

ACTS

OF THE HOLY SPIRIT



**A SERIES OF DAILY DEVOTIONS FOR LENT 2014
ON THE BOOK OF ACTS**

Acts 7: 55-56

**But Stephen,
full of the Holy Spirit,
looked up to heaven
and he saw Jesus
standing at the right side of God.**

This Lenten Devotion for 2014 booklet was produced by members of St Stephens Lutheran Church, Adelaide South Australia.

It is the fifth Lenten Devotion booklet that has been produced. Thank you to the 140 different people and couples who contributed to these booklets.

INTRODUCTION

The book of Acts has had a huge impact on me. To a large part it has formed my understanding of all the Christian community is and can be. From the beginning of the Christian community in Acts 2, through to Peter's growth toward an inclusive understanding of people in Acts 10, to Paul's positive interactions with popular culture in Acts 17 the book of Acts has taken me to places that my soul aches for.

This series of devotions is, in some ways, Acts in action. It has been a community sharing and a community building project. Each writer has given of her or himself in ways that enrich all of us. We can surely be thankful to God for such generosity of spirit.

Special thanks should also go to Yvonne and Colin for leading this project. It's a huge effort, but one that is well worth it.

Thanks also to each writer for his or her contribution. Each devotion offers us the opportunity to know a little more about its writer, and collectively all of the devotions present the diverse kaleidoscope of people and expressions that makes St Stephen's.

God bless you as you use these devotions throughout the Lenten season.

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ASH WEDNESDAY

Wednesday, 5th March 2014

Read Acts 1:1-11

YOUR KINGDOM COME

The actions and words of Jesus were only the beginning. Here we have a personal communication, across 2,000 years, from a person we call Luke. We could even take the name Theophilus = 'lover of God' for ourselves. Jesus instructed his disciples personally, and presented himself to them repeatedly after his suffering. But when he finally left them, they were not to stand around looking heavenward, any more than they were to look for Jesus in his grave.

We are in the same situation as every other Christian disciple. We have been chosen and instructed by the Holy Spirit, and through baptism with the Holy Spirit are empowered to be Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth. The gospel story is set in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. Since then, the message of the kingdom of God has spread through Christian witness into Syria and England – most of the Roman Empire, which at the time of the book of Acts could be described as 'the ends of the earth'. Now the kingdom of God is preached also in China, North America, Australia, South America and Africa. This is evidence of the vitality of this message of the kingdom of God.

*Our Father in heaven,
may your kingdom come among us also.
Teach us your will for us
that your kingdom may come,
with the love of Jesus Christ
and the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

2ND DAY IN LENT

Thursday, 6th March 2014

Read Acts 1:12-26

JUDAS IS REPLACED

God's Justice

The bloody death of Judas always reminds me of the old Mutual Community ad in which a kid claims that a crocodile came up and “ripped my guts out... my legs went that way, and my head went that way”. There's a certain amount of childish, bloodthirsty glee in his fate. This is classic retribution, meted out by a vengeful God upon the wicked. The version in Matthew 27 is perhaps more acceptable to the modern mind. At least there, Judas understands his sin, is contrite, and causes his own death; it's worth noting, though, that suicide would still be regarded as a mortal sin in traditional Christian morality.

It's interesting to note how his replacement is chosen. Once two possible candidates have been determined, the result is drawn by lot – essentially left up to providence, or to God. So both, this election, and the death of Judas, are decided by God in this chapter.

A world in which everyone gets their just desserts – is this comforting? Terrifying? Is this how our world works? How do we explain it, then, when bad things happen to good people, or the wicked remain unpunished?

*Dear God,
Help us to accept your grace, on ourself and on others.
Help us not to judge.
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us,
Teach us to be your faithful witnesses. Amen.*

3RD DAY IN LENT

Friday, 7th March 2014

Read Acts 2:1-21

GOD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS

As a child, I recall that the Pentecost story really became so alive for me. I imagined the rushing wind, the apostles with flames (tongues of fire) on their heads and the garbled conversation of their many languages! So each year, when the Church celebrates Pentecost with all the colourful red adornments, I again relive the scene!

