

Date: 7.2.21
 Text: Acts 1
 Title:
 Place: Swansea/Charlestown AM
 File: Acts 1
 Preacher: Stephen Taylor

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The Taylor household is almost at the end of their time receiving school report cards. But for almost two decades it has been a constant. A look at how the kids are really going. An independent review by their teachers at what they have achieved in the last six months and what they need to do in the future to reach their potential.

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But what do you think about this report card? *"Christina started off the year with great enthusiasm. She wanted to learn and was keen to pass on what she learnt to others. She made quite an impression on the rest of the class. But after a while, she began to think she knew it all. She stopped listening to her teacher. She isolated herself from her fellow classmates. And she got into some bad habits which she has failed to rectify. Christina's results have since suffered and she's in danger of being left behind"*

Now if we were Christina's parents, we would be rightly concerned, wouldn't we? And we would probably want her to get back to basics and try and do again what she had been doing earlier. Well, I think if we were going to give the Christian Church a report card, it would be very similar to the one that Christina received. The Church started off with great enthusiasm. It listened to its teachers, the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It achieved great results, but it began to look inward. It began to forget why it was placed here by God. It began to concentrate on itself. And now it is in danger of being left behind.

I wonder what report card we would get for our Church? Doing well? Trying hard? Distracted? Off the boil after such a crazy mixed-up year? Top of the class? I guess we would all make different assessments. But before we do that, I thought, why don't we look at the setting up of the Church, the mandate for the Church, the early practise of the Church? So, this term we are going to look at the book of Acts to remind ourselves of why we are here and why the Church is of vital importance in God's plans for His world.

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So, our author Luke begins his history lesson by saying, v 1, *"In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus **began to do and to teach** ² until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen."* Luke begins by saying something quite startling. This is not a book about the Church but about Jesus! In his first book, the gospel of Luke it was obviously about Jesus. What he began to do. But this sequel is also about Jesus what he continues to do through the Holy Spirit. So, in the beginning how does Jesus lead his Church? Well, it begins with

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1. **Jesus spending** time with his followers (v1-3)

Jesus spends. *"³ After his suffering, he **presented** himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God."*

Jesus made sure that his followers knew that the resurrection was for real. He gave them convincing proofs that he was really alive. He comes and goes over the next 40 days and 40 nights. For Jesus followers had to be convinced, utterly convinced that Jesus had indeed physically risen from the dead.

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This is the difference between Christianity and every other religion. All the leaders of the other religions died. And their bodies remain in the grave. But Jesus came back from the dead. Death could not hold him. Jesus is alive. His work is going to continue. That is why the gospel of Luke is about what **Jesus began to do & teach** before he was taken up to heaven. And that is why the book of Acts is about what Jesus continues to do through his followers.

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For Jesus had come to preach about the Kingdom of God. He had come to grow the Kingdom of God. So, he appears to his disciples to teach them about the resurrection and to instruct them about the Kingdom of God. Now today we have the Kingdom of Denmark or the Buddhist Kingdom of Thailand and even the United Kingdom of England, Scotland, Wales and Nth Ireland. And each kingdom is marked by borders, it is all about land.

But the Kingdom of God is marked out by a people. The people of God. Who have been saved by the power of God, based on the work of the Son of God and made holy by the Spirit of God! This Kingdom is like a seed that has been placed in a ground. Its growth has only just begun. And Jesus will grow this kingdom, Jesus will build this church. And the gates of Hades will not stop it. Nothing in fact will stop it.

You see if Jesus lives then his ministry will continue in new, fresh & vibrant ways every day. Until he appears again, when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the King. He is the King of God's kingdom. And so, Jesus spends time with his disciples and teaches them and prepares them for their future role. In growing God's kingdom. Making sure that everyone has a chance to be a part of something big, really big.

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So how would someone independent mark that part of our Church's report card. Because we know that when two or three gather in Jesus name, he is in our midst. Jesus still is spending time with his people. He is still the head of the church. He is still teaching us through his word. Challenging us to be his witnesses. Strengthening us for the task at hand. So, what difference does spending time with Jesus make in our lives? At Church on a Sunday. With our Bibles open on a Monday? Has his presence really and truly rubbed off on us? Is his word really shaping us? Does his company give us strength, courage and perseverance to face every situation?

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2. Jesus spends, then Jesus suspends (verse 4-5)

⁴ "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. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

The world needs to hear the good news, but the disciples are to wait. People need to be saved from hell but the disciples are not to go, not just yet. Jesus has already given them the

great commission, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel” but it is like he suspends that mandate until the coming of the Holy Spirit. For it is the Holy Spirit that opens men’s hearts and minds, it is the Holy Spirit that convicts men of sin, it is the Holy Spirit who guides us into the whole truth.

