

Who Leads the Church? Noticing the Holy Spirit's work
Extracts from the Acts of the Apostles

[With Commentaries by Bishop Brendan Leahy]

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INTRODUCTION

The Acts of the Apostles tells a good story. The story-teller is the evangelist Luke. He had already written the Gospel that gave us Jesus' words and deeds. Now, in part two of his work, the Acts of the Apostles presents us with what happened after Jesus' earthly life, how the Church grew and developed in its early years.

When Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles around 85 AD, he didn't just want to give a facts and figures history lesson. He tells his story with perspective. He wants us to see certain things. A key phrase that let's us know Luke's focus comes in the first chapter where we hear the words of Jesus to the apostles, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem... and to the ends of the earth”. Luke's emphasis is on the themes of mission and universality.

If, in his Gospel, Luke wrote mostly about Jesus' earthly ministry that begins in Galilee and reaches Jerusalem, now the Acts of the Apostles begins in Jerusalem and will end up in Rome, the centre of the Roman Empire. Luke's message is clear – the event of Jesus is no small thing in history, limited to a corner of the Roman Empire. While rooted in the

history of Israel, the event of Jesus Christ is destined to reach everyone. This will happen through the Church, guided by the Spirit. The Church exists as mission.

Luke escorts the reader through a journey of discovery. The Church had to find its feet, working out how it related to its heritage in Israel while at the same time figuring out how to engage with the Greco-Roman culture (and all other cultures of the world). Christianity both fits into our world and challenges it with the newness of its life and message.

There are several points to watch out for as we read the Acts of the Apostles:

- ✦ The role of the Holy Spirit who guides the Church's development even if this happens in unexpected and, at times, apparently negative ways.
- ✦ The power of the Word of God that Luke presents almost as a very active person in the growth of the new Church community.
- ✦ The importance of the Church as a community. It is the community that evangelises. The apostles are key witnesses and we see them return again and again to the community to share their experiences. The life of unity is directly related to the effectiveness of mission.
- ✦ There is a dynamic of death-resurrection, hardship-success, failure-victory at work in the Church. At times certain situations can seem major setbacks but then, in time, you begin to see that they fit into God's plan.
- ✦ The relationship with the Jews. It is important to note that Luke describes the Jews both positively and negatively. Luke knows that God is faithful to

his promise to them, yet he also recognises that just as Jesus, who himself was Jew, suffered fierce opposition from the leaders of his people, so too the preaching of the apostles suffered the same fate in the early Church. It would be wrong to read Luke as anti-Jewish in the general sense of hating the Jewish people as a whole. In his Gospel he records Jesus saying we need to pray for those who persecute us (Lk 6:27-28) and he provides us with the example of Jesus (23:34) and of the first Christian martyr, Stephen (Acts 7:60) seeking forgiveness for those individual leaders who put them to death.

In reading the Acts of the Apostles an image comes to mind. It's that of a small seed planted in the ground that grows into a tree. Luke used this image in his Gospel (Lk 13:19). In the Acts of the Apostles he spells out what this means for the Church. The Church is like a seed cast into the furrows of history in order to grow and develop into a large tree. The seed contains everything but time is needed for the tree to emerge. That's how it is for the Church at its beginning. Everything is there but it takes time to emerge. In studying Acts we learn many things about the life and structures of the Church. Above all, we learn how to tune into God's guidance of his people as they journey through history.

Some Suggestions for Reading the Text

This booklet contains only a selected number of passages from the Acts of the Apostles. What I hope is that in reading the passages suggested here, the reader will be encouraged to



go on to look at the whole text. To help readers, I've included a few brief commentaries on the passages selected.

The Acts of the Apostles is not just a document of history. It is the Word of God. As such, it has a power in it that can change our lives. We need to call on the Holy Spirit to guide us and ask for the grace to be touched by what we read. Above all, as we set about reading the passages in this book, it's important to be "doers of the Word", that is, putting into practice what we read. In that way we will understand the Word of God with our life experience.

The Word is "alive and active"

The Word is "alive and active" wanting to bring a revolution in our thoughts, our affections and our will. It helps us see things differently, judge situations with a Gospel logic and act as new men and women. As St. Augustine says, a new person sings a new song.

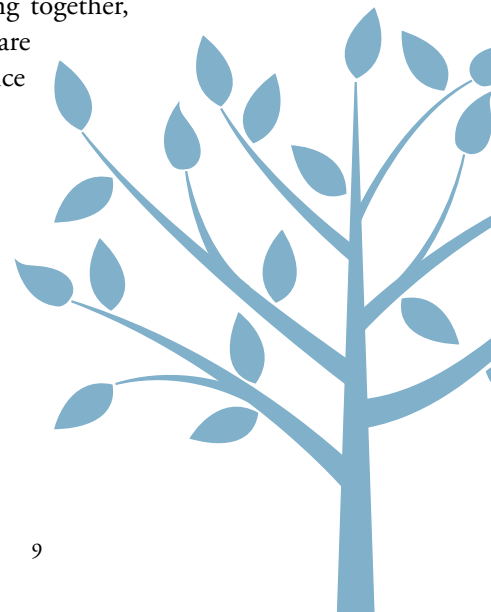
PERSONAL READING

If you are reading it on your own, I suggest that you begin by reading the commentary that sets the context. Then, slowly read the text of Scripture, using your imagination to place yourself in the scene. See in your mind's eye what comes to you, the emotions you sense, the questions you find yourself asking, the challenge you feel. As you read, if there's a phrase or idea or image that strikes you, stay with that for a while, reflect on it and open a conversation with Jesus, God the Father, the Spirit, Mary, the saints. Let the Word speak to

you and respond with your heart and mind. Then, before concluding, make a decision to live out the aspect that has struck you in reading the text.

