their question has about as many errors in it as there are words. First. They were wrong about the timing. Something important needed to happen before they could get to work.

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised,

which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.’ (v4-5)

Luke’s gospel finishes with the same promise:

I am going to send you what my Father promised: but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:49)

Jesus is saying: “Wait! it’s not time to go anywhere yet! First the Spirit needs to come.”

The apostles weren’t just wrong about the timing. It sounds like they were still thinking in terms of a violent sudden take over. Jesus makes it clear they don’t need to load up on weapons. They need to be clothed with power from on high. “ You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” (v8)

We’ll see that Jesus did have work for them to do. But in order for them to do the work he had for them, they needed to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is how Jesus is going to work in the world after he’s gone up to heaven: the same Spirit that powerfully worked in him is going to come on his followers. When Jesus was on earth his ministry was limited to wherever he was. But now Jesus is at work wherever there are believers filled with his Spirit. His promise in v8 is to the 11 apostles. But in Ch 2 we’re going to see that it’s not just the 12 apostles who receive the HS, but everyone who God calls - everyone who responds to the message, who repents and turns to Jesus. The Holy Spirit is given to every believer. (2:4, 38-39).

Jesus is at work in the world today through ordinary people powered by his Holy Spirit. That’s encouraging when we feel weak and ordinary and frightened. It means you don’t have to try to be impressive or strong in yourself. If you trust in Jesus, you have God’s power in you. The Holy Spirit is

very powerful. He's **UNSTOPPABLE**. He can create a universe. He can make a dead person alive. When you feel weak, ask God to show his power through you. *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you*

That's also a challenge because often we live as if we don't need the Spirit's power. In our individual lives: we try really hard to do the right thing, but we keep failing because we're doing it in our strength. In church life: we can plan as if we didn't need the Spirit. We might think "if only we have the right events that draw people in. If only we had a quality website that shows how relevant and active we are. If only we had a pastor who's got all the answers!!" None of those things makes any difference while we're powered by human strength and human ideas. We need the Holy Spirit to be at work in us and through us. Otherwise we're like a formula one car without any fuel. Very expensive, maybe even good to look at, with lots of people committed to keeping it on the road, but without fuel it's useless. It can't do the thing it was made to do. Or a phone or laptop or tablet without a battery. So much potential, but without a source of power it's just an expensive paper weight. We can't carry out Jesus mission without his power

You will be my witnesses

This is the task that Jesus has for his followers. The word 'witness' comes up all the way through the Chapter. The apostles are going to be eyewitnesses. That's why it was so important for them to be convinced that Jesus is alive in v3. That's why they say they have certain criteria for the apostle to replace Judas. What do they call him at the end of v22? "A witness with us of the resurrection." That's exactly what Jesus said their role was in v8

Remember, they'd asked 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel' (v6). We've seen that they were wrong about the timing.

And they were wrong about the weaponry they needed. Now Jesus is showing them something else about his kingdom. It's not a political kingdom. It's a spiritual kingdom and it will grow as the gospel is proclaimed. The good news that the king has come! The apostles were witnesses that Jesus is the king. And that the kingdom has come, in part.

When Jesus died on the cross, that was his coronation. It showed him to be the servant king who died for the sake of his people. As he died he took the punishment for our rebellion against God. Just as God had promised. His resurrection not only proved it was true, but showed that he had won a victory over sin and death. In verse 9 he ascended to heaven, where he reigns from his throne. In the OT God's glory is often hidden by a cloud, so I think that's the idea in v9 when Jesus is hidden by a cloud - he's entering God's glory.

The king has come. His kingdom is here. And when he comes back, the whole world will see, and he'll bring his kingdom in full. That's what v10 and 11 hint at. There are the apostles staring up at the sky. You would, wouldn't you, if you'd just seen someone disappear into the clouds. And these two angels appear.

'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'

So here's Jesus' mission plan, his road map: You will receive power when the HS comes on you. That's happened already - we'll find out more next week. Then one day, only God the Father knows when, King Jesus will come back to judge the world. And until then, there's one thing at the top of God's agenda: Witnessing. This is the age we live in. After Jesus' first coming. Before his second coming. Jesus says: this is the task that will define that age: you will be

my witnesses. Did you notice, it's not a command but a promise. You will receive power, and you will be my witnesses. It's part of our identity as followers of Jesus.