At that time also there were 'God-fearing Jews' from every nation staying in Jerusalem who heard the sound and so they came together in utter bewilderment at what was happening. Peter stood up and addressed the people encouraging them to listen carefully, as these men were not drunk as some thought. He reiterated what the prophet Joel had spoken of that in the last days God would pour out his Spirit on all people from all nations. As a result the disciples were empowered to go out into the streets of Jerusalem and began preaching to the crowds gathered for the festival. They preached with boldness and vigour, and by a miracle of the Holy Spirit, they spoke in the native languages of the people present. Hard to believe isn't it but that's the power of God.

And what a message - that 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'. What an unbelievable promise to us all!

Dear Lord, help us to ponder on the Pentecost story more seriously and instil in us the desire, the boldness and the vigour to share the Good News with everybody. Amen.

4TH DAY IN LENT

Saturday, 8th March 2014

Read Acts 2:22-42

HOW WELL DO WE KNOW JESUS OF NAZARETH?

Who's speaking/witnessing in this reading? Peter!

Remember Peter's answer to Jesus' question, 'Who do you say I am?' You are God's Messiah.' (Luke 9:20)

On another occasion when Jesus, the Messiah, made it very clear that he (Jesus) would be put to death, but three days later would rise to life, this message didn't impress Peter, and he told Jesus so. Jesus corrected Peter, not mincing any words. Peter's thinking was under Satan's influence. (Mark 8:31-33)

On the night when Jesus was taken prisoner, suffering and death were in the air. It was scary. Peter was worried for Jesus, he was afraid. The man who said, 'You are the Messiah', didn't have the 'the guts' to say, 'I am one of his followers!' Three times he said that he wasn't a follower – Mark 9:30, 14:68-72.

Now keep your Bible open at Acts 2:22-42:

Look at what Peter (also the other 11 apostles) witness to:

Verses 22-24 – God's plan being carried out;

Verses 25-36 – one of the prophecies about the Lord, the Messiah.

What was foretold took place.

Verse 37 – Have we been disturbed by the report of these events so that we asked, 'What shall we do?' or similar questions?

Verse 38-40 – What's been the answer?

Have we experienced the call and answer – repentance, baptism, the reception and on going dwelling of the Holy Spirit?

Read verses 41, 42. There's a 'transformation'. Does verse 42 describe some of the activities we are involved in, because the Holy Spirit has convinced us that Jesus of Nazareth 'is the one that God has made Lord and Messiah.' – verse 36

Holy Spirit, enable us to know for sure that Jesus is the one that God has made Lord and Messiah, and that we witness to the relationship we have with Jesus. Amen.

5TH DAY IN LENT

Sunday, 9th March 2014

Read Acts 3:1-10

THE CRIPPLED BEGGAR

There was a man crippled from birth, who was carried to the temple gate everyday to beg from those going through the gate. I presume his leg muscles would have been atrophied. He was reliant on family or friends for mobility and location change. How did he prepare his meals, go to the toilet and keep clean? It can be humiliating and embarrassing to be so dependent on other people. He would have been well known in the community, but he did not even take a proper look at the people passing by. Did he feel sad or hopeless?

When Peter and John were passing and the crippled man begged for money from them, Peter demanded that he look at them. Peter wanted the beggar's full attentions so the beggar could acknowledge who was healing him. Maybe the beggar knew of Jesus or had seen him enter the temple before He was crucified. Anyway Peter made it quite clear when he said, 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.'

I am amazed at the beggar's faith to take Peter's hand when he had never walked before. I am filled with joy when I imagine him jumping and praising God. I question why this man was chosen not another person. Was it because he was so well known in the community and no one could doubt that he was genuinely crippled and it was a true miracle of God? Why aren't we all physically or mentally healed when we ask God for it? Only God has the answers to so many questions I have. I do know that God loves us all and sees us as whole and heals us through Jesus. He can use us as His light in this life.

Dear Lord, thank you for all the healing and miracles that still happen today. Help us to accept the things we can't change and to use them for your purpose and glory as well. In Jesus' name. Amen.

6TH DAY IN LENT

Monday, 10th March 2014

Read Acts 3:11-26

GOD'S FORGIVENESS

In response to the people's amazement at the healing of the lame man, Peter took the opportunity to again tell the story, of what God has done.

God sent Jesus. He is the awaited Messiah. He was holy and good. He suffered and died. God raised him up. All things will be made new.

This was an offensive message to the Jews and nonsense to the Gentiles.

The Jews saw themselves as God's very own nation. God would send them the Messiah who would be made known to their people as a whole nation. The Messiah would bring peace and blessings for them all and for their descendants.