GROUP READING

If there's a group reading the text together, I suggest that after an opening prayer asking for the assistance of the Holy Spirit, and after reading the commentary, read (either one person reading the whole text or taking it in turns to read sections) the texts out loud twice, then pause to give time for each individual to reflect a moment on what they've heard. Then, those who want can simply say out loud what word or phrase struck them. Then read the text again together. This time, those who want might share briefly how they feel the text could be applied to life. When you all return for the next meeting together, it would be good to share briefly and with prudence (it's not confession!) how the text made a difference in your life since the last time you all met. Conclude by reading the whole text once again together and then pray the "Our Father" together.



GETTING READING FOR THE COMING OF THE SPIRIT

Acts 1: 3-5; 8-14

After his suffering he (Jesus) presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. ‘This’, he said, ‘is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.....you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Commentary

The first chapter of the Acts tells us about the forty days between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. It’s the period that links Jesus’ earthly ministry and the time of the Church that is about to begin. In his earthly ministry, the gentle Jesus had spoken words of fire about the Kingdom of God. He spread the message of peace and advocated poverty, mercy and love in our relationships. His words and deeds inspired many.

With Jesus’ death on the Cross, the apostles were traumatised, downhearted and bewildered. But then, unexpectedly, a new chapter of the story begins. Jesus is Risen! And Luke begins the Acts of the Apostles

Jesus is Risen!

by telling us that the Risen Jesus reunited the apostles, promising a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit so that they would become witnesses “to the ends of the earth”.



After the ascension they would no longer see Jesus visibly but, because of the Spirit, they would encounter him in a new way – in the Word of God, in one another, in the community, in the apostles, in the poor. The Risen Christ would always be going ahead, leading the Church.

In the passage from the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we read how, after the ascension, the apostles go to the Upper Room in Jerusalem. This great city was very central in the history of the people of Israel and linked to the eschatological (end-time) fulfilment of the Kingdom of God. It is there the apostles wait for the coming of the Spirit. The Kingdom of God is about to explode into life in a new way on earth.

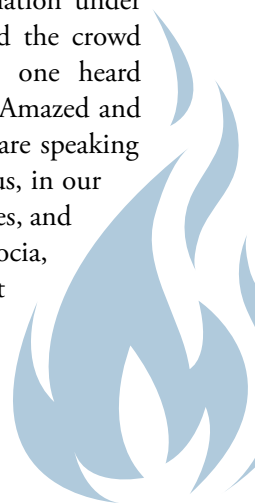
It is significant that Mary and the women are there. At the beginning of Luke's Gospel we read of the Spirit's descent upon Mary bringing about the Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth. Now at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, Mary is at the heart of the community as it prays that the Spirit will come upon them in a new way. All of this indicates to us that the Church is a continuation, as it were, of the incarnation of Jesus in the world. Christians not only bring the Good News about Jesus but they are to continue Jesus in the world. And for that to happen they need the Holy Spirit to guide them and Mary as their example.

PENTECOST —
THE CHURCH'S "BIG BANG"

Acts 2: 1-18; 22-24; 32-39

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we



hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them:

'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy...."

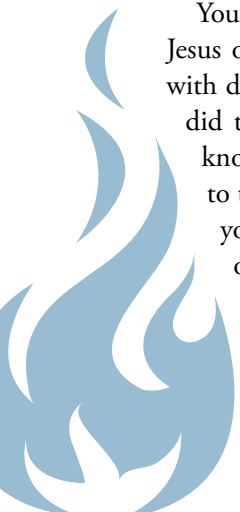
You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power...

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.'

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'

Commentary

This chapter presents us with the event of Pentecost. Luke wants us to realise that Pentecost is like the birthday of the Church. He describes the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost carefully. In ways, there is a parallel between the way Luke in his Gospel presents the Baptism of Jesus that marked the beginning of his public ministry (Lk 3:1-21) and the way he presents Pentecost as the event that marks the beginning of the



Church. The Church will continue until the Parousia (the second coming of Christ). The time between the birthday of the Church and the end of time, is a grace-filled time of the Spirit, a time of conversion.

Luke describes the coming of the Spirit as an event that happens “suddenly”. In other words, it’s God’s initiative not something the apostles and women in the Upper Room brought about themselves. In the Jewish world, the Feast of Pentecost was celebrated 50 days after the Passover. Pentecost was linked with the spring barley festival and Jewish tradition held that the law was given to God’s people, represented by Moses, on Mount Sinai on that day. Some of the prophets had foretold of the outpouring of the Spirit who would interiorise the law of God within us in a new way. Luke presents Pentecost as the event when God’s law of love was written on our hearts through the gift of the Spirit poured into our hearts.

Luke emphasises the universality of the event. “Jews from every nation” are present and “other languages” are heard. He names out in detail the list of places represented, again indicating the universal participation in the Pentecost event and reminding us of the universal extension of the Church. Everyone is a candidate for the new life of faith, hope and love that Jesus brought on earth.

Notice how Peter is the spokesman for the apostles. Catholics believe the Pope is the successor of Peter. In his speech at



Everyone is a candidate for the new life of faith, hope and love that Jesus brought on earth

Pentecost, Peter, who had denied Jesus, with new strength and courage, stands up and interprets what’s going on. His message centres on Jesus’ death and resurrection, the core of what is sometimes called the “kerygma” (the early preaching). His words cut to the heart. He calls those present to repentance and to be baptised, that is, to turn around and realise Jesus Christ is the Messiah who forgives sins and gives new life in the Spirit; he is the fulfilment of the promises that had been made in the past, including to King David. The promise of God’s merciful love is for everyone.