Spotlight on Jesus

The purpose of the gift of the Spirit is to make ordinary, weak, frightened people into powerful witnesses. Sometimes people talk about the Holy Spirit as if he's doing some kind of sideshow over here. We can imagine Jesus, because he came to earth as a man. And we get the idea of the Father. But the Spirit? We find it much harder to get our heads around what he does.

What we're going to see in Acts is that you can't divide the Spirit and the Son. The Father, Son and Spirit are always working together, singing off the same hymn sheet, working on the same agenda. The Father promised the Spirit. The Father and the Son send the Spirit. And the Spirit isn't there to draw attention to himself. He's like a spotlight. He puts the spotlight on Jesus. He helps us to see who Jesus is. He helps us to witness to him. A witness is just someone who talks about what they've seen and heard.

Us vs Apostles

The apostles were EYE-witnesses to the resurrection. We've already looked at v3 where J presented himself to them and gave them convincing proofs he was alive. They saw J and touched him. They were with J before his death, and after his resn they recognised him. There's a third qualification for an apostle. It's in v24. There were three qualifications for those 12 apostles.

1. Someone who had been with Jesus for his whole ministry
2. Someone who was a witness of his resurrection
3. Someone who was chosen by Jesus

That's why they prayed and then cast lots - which might seem strange to us, but here's what it says in Proverbs.

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. Proverbs 16:33

These 12 apostles were chosen by J and sent out by him. They had a foundational role in the church. The NT was written under their authority. But when they died they didn't appoint new apostles.

We're not witnesses in the same way. Acts 1:8 applies to us too, but we need to realise that we're not apostles. Their message was:

- J has proved himself to be the Messiah
- You killed him
- God raised him
- We are witnesses

NOW we have the NT written down. So our message is more like:

- There's a king, he's called Jesus
- He died and rose again
- Look, we've got eye witness evidence
 - You can look into it for yourself
 - I'm convinced it's true

BUT we're witnesses in another way too. Our faith is based on historical facts, recorded by eyewitnesses. But Jesus is alive and he's working in the world today. So we can talk about how he's at work in our lives. You can be his witness by talking about what he's done for you, how he's changing you and what he means to you.

Endorsing a product vs enjoying a person

Sometimes I struggle to talk about Jesus because I think it's more like endorsing a product than enjoying a person. Being a witness is more about enjoying a person. A celebrity gets hired to endorse a product, so they pretend it's great so that they get their fee.

I can remember when I first started going out with Lil - I used to share a lift to work. I can remember getting into my colleagues car the morning after I'd asked Lil out, and I was buzzing. I couldn't wait to tell him. I was sitting there figuring out how to set it up without just blurting out something weird.

Let's ask Jesus to show us something about himself today so that we'll be buzzing about him. That he'll help us to talk about the difference he makes in our lives that isn't weird, but that connects with our friends and colleagues and neighbours.

...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

...to the ends of the earth

This is the third part of Jesus' mission plan in v8, and it speaks to another error in the question his apostles asked in v6. They were wrong about

- the timing
- the weapons they needed
- the nature of Jesus' kingdom

But it also sounds like they had nationalistic ideas. In their minds the Jews were God's people. But Luke's gospel has already made it clear that Jesus

hadn't just come for one people group or race, but for anyone who would believe. So Jesus says:

...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

There's obviously some geography going on there (you could draw a map and colour it in). But there's more to Jesus' statement than that. Each of those places is theologically loaded.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem was the capital city of Israel, where the temple was, which represents God's presence with his people. It was the City of David. God had promised King David that one of his offspring would be king forever. That's where the mission would start.

That's one of the reasons why it was important for the apostles to replace Judas. Jesus had appointed 12 apostles on purpose. Because there were 12 tribes of Israel. If you read Luke's gospel you'll see him talk about how Jesus fulfils the OT, but also that he's starting a new thing. He's making a new people, a new Israel. From now on, you can't be part of God's people by being born into the right family, only by believing in Jesus. So before the mission can begin in Jerusalem, they need to have 12 apostles.

