

Acts 1:6-14

To The Ends Of The Earth

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today marks the beginning of the end of the Easter season. For seven weeks we've celebrated the resurrection of our Lord, matching the time that he spent with his disciples before his ascension, and then the short wait before the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And all four gospel accounts tell us what was to come next.

John's gospel is a little different, with the author telling us the reason for him having written his account:

These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

(John 20:31)

In Mark, we have Jesus saying to his disciples, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15).

In Matthew, we have the more well-known great commission, where Jesus says:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

(Matthew 28:19-20)

And, of course, Luke also has Jesus speaking to his disciples, where he says that "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). But remember that the Gospel writer Luke is also the author of Acts. Or its longer title, the Acts of the Apostles. Although some prefer an alternative title, the Acts of the Holy Spirit, because none of it happens until the Spirit is sent at Pentecost. Either way, the account of the Ascension of Jesus is the key transition between Luke and Acts. And Luke actually gives it to us twice. One at the end of the Gospel, and one at the start of Acts.

The way Luke introduces his second book, the book of Acts, shows us that the main character hasn't changed. It is still all about Jesus. The ascension changes things, but it's always about Jesus. About the work of Jesus Christ in this world, bringing salvation to a lost and broken people. And specifically, it is about the cross.

In the last chapter of his gospel, Luke describes some of the scenes where Jesus meets his disciples after being raised from the dead. And we see that it really was him, he really was alive, truly alive, in a transformed body that could eat and drink as well as walk and talk, but was, somehow, different. Accounts of appearing among the disciples, even through locked doors, and then disappearing again speak of something very different than a normal human being. To us, they sound as if he were a ghost, someone no longer living in the flesh.

But what Luke and the other writers who describe the risen body of Jesus are saying, rather, is that Jesus is more than ordinarily embodied, not less. His resurrected and transformed body is now the beginning of God's new creation. And in God's new creation heaven and earth will come together in a new way. That's why Mark's gospel has Jesus telling the disciples to proclaim the good news to the whole creation. Because of the crucifixion event, things have changed for all of creation. And to enable that change to be proclaimed to the whole world, and experienced across the whole world, the Holy Spirit is sent.

So the book of Acts is all about this happening because of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. And if you read Luke and Acts together, nothing much changes. It was the Spirit that filled John the baptiser, as was promised even before his birth. It was the Spirit that overshadowed Mary to give us the miracle of Jesus' conception. It was the Spirit that stirred up Elizabeth to bless Mary. It was the Spirit that enabled Zechariah to speak and prophesy about his son John. It was the Spirit that drew Simeon to the temple to meet the infant Jesus and proclaim that he had now seen salvation. It was the Spirit that anointed Jesus before his ministry when John baptised him in the Jordan.

So really, it's not at all surprising that when Jesus commissions his disciples to continue his ministry he tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon them to empower them. And so, at the start of the book of Acts, before all of this happens, we have Jesus saying to his disciples:

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. (Acts 1:8).

Much like what's recorded in the four gospels, the message and mission that Jesus proclaims here is wide-ranging. The funny thing here is that this is Jesus' response to the disciples asking if this was the time that God would restore the kingdom to Israel. Even after witnessing Jesus die on a cross and be raised to life again, they still thought that the Messiah was a political saviour for the nation of Israel. Jesus rejects both their desire for knowing when and their assumption that it's only for Israel.

When the kingdom comes is not our concern. What we do until it comes is: we are to be his witnesses. And enabled by the Holy Spirit, this would start in Jerusalem, start in the city that welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday and rejected him on Good Friday. It would start there in the middle of Israel's promised land, but it would not be contained there. It would spread through all the province of Judea, which is basically the area immediately surrounding Jerusalem, the land given to the tribe of Judah.

But next is Samaria. Note that the Samaritans were not of good terms with the Jews. They both were part of the original twelve tribes of Israel, but though many of the events of history had become separated. According to the Judeans, the Samaritans had not remained faithful to God's covenant, and so were excluded from the temple in Jerusalem, and regarded as inferior. And yet, this is the next step for proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. The gospel of Jesus is to go to Samaria. They too are included. And it doesn't end there.

The Holy Spirit will lead them to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. And this is how the book of Acts unfolds. The gospel message is proclaimed on the day of Pentecost to people from a huge list of nations. And some of the apostles travel far to preach that gospel to all sorts of people. There is a strong case in church history that Thomas made it to India and proclaimed Jesus there, long before any other missionaries were sent. And the books of Acts ends with Paul's ministry in the city of Rome, the capital of the Empire. And there's possibly a bit of hidden humour there. You may have heard the saying 'all roads lead to Rome', which at the height of the Roman empire was literally true. They loved making roads from Rome to the far reaches of the empire so their legions could march easily to wherever they were needed. And so if you were in Rome, as Paul was at the end of Acts, whichever road you took out would eventually lead you to a far corner of the empire, to the edge of the known world. Whichever way you go, you would reach the ends of the earth.

And that is what the church of Christ done. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the gospel message has been proclaimed and believed in every corner of the globe. There are many who do not yet believe, and so the mission continues, the proclamation continues. We too get to join Jesus in this mission to the whole world. It does look a little different at the moment, but the Holy Spirit is still with us in this mission. The promise Jesus made before his Ascension is still true. The Holy Spirit has been poured out, and so that the gospel message can be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. And the funny thing is, in this time where we can't gather as church, the message of Jesus Christ is more available than ever. So many churches are posting sermons online that are being viewed all across the world. The good news of the kingdom is reaching places that on a normal Sunday with normal church gatherings, it doesn't normally reach.

We praise God that whatever goes on through the course of human history, his Holy Spirit is still at work bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to those who need it. And we thank God that each of us is invited to play our little part in making that happen, whether it's within our own household, our own family, our local community, or somewhere much further away. So, thanks be to God that we have received the Holy Spirit, that the mission of the church continues, that the gospel is proclaimed, and that forgiveness is given to us and all who would believe. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.