In commenting on Pentecost, the theologian, Karl Rahner, underlined how it was a communal experience of the Spirit. It wasn’t a chance local gathering of a number of individual mystics! It was an experience of the Spirit on the part of a community as such. On this basis, he explained how it isn’t enough today to try and live our Christian life in a privatised or individualistic sense. We don’t go to God independent of one another. We really have to live the experience of the Spirit together. This requires a renewed form of living our Christian faith together.

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. It represents something like a “big bang” at the beginning of the Church. All that would come out over the centuries was already contained in essence at Pentecost. Over the centuries it would unfold in terms of clarifications in teaching and structures, new initiatives, charisms both ordinary and extraordinary, new religious orders and movements, saints, founders and mystics...life in the Spirit. Pentecost is an event that is still continuing in the life of the Church.

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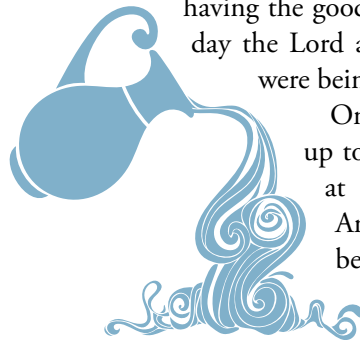
WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY IS THE CHURCH?

Acts 2: 41-Acts 3: 1-10

So those who welcomed his (Peter's) message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay





him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' And he fixed his

attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.' And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Commentary

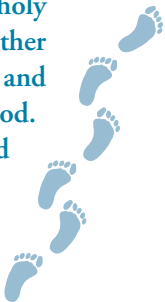
In this short passage, Luke is saying a lot! He presents the Pentecost event as having a big impact. It's not something confined to a hidden place. Peter's speech was made in public. Three thousand people were baptised. What Luke provides us with is a summary picture of what the early Church looked like. In particular, presupposing conversion and baptism, he outlines four elements that are fundamental still for the Church:

1) **The teaching of the apostles.** The apostles were key witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Their teaching and preaching are fundamental for the Church. The Pope and bishops are successors of the apostles. At every Mass we pray for the Pope and local bishop, not just because they need our prayers but also as a sign that we are in communion with them and, through them, with the preaching of the Word of God that has come to us from the apostles who saw and witnessed Jesus' life and teaching.

2) **The community life.** The Christians aren't linked to one another simply because of friendship or natural affinity but rather because of baptism and their new shared life in Christ. Together they grow in faith, hope and love. The bonds that unite them are divine and human. The great and constant challenge for Christians is to renew this divine-human unity with one another. The effectiveness of the Church's mission will depend on the strength of our community life.

3) **The breaking of bread = the Eucharist/Mass.** From the beginning the Mass has been central in the life of the Church. It unites us to Christ and to one another. Here we have the source and summit of the "holy communion" that radiates Christ. This "holy communion", the Eucharist, is linked to two other "communions" – communion with our sisters and brothers as well as communion with the Word of God.

4) **Prayers.** The first Christians prayed to God who was the source of their courage also in time



of persecution. They used the prayers they received from their Jewish heritage such as the psalms and they had new prayers such as the “Our Father” prayer that Jesus taught them. They prayed three times a day. They sang hymns and used various forms of prayer such as praise and intercession. Throughout the centuries the Church has built up a real treasure throve of prayer methods and spiritual practices.

Notice that Peter and John are going up to the Temple. In other words, they are devout Jews who continue to attend the Temple. Yet, in performing the wonders and signs, they are working “in the name of Jesus”. The apostles reach out to people in need and heal a man lame from birth. In doing so they are continuing the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

They are letting Jesus continue to work through them. In his own way, Luke is saying about the apostles what St. Paul declared about his experience: it is no longer they who live but Christ who is living in them. Christ continues his mission in and through the community, in and through the apostles. Just like the disciples experienced on the road to Emmaus, Jesus is present among us in our relationship with one another.

**Jesus is
present
among
us in our
relationship
with one
another**

We today continue to be Jesus reaching out to others, healing and bringing new life. In a prayer attributed to Teresa of Avila, the Spanish doctor of the Church, we read, “Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks, Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.”

**Christ has
no body
but yours,
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yours**

A NEW MODEL OF LIFE THAT IS CONTESTED

Acts 4: 1-23; 31-32

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of

Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is

“the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.”

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. They said, 'What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.' So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.' After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them....

When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

Commentary

In telling us in the previous section about the community life of the early Christians and the healing performed by Peter and John, Luke wants us to realise that as the Word of God spreads, the Church grows, a new model of life emerges. They apostles work “in the name of Jesus”. But not without opposition and persecution. In this passage it is the rulers, elders and scribes who object.

**As the
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In the Acts of the Apostles Luke presents the difficulties faced by the first Christians in terms of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the hidden story of Christianity. Yes, there are persecutions and difficulties but these can lead to new courage, strength and openness to the Spirit. The apostles boldly witness to Jesus as the Saviour of the world. As we'll see repeated throughout

the Acts of the Apostles, often the difficulties encountered by the First Christians opened up new opportunities and avenues of mission.

Again, Luke wants us to see that if we are to “be” Jesus, continuing his mission, letting him work through us, then we shouldn't be surprised if we meet adversity. Jesus himself had said “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (Lk 9: 23-24).

**For those
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it, and those
who lose
their life
for my sake
will save it**

COULD THIS SOLIDARITY BE FOR REAL?

Acts 4:32-37

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet...