Jesus has no intention of sending out his followers to be lambs to the slaughter. He will not give them a task to do before fully equipping them for the task at hand. He will not send them out powerless. So, they need to wait. For the gift that His Father had promised. For the Holy Spirit is not a reward for work done, it is a gift attached to souls won.

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Wait. Don’t run on ahead. Don’t think it is all up to you. It isn’t. In the OT God sent the Holy Spirit to just a few people for just a short period of time. So, prophets or priests or kings were filled with the Holy Spirit and when they were filled, they were able to do great things.

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Now God is about to fulfill his promise to the prophet Joel that *“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit **on all people**. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. ⁹Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. ³⁰I will show wonders in the heavens & on the earth, blood & fire & billows of smoke... ³²And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved”*

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So, wait! In my good time I will give you all that you need. And so, I wonder are we good at waiting for God? Are we good at resting in his promises? Would our report card say that when God tells us to move, we move and when God tells us to wait, we wait? Jesus is in control of the work of the Church. We have no mandate to do things alone, in our own strength. We need to look to him. Listen to him. Obey him. How good are we at doing that?

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3. Jesus spends, suspends and thirdly sends (verse 6-8)

*⁶“Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But 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.”*

You see even after spending time with the disciples they still don’t get it. ‘Restore’ means they thought God’s kingdom was a kingdom with borders, ‘Israel’ shows they thought it was going to be all about the Jews. And ‘at this time’ means they thought that Jesus resurrection was going to bring God’s kingdom into place right now. As Calvin once said, *“There are as many errors in this question as words!”* And this is after Jesus has spent time teaching them!

But Jesus as he answers them lifts their sights. He moves their gaze from their own backyard to the furthest corners of the earth. Yes, God’s Kingdom will take a hold in Jerusalem but that is just its starting point. It’s going global, viral even. It’s going to make it to Charlestown, Chad & Chile. To Swansea, Swaziland & Switzerland. But to do that it is going to need power.

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Not power to wage war but to witness to the truth. Not by force of arms but by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. The power of the Holy Spirit. The book of Ephesians says the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is available to every believer. Not to

bludgeon others into submission but to grow in godliness, to witness to the world & to persevere in prayer. That's why they had to stay to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Remember Jesus said to his disciples, it is better that I go for them the Holy Spirit will come. While Jesus was here on earth this power was concentrated in our person, now that he is going to the Father, he can send this power to all those who have put their trust in Jesus.

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Power to be his witnesses. The disciples are not bearing witness primarily to something that's happened to them. Rather, they are bearing witness to something Jesus has done. He has died and risen again. His Word is alive sharper than any two-edged sword. And he has transformed a people. Jesus has turned sinners into saints. Ordinary, everyday, followers into people who will help change the world.

In the past the nations came to the Jews. Naaman came to Elisha for healing. The Queen of Sheba came to hear Solomons Wisdom. The wise men had followed the star in the sky and come to Jesus. But now God's kingdom was going to go to them. As Bishop Leslie Newbigin says in his book the Household of God *"the Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move – hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God & hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all into one."*

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We have no liberty to stare at the sky waiting for someone else to do all the work. We are given the work to do. In the words of David Strain, He *"will empower and equip God's people to be witnesses all over the world in fulfillment of Christ's vision. The gift of the Spirit will enable and propel mission. When we think about the work of the Holy Spirit, too often, I think, we focus on experiences and emotions when we think about the Holy Spirit's work in the Church's life. But in Acts 1:8, Jesus says the primary ministry of the Holy Spirit is to propel ordinary, average, broken-down, often confused, usually stumbling, falling, sinful believers outward to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. That's His work."*

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And the rest of the Book of Acts shows how the early Church did just that. In chapters 1 to 7 we see them being witnesses in Jerusalem, in chapters 8 to 11 it was Judea and Samaria turn: and chapters 12 to 28 takes us to Rome, which in one sense for the people of that time was the end of the earth. But this is more than just a pattern for the early Church I believe it is a pattern for us now. We start with Swansea/Charlestown & then we work out so that we too can be witnesses in Newcastle, in NSW, and then to the very ends of the earth.

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So how would our report card say we are going with that mission? With our witnessing? Would the people of our suburb even notice if we shut up shop and went away? I doubt they would. I often think about the work of all the other churches in our area and think what they do doesn't affect me at all and then I realise what we do doesn't affect them either!

We are a Church with tremendous resources. Two full time ministers, two part time workers, good Christian families with decades worth of a good teaching. And how many people are converted each year because of our ministry. One a year, if we are lucky! When did we last plant a Church? When did we last send out a missionary? When did we last step out in faith and do something really radical for the Lord?

We have a great need, for a fresh out pouring of the Holy Spirit. We have a great need to get out of our building and into our world. We have a great need to go from this place and be witnesses to the risen Jesus Christ.

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4. Jesus spends, suspends, sends and fourthly ascends.

⁹ "After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "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."

