

POSTSCRIPT

Reviewing the Acts

We have come to the end of our analysis of Luke's inspiring record of the history of the early years of the growth of the Christian church. As we look back over our journey a number of key themes emerge.

1. The Spirit of the exalted Jesus

It should be clear by now that the title 'Acts of the Apostles' which we find appended to this work as early as the second century is somewhat misleading. Luke's focus is on the actions of Peter and John, Stephen and Philip, and Paul and Barnabas only insofar as they reveal what the Spirit of God, the Spirit of love that filled the heart of the risen Jesus, is doing in the world through the 'apostles'.

From the opening verses our attention is drawn to the instructions given by the risen Jesus to his chosen apostles 'through the Holy Spirit'(1:2). They are to be witnesses to Jesus, and to be able to do this they are told to 'wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father'(1:4). And what is the promise of the Father? Speaking of Jesus, Luke says: 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; and he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him'(Acts 10:38). Jesus' disciples were to receive the same anointing: 'you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'(1:5); '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'(1:8).

In his first book, the Gospel, Luke showed us what God's Spirit was doing through Jesus, from his conception through to his death and resurrection. Here, in his second book, we are watching the same Spirit still working through Jesus, but now it is through the exalted Jesus 'whom God has made both Lord and Messiah'(2:36), who is inspiring, encouraging, guiding and gracing his disciples with the fullness of the Spirit which he shares with God in the eternal communion in which the risen life consists.

Throughout the Acts, beginning with Pentecost, we witness the outpouring of this Spirit of love on those open to welcome the promised gift. At Pentecost it was the newly constituted Twelve who found themselves filled with the love-power of the Spirit (2:4): 'being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, Jesus has poured out this that you both see and hear'(2:33). Peter promised the assembled pilgrims that if they opened their minds and hearts to the love which God wanted to give them, they too would receive the same gift: 'The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him'(2:39). On a later occasion, speaking of the resurrection of Jesus, Peter declared: 'We are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him'(5:32). Ananias told Paul that he had been sent to him by the Lord Jesus 'so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit'(9:17).

The community assembled in Jerusalem experienced the outpouring of God's Spirit (4:31), as did the newly baptised Samaritans (8:17), and the gentile Cornelius and his household (10:44; 11:15; 15:8), as well as a group of twelve disciples in Ephesus (19:6).

The Spirit of God spoke through David (1:16) and Isaiah (28:25). It is the same Spirit, now filling the exalted Jesus, who gives life to the Christian community (9:31), inspiring the disciples to speak and to act in accordance with God's will. They are carrying on the mission of Jesus. Again and again in prayer Jesus' witnesses discern the direction which Jesus is gracing them to take. Peter's words to the Jewish council are inspired by Jesus' Spirit (4:8). The same Spirit inspired him to break free of the rules that prevented him associating with Gentiles (10:19; 11:12). Those who were debating with Stephen were unable to 'withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke' (6:10). It is the Spirit who inspired Philip to approach the chariot in which the eunuch is riding (8:29) and once the eunuch is baptised it is the Spirit who inspired him to withdraw (8:39).

It is the Holy Spirit who inspired the community in Antioch to set Barnabas and Paul aside for a mission to Cyprus and the mainland of Asia Minor opposite Cyprus (13:2) and who empowered them on their journey (13:4). It is the Holy Spirit who guided Paul on a later journey towards Macedonia (16:6-7). The momentous decision of the Jerusalem Assembly to welcome Gentiles into the Christian community as Gentiles is prefaced by the following words: 'it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (15:28). Paul tells the elders at Miletus: 'The Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me' (20:23). Perhaps this is all best summed up by Paul in his farewell address to the elders of Ephesus when he speaks of himself as 'a captive to the Spirit' (20:22).

The Acts is a story of love, of the love of God filling the heart of his exalted, glorified Son, Jesus, and pouring out over the world wherever he is welcomed in faith.

2. Prayer

Closely allied with the above is Luke's focus on prayer, for prayer is the experience of communion with Christ, the experience of being drawn into the same communion of love which is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love binding the heart of the exalted Jesus to the heart of God. It is in prayer that the disciples prepare to receive the outpouring of the Spirit promised by the Father: 'All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers' (1:14). Before choosing a replacement for Judas, they pray that their choice will be in accordance with the will of God (1:24). It is the same when they select the seven disciples to help with the Greek-speaking Christians in Jerusalem (6:6).

Peter quotes the prophet Joel who asserts that 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' (2:21). Because God is love, God does not force the Spirit upon anyone. To receive love we must freely welcome love.