Commentary

In this passage Luke gives us one of his summary formulas that he offers every now and then in the Acts of the Apostles. He emphasises

how the first Christians were one heart and soul. Because of the Spirit poured into their hearts they were very much united and lived a culture of giving. Bound together in Christ, they immediately shared their goods. This is the true response to Jesus' preaching of the Gospel. It is the Spirit who helps us implement it. The love that is characteristic of the first Christians is not sentiment. It is action and it is concrete. It impacts on their wallets!

When Luke says there was no needy person among them, he may have been recalling what the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy had foretold about sabbatical years celebrated every fifty years, the special years of God's favour when, it was said, there would be no one in need among the people of Israel. While the sharing of the new converts is spontaneous, nevertheless Luke does indicate that the sharing of the First Christians was organised. There seems to have been a common fund.

The communion of hearts became a solidarity that ensured equality also in terms of the distribution of money. We will read later in Acts of St. Paul bringing a collection to Jerusalem

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for the poor. In one of his letters to the Corinthians, St. Paul gives advice on how to arrange the sharing of goods. He talks of mutual help with the measure of loving your neighbour as yourself: “I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance (2 Cor 8:13-14). The selfish possession of goods was not compatible with this new life (the dramatic story of the death of Ananias and his wife Sapphira told in Acts 5 describes how a lack of transparency, pretence and dishonesty were shunned by the First Christians).

Perhaps Luke’s description of the early Christian community is a little idyllic but it is clear he wants us to understand the Church is a living community bound by a new life in God. It makes a difference not just on the personal, spiritual and inner levels. Now, because of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Spirit, an “earthly paradise” has begun on earth also in our practical and concrete relationships with one another.

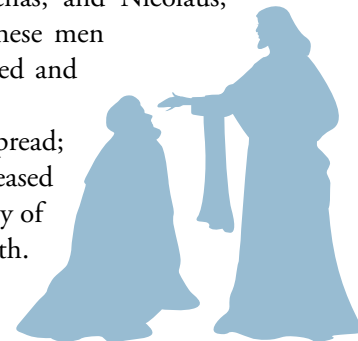
Pope Francis in his encyclical “*Laudato Si*” has reminded us that while the Christian tradition recognizes the right to private property, it has never recognised this right as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property.

GOD IS IN CHARGE, NOT US

Acts 6:1-13; 7:1-2; 54-8:3

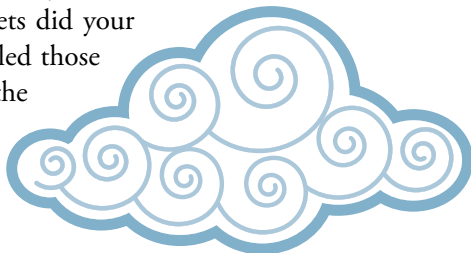
Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.’ What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.



Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.' And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Then the high priest asked him, 'Are these things so?' And Stephen replied: 'Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, "Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you." ... You stiff-necked people... you are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and



murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.'

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him.

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.

Commentary

There are two parts of this text worth reflecting on separately. The first part of this passage we read about tensions within the Christian community. There were Jewish Christians who belonged to the Greek-speaking



Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good ...

synagogues (Hellenists) and Jewish Christians belonging to the Aramaic-speaking synagogues (Hebrews). The issue was the distribution of food to the widows who would have been very vulnerable at that time of no social insurance or state assistance. Once again, Luke takes this circumstance to help us see that a difficulty in the early Church often became the occasion of a new development.

The solution is that the apostles, the custodians of the Church's unity, are to focus on that unity by praying and serving the Word of God, while new ministries are established to look after various other aspects of the community life of the Church. The apostles "laid...hands" on the seven identified for these new roles. This is a ritual of consecration and appointment. In other words, there are new ministries in the Church alongside the apostles.

In St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he describes the community as made up of various services and ministries, all coming from the Holy Spirit and all working together for the harmony of the Church: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the

same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor 12: 4-7). And in the Letter to the Ephesians, we read of the Church founded on the "apostles and prophets": "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12).

In the Letter to the Romans, we are again reminded of the different gifts and tasks we have in the Church, and Paul advises, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour." (Rom 12: 9-10).

The second part of the text from Acts that we are considering is about the persecution and death of Stephen whose feast day we celebrate the day after Christmas. He is the first martyr. The text begins by reminding us of the success story – the Word of God is spreading, the number of disciples increasing and many of the Jewish priests are believing in Jesus Christ. But then comes the persecution theme again. Another group, not followers of

... love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour

Christ, take on Stephen, one of the newly appointed ministers (later called deacons).

Stephen's suffering and death mirror what happened to Jesus – there are false witnesses, he is put to death and, as he is dying, he forgives just as Jesus had done. He is an example for Christians. Luke provides us with a speech Stephen made. Only part of it is printed here.

In his speech, Stephen quotes often from the Bible, giving an overview of the history of Israel leading up to Jesus. The early Church made a definite decision to keep the writings of what we today call the Old Testament. It is part of our story.

What we don't have in this extract is what follows Stephen's death. We read about it in the following chapters of Acts. Luke makes the point that with the persecution and death of Stephen, a new stage begins for the early Church. The apostles leave Jerusalem, scattering to other towns. It must have seemed a major setback. But this becomes the time when the Christian message spreads in a new way. God is seen to be in charge.

It's not how the First Christians would have planned things. God's plans are not our plans. It might have seemed that with Stephen's martyrdom, everything could have fallen apart. But Stephen's death is the catalyst of a process whereby the Church reaches out beyond its set peripheries, attracting new people to encounter Christ.