This Jesus didn't fit their criteria. In their ignorance they rejected him.

Jesus had, had this discussion many times with the Jewish authorities. In John 8 Jesus said to them, 'If God really were your Father, you would love me, because I came from God and now I am here. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to listen to my message.'

They did not hear God's word of repentance and forgiveness. They did not have faith in Jesus' name.

Do we hear God's word? Are we ignorant? Do we understand what Jesus is saying? I know that I have very little understanding of what Jesus is saying. But I do know that Jesus has given me faith. I know that Jesus loves me. He has forgiven me.

God loves everybody. He wants all people to respond to him. He offers all people who repent, forgiveness. They either believe in him or they reject him.

All we can do is respond to God. In our response to what he has done for us, we tell others about him. God uses us. We do not know the impact our lives have on other people.

We pray Lord Jesus, that you will use us, so that your offer of love and forgiveness will be made known to others around us. Amen.

7TH DAY IN LENT

Tuesday, 11th March 2014

Read Acts 4:1-31

BEAUTIFUL BUTTERFLY

‘Ohh butterfly,’ that’s what I would say when I see one. Watching its beautiful wings, flapping elegantly. I could not have imagined that this butterfly was before a caterpillar, and how it once almost became a bird’s breakfast. How it miraculously survived pesticides, how it hid its pupa safely from predators, waiting patiently to transform into a butterfly. Sure is a rough life.

In Acts chapter 4, Peter and John were arrested for healing people and teaching people about Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. They were questioned: ‘By what power or what name did you do this?’ ‘In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth...’ they replied with great confidence and courage, filled with the Holy Spirit. Surely the Sanhedrin did not see that coming, not from the mouth of some ‘unschooled, ordinary men’. How could these men have thousands of believers? Unlike us, they not only see the beautiful wings, flapping elegantly, but ‘they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.’

Have you been with Jesus? Peter and John had lived with Jesus, had walked with Jesus. Despite the hardships that they went through, Jesus had it all under control. Jesus had filled their life with hope and fed them with the word of God every day. They are different now, even when Jesus is not around physically, no longer an ordinary man but man who has been on the road of grace. I believe when Peter and John answered the Sanhedrin with much confidence and courage, not because they had been with Jesus but they truly know that Jesus is with them.

*As I come in empty handed and be rewarded in You.
Bring me to walk with You, to walk Your path,
Like you have walked your apostles, in your road of grace,
So that we live with great confidence and courage everyday for Your Glory and honour,
And when others see us, they see Your beauty.
In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

Read Acts 4:32-37

THE BELIEVERS SHARE THEIR POSSESSIONS

We read in this passage of the power of the Holy Spirit as it worked amongst the early believers. Not even threats by the rulers discouraged them in their new and emboldened faith. So moved were they that they began to pray and worship in one heart and mind. As a great united family in Christ, they recognised the needs of others and were moved to share their possessions with them. We read also that some even sold their land and houses and presented that money to be distributed to the needy with the result that not one amongst them was left wanting.

We, too, must recognise that all that we have, we have been given – that is, given by the Grace of God. It is so easy to believe that we have worked hard and have every right to hold on to our possessions; yet, there are so many who have not been so fortunate and for whom life is a constant struggle. Surely, we must follow the example of these early believers and gladly share what we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ supporting them with both hope and prayer.

Thank you, Father for all that we have received through your Grace, not only the promise of eternal life, but all that is necessary to support our daily life. Help and encourage us to be generous in our support of the work of your church and to those in need. Amen.

9TH DAY IN LENT

Thursday, 13th March 2014

Read Acts 5:1-16

TROUBLE IN THE CHURCH

Have we ever heard of trouble in the church?

There are many Church leaders, Pastors and Christians today who are working tirelessly in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. So it was in the early church as the Apostles shared the blessings of Jesus as their risen Saviour. With the Apostles leadership and example the church grew, charity and fellowship was practised. But trouble amongst members also happened. Although Satan was defeated by Christ at the cross, he was and still is actively trying to make believers stumble.

Such was the lot of Ananias and Sapphira. They were not stingy. After all it was theirs to do with as they wished. They lied! Even the early Church had imperfect Christians. Dishonesty, greed and covetousness are destructive in the Church and all lying is a hindrance to our relationship with God.

The following verses show clearly how beautifully the Church was functioning and growing with the Apostles.

What makes Christianity attractive today?