All Judea and Samaria

From Jerusalem the message is going to spread to all Judea. That's the southern part of Israel - and Jerusalem is in the middle. Samaria is the old northern part of Israel (where Samaritans come from). The Jews hated Samaritans because they were half-casts, mixed race - they'd intermarried with non-Jews. The northern and southern kingdoms hadn't been united since

the reign of Solomon But in the OT God had told Ezekiel to do a sermon with a visual aid (in Ez 37). He got two sticks and wrote JUDAH on one and JOSEPH (representing The Northern kingdom) on the other. Then he tied them together to make one stick. Then God told him to hold up the stick and say this:

“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 22 I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. 23 They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offences, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

24 “My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. 26 I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them for ever. 27 My dwelling-place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. 28 Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them for ever.”

The idea of being witnesses in Samaria must have blown the apostles minds. I guess they couldn't have imagined Samaritans being part of God's people. Jesus was the son of David who would have this glorious united kingdom. Ezekiel was talking about something that would be partly fulfilled through their witness, and filled full when Jesus comes back and God makes his dwelling place on earth in the new creation.

To the ends of the earth

And Acts tell the story of how the apostles were sent out in the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses. First in Jerusalem. Then because of persecution they had to flee, so they went out to Judea and Samaria. And eventually, especially once Paul gets on board, to the ends of the earth.

The book ends in Rome, the capital city of the Roman empire. But the mission carries on today. So let's round things up

So what??

Jesus is at work in the world today.

- Through ordinary people
- Powered by the Holy Spirit
- To be his witnesses
- From here to the ends of the earth.

Time is limited. We live in this age of opportunity. Jesus is coming back, and this is the age of the witness. We have a message that is the difference between eternal death and eternal life. Sharing that message is at the top of God's agenda

Grace Church was planted 5 years ago with the aim of reaching the people of Wrecclesham with the good news of Jesus. But our mission is bigger than that. Because Jesus' mission is bigger than that. We live in a country where less than 10% of people are members of any kind of church.³ In the past we used to send

³ <http://www.brierleyconsultancy.com/where-is-the-church-going/>

missionaries to other countries, now other countries are sending missionaries here.

World

Our world has a population of 7.47bn. There are something like 2.2 bn Christians (31%). 3.14bn people are unreached: (41%)⁴. That means there is no Christian witness in their part of the world. They don't have bible in their language. They don't have even have access to the gospel. 41% of the world's population.

So let's ask God to show us where our agenda needs to change to fit with his.

I'm going to close by sharing something I read about Adoniram Judson.

Adoniram Judson's proposal

Adoniram Judson is known as the first Baptist missionary from America. In February 1812 he set sail for India, and eventually ended up in Burma (Myanmar) where he had a hard but fruitful ministry. It was nearly unheard of in those days to be an overseas missionary. If you went overseas you generally didn't come back.

About a year before he set sail, he met a girl and fell in love. Her name was Ann Hasseltine. Here's a bit from the letter Adoniram sent to Ann's dad, asking for permission to marry her:

I have now to ask, whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next spring, to see her no more in this world; whether you can consent to her departure, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of a missionary life; whether you

⁴ <https://joshuaproject.net>

can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean; to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death. Can you consent to all this, for the sake of him who left his heavenly home, and died for her and for you; for the sake of perishing, immortal souls; for the sake of Zion, and the glory of God? Can you consent to all this, in hope of soon meeting your daughter in the world of glory, with the crown of righteousness, brightened with the acclamations of praise which shall redound to her Saviour from heathens saved, through her means, from eternal woe and despair.⁵

Some of you have got daughters. What would your response have been? Ann's dad said he was willing - and that it was up to Ann to decide. They got married and two months later they were on a ship. Ann never came back. She died in Myanmar having experienced suffering that most of us couldn't imagine.

Adoniram Judson didn't believe the Christianity is dead, or dying. He thought that it was worth dying for.

We might not be called to mission overseas, but Jesus has given us work to do where we are. The same Spirit that powered Jesus in his ministry on earth is working in us, powering us to be his witnesses. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is working in you, giving you courage and strength, so that when every fibre of your fleshly body is saying "don't say it!! This is social suicide, they'll never respect you if you talk about Jesus as if he's real!" He can help you to say something - something about Jesus and what he's done for you, and he means to you.

⁵ [1](Quoted in Courtney Anderson, *To The Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson* [Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1987], 83.) <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/a-peculiar-proposal/>

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Acts 1:8