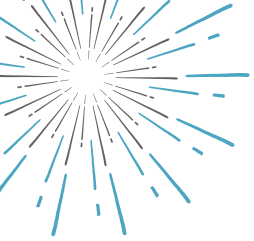
In chapter 8 of Acts (not in the selection of texts

that I've chosen for this book), we read about Philip breaking religious barriers when he meets Samaritans and an Ethiopian (Ethiopia would have been considered by some as the ends of the earth) who were baptised. The point for Luke is that God is in charge of the Church's missionary drive.

We can think of God's words to the prophet Jeremiah, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." (Jer 29:11)

It is important to keep hope alive in times of difficulty. Pope Francis has a great devotion to Mary, Untier of knots. We come across many knots in our personal lives and in the life of the Church. We can ask Mary to help us untie the knots, as we hope that God works for the good in all things for those who love him.

It is
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difficulty



PAUL'S CONVERSION STORY

Acts 9:1—31

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a

man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' 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; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' All who heard him were amazed and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?' Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul.



They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

When he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Commentary

This passage gives us an account of the conversion and call of Saul (Paul) that occurred around 33-36 AD. With this story Luke is preparing us to reflect on how the Church spread dramatically beyond the frontiers of Israel. Paul will be God's instrument in preaching to the "Gentiles/pagans" (that is, to those who were not born into the Jewish tradition). Although it was actually Peter who inaugurated the mission to the Gentiles (see the important story of the conversion of

Cornelius, an officer in the Roman army, in chapter 10 of Acts), it will be Paul who will be the main missionary to them.

What we see in this passage is how Paul was prepared for mission – he encounters in a vivid way the Risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus. His whole life changes direction as he recognises Jesus who has given his life for him. When he is brought to Ananias, one of the newly converted disciples in Damascus, Ananias greets him with the words "Brother Paul" and he is baptised. In other words Paul has become a member of the family of God. Immediately the passionate missionary, Paul, begins his Christian preaching.

Notice how Paul wants to go to Jerusalem to be linked with the church of the origins and to be in contact with those who lived with Jesus and received from him the mandate to preach the Word to the ends of the earth. Paul will always have this combination – radical newness yet creative fidelity to the Tradition.

Luke concludes by telling us the Church continued to grow, not least because the Christians put God in the first place in their lives (this is what is meant by the expression that they lived in "the

**[Pauls]
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It is he who saves us, he who loves us

fear of the Lord”) and it was the Spirit who consoled, encouraged and inspired them.

Notice how Luke talks about the Church being “built up”. He’s not referring to the concrete building of the Temple, but rather the people who together form the Temple of the Spirit, the Body of Christ.

Notice too that at the very beginning of this passage the disciples of Jesus are called followers of “the Way”. Jesus had defined himself as the Way and now followers of Jesus Christ saw themselves as journeying along the Way with the Risen Jesus, the Wayfarer, among them.

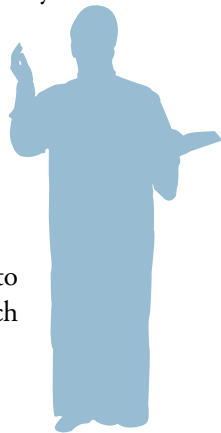
Commenting on Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, Cardinal Martini wrote once that if Jesus appeared to Paul in power while he was still a sinner, then this is valid also for the community and every single human being. Community is created, not because Paul has done something, but because Jesus manifests himself in power and will continue to manifest himself in the heart of each of us. It is important to remember that while efforts and application are important in the Christian life, they are not what matter most. When we have done all we can, the factor that will tip the balance is still the mercy of God. It is he who saves us, he who loves us.

WORKING OUT WHAT GOD WANTS ISN’T ALWAYS EASY!

Acts 15: 1-35

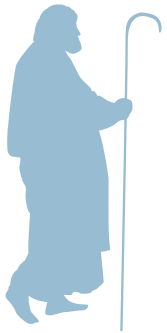
Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.’

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much



debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.’

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘My brothers, listen to me. Simeon (Peter) has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,



“After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.”

Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.’

Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, with the following letter: ‘The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.’

So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered

the letter. When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

Commentary

Before we comment on this extract, it is good to mention some of what comes before this chapter in the Acts of the Apostles. The previous chapters tell what happened after the conversion of Paul. The Church grew with new converts from the non-Jewish world. It was because of the persecution at the time of Stephen's martyrdom that the followers of Jesus ended up bringing the Good News to places like Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Jewish Christians and Pagan Christians (that is, those who were not Jews when they converted) lived together in harmony in Antioch and it was in this city that the disciples were first called "Christians".

Persecution, however, continued. King Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great put James, one of the apostles to death. And Peter ended up arrested. However he escaped miraculously from prison, thereby experiencing first-hand the liberating action of the God who had brought the people of Israel out of slavery.



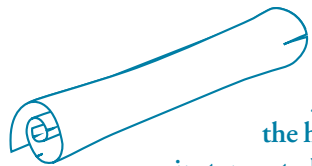
The Church at Antioch became a new basis for the spread of the Christian faith. It was a lively community with prophets and teachers. Prompted by the Spirit, the Christians of Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas off on mission. They travelled to Cyprus and various places in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).

It was never plain sailing! Opposition, misunderstanding and persecution accompanied them, but Paul and Barnabas managed to encourage Christians to continue in the faith saying, "it is through many persecutions that we must enter the Kingdom of God" (Acts 14: 23).

When this missionary journey concluded, Paul and Barnabas came back to Antioch and they called the Church community together to share their experience and tell what God had done and how he had opened the door of faith for the Pagans/Gentiles.

