

Preparing the Understanding for mission

Can a butterfly flapping its wings in Peking really create the beginnings of an atmospheric disturbance that will lead to storm force winds in America. Well that was the conclusion of Edward Lorenz the physicist who discovered the theory we call the butterfly effect.

Well certainly it is true if not for the weather then for the development and growth of the church from its very humble beginnings 2000 years ago. Like the ripple effect from a stone thrown into a calm pond so the events we will read about in the next couple of weeks – though taking place in a relatively insignificant part of the known world at that time -would create ripples that would convulse though all of our history till it grew to the major world religion.

But did the things we are reading about really happen? Can we trust the author of this book entitled the Acts of the Apostles?

Open up your bibles to the passage we read.

We know that the Author is Luke, who wrote Luke's gospel. This is the sequel to his first writings - we can see that in verse one

Acts 1:1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach

The name Theophilus means lover of God and is possible a code name but the person is almost certainly a high Roman official given that at the beginning of Luke's gospel he calls him by the title 'most excellent' (Lk 1:3). Theophilus has possibly sponsored Luke to write a historical account of Jesus life teaching and the spread of the church.

What do we know about Luke?

He is a Doctor

Colossians 4:14 ¹⁴ Our dear friend Luke, the Doctor, and Demas send greetings.

Companion of Paul

Acts 16:8-11 ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas...¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia

Can he be trusted?

Well, Sir William Ramsay geographer and regarded as perhaps the greatest archeologist who ever lived believe it was written 100 years after the events and therefore not by Luke and full of inaccuracies.

He undertook a geographical study based on that principle and found that, to the contrary, Luke's record was highly accurate and had to completely change his opinion – in conclusion he wrote

“Luke is an historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians...Luke’s history is unsurpassed in its trustworthiness”

If that is true then no wonder what he wrote about changed the course of human history and hopefully we will experience something of that in our own lives and the life of this fellowship as we look through it over the coming weeks.

In his former book Luke tells of what Jesus began to do and to teach (vs 1) now he is going to tell what Jesus is going to continue to do through the Apostles and the church that they would establish.

Luke starts by recapping – he reminds Theophilus and us his readers that Jesus is a risen savior

A Risen Saviour

The question I can’t help but ask myself is how were the disciples feeling at this point. Their teacher, the one they suspected to be the Messiah had died, they had three days of anguish and then there he was risen from the dead. The nail marks proving it was him. Surely there was a mix of emotions joy, confusion – it was beyond their wildest imaginations. But what now? Things were different. He came and went as never before. It was no hallucination as

many people saw him vs 3. He continued to teach vs 2, notice the reference to the Holy Spirit that will become more important as time goes on. And vs 4 he eats with them.

This man who had come to them and asked them to follow him. Whose commanding yet winsome presence had given them sufficient confidence to give up their livelihoods for him. Who had given them the privilege of being disciples of a Rabbi, something reserved in those days only for the brightest and best. Who had brought indescribable honour and privilege to their ordinary lives. Meaning, purpose, understanding, truth, light, freedom. Now risen. Without a doubt the Messiah, God come to rescue men and women from themselves and the ravages of sin and sinfulness. To bring new life and a new way of living and looking at things. This man was God! Not someone hidden in obscurity but revealed with clarity. No longer just Jesus the teacher from Nazareth but Jesus the Christ, the Messiah – the Son of God. And he was going to leave them again. Did they try to cherish these moments? Were they waiting for him to do something – vs 6 indicates that they were but his agenda will be very different from that which they expect.

From these first few verses we can see Luke wants us to be clear who Jesus is. It is on the premise of his identity that the whole of this book is written and is to be understood.

So if we are to understand the book of Acts then we must understand this. That as far as Luke the historian is concerned Jesus is God come in human form. Luke had spoken with those who were there. He traveled with the Apostles and saw God do many wonderful works through them.

For Luke then God is real. He living and active in the world and in the lives of ordinary people. Jesus Christ is the convincing proof of that (vs 3).

But he was not just real then. He is real now. Jesus began to teach and do, he then used the apostles to build his church, the people of God, so that he could continue his work through them – through you and I.