Is it the programmes and good speakers? Is it beautiful churches and great facilities for fellowship? Or is it the forgiveness and grace offered to us sinners all.

The early Christians were attracted by expressions of God's power at work, the generosity, sincerity and unity of the members.

Have our standards slipped? God wants believers in His Church today because they demonstrate the power of the Saviour, who was crucified, died and rose again to be with us His followers.

Heavenly Father, help us to be more zealous in doing your Kingdom work, showing understanding and love, just as Jesus taught the Apostles. Amen.

Read Acts 5:17-42**OBEYING GOD RATHER THAN HUMAN BEINGS**

After the second arrest of the apostles, when brought before the Council, they refused to stop teaching in Jesus' name. Peter said 'We must obey God rather than any human authority'. The members of the Council were enraged and wanted them put to death. This human intolerance of others who have different beliefs than our own hasn't changed much over the centuries.

Persecution and at its extreme, the desire to kill those who offend, still exists.

Gamaliel, a member of the council, cautioned them against this action. Referring to this new Jesus movement, he said, 'If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail, but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them - in that case you may even be found fighting against God!' This tolerant man's speech swayed the council into releasing the apostles. If Gamaliel had not acted on God's guidance, the early church would have experienced a devastating setback.

Despite receiving a flogging before they were released, the apostles did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. Throughout this whole experience they relied on God's guidance through the Holy Spirit, and on one occasion the direction of an angel of the Lord.

God, help me to see others through your eyes. You were prepared to send your own son Jesus to this world, to carry their sins as well as mine. As the apostles, may I also rely on your guidance in my life. Amen.

11TH DAY IN LENT

Saturday, 15th March 2014

Read Acts 6:1–15

LORD, STAND NEXT TO ME

Many, (too many) organisations struggle because everyday business and management issues keep cropping up, all the organisation's energies get diverted to deal with these issues, but the issues never seem to go away. Board meetings are spent discussing only these 'critical' issues which seem to become the purpose of, and de-facto mission for, the organisation. While sitting in the Board meetings I feel I am supporting somebody's system - not a mission.

This reading shows that human nature has not changed over the last 2000 years. But those early Christians acted decisively and separated the day-to-day from the mission. The outcome was, the people who want to be involved with the day-to-day were, and those who wanted to separate off to do mission did. And both groups were pleased with the outcome.

While there is a second set of characters in the second part of the reading (the arrest of Stephen), the human story continues. Those leaving behind the day-to-day are out solely doing mission. However, these people too become absorbed by their need for others to deal with what they see as important - this time 'mission important'. The reading tells us they are so absorbed with the importance of their view of mission they refused to see and accept other missions even when it is the Lord (through the person of Stephen in this case) literally staring them in the face.

In governing bureaucracies, the figure of speech used to describe one person's planned vengeful act of bureaucratic behaviour against another (often for reasons of mission) is 'the knives are out'. In this reading there was no figure of speech, it was the stones that were out for Stephen – literally – and all for reasons of mission.

This chapter captures the difficulties human beings have with the organisations they create. The difficulty where the day-to-day dominates and overwhelms the mission and mission advocated on its own becomes corrupted and loses its day-to-day perspective.

I thank Jesus for coming to me personally through the Spirit and not through some human organisation.

Lord, thank you for standing next to me so that the world can't. Amen

12TH DAY IN LENT

Sunday, 16th March 2014

Read Acts 7:1-53

THE STONING OF STEPHEN

The previous chapter ended with Stephen before the Sanhedrin council facing accusations that he spoke blasphemy against the temple and the Law.

In order to make his defence, to unveil the fact that his accusers were fighting God, and to preach Christ, Stephen rapidly and succinctly outlines Jewish history. Every fact cited has a point.

Verses 1-8 cite God's dealings with Abraham:

The call to leave Mesopotamia, the sojourn in Canaan, the promise of possessions to his descendants, the covenant of circumcision and Abraham's descendants and the twelve patriarchs.

Verses 9-16 outline the Patriarchs sojourn in Egypt:

Joseph was sold into Egypt but becomes the governor, Jacob and his sons move there during the famine and the patriarchs who were buried in Canaan.

Verses 17-36 retell God's deliverance of Israel by Moses:

The history starts with the children of Israel becoming slave in Egypt, the work of Moses raised by the Pharaoh's daughter, the killing of an Egyptian but he is despised by his brethren, so he flees to Midian where he lives for forty years until the Lord appears in a burning bush. Moses then returns to Egypt and brings the Israelites into the wilderness.