But now the Church was faced with a big issue. With many new converts from the Gentile (Pagan) world becoming members of the Church, the question of how much should be demanded of the new converts arose. And this introduces us to the text that we have just read. While many delighted in the conversion of the Gentiles, there were some who insisted non-

It is through many persecutions that we must enter the Kingdom of God



Jewish converts needed to take on of the heritage of Israel. So was it essential, for instance, to have circumcision of males, considered a sign of belonging to the people of Israel? What about all the Law given to Moses? These questions went to the heart of the identity of the new community. Many different possible solutions were proposed and it was becoming crucial for the sake peace in the whole Church to discern which direction to go in.

Paul and Barnabas realise these are serious questions and they are appointed by the community in Antioch to go to Jerusalem to discuss them with the apostles and elders and discern what God is calling the Church to do. A major gathering takes place in Jerusalem around 49-50 AD and can be considered the first Council of the Church. The fact that Luke places his account of the Council right in the centre of the Acts of the Apostles tells us how important an event it was. It also shows us how they discerned the will of God. Discernment is more than the noisy wheel getting the oil!

The scene of the Council is described with solemnity. Firstly, Paul and Barnabas are welcomed to Jerusalem and they share their experience. The apostles and elders and the whole community then gather. Peter tells his experience emphasising that God saves people through the grace of Jesus Christ (and not the yoke of the Law). There is great silence as people listen also to Paul and Barnabas tell their story. James, a cousin of Jesus who

was by now the leader of the Jerusalem community, decides, especially on the basis of Peter's testimony, that the new Pagan converts did not need to go through all the rituals of the Jewish faith and follow all the demands of the Law given to Moses. Faith in Christ is what is essential.

Faith in Christ is what is essential

By way of an outcome of the Council, a decision was made to write a formal letter, almost like a decree, clarifying that "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" to impose no further burden on the non-Jewish background Christians other than a certain number of practical ritual and ethical essentials that ensured the Christians of different backgrounds might keep united. When the letter was read out in Antioch, it lead to great joy, new courage and strength. The tensions decreased; full unity was restored.

The way was cleared for the mission of the Church to continue towards its goal of reaching everyone, regardless of background.

To work out God's will in any situation requires attentiveness to the Holy Spirit speaking within us and in others.

Today the Church is faced with new challenges. It requires we read "the signs of the times" with openness but also with careful discernment. Pope Francis has reminded us that "in her ongoing discernment, the Church can also come to see that certain customs not

directly connected to the heart of the Gospel, even some which have deep historical roots, are no longer properly understood and appreciated. Some of these customs may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them.” (Evangelii Gaudium., n. 43). Some talk of “creative fidelity”. We need to be true to what we have received from Christ and the apostles but open to the creativity the Spirit is drawing us towards.

God saves
people
through
the grace
of Jesus
Christ

LYDIA’S STORY — AN EXAMPLE
OF HOW WE COME TO FAITH

Acts 16:6-15

They (Paul and his new missionary companion, Timothy) went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.



We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we

sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.

Commentary

After the Council of Jerusalem, Paul launches out in full missionary drive, directed by the Spirit where to go and where not to go. It is significant that Paul felt called to go to Macedonia. This is an important moment because Macedonia was in Europe. So now the Word of God was entering Europe.

Paul comes to Philippi. As usual Paul looks for the Jewish community where he can begin his preaching.

He goes outside the city gate to a place of prayer, possibly a synagogue but not necessarily so. He meets the women who are gathered there.

One of the women is Lydia. She is described as a "worshipper of God". This can mean either she was a devout person or a Jewish sympathizer. She came from

Thyatira, a city that was a centre for the dyeing industry. And she is, in fact, described as "a dealer in purple cloth". This indicates she was wealthy and running a sizeable business. The Lord opens her heart and she is struck by what Paul says and she and her household are baptised.

The Spirit acts and transforms a person deep within

In his letter announcing the Year of Faith, Porta Fidei, Pope Benedict presented Lydia as an example of how a person comes to faith. First of all it is God's gift. The Spirit acts and transforms a person deep within. The Pope makes an important point by highlighting what Luke teaches us. Lydia didn't just pick up information about Christianity from Paul. Knowing the content of our faith is not sufficient. Lydia's heart was opened by God's loving grace. The heart is the authentic sacred space within the person. Once it is touched by God's love, a person's eyes are opened to see below the surface and to understand that what has been proclaimed is the Word of God. That is what happened to Lydia.

Once she entered into faith, she wanted to continue the journey. Once again, this time in Lydia's case, we see the fruit of conversion – the sense of belonging to the family of God and the desire to share. Lydia's generous hospitality results in Paul having a base for his missionary operations.

The heart is the authentic sacred space within the person

One of the great Irish women of faith is Catherine McAuley who founded the Mercy Congregation. Her entire life was a faith-expression. She encouraged her companion sisters to faith under all trials and difficulties, faith when crosses marked their progress and faith in the providence of God. For her, lively faith was the solid foundation of all virtue. She encouraged others saying we must endeavour to keep ourselves in God's presence, united to him by faith, knowing that he sees and hears us everywhere.

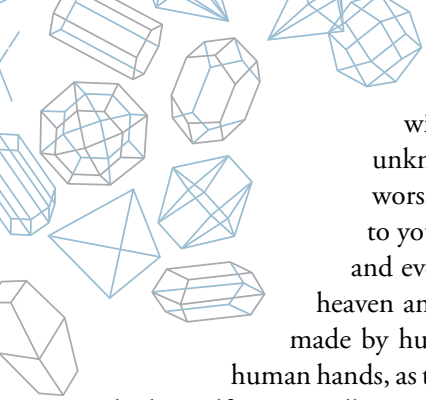
**We must
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him by
faith**

**A LESSON IN
"INCULTURATING" THE GOSPEL**

Acts 17:16-32

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbler want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar



with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by

human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Commentary

This chapter tells us about Paul in Athens. It is a significant moment that Luke underlines because it is a model lesson in how to dialogue with the surrounding culture and how to inculturate the Christian faith. The city of Athens is highly symbolic since it is linked with Greek culture and philosophy, debate and learning.