There is a reality of life and living to be found in God through Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit because Jesus Christ rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. It is a reality that is found by stepping out in faith. Faith in the God of the bible. In the God Luke believed in – in Jesus Christ the risen saviour and Lord and his ability to work in and through you and me. Do you believe that? Maybe some this morning are feeling a bit unsure in their faith at the moment. Ask God to help strengthen it in the coming weeks. It will not happen over night. God's work in our lives is firm and steady in its progress. It will require a preparation of the mind as well as the heart.

We, like those first followers of Jesus, too need to hear all about the Kingdom of God

Acts 1:3 He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

To hear the same Kingdom mandate

A kingdom Mandate

It is easy to assume that when the kingdom of God is mentioned Jesus is talking about heaven. The Kingdom of God is the place where God is king and of course that is true in heaven but his kingdom extends beyond there. It's borders reach out into our own time and it is located not in a geographical locale but spiritual one. It is located, not solely, but primarily in the hearts and lives of the followers of Jesus and in his church. Because when we become Christians somehow something of God comes to dwell in our hearts by his Holy Spirit. He comes in response to us to reign, be king, in and over our lives.

The disciples spent 40 days with Jesus under his instruction.

Acts 1:3 He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

He was preparing their minds for mission so they would understand what would happen and what to do.

The kingdom of God as we will see in weeks to come is closely associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1:3-5kingdom of God.... ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."

We can see that the first followers of Jesus were needing instruction

1:6 So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

They were still caught up in parochialism, small minded notions of what the kingdom of God was meant to be.

And so over a forty day period he opened their minds to the scriptures. Maybe to the foundations of the kingdom of God through Abraham and his offspring. From its origins in one nation and it's expansion to many nations, foretold by the prophets. Of the one who would come to be the eternal King of this Kingdom. Of this King who would bring a new agenda to the world. A new ability to follow God. Whose agenda would challenge the norms of every

age. A message of hope, purpose and meaning. A message to bring great joy. A message of forgiveness for the past and new possibilities for the future for every individual. A message of help, strength and guidance for daily living. A message of how to know God. A message that transforms the very heart of men and women. A message of love restored, new life and way of living, of judgement averted and eternal life. A message with a radical social agenda of caring for the uncared for, of love of enemies of love of truth and justice and the despising of lies and injustice. A message that speaks to our souls and tells it it is in darkness and need light. The light of the life transforming love of God poured out in Jesus Christ and by his Spirit.

It is a straightforward message. Not kowtowing to modern politically correct theories or pluralistic or secular agendas. It is the goodness of God manifest amongst men and women. And you and I are ambassadors of this Kingdom mandate and kingdom living.

But like the disciples we too need to be prepared in our understanding. That is why I cannot recommend the house groups highly enough. They will be following the sermon series on Acts for the next few weeks till Christmas. They meet fortnightly so that will be six times before Christmas. They meet to study the passage again, to have an opportunity to ask questions of the passage or sermon that there

was not opportunity to do on a Sunday and encourage one another in the faith.

The disciples met with the risen saviour, who spoke of the kingdom mandate and hey had to wait.

To quote Alexander MacLaren, one of my favourite preachers

“Waiting times are not wasted times. Over eagerness to rush into work is sure to end in defeat. Till we feel the power coming upon us we had better be still”

And the enabling power was promised to the disciples.

An enabling power promised

Acts 1:8 ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

You see, as Christians, we are not left to get on with it in our own strength. John records for us in chapter 14 of his gospel that Jesus promised that he would send a helper, a strengthener to be our constant companion on the journey. One who would minister God himself to us – his words, his ways, his comfort, his strength – the Holy Spirit.

The power has come and is coming. If you are a Christian here this morning then the Holy Spirit is an integral part of your life. Did you know that?

We are going to find out how the Holy Spirit works in and through us in the coming weeks. We are also going to see what happens when the kingdom of God, when the gospel is proclaimed in other cultures – cultures that believed that there is nothing beyond death, monotheistic, pluralistic, philosophical cultures and hedonistic cultures. Cultures no different from the one we live in today.

Our understanding will be prepared for mission. Jesus the Christ, the risen Saviour, has come and is coming, his kingdom mandate has come and is coming, the enabling power of the Holy Spirit has come and is coming here and he wants us to continue his mission.