

Acts 1: 8 “You shall be my witnesses”

Series The ACTS of the Holy Spirit (2): Seeking to compare today’s church to the early church and rediscover our missionary DNA

Introduction

Well-chosen worship songs set the scene + lively presentation in Family Talk.

Initial verses: Ps 51: 6, 10, 15.

Last week the first message in this series focused on the Promise of the Spirit.

This week’s title is both a promise and a command.

Promises are reassuring and encouraging, but commands can be intimidating if we don’t feel capable of responding to them. So how do we feel when we hear the word “witnessing”?

Challenged? Excited? Under accusation because we feel we have fallen short? All of the above?

We need to investigate exactly what is meant by the challenge to witness, and then see how we can work it out in our lives by allowing the Holy Spirit to take control. In doing this, we should remember that the Holy Spirit is the Enabler and that Satan is the accuser of the brethren, so our first task is to know whose side we are on!

The second point to bear in mind is that we cannot necessarily expect to achieve everything all at once. A life of witness should be something we grow into, so we shouldn’t be “beating ourselves up” for missing opportunities, but rather encourage one another to press on and grow up into Christ, however young or old we may be at the present time. In any situation it is good to pause and think “What would Jesus think, do and say?” We can over-emphasise what we say or don’t say and forget that what we think and do can be just as important in our witness to others. Our first priority is to forgive and to receive forgiveness, so unless we approach people in humility our witness will be in vain.

This series is comparing the Early Church with our experience today and is challenging us to rediscover the missionary zeal that was evident in New Testament times. It is therefore a good idea to begin by examining the precise meaning of the original word that was spoken to the disciples. The word translated “witness” in Acts 1 is in fact equivalent to the English word “martyr” which implies that we should be ready to lay down our lives for our faith. The same word is used, for instance, in 1 Peter 5: 1-11, a word addressed to Elders and to young men in the church, calling for humility in all our dealings with one another in the knowledge that we can cast all our anxiety on the God of Grace who cares for each one of us and will make us strong, firm and steadfast. In common with all our fellow-believers, we can bear witness to Christ’s sufferings for us but also to the glory that is to be revealed.

So Jesus’s redeeming work is done, but He relies first on the disciples and then on Christians through the centuries that followed to spread the Word. Acts 1:8 mentions Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth, which means we start from where we can initially make a difference and then contribute what we can to outreach in the wider world.

How do we become witnesses for Jesus?

For the disciples in Acts 1 it was a case of waiting until they received power from the Holy Spirit. They had met with Jesus and accompanied Him along the way, but with the coming of the Holy Spirit their lives would be transformed: the Greek word for power used here is like the English word dynamite. How dynamic is our faith and witness? Are we allowing the Holy Spirit to transform our lives as he did for the lives of the disciples in the Early Church? Let's look at some examples, eg Paul on the Damascus road or Peter who addressed the crowds on the day of Pentecost. These examples may seem beyond our reach, but there are plenty of examples in the Bible of very ordinary people of all types and backgrounds whose lives were transformed by their encounter with Jesus and who began a life of witness that is recorded in Scripture because they influenced the people around them.

Let's think back to our own first encounter with Jesus. There must have come a time when the words we'd heard about Him, maybe from school assemblies or RE lessons or from other people's testimony, became a reality, as we understood that now was the time when He was calling upon us to make a personal response. From that moment on there was no turning back, and we understood the truth about the world we live in entirely differently. Having received the words of eternal life into our own lives, we then wanted to pass them on to those around us. But how much success have we had? How many lives have been changed as a result of our witness? Have we become discouraged and tempted to remain silent rather than risk appearing to be "a fool for Christ"? Are there ways in which we can reverse this impression and step into the truth of our calling to "be my witnesses"?

How do we speak the Word into the lives of those around us?

Solo with words displayed: 993 Say the Word, I will be healed → Time of reflection
Challenge for us to believe & claim promises from the Word for ourselves and others. Good to agree as we apply the Word and pray together:

- I will be healed
- I will be free
- I will be filled
- I will be changed
- I will receive grace to help in time of need
- Beatitudes shows reverses in God's world view
- Joy comes in the morning
- Peace to transform anxious, troubled minds
- Love poured into troubled, insecure hearts
- Courage into fearful hearts (2 Tim 1: 7)

This daily witness is a valuable part of our lives as Christian brothers and sisters, and we should do more to minister to one another in Christ in this way. We can also apply these words and principles to uncommitted friends or family members in times of need, for example when we gather together to grieve the loss of a loved one or to pray for healing.

How can we live a life of witness and spread the Word more widely?

We need to have every confidence in the One who called us and in the value of our life as a witness to those around us.

Eph 2: 10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.

The way we live our lives and our attitude to those we work and live with is a powerful witness, and our words will be of no value if they are not borne out in our daily lives.

We also need to have confidence in the person God has created us to be. In today's society it can seem necessary to impress by the power of our arguments and by concentrating on building up our public image – examples on TV are The Apprentice and various celebrity shows. There is also immense pressure for us to assert ourselves in the work-place. However, we need to avoid following the world's pattern of over-valuing certain personality types, as we are all of equal value in God's sight. The extravert to whom words come easily and thoughts flow freely may find it easier to witness in public, but the introvert who listens more intently and takes time to observe and consider can be equally effective in different ways.

A few biblical principles can help us keep on track and remember the life of witness to which we have been called:

- Renewal: 2 Cor 4: 16 "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day."
- Focus: Col 3: 1-2 " Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, not on earthly things.
- Encouragement: 2 Cor 5: 17 "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come."
- Living by faith: examples of lives of faith from Hebrews 11

Conclusion

Witnessing refers to our whole lives and not simply to the words of testimony we speak. This topic is often one that leaves us feeling inadequate, but I hope that today we will feel encouraged and able to encourage one another in our lives of witness. We need to relax and feel free to be ourselves in Christ and to fulfil our unique destiny, obedient to the voice behind us saying, "This is the way, walk in it" (Is 30: 21).

Following on from the message, there will be an opportunity for shared testimony about witnessing and a time of prayer.