

The Great Call (to witness).

Acts 1:1-8

2 Peter 3:13-18

The early followers of 'The Way' did not set out to build Church: they had clearly remembered the words of Jesus that He alone would build His Church (Matthew 16:18) and the truth encapsulated in Psalm 127:1 that unless the Lord builds the House its builders build in vain! Those early believers gossiped the gospel telling their unique experience of Jesus to whoever would listen, they continued the ministry of Jesus (in the power of the Spirit), they responded to the Great Commission (to make disciples), set about the Great Call (to be witnesses) and all of it was as it were mediated through the Great Command (to love God, one another, and to love the lost) and the consequence was the Church! It must always be that way round for the Church is not an end in itself but the way Christ has chosen to weave us together in love with Him at the Head! Hence the other crucial name for the Church is the Body of Believers: no its not. It's the Body of Christ!!!! Whenever it becomes about us the alarm bells need to ring because it's all about Jesus and Him alone!

Now because the story of Jesus is so impressive - God among us! God speaking a language we can understand! God acting in ways that heal and help us! - There is a danger that we will be impressed but only impressed. As the spectacular dimensions of this story slowly (or suddenly) dawn upon us, we could easily become enthusiastic spectators, and let it go at that - become admirers of Jesus, generous with our ou's and ah's and in our better moments inspired to imitate Him. So that's why John's gospel is such a blessing with his 60 year mature reflection on the life of Jesus and how we can believe

and have that same life of God in us! So now in Acts it is Luke's task to prevent us from becoming mere spectators of Jesus, fans of the Message. Of the original quartet of writers on Jesus, Luke alone continues his narration with hardly a break, a pause perhaps to dip his pen in the inkwell, writing in the same style, using the same vocabulary.

He is desperate for us to realise that the story of Jesus doesn't end with Jesus. It continues in the lives of those who believe in Him. The supernatural doesn't stop with Jesus. Luke makes it clear that these Christians he wrote about were no more spectators of Jesus, anymore than Jesus was a spectator of God - they are in on the action of God, God acting in them, God living in them & God speaking to and through them. Now doesn't that excite you: it does me? That the God of Heaven and Earth would come and make His home in me and use me to fulfil His purposes of love, restoring His children to that place close to His heart. As the song in the eighties said (we sang it last Sunday): I want to serve the purpose of God in my generation, I want to serve the purpose of God while I'm alive, I want to give my life to something that will last for ever!

But hey you say, we are dealing with stubborn sinful ordinary people here! T'was always so: even post Resurrection the disciples (who had seen the risen Christ) were here in our reading still asking the wrong questions. Jesus did not and does not have a narrow nationalistic agenda, nor indeed dare I say it: a denominational one! He was not about to boot out the Romans and establish His followers as the ruling government of the day. Some of His followers still wanted positions of influence (Mark 10:35-41) in an earthly kingdom. Was this when Jesus was planning His coup? But even after all this time with Jesus they were still missing the point. So He keeps explaining to them about the kingdom (v3), trying to get it

into their heads that His kingdom is bigger than all their political, religious and cultural expectations. Their relatively small concerns would be handled by God the Father, in His own time and way. They were not to worry about the timetable.

So Jesus seeks to shift their focus back to the business of life in His kingdom. When the promised power of the Holy Spirit (v5) arrives they will be able to spread the news of the Kingdom all over the world. In His typically direct manner, Jesus challenges and envisions in the same sentence.

"You don't need to know the time; timing is my Father's business. What you'll get is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea & Samaria, even to the ends of the World". Acts: 1:8/9.

They are to tell their friends and family in the locality, but not be limited to this. They and their fellow believers will go all over the planet, telling what they know about Jesus and His kingdom.

So these last words and promise of Jesus are not only crucial, they are essentially, the foundation stone for Pentecost - even the promise of a personal Pentecost for each of us and a personal call to which we need to respond.

The early followers of 'The Way' were not evangelists: such is a later title unhelpfully added by the Church. Only Philip is actually described as an evangelist (21:8) and this is I think to distinguish him from Philip the Apostle (1:13) rather than to indicate a formal title. The first believers (not called Christians till later) saw evangelism as a natural response to their own conversion, based on the commission and call from Jesus (1:8, Matthew 28:18-20). Sharing the good news was seen as the responsibility and privilege of everyone. Apostles evangelised (Peter & John), prophets evangelised (Barnabus),

teachers evangelised (Paul) and even deacons evangelised (Stephen & Philip)! Telling others about Jesus seems to be a very high priority; indeed it is the focus of almost every chapter in Acts. This is even more remarkable when you consider the pressure they were under to be silent. Faced with this kind of opposition, most of us would be content to let evangelism slip down our list of priorities.

So what made the difference: answer Pentecost! Answer: the Holy Spirit! Now the Holy Spirit had me look again at the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8 this week. He rightly drew my attention to the fact that what we have here is a promise and a task: previously I had majored on the task and minored on the promise but both are crucial for our effectiveness as disciples of Jesus. The promise is not just of Baptism in the Holy Spirit but also that He will make us His witnesses: its like a Holy Spirit serpena, we will have become Witnesses by His anointing and we won't be able to help ourselves sharing our story about how the Saviour has transformed our life! Such witness has been and still is the lifeblood of the mission of the Body of Christ. We are not all called to be evangelists but we are all very definitely called to be witnesses! So what is a witness? A witness is someone who says I know this is true. In court the evidence you give must be your own - it must be your personal experience, in this case, a first-hand experience of Christ.

There was a time when John Bunyan (of Pilgrims Progress fame) was not quite sure. What worried him was that the Jews think their religion is the best; followers of Mohammed think theirs the best. What if Christianity be but a 'think-so' too? But a witness does not say, "I think so" He says, "I know!" A witness must be able to express their experience of Christ in words, must be able to give a reason for the hope

that is in their heart, and do so with gentleness and respect, as Peter reminded us.

Of course Real Witness is not just of words but also of life and tangible action and deeds. Preach the gospel and it necessary use words said Francis of Assisi. H M Stanley said of David Livingstone (having spent time with him) "If I had been with him any longer I would have been compelled to be a Christian and he never spoke to me about it at all". The sheer weight of the witness of a life lived in Christ should in itself be irresistible because of the Spirit fired conviction in seeking souls that makes it so.

Interestingly the Greek word for witness and for martyr is the same: *Martus*. A witness has to be ready to become a martyr. To be a witness means to love nothing more than Jesus: to say I can't live without Him! A witness will have confidence in the power of God. A witness will have compassion for those who are spiritually lost.

Friends, St Andrews needs to be a church built on the sum total of all our current testimonies. A church where every member can give a reason for the hope that is in their heart and to give it with gentleness and respect as 1 Peter 3:15 calls us to do. One of the lovely Moravian traditions that Wesley borrowed and planted into Methodism was that of the Love Feast: don't confuse it with the Lords Supper, which it is not. In essence it's a fellowship meal, which we use at Oasis Church, but at the heart of it is testimony of what the Lord has done or is doing in individual lives or in the congregation. Preaching the Word is important, seeing it applied into our lives even more so, but supremely we are inspired by testimonies shared. Tell me that you don't have a testimony and I won't believe you: as Christians we all have experienced the dynamic presence of God at one time or another whether we realise it or not and as we share it it

builds our faith and encourages all who hear. Testimony is our privilege, God's promise, and a work of the Spirit rather than the flesh. On it Jesus builds His Church!

Pastor

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