It's been well said that: "At the Ascension Jesus left the Here for the Everywhere; He left the Time for the Eternal; He left the First Century to fill All the Centuries." At the ascension, Jesus miraculously leaves this earth and goes to heaven. At the ascension, Jesus begins a new part of his ministry, he starts interceding for his followers on behalf of the Father. He begins to rule the world. He takes up his position as head of the Church.

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In Daniel 7 we have the Son of Man ruling on high, now the Son of Man has gone to rule from on high. Jesus is crowned as King of Every Nation. As God's appointed ruler not just of little Israel. But everywhere & this little bunch of guys, these 120 or so disciples, this bunch of men & women, fishermen & family have got the job of announcing it & telling the world.

How do you reckon they're going to go? I reckon it's a scary job. I mean, I reckon it's scary enough just having Lake Macquarie to worry about. They had the world. And they're just ordinary guys. But ordinary guys with the power of the Spirit, with the witness of Jesus, with access to the promises of the Father.

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In the words of John Calvin "Since Jesus has gone up there, and is in heaven for us, let us note that we need not fear to be in this world... thus we look to our Head who is already in heaven and say "Although I am weak, there is Jesus Christ who is powerful enough to make me stand upright. Although I am feeble, there is Jesus Christ who is my strength. Although I am full of miseries, Jesus Christ is in immortal glory and what he has will sometime be given to me and I shall partake of all his benefits. Yes, the devil is called the prince of this world. But what of it? Jesus Christ holds him check for he is king of heaven and earth... the Son of God is my head... I must then take confidence in Him."

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Is that what is written on our report card? Even when we felt weak during the coronavirus we looked to Jesus and found strength. Even when we were opposed by a changing culture we looked to Jesus and found courage. Even when we felt like there was so much to do within the walls of our Church we kept reaching out, witnessing to all about Jesus Christ.

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5. Jesus spends, suspends, sends, ascends and lastly mends (verses 12-26)

Which leads us to the practical component of the Church's report card. For after Jesus leaves, and before the Spirit comes, the Church has to make a decision, an important decision. And that is who what happens to Judas' place? How do we mend, how do we fix

up and repair our past failure with regard to Judas? Who betrayed Jesus? Who caused God's Son to die? Who helped kill the Son of God?

In this case study we see how any group of Christians should make a decision. Notice firstly they met regularly to pray. They all joined together in prayer. Everyone. Together. Seeking God's help and asking for God's guidance. As Matthew Henry once said, *"When God intends great mercy for his people, the first thing he does is to set them praying."*

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Or listen to the words of the preacher Harry Ironside, *"When God is going to do some great thing, He moves the hearts of people to pray. He stirs them up to pray in view of that which he is about to do so that they might be prepared to for it. The disciples needed the self-examination that comes through prayer and supplication that they might be ready for the tremendous event which was about to take place, the coming to earthy of God the Holy Spirit to dwell in believers and empower them to witness for him."*

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And it seems out of this time of prayer, they realise that they need to replace Judas. And once they make that decision, they find that Scripture confirms their need to do just that. They find two passages from the Psalms that back up their heart's promptings. When it comes to guidance, here is where we always need to start. What does God want me to do? How should I live? How can I really help my friends, my family? If we are often in prayer, God will convict us, and we can confirm these convictions through the Scriptures.

Next, they used their common sense. To be an apostle, they had to know Jesus, which meant being there from the beginning. And because the death and resurrection and ascension were the key to who Jesus was that person had to be there at the end as well. So, they sifted through all the possible candidates and choose two who were suitable, Justus and Matthias. So, friends relying on God doesn't mean throwing away our brain.

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And lastly, they left the final decision up to God by drawing lots, and Matthias was chosen. This is the only use of lots in the NT, and personally I think that once the Holy Spirit comes, there are probably better ways. But you can see that the early Church is keen to let God make the final decisions.

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How have we gone with our practical component of our report card – say the coming of COVID last year? Did we pray together? Did we search the Scriptures for answers? Did we use our common sense? Were we really dependent upon God to lead us through the tough times? Or did we just do our own thing, each man for themselves & hope that somehow, in some way, God would get us through such a tough time.?

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When the missionaries were forced out of China by the Japanese during WW2, one lady Gladys Aylward decided she couldn't leave her work behind. So, with only one assistant she led more than 100 orphans over the mountains out of China. It was a harrowing journey in a war-torn country. One of the orphans, a 13-year-old girl reminded her of the story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. "But I'm not Moses", Gladys cried out. "Of course, you aren't," the girl said "but Jehovah is still God."

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God hasn't changed. God's mission for us hasn't changed. He is calling us to be his witnesses here in Newcastle, Australia, the world. But he doesn't leave us on our own, we have prayer, we have his word and we have the power of the Holy Spirit. And friends that is more than enough. So, let's get going. The work of Jesus hasn't stopped. It continues through us.