

Tell us a story

Luke 1: 1-4, Acts 1:1-5

In an article in Campus Life a young nurse writes of her pilgrimage in learning to see in a patient the image of God beneath a very 'distressing disguise'.

"Eileen was one of her first patients, a person who was totally helpless'. A cerebral aneurysm (broken blood vessels in the brain) had left her with no conscious control over her body,' the nurse writes. As near as the doctors could tell Eileen was totally unconscious, unable to feel pain and unaware of anything going on around her. It was the job of the hospital staff to turn her every hour to prevent bedsores and to feed her twice a day 'what looked like a thin mush through a stomach tube.' Caring for her was a thankless task. 'When it's this bad,' an older student nurse told her, 'you have to detach yourself emotionally from the whole situation...' As a result, more and more she came to be treated as a thing, a vegetable...

"But the young student nurse decided that she could not treat this person like the others had treated her. She talked to Eileen, sang to her, encouraged her, and even brought her little gifts. One day when things were especially difficult and it would have been easy for the young nurse to take out her frustrations on the patient, she was especially kind. It was Thanksgiving Day and the nurse said to the patient, 'I was in a cruddy mood this morning, Eileen, because it was supposed to be my day off. But now that I'm here, I'm glad. I wouldn't have wanted to miss seeing you on Thanksgiving. Do you know this is Thanksgiving?'

"Just then the telephone rang, and as the nurse turned to answer it, she looked quickly back at Eileen'. 'Suddenly', she writes, Eileen was 'looking at me... crying. Big damp circles stained her pillow, and she was shaking all over'.

"That was the only human emotion that Eileen ever showed any of them, but it was enough to change the whole attitude of the hospital staff toward her. Not long afterward, Eileen died. The young nurse closes her story, saying, 'I keep thinking about her... It occurred to me that I owe her an awful lot. Except for Eileen, I might never have known what it's like to give myself to someone who can't give back'

This morning we are beginning a new journey, a journey that will take us through the birth and early growing pains of the fledgling phenomena we call the church. We will be confronted by many situations that seem completely hopeless just as our young nurse was confronted with the situation of Eileen. We will see how those apparently hopeless situations and insurmountable problems were overcome by faithful men and women who were operating under the guidance and with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts is a very unusual book, it is as long as the gospels, but it is not a gospel; it has only very brief appearances of Jesus Himself. It is not one of the letters, though it does give us much of the historical, political and geographical background that helps

us to understand the letters of the New Testament, further it also introduces us to the writers and recipients of many of these letters. It is not apocalyptic literature; it does not attempt to give us any insight into the future plans of God, whatever they may be, other than that those plans will be accomplished by His Church.

The question remains then what is it, how are we to read this book, what are we to do with it and how are we to understand it? The answer to this vexing question is provided in the introduction both to Acts itself and the gospel of Luke. Verse 3 of Luke 1 tells us, "Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus."

When we think about and study the book of Acts we need to do so remembering that it is really Luke, that is to say it is a sequel, it is a direct follow on from Luke's gospel and in his own words from the introduction of Acts where it reads, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen." Luke then goes on to report that the apostles, the ones who had been with Jesus in His earthly ministry were with Him when He said to them, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."

Luke in this introduction is showing us that this account, this orderly account, as he describes it is a continuation of his earlier work and that the things he is going to report are a direct result of the fact that Jesus has now ascended to be at the right hand of the Father and that His Spirit has come to dwell with His people.

This book then is the second part in a series, the first part told what Jesus did and said during His earthly ministry, the second part continues the story of Jesus but the focus shifts and rather than it being His direct words and deeds that are reported it is the words and actions of His followers the Church that is described. What is fascinating is the end of the book, the final part which we will obviously look at in more detail at a later date feels a little unfinished. The final verses say, "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ".

