

## And You Will Be My Witnesses – Acts of the Apostles

Perhaps you might ask: Why study Acts of the Apostles?

Well, this inspiring story of the church claiming its mission in the world has a timely message for us all. What is the church's mission, now that the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic is behind us? What challenges await? How do we press on, empowered by our faith and God's grace? Some of the answers are found in Acts.

It continues the work St. Luke began with his Gospel. The scholar Luke Timothy Johnson calls Acts "the book of the Holy Spirit." It is the story of God's power working through ordinary human beings like you and me.

The gospel presents the story of the prophetic Jesus who, in the synagogue in Nazareth, said: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Luke 4:18-19

Acts tells the story of the prophetic Church, called to be the witness of Christ and God in the world. Thus, it is our story. We are the inheritors of that ancient Church. And the miracle is that the Christian church began with barely 120 people, about as many who might attend a 9:30 service on a Sunday at St. Anne's.

Acts is also a great adventure story, travelogue and journey through mid-first century Palestine, Asia Minor and Greece. There are riots and shipwrecks, conspiracies and escapes. Is it true? That question has bedeviled scholars and faithful Christians for centuries. At times Luke writes in the first-person, as if he were an eyewitness. Some parts match Paul's letters. Some don't.

In the end, we can say that Luke has written this story with a distinct purpose. Both volumes open with definite statements of intent. Just read over Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-2.

It is a story of the church directed by prayer. The events described in Acts 1:14, Acts 4:31 and of course on Pentecost show the power this community found in its prayers.

In those passages and more, we also see the Holy Spirit at work. Note Peter's encounter with Cornelius the Centurion in Acts 10:44; the Holy Spirit boldly giving directions in Acts 16:6-10; and Paul and Silas imprisoned in Philippi in Acts 16:25.

Acts gives us a church struggling with conflict and working prayerfully toward resolution. We see this in Acts 6:1 where “the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.” Also in Acts 15:1-29, where the question concerned what to do about Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles, the community engages in debate and seeks compromise.

Our story ends on a note of triumph. The gospel message did not die on the cross at Calvary. The followers of Jesus Christ did not lose heart when Stephen was stoned to death and Paul the Pharisee unleashed all the fury at his disposal to arrest them. Did they stop when James, the brother of John was executed, or when they were run out of Antioch of Pisidia? No.

They went to Samaria and Lystra, Cyprus and Macedonia. And, in the end, to Rome. [Paul] “lived there 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.” Acts 28:30.

With all boldness and without hindrance. Those are words to keep in mind, given the challenges that were overcome.

The ending completes Jesus’ prophecy and Luke’s work. His gospel began and ended in the temple in Jerusalem. Acts of the Apostles began in Jerusalem and ended in Rome.

Yet, the story continues. Jesus continues to call us to be his witnesses.

Our seven-week Bible Study of Acts of the Apostles, led by myself and Patricia Jennings, begins on April 28<sup>th</sup> and continues through June 9<sup>th</sup>. We will be meeting in-person and on Zoom on Thursday evenings from 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

Please check the website for updates, information and links to a film version of Acts.

*With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. – Luke 4:33*

Fr. Dion