Verses 37-43 detail Israel's rebellion against God and Moses:

Moses is the person: Who said God would raise another prophet like him, who spoke to the Angel on Mount Sinai, who received the living oracles to give to Israel whom the fathers would not obey but rejected.

Israel is the nation: Who turned back to Egypt in their hearts, pressured Aaron to make the golden calf.

Verses 44-50 outline God's true tabernacle:

The father's or Israel had a tabernacle of witness in the wilderness built according to the patterns shown to Moses and brought into the Promised Land by Joshua.

They also had a temple asked for by David who found favour before God and built by his son Solomon

Yet the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands for heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool, his hands made all things.

In verses 51-53 Stephen charges the council of resisting the Holy Spirit just as their fathers did. He tells them that their fathers persecuted and killed prophets and hence they have killed the Just One – they received the law but did not keep it.

It can be seen that Stephen makes no attempt to defend himself through the telling of Jewish history culminating with his insults about them being stiff-necked, and with their lack of faith in the Holy Spirit similar to the uncircumcised. His taunts here are totally irrelevant to his predicament and intentionally inflammatory.

Raymond Brown finds the scene involving Stephen's trial and death matches closely the death in Luke's Gospel and says we can never verify the existence and martyrdom of Stephen.

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The controversial Robert Eisenman draws parallels between the trial, vision and execution of James to the trial, vision and stoning of Stephen in Acts. He suggests that the martyrdom of either James or Stephen is derivative and did not really occur. It is suggested that the real purpose was to reveal Paul to the readers as a totally repugnant person, before his conversion.

Dear Lord we ask that you help us to understand your words as given to us in scripture. Lord give us a clearer vision of your greatness and of your love for us as we see the story of your gift of the life and death of your son Jesus. Come Holy Spirit, fill me today and lead me in the truth, so that my life may bring glory to my Lord. Amen.

13TH DAY IN LENT

Monday, 17th March 2014

Read Acts 7: 54 -60 and 8:1-3

COME HOLY SPIRIT

I keep wondering about the nature of God. Mostly it is not at all clear - just as I am not at all clear about who I am. But I must have some preconceived ideas about the nature of God because the ideas just jump out when things happen and I have my “that is not God doing that because God is just not like that!” reaction. So, often I describe God by who he is not rather than by who he is.

In this (and the previous) reading, the Jews were experiencing a particularly strong “that is not God doing that because God is just not like that!” reaction. For them what was happening was an absolute anathema. Both Stephen's teaching about God and his description of God coming to him in the vision was an abomination to them and they turned on Stephen and destroyed him with an equal amount of abomination.

It is sometimes said our incapacity to grasp the nature of God comes about because we are tainted by our sin, and, as sin separates us from knowing God, how can we know how God acts and whether it is God acting. However, it could be that our incapacity to know the nature of God might go deeper. Adam and Eve, even in their sinless state, became fatally confused about who God is even though they had, had the opportunity to get to know him as he walked with them and talked with them each day in the cool of the afternoon. It seems like we have an innate incapacity to know the nature of God.

And so, central to this reading (and to our lives) is the Spirit. The reading shows how it is through the Spirit at we see, hear and know the nature of God. The reading also brings home the effect of people not accepting the Spirit and the actions and revelations of the Spirit. Through our rejection, the work of the Spirit is simply killed off.

I was in the middle of writing this devotion and had a 'light bulb' experience during the epistle reading at church. Part of the reading was 1 Cor 2:10-16 (Please read it now – it says it all.).

Quotes include: - “It was to us that God made known his secrets through his Spirit”. “The Spirit searches everything, even the hidden depths of God's purposes.” “Who knows the mind of the Lord? Who is able to (make judgements) and give him advice?”

Paul concludes in verse 16 “We, however, have the mind of Christ” and in this context implies we should consider ourselves blessed and should be satisfied with 'the mind of Christ' and not seek out the mind of God.

Come, Holy Spirit. Come. Amen.

14TH DAY OF LENT

Tuesday, 18th March 2014

Read Acts 8:4-25

GOSPEL INTO SAMARIA

Acts 8:14. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria.