We find Paul debating with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Eventually he is brought to speak at the Areopagus, a Roman court, a forum in Athens where the educated élite of society would gather. In his speech, Paul identifies with those he is talking to and refers to their shrines and uses expressions taken from their philosophers. He makes reference to the search for God that is found in them as they honour the “unknown god”. But, in doing all of this, Paul doesn’t water down his message. He takes the philosophical concepts but fills them with the new message of the Gospel. The concepts, in other words, are transformed.

The crux comes, however, for the Greeks is when Paul mentions the Resurrection of the dead. They laugh at him. Only a few accept his message and become believers, including Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus court and Damaris, probably a woman of high social status in the city.

Paul fills them with the new message of the Gospel

The result of Paul's mission in Athens may have been small but again Luke wants us to see that what matters is that the seed is sown because once sown, it bears fruit even if in small measure. There's also a subtle point being made in this chapter. Paul preached well so it wasn't his fault that the preaching wasn't successful. Rather it had to do with the hearers – philosophical knowledge of God is not enough to welcome the God of Jesus Christ.

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A MARRIED COUPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Acts 18:1-4; 18-19, 24-26

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers. Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks...

After staying there for a considerable time, Paul said farewell to the believers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had his hair cut, for he was under a vow. When they reached Ephesus, he left them there, but first he himself went into the synagogue and had a discussion with the Jews.

When they asked him to stay longer, he declined; but on taking leave of them, he said, 'I will return to you, if God wills.' Then he set sail from Ephesus. Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-



versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers...

Commentary

In this passage we read about Paul in Corinth, an important commercial city. We are introduced to Aquila and Priscilla, a married couple, who came into contact with Paul after they were driven out of Rome in 49 AD when the Emperor Claudius issued an edict expelling the Jews from Rome. The Roman historian Suetonius

explains that the Jews were expelled because they were rioting due to internal divisions about whether Jesus was the Christ.

Priscilla and Aquila were Christians already when they met Paul but they became among his closest collaborators. In the letter to the Romans, written some time later, he wrote that they had “risked their necks for my life” (Rom 16:3-5)

Priscilla and Aquila formed a “domestic church”

probably in reference to some intervention on his behalf on one of the occasions he was in prison. We know that a church community met in their house where Christians would have listened to the Word of God, shared experiences of the Gospel and celebrated the Eucharist on the first day of the week. It seems Priscilla and Aquila were well to do but generous, living the culture of giving that the Christian faith brings about.

During his time in Corinth Paul stayed with them because they were tentmakers just like him. Priscilla and Aquila then went with Paul to Ephesus (via Syria) and Paul left them there. While in Ephesus, the married couple, always mentioned together, continued their evangelisation and catechesis. When Apollos arrived from Alexandria in Egypt, though he knew about Jesus and would become a major evangeliser, nevertheless his Christian formation was not complete. Priscilla and Aquila “took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately”. When eventually they returned to Rome, Aquila and Priscilla continued to carry out important functions in the capital of the Empire.

It is good to reflect on this married couple as they were among the first Christian missionaries. Together they formed a “domestic church”. They evangelised as a married couple. We can imagine that their love for one another in Christ would have struck many. Priscilla’s role as a woman was unusual for the culture at that time. She clearly exercised a vibrant role as co-

Every lay Christian ... is called to the heights of holiness

worker with Paul and teacher of the faith. It's quite probable that Paul would have had Aquila and Priscilla in mind when, in the Letter to the Ephesians, he compared the husband-wife relationship to the spousal communion that exists between Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5: 25-33).

In recent times, there is a greater sense of the significance for evangelisation of married couples and the family as a domestic church. The married couple, Luigi and Marie Quattrocchi was beatified in 2001 and the parents of Saint Therese of Lisieux, Louis and Zelig Martin were the first married couple to be canonised together at a ceremony in 2015.

It is important to note that both Priscilla and Aquila are lay people who live out the missionary calling that they received in baptism. During his visit to Ireland, Saint John Paul II reminded us in Limerick that 'every lay Christian is an extraordinary work of God's grace and is called to the heights of holiness. Sometimes, lay men and women do not seem to appreciate to the full the dignity and the vocation that is theirs as lay people. No, there is no such thing as an "ordinary lay person"... As God's holy people you are called to fulfil your role in the evangelization of the world.'

WORDS OF ADVICE FOR THE FUTURE

Acts 20: 17-38

From Miletus he (Paul) sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to meet him. When they came to him, he said to them:

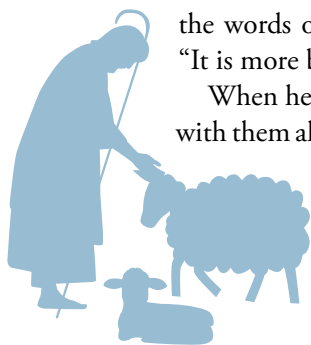
'You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus. And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.'



And now I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, will ever see my face again. Therefore I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by

such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed. There was much weeping among them all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again. Then they brought him to the ship.



Commentary

In describing many of Paul's missionary journeys Luke focussed above all on Paul's speeches and generally underlined the successes. If we want more detail we have to go to Paul's own writings. For instance in 2 Cor 11 Paul describes what he went through in graphic terms, "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked..."

