

Good morning. I have been asked today to speak on Acts 1:1-12, which opens with these words:

¹In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach...¹

The 'I', here, is Luke the apostle - the same Luke who wrote, at the beginning of his gospel,

¹Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ²just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.²

Luke wrote what we now call 'the gospel according to Luke' as an account of what Jesus had done among the disciples so that Theophilus - probably a Roman official³ - could have certainty concerning the things he had been taught. Luke wanted Theophilus to know with certainty what it was that Jesus had done, who he was, what he had taught.

But having told Theophilus about this in his gospel, Luke now opens the book of Acts by saying, 'What I told you in the other book was only what Jesus *began* to do and teach.' It was just the beginning, it's not the end of the story - there is more to come. And I think Luke doesn't just mean, 'I am writing a second book, and *that* will be the end of the story.' Jesus features very little in person in the book of Acts - he appears at the beginning, and then he is taken up. Luke's point, I believe, is to say to Theophilus: Jesus is not done with us yet. He works among us still. He is still among us: he is still *doing* and he is still *teaching* - and we should take that as encouragement: Jesus is alive. He is still doing the Father's work among us, and he is still teaching us.

Let's look at Acts 1:1-5:

¹In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁴And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."⁴

In these verses, Luke tells us of three things that Jesus did in relation to the apostles:

1. He gave them commands through the Holy Spirit (verse 2).
2. He presented himself alive to them by many proofs, and spoke with them about the kingdom of God (verse 3).
3. He ordered them to remain in Jerusalem and wait to be baptized with the Holy Spirit (verses 4-5).

Why? Why would Jesus do these things? And why would Luke think it was important to tell us about it?

I think the answer to that question lies in the first point: Jesus gave the disciples commands through the Holy Spirit. What commands? We can look to Luke's gospel for an answer. After Jesus' resurrection, we read the following account:

⁴⁵Then [Jesus] opened [the apostles'] minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷and

¹ Acts 1:1 (ESV).

² Luke 1:1-4 (ESV).

³ Indicated by the use of 'most excellent', which Luke generally reserves for Roman officials.

⁴ Acts 1:1-5 (ESV).

that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."⁵

The command is there in verse 47: 'Start in Jerusalem. Tell them to repent, and that there is forgiveness of sins to be had in my name. But don't stop there: tell all nations; tell the whole world!' And we find this same command at the end of Matthew, of course:

¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."⁶

'I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth,' says Jesus, 'and in that authority, I say to you: go. Make disciples of all nations. Baptize them. Teach them to keep my commands. And I will always be with you. My work is not done.'

And in John 20, we read this:

²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²²And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."⁷

Jesus says to the apostles, 'The Father sent me to restore a fallen people to himself - to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour on an undeserving people. In the same way that he sent me, I now send you.' And then he breathes on them, saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'

So when Luke says that Jesus gave the apostles commands through the Holy Spirit, I think this is what he has in mind - and while these scriptures leave space for interpretation, I think perhaps he means that Jesus gave the command, and the Holy Spirit somehow ministered that command in them. Perhaps one way of thinking about this is to say that there is a difference between *knowing* what Jesus commands, and *receiving* it with one's heart, and the apostles *received* it as the Holy Spirit worked in them.

The apostles are given a command: to proclaim Jesus to the world, repentance and the forgiveness of sins; to make disciples; to baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; to teach them to keep Jesus' commands; to go, just as Jesus went.

That is a big command: 'As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' I read this as Jesus saying, 'Go, just as I went; I am sending you *in the same way* as the Father has sent me. Do not shy away from proclaiming the kingdom of God boldly, because I didn't shy away. Do not deny the Father's work, because I didn't deny it. Do not allow the fear of man to rule your hearts and cause you to deny the truth, because I didn't allow it to. Do not miss an opportunity to glorify the Father, because I didn't miss one. But tell the world to repent, and that they can have peace with the Father and belong to him once more.'

Thinking of it like that I think makes sense of the second thing that Luke tells us Jesus did: he showed the apostles that he truly *was* alive after the crucifixion. We can read an account of this in Luke 24:

³⁶As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" ³⁷But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. ³⁸And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marvelling, he said to them, "Have you

⁵ Luke 24:45-47 (ESV).

⁶ Matthew 28:18-20 (ESV).