This verse may not have any special meaning to those who read it at first. But when you understand the background and the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans, it carries great meaning. Jews were hostile to the Samaritans. To them the Samaritans were heathen. There are no amicable dealings between the two societies. In Acts 8:4-25, it describes the spreading of the word of the Gospel into the Samaritan society. Philip is one of the preachers that headed towards Samaria (Acts 8:1). During the outbreak of the persecution, Philip, like many others, scattered and preached the word of God. Acts 8:14 indicates that, with the same belief in Christ, the Jews and the Samaritans are able to overcome their hostility. This signifies the advancement of uniting the Jews and the Gentiles in Christ, despite the difficulties that lay ahead.

Reading these bible verses and understanding their meaning reminds me of a picture I saw on Facebook. In the picture, there are three people on a subway - a white mum carrying a baby in her arms, she has her back towards a black guy, her baby reaches out to grab the black guy's hand. There are so many differences in this world, differences between religions, cultures, nations, background and even individuals. This has led us to seeing the world and their people with "coloured-glasses", carrying prejudice when we view them. This is not only towards non-believers but also within the believers. However, we are not born with it.

In Acts 2:44, it says "All the believers were together...". We all longed for friendly interaction within our congregation, establishing a relationship that allows us to help and support each other on the path with the Lord. It is fundamental for all believers to maintain relationship and fellowship with other believers on their journey in Christianity. When we have fellowship and prayers together, our heart is becoming one in Christ. One of the methods of God unfolding His love before our eyes, is through the interpersonal relationship between us and other believers. When we are confronted by struggles of our lives, our friends will help us up (Ecclesiastes 4:10).

Our heavenly Father, bless all who believe in your name. Lord, we are gracious for you bring us together in your love. Lord, please help us to be one in you, to live in harmony on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

15TH DAY OF LENT

Wednesday, 19th March 2014

Read Acts 8:26-40

PHILIP'S LEGACY TO ETHIOPIA

Philip's complete trust in God and His plan for Philip's life are very much in evidence in this text. Philip was one of the first missionaries to leave Jerusalem to spread the Good News as commanded by Jesus. Philip was different from the other missionaries because he went to places such as Samaria, to preach to non Jews. Many people were baptised after hearing Philip's preaching about Jesus. How appropriate then that he was sent by God to talk to the Ethiopian eunuch. Sitting with the eunuch, explaining in a language easy to understand, the text from Isaiah about how Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies, and then this encounter ultimately leading to the eunuch being baptised. Who knows what affect this testimony, from a person in a high position in his own country, had on the entire nation of Ethiopia?

It is sometimes difficult for us to figure out how we are, or how we can be used to spread the Good News of Jesus in our every day lives. Philip's life of evangelism reminds us that we are to strive every day to be a faithful follower of Christ, and by doing so, in our neighbourhood, we can show, with the help of the Holy Spirit, our commitment to Jesus.

Heavenly Father, guide us in our every day lives so that we can be a Christ like example to those around us. Amen.

16TH DAY IN LENT

Thursday, 20th March 2014

Read Acts 9:1-31

THE GREAT ENTHUSIAST

Saul was enthusiastic. He knew what was right (his belief) and what was wrong (the Way of the Lord). Saul was so enthusiastic about his beliefs that he had permission to go to Damascus and arrest followers of the Lord and to take them back to Jerusalem.

But God had other ideas. God had chosen Saul to bring God's name 'to gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel'. (v 15) Saul's conversion was dramatic – flashes of light, a voice from heaven.

The conversion was transformational and complete. Saul now preached that Jesus was the Messiah with even more enthusiasm than he had preached against him. The church grew.

What a comforting message for us today – that despite our best (or worst) efforts, the Holy Spirit is not limited by our so-called strengths or weaknesses. Christianity is here to stay.

The church of the future might not look like the church of today. The forms and practices may change. The Holy Spirit is not bound by our perceptions or our traditions. God's love, the core of our faith and our hope, supersedes the most challenging and sceptical attitudes and can be expressed in ways that may not yet have been invented.

*All powerful God, open our eyes to see the signs of your presence in the world.
Help us to encourage and celebrate the diversity that is your true kingdom.
Amen.*

17TH DAY OF LENT

Friday, 21st March 2014

Read Acts 9:32-43

NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE

'Nothing is impossible.' I have thought this through many times, and possibly you have too. A positive thought of course, but the answer is 'with God by my side', all is possible.