At this point in the Acts of the Apostles Luke gets us ready for an important message from Paul as he begins his final journey towards Rome where the reader knows he will be martyred. Luke will present this part of his life as a mirror image of Jesus' way of the Cross. He will go from Ephesus to Jerusalem and then

Luke gets us ready for an important message from Paul as he begins his final journey towards Rome

[Paul's] own ministry remains a model to be imitated

to Rome. He will be arrested and put in chains but, Luke reminds us, this all serves God's purpose because he is going to get to Rome, the centre of the Universe and so the Gospel will be preached there and from there will go out to the whole world.

Paul gives a farewell address to the elders of the Church at Miletus, a port 50 miles south of Ephesus. This is the only one of Paul's speeches actually

addressed to Christians. He reviews his missionary achievements but also prepares the elders for what they are to do when he is no longer around. His own ministry remains a model to be imitated. He warns them to be careful of false teachers even within the Christian community that threaten the health of the community. They need to be faithful to the Tradition that has been handed down to them.

With this address, Paul prepares the Church for the post-apostolic era. The elders will have an important ministry that consists in protecting the community from deviations. They will need to "shepherd the Church of God" that came to life through Jesus' death on the Cross. The elders are to remember Paul's example of love, modelled on Jesus Christ, a love that knows how to give generously.

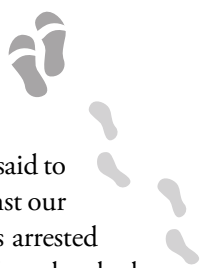
In this final farewell, Paul also does something significant – he entrusts the elders to the Gospel message. It has a power in it to build up the Church community. It is the Word of God that helps people grow in holiness and converts those who are not Christian.

Throughout the centuries, periods of renewal in the Church have always begun with a new love of the Word of God.

The Gospel
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[in Rome]
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the whole
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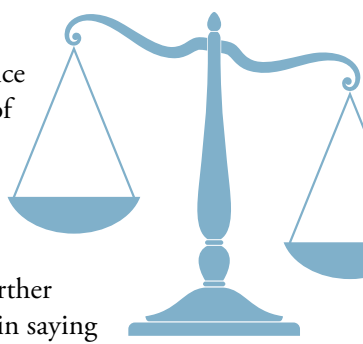
AT LAST — THE WORD OF GOD REACHES ROME

Acts 28: 16-30



Three days later he (Paul) called together the local leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, he said to them, ‘Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, yet I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. When they had examined me, the Romans wanted to release me, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to the emperor—even though I had no charge to bring against my nation. For this reason therefore I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is for the sake of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.’ They replied, ‘We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken anything evil about you. But we would like to hear from you what you think, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.’

After they had fixed a day to meet him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the



kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe. So they disagreed with each other; and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: ‘The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah, “Go to this people and say, You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.” Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.’

He lived there for two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Commentary

Paul’s journey from Ephesus took him principally to Jerusalem, Caesarea, Malta and finally to Rome. It lasted a few years and involved many hardships along the way but all the time Luke presents it as part of God’s plan. Paul is to get to Rome and even the crooked lines will write that story.

The message will spread to the whole world “with all boldness and without hindrance”

Paul is brought before the Roman courts and even before a visiting King in Caesarea (Luke includes this significant detail because, during his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, the Risen Christ had told Paul that he was chosen “to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel” [Acts 9: 15]). Each time Paul is brought before the court or King, he defends himself, telling his story about his thoroughly Jewish upbringing, his Damascus conversion experience and his mission to the Gentiles.

While on trial Paul appeals to be brought before the emperor which he was entitled to as a Roman citizen. Eventually Paul, still a prisoner, is sent on the journey that will bring him before the Emperor in Rome. The journey to Rome included being caught in a violent storm at sea but Paul showed his conviction that he would get to Rome. Once there, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

Now the stage is set for the innocent Paul to come before the Emperor. But the Acts of the Apostles concludes at this stage, presenting Paul to us preaching to the leaders of the Jews in capital city. His words summarise some main points of his ministry in which he refers to the Kingdom of God and the teaching about Jesus Christ (in providing this detail Luke is also reminding us of the Gospel that focussed on the life and preaching of Jesus, the first part of his two-part work of Gospel-Acts).

We, the readers, however, are left with the assurance that the programme outlined by the Risen Jesus as reported at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles (“you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth”) is now well under way. The Word of God has reached the heart of the Empire. Rooted in the heritage of Israel, to be Christian is compatible with being Roman and being a good citizen. From here the message will spread to the whole world “with all boldness and without hindrance”.

Because Peter and Paul both ministered in Rome and were both martyred in that city, the two saints are forever associated as the apostles of Rome. Catholics treasure their communion with the Diocese of Rome which has the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, successor of Peter. From earliest times, it was said of the Bishop of Rome that he was called to preside in love and provide a visible principle of unity for the whole Church. He is the point of unity within the diversity that the Holy Spirit also brings about. We can be grateful for the gift of the Church’s many dioceses and religious orders, ministries, movements and agencies, spiritual, social and cultural initiatives as well as the abundant gifts of grace poured out among all the baptised.

With Luke, we finish our reading of these extracts from the Acts of the Apostles with the message of hope. The Acts of the Apostles concludes but we know the story continues.

Within a few short centuries from its beginnings, Christianity spread all over the then known world. It reached Ireland too, in particular with the arrival of St. Patrick around 432. The Spirit still guides the Church. As the Second Vatican Council puts it, by the power of the Gospel the Spirit makes the Church keep the freshness of youth. Uninterruptedly He renews it and leads it to perfect union with Jesus Christ. Indeed it is always a source of hope to recall that every single person and every single situation is in some mysterious way linked to the Holy Spirit who is always at work in our lives and in our world.

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