⁷ John 20:21-23 (ESV).

anything here to eat?" ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate before them.

⁴⁴Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."⁸

Jesus wanted the apostles to be absolutely certain that it really *was* him, and not just a ghost. They should see his wounds - touch them, so that they could have no doubts and wouldn't just think they'd made a mistake. They should have a tangible experience - an experience they simply couldn't deny. 'Here, touch the hands that the nails were driven through, and see for yourself, that no hint of doubt should linger in your mind.' And then he eats before them, so that they can see: this is no ghost.

Jesus wants the apostles to know with absolute certainty that he is alive - that the man they indisputably saw killed is alive. They are to know, as John says in Revelation, that Jesus is the living one who died and is alive forevermore,⁹ that he has overcome death and has destroyed its power,¹⁰ that death no longer has the victory,¹¹ that there is eternal life for all who believe,¹² that through Jesus' death we can come to God,¹³ that there is to be a resurrection to life for believers,¹⁴ that death has no dominion over Jesus,¹⁵ and that we, too, through him, have died to sin and are made alive, in him, to God.¹⁶ Jesus wants the apostles absolutely convinced of this, to their very cores. He wants to make their faith huge, so that they will stay true to him - right to the end.

If the apostles were convinced of all of this, then they would be on their way to fulfilling the command that Jesus had given them. So they *had* to be sure about him and he made sure that they were - and more, he made sure that they understood how the scriptures pointed towards him and told the truth about him, so that they would see clearly that God's plan of salvation, mapped out in what we call the Old Testament, was at last being fulfilled. Hearts of stone would be removed, and replaced with hearts of flesh, and we would be *moved* to be careful to keep God's commands,¹⁷ and we would belong to him fully, not just honouring him with our lips, but with our hearts.

So Jesus commanded the apostles, and Jesus showed himself to them, so that they would know what the call on their lives was and whom they believed - but that was not enough. One more thing was needed. They were to wait in Jerusalem.

⁴And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; ⁵for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."¹⁸

John the Baptist had said something similar:

¹⁵As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."¹⁹

⁸ Luke 24:36-44 (ESV).

⁹ Revelation 1:17-18 (ESV).

¹⁰ Hebrews 2:14.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:55.

¹² John 3:16.

¹³ 1 Peter 3:18.

¹⁴ John 5:28-29.

¹⁵ Romans 6:9.

¹⁶ Romans 6:11.

¹⁷ Ezekiel 36:26-27 (especially the NIV).

¹⁸ Acts 1:4-5 (ESV).

¹⁹ Luke 3:15-16 (ESV).

In Luke 24 we read this:

⁴⁹...behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.²⁰

Wait to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. It will be like fire, and you will be clothed with power from on high. Power for what? The apostles were excited:

⁶...they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."²¹

The Holy Spirit was to come upon the apostles and they would receive power - not to throw off the shackles of Roman rule, not to make Israel her own kingdom once more, but to be witnesses: in Jerusalem, and throughout the kingdoms of Judah and Samaria - so throughout old Israel, even though she had rejected her God - and throughout all the nations of the earth. Power - not, first and foremost, for what some people call 'victorious living'; not power to get a car and a house; not power to get a good job; not power to make much of number one - but power *to be witnesses*. Power to tell the world about Jesus. Power to fulfil the great commission. Power to stand before rulers and kings and to proclaim that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

So important is this power - so crucial to the work of witnessing - that Jesus tells the disciples: wait in Jerusalem. Don't do anything until you receive the promised Holy Spirit. *Then* you will have power, and *then* you will fulfil my command.

Now, there is a question I don't intend to deal with in a great deal of depth here. When Jesus told the apostles that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit, he had not yet ascended into heaven. He told them in John 16 that the Holy Spirit *would not* be poured out until he did so.²² We also know that when someone comes to Christ, the Holy Spirit works within that person - thus, for example, Paul tells us that 'in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.'²³ If the new convert begins to grow in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control - why, then the Holy Spirit is at work in them.

The question, then, is this: now that Jesus has ascended into heaven, does this baptism of the Holy Spirit take place *automatically* when someone comes to Jesus? Is there still a separate event called 'baptism with the Holy Spirit' - or, in the language of Acts 2, 'being filled with the Holy Spirit'²⁴ - or was that special to the apostles' day, because Jesus had not yet ascended into heaven?