The traumas and disappointments of everyday living can be turned into something positive if you trust in our Lord and Saviour, and seek his help. I would find it a difficult old world if I did not ask for God's guidance and help in every thing I do. Surprise, surprise, God has shown me a better way to overcome travesties and disappointments. I call them 'miracles, and so often when we ask the Lord for guidance and help leave your mind open for the answer, you will be surprised how bad can turn to good, as shown in the above text too.

Your friends, relatives and strangers around you, can be helped by you love and support, through prayer to Jesus.

The homeless, unemployed, even in our families, suffer much through no fault of their own. Give them you interest love, support and care, through prayer to our Lord. I am sure you will then find ways to help. Do not despair; God's miracles are all around us. Trust in the Lord and he will share his love with you.

*The Lord is in our midst;
Let us never fear,
The Lord our God, the mighty One
Always will be near. Amen.*

18TH DAY IN LENT

Saturday, 22nd March 2014

Read Acts 10:1-33

PRAYERS AND GIFTS

Prayers and gifts come up as a memorial offering before God.

This is a lovely angelic message that Cornelius received after years of devoted prayers and generous giving. He is an Italian Regiment, yet he is a God-fearing man. Prayers in our devotional times, services, fellowship groups sound redundant sometimes, yet not so in the eyes of the heavenly creatures. Moreover, more than morning and evening prayers, for which we are quite familiar with, Cornelius did the afternoon prayer!! Cornelius answered: "Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. (v. 30) A good guess is that perhaps due to his duty, he managed or squeezed an afternoon time slot for his prayer. No matter what time, we pray whenever we feel we need it and whenever we feel it's convenient.

Peter's humble response to Cornelius' misplaced reverence.

Peter did not give a lecture about idolatry or improper movement/gestures made by Cornelius when he met Peter. Although Cornelius, in reverence, knelt before him, Peter immediately made a humble, biblical response to Cornelius. What an apostle!!

It is common some attendees may act improperly or make misplaced movements, in our service. Church frequenters can learn from Peter that just a smile, a humble mimic, and a loving nod will be sufficient. But not a contemptuous stare!!

We pray that we live our lives, offer our prayers and receive our gifts with humility. Amen

19TH DAY IN LENT

Sunday, 23rd March 2014

Read Acts 10:34-11:1-18

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S PRESENCE

God is really doing His work; so let us be prepared to realize the fullest sense of the truth.

Peter knows 'God does not show favouritism', but hasn't realized its fullest sense yet, until now. The fullest sense comes when he observes and sees through all God's doing around his life journey. He is not hesitant to say, "I now realize how true it is that God..." (v.34). His outspokenness is inspired by God's doing: note the words like "You know the message God sent to ... announcing the good news ... what has happened ... how God anointed ... and how he went around... of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem.

During the Lent, we thank God for everything he has done for us. During the Lord's Supper, the rite is so sense-full that we have the fullest sense of God's doings; the taste, the smell, the eating, the drinking, the Word of God in, with, and under the bread and wine. Can we say that "Now I realize how true it is that the Lamb of God is slaughtered for our sins"?

God is really changing our deep rooted, inherited opinion, so let us be prepared to recognise the clearest sense of the will of God.

The sheet, came down by its four-corners, is full of four-footed animals, and through this, God wants to change Peter's long-inherited opinion. Yet Peter is not ready. Three times, up and down... woops... woops... woops!

During our daily devotion, or weekly service, are we prepared to receive the new sheet that contains God's perspective and command? "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." Finally, Peter got it. He met three men who had been sent to him from Caesarea, and preached the gospel with the Holy Spirit's presence, a mini-Pentecost for the Gentiles.

Lord, help us to be prepared to truly realise, recognise your presence, your doings, and your wills in our earthly journey, so that we can be changed, and people can be blessed. Amen.

20TH DAY IN LENT

Monday, 24th March 2014

Read Acts 11:19-30

THE ANTIOCH MOMENT

Stephen's death by stoning was the impetus for the new believers to flee persecution and go to Antioch. There, many Jews, Gentiles and pagans were moved by the grace of the Holy Spirit and turned to follow Jesus. This is a pivotal moment when Barnabas became excited at what was happening at Antioch and brought Paul back there after his road to Damascus experience. These two men formed a strong supportive core as they taught and lived with the congregation in Antioch. They were good for each other as they began to spread the faith. This year together gave them both foundations to go out later and convert people: Barnabas, other Jews and Paul, Gentiles all over the Empire.