This seems a peculiar end to a book, it is very open ended, we have, as people say today, no closure. This is deliberate; the end is left open because it is not an end. Scholars have argued that there must be a third volume to Luke, a volume where we read of the death of Paul and some other great actions of The Spirit. I don't agree with this line of reasoning. I think that Luke left the story open for the Church of God to continue to write its own history. It speaks to us in our modern world in our own

particular situations and circumstances and encourages us that we are part of the ongoing story, the story of God's people.

The main thrust and purpose of the two volume work Luke-Acts is to tell the story of the Church, in order to do that Luke had to tell the story of Jesus the one who founded the Church and then he told the story of its birth and growth pains, but he left the end open so that we in our time can join that great story.

Luke had great insight and knowledge, as we will see some of the things that take place in the book of Acts involved him directly, there are many passages which talk of we and us. But Luke was not an original disciple he was not there from the beginning, which is why he talks of carrying out a thorough investigation. He was able to talk to some of the disciples and pick their brains, he was probably able to talk to the aged mother of Jesus and hence get some amazing insights into the birth narrative in particular, that is why he says in Luke 2:51, "But his mother treasured all these things in her heart." Luke was a good historian, he did his research thoroughly and checked his sources and information, we can be certain that the events recorded are accurate and the words can be totally relied on.

That does not mean that we can read this as a history book, it is of only limited value in that for it only tells the story of the early church and even then only part of it but what it does tell us, it tells us well.

If you were to sit down and read the two volumes of Luke and Acts consecutively some time, a course of action I would heartily recommend for all sorts of reasons you will be struck I think by the amazing sense of journey that is involved. That journey is a two-fold journey; the first part involves a coming in and the second a going out.

In the early part of Luke, Jesus is travelling around in the rural parts of Israel always on the move but slowly getting closer and closer to Jerusalem, until we read in Luke 9:51, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem". As we know it was in Jerusalem that Jesus was crucified, in Jerusalem that He was buried and in the outskirts of Jerusalem that He ascended, to the right hand of the Father.

The second part of the story is the taking of the gospel and the growth of the church out of Jerusalem to the very ends of the earth. It all started in Jerusalem; the disciples were all gathered together praying and worshiping together as they had been told to do, once the Spirit was given, as we shall see on Pentecost Sunday, the church was driven first out into the streets of Jerusalem and eventually into the wider Roman world. By the time of the close of the book of Acts the gospel had spread to the ends of the earth, at least as they knew it at that time.

It is into this outward moving, ever seeking ever growing situation that we find ourselves today. You see the story of Acts is the story of the early church and what it did, but that also makes it our story to since we are the church now and we are

empowered by the same Spirit that empowered those first disciples. We are called to have the same attitude and heart as those early Christians, a heart to make Jesus known and to be totally reliant on the Father.

Acts is a very honest book, it doesn't paint the Christian life or even Church life as all sweetness and light, we have, thanks to Luke's orderly account a warts and all story of how this simple group of rough and ready folk from the unfashionable North of the country grew into the biggest movement that this world has ever known.

This is good news for us; we all know that there are times when we wonder whether following Jesus is actually worth it, we wonder whether we want to put up with the church anymore. These are questions that undoubtedly went through the minds of those early followers as they were beaten and whipped, as the Jewish Christians looked down their nose at the Johnny come lately Gentile believers. But because of their reliance on the Spirit of God they were able not only to endure but to flourish and grow and see the gospel spread and spread.

My hope and prayer is that as we spend time in this amazing book that we will recapture some of God's heart, His heart not only for the church but also for the world. As we do we will be reformed and reshaped more into the head of the Church the Lord Jesus Himself. It is not by our strength or might or wisdom that the Church will grow, it is by The Spirit of Jesus working in us and through us, developing the Fruit of The Spirit that we have been looking at in the evening services and being open to use the good Gifts of The Spirit that Jesus so longs to lavish on His Church, gifts that will enable His Church to grow exponentially as it did in those first heady days of Pentecost