Calling on the Lord, calling on our saving God, is calling on the One who has exalted his Son, Jesus. God wants us to call on our brother, Jesus, opening our hearts to welcome a share in the love which fills his heart. Is not this what we mean by prayer? The apostles know that it is Jesus who is revealing his will to them through the Spirit, and that it is the Spirit of Jesus who is working through them to bring about the reign of God's love on the earth. They know how essential it is to 'devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word'(6:4). It is while he is praying (10:9) that Peter comes to see that he must not call unclean what God has made clean (10:15). It is this insight that leads to the first Gentile being welcomed into the community as a Gentile. It is while he is praying in the temple that Paul realises that he must follow in the footsteps of Jesus and go to Jerusalem (22:17).

3. Witnessing to Jesus

The mission given to the disciples is precisely to witness to Jesus, so that others will look to him, open their hearts to him and receive from him the Spirit. This is made clear from the outset in a statement which functions as a summary of the whole book. Jesus declares (1:8): 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem (chapters 1-7), in all Judea and Samaria (chapter 8), and to the ends of the earth (chapters 9-28).' It is for this mission that Matthias is chosen (1:22). Speaking to the crowd on the day of Pentecost, Peter states that God raised Jesus to life 'and of that all of us are witnesses'(2:32). He makes the same assertion to those gathered near the Beautiful Gate (3:15). When the Jewish council orders Peter and John to be silent, they reply: 'we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard' (4:20). In his summary of the life of the Jerusalem community, Luke writes: 'With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all'(4:33). When Peter is miraculously released from prison he is told by God: 'Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life' (5:20). In obedience to this command, they 'filled Jerusalem with their teaching'(5:28). They are not alone in their witnessing, for their words and their actions are confirmed by 'the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him'(5:32).

4. The promise is for everyone

At the heart of the good news is the truth revealed by Jesus that God is love and that God wishes to share the Spirit of his love with everyone. The apostles are to witness to Jesus 'to the ends of the earth'(1:8). God promises through the prophet Joel: 'I will pour out my Spirit upon *all* flesh'(2:17), and '*everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'(2:21). Peter reassures the crowd at Pentecost: 'The promise is for you, for your children, and for *all* who are far away, *everyone* whom the Lord our God calls to him' (2:39).

In a later speech, Peter refers to ‘the *universal* restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets’(3:21). He goes on to remind them of God’s promise to Abraham: ‘in your descendants *all* the families of the earth shall be blessed’(3:25). At the house of Cornelius Peter says: ‘in *every* nation *anyone* who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him’(10:35). He then speaks of Jesus and describes him as ‘Lord of *all*’(10:36).

In recounting the universal mission of the church, Luke focuses especially on Paul. On the temple mount, standing between the Gentile Romans and the Jewish crowd, Paul recounts the words spoken to him on the occasion of his conversion: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to *all* the world of what you have seen and heard’(22:14-15). Paul is given a special mission to the Gentiles, but throughout the Acts he is presented as witnessing to his own people as well. God reveals to Ananias: ‘Paul is an instrument that I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel’ (9:15).

Luke tells us that during Paul’s first stay in Corinth: ‘Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks’(18:4). Paul sees his mission as precisely one of being faithful to the mission given by God to Abraham. He sees that being faithful to the commission given by God to Israel means freeing Judaism from the human traditions that have limited God’s universal call. Paul calls the Jews to embrace their Messiah and to take the knowledge of the Lord to everyone, welcoming the Gentiles as Gentiles. Paul is accused of ‘teaching all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses’(21:21), and of ‘teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our law and this place [the temple]’(21:29). The contrary is the truth. Paul’s mission is to call his own people to be faithful to the mission given them by God. As he declared before the governor and the high priest at Caesarea: ‘I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets’(24:14). A cross which Paul carried to the end was the immense sadness that his own people, the Jews, continued on the whole to stay with the Judaism with which they were familiar and failed to accept the challenge of the mission offered them by the risen Christ through Paul.

Luke is calling us to carry on the mission given to the apostles by opening our hearts to be instruments of the Spirit in drawing everyone everywhere to know Jesus and so to know God as God has chosen to reveal himself through Jesus, so that God’s kingdom will come (Luke 11:2). It is for this that Jesus prayed and gave his life. It is for this that the risen Jesus continues to work: that the world will be truly one in the love that binds Jesus to the Father and that is continually being poured out over our world. Our deepest yearning is for this love and there is no project more worthy than to give our lives as did Jesus’ apostles to witnessing to Jesus in our words and in our deeds. Only when every heart opens to receive his Spirit will God’s design for our world be complete. Only when all the energies of love of every human being are harnessed will our world be the paradise which God wills and for which we all long.