I think there is a separate occasion. Not everyone will agree. I will tell you why I think there is:

1. When Jesus speaks of being baptized with the Holy Spirit in Acts, he isn't speaking about something to do with conversion or regeneration - that is, he isn't speaking about something the apostles need in order to come to know Jesus (they already know him!) or in order to be sanctified.
2. Jesus is speaking first and foremost about a *power* which the apostles need *in order to be witnesses*.
3. All the descriptions in Acts of what happens when people are baptized with, or filled with, the Holy Spirit are connected with witnessing - and usually, with *extraordinary* witnessing. Here is just one example, after the healing of a lame beggar:

²⁰ Luke 24:49 (ESV).

²¹ Acts 1:6-8 (ESV).

²² John 16:7.

²³ 1 Corinthians 12:13 (ESV).

²⁴ Acts 2:4.

⁵On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, ⁶with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷And when they had set [Peter and John] in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" ⁸Then Peter, *filled with the Holy Spirit*, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. ¹¹This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹²And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

¹³Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.²⁵

Peter, full of the Holy Spirit, testifies - and he testifies in a way in which, as an uneducated man, he shouldn't be able to, so people are astonished.

There are many other examples which point towards a bold witnessing with extraordinary effects.²⁶

Whatever view you take of the question of when the baptism in the Holy Spirit takes place, I want to suggest to you that there *is* something called baptism with the Holy Spirit, or being filled with the Holy Spirit - and that above all, its hallmark is a divine empowering for witness; a divine empowering to glorify God in the sight of men. And whether you think that that power is in principle available from conversion onward, or that it is a separate event, or that it can happen repeatedly: we need it. The church today needs it.

I sat in my connect group last Tuesday, and somehow we got on to the question of why God permits hardship. As is probably not unusual in these circumstances, we ended up looking at some of what James has to say:

²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.²⁷

The testing of our faith produces steadfastness, and helps perfect us in Christ. And this is all very well, but then my pastor asked, 'What kinds of suffering and trials do you think people like James and Peter had in mind when they wrote their letters?' And the answer to that, as far as I'm aware, is real persecution. Being crucified upside-down for confessing Christ. Peter writes:

¹⁴But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.²⁸

I don't think he was thinking of late mortgage repayments - and my point here is not that our lesser trials might not be a means of building our faith, but that the examples we see in the early church were of people so desirous of glorifying their God that they would take what came to them. And so we moved on to a related question: why do we not have to endure much persecution? Is it that what we have to say is accepted, or at least tolerated, by a secular world around is - or is it that we don't say it in the first place?

²⁵ Acts 4:5-13 (ESV).

²⁶ Acts 4:31; Acts 6:5 and 6:8-15; Acts 9:17-22; Acts 11:23-24; Acts 13:9-12.

²⁷ James 1:2-4 (ESV).

²⁸ 1 Peter 3:14-17 (ESV).

I can't speak for any of you - how you find witnessing, how zealous you are when it comes to glorifying God before others. I know that I could do more - I could do a lot more. And so I want to draw these three things from this passage in Acts, and encourage all of us:

1. Our witness is not optional, but is commanded by Jesus. But he doesn't just command us and then leave us to do it, because
2. our witness is to be built on the knowledge and certainty that Jesus is *alive* - he *is* the resurrection and the life. By that, I mean let's not try to testify to someone we're not convinced by. Let's not say that Jesus is great if we don't know that he is. If that's the case, let's ask him for faith and a real, life-changing encounter with him, so that we are fully convinced: of his Godhood, of his righteousness, of his glory, of his love, of his grace. And true faith, as we know from James, produces works - including witness.
3. God himself provides the power to witness to him in a way which leaves people astonished. I want to encourage you to pray for that power - for that filling with the Holy Spirit that allows us to stand and boldly proclaim that Jesus is Lord, even as it says so clearly over the doors to this building, to call to repentance and to proclaim that there is reconciliation with the Father to be had.

Jesus himself promised his disciples that as they went out and made disciples and baptized them, he would be with them, even to the end of the age. Jesus is still doing his work, and is still teaching us, today - and he is still with us. With faith, and with the empowering of the Holy Spirit, let's fulfil his command.