The reading tells us that it is here in Antioch where the disciples first got the name of Christians. Their concern for well being of all people is shown in their contributions to people affected by famine, with Paul and Barnabas taking food parcels to fellow Christians in Judea. The intense study, collaboration and growth of the new Christians in Antioch was not just about the community's own needs – they took practical, real steps to assist people outside their flock in need.

Help us, gracious God, to live our lives as 21st century Christians, learning from the model of Barnabas and Paul in Antioch two thousand years on. Open our eyes to your bounteous spirit with us as we support each other in faith and tell others of your good news in our lives. Sustain our hearts and bodies as we respond to people in need where we find them. Amen.

21ST DAY IN LENT

Tuesday, 25th March 2014

Read Acts 12:1-19

RHODA, BEARER OF GOOD NEWS

How do you respond when all seems dark and hopeless?

This passage begins by describing a dark time for the followers of Jesus. Herod is on the rampage again. James has been killed, and Peter has been arrested and is in prison. The believers would have been justified in thinking that Peter, too, would be killed. Fear and hopelessness would seem entirely appropriate.

The community responds by gathering together in the house of Mary and praying. Maybe it is because they are praying so earnestly that they don't believe the servant girl Rhoda when she comes in to announce that she has recognised Peter's voice; he had knocked and was standing at the gate. Of course it doesn't help that Rhoda was so excited that she has forgotten to let Peter in. He is still out there in the street at risk of being re arrested.

Like the announcement by the women of the resurrection of Jesus, the announcement of Peter's amazing escape comes in an unexpected way, through a person easily dismissed as unreliable, and in circumstances the believers simply couldn't imagine.

We can be grateful that despite our doubts and slowness to respond we have a God who comes to us in unexpected ways and through situations beyond our limited imaginations. The Rhodas of this world bring good news. We can accompany them out and open the gates to the unexpected mystery of God.

God of love and surprises. Be with us in our darkness, help us to pray and to listen and to look for you in the unexpected, trusting in your love for us. Amen.

Read Acts 12:20-25

THE WORD CONTINUES TO GROW

When I read this text about Herod, I was reminded of the story of the successful rich man who built new barns to store his massive food supplies. He then decided that he could put up his feet for life and rest on the results of his hard work. He was self-sufficient, with no need of God and no compassion for his hungry neighbours. Little did he know, that that night God would require his proud, complacent soul.

Herod is this man magnified. He is aggressively trying to stifle God's mission of grace carried out through the disciples. He has respect for no one – proud of his own achievements and power, he destroys anyone who speaks the truth. Herod accepts the mock adulation of those at his mercy, allowing them to compare him to God. Suddenly it is as if the poison within destroys him, and Herod dies.

However, despite the efforts of Herod, nothing, not human complacency, pride, or corrupt and ruthless political power could prevent the spread of the liberating message of the Gospel. The offer of forgiveness and new life with God continued to be spoken. The message of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus continued to germinate faith into the hearts of new believers. And many, wooed by the witness of the apostles, believed. Many turned from the wisdom of the world to put their faith in the foolishness of God's action in the cross of Christ.

Lord God, you hold our lives, body and soul in your loving hands. Especially when things seem either too tough or too easy, help us to keep our eyes on you, rather than being overawed by our own or others' power and wisdom. Loved by you, liberate us to share your love and message of hope with those around us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

23RD DAY IN LENT

Thursday, 27th March 2014

Read Acts 13:1-13

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Elymas was a sorcerer or magician in the court of the proconsul at Paphos in Cyprus, Sergius Paulus. A proconsul was a governor of a province in the Roman Republic appointed for one year by the senate and therefore Sergius Paulus was a person of major importance in the local area.

Sergius Paulus sent for Saul and Barnabas because he wanted to hear the Word of God. Elymas tried to prevent this happening, fearing perhaps that it might weaken his position in the court.

The Holy Spirit, through Saul, intervened and struck Elymas temporarily blind. Most of us have probably not had such a graphic demonstration of God's power as Sergius Paulus received in order to believe.

Elymas was a Jew and therefore of the same repressed nationality as Saul and Barnabas. But he was employed by the foreign power. He did not want his foreign employer hearing from his fellow Jews about God. So he became a barrier, which the Holy Spirit crashed through.

Lord, help us not to be barriers to others hearing about you. Amen.

24TH DAY IN LENT

Friday, 28th March 2014

Read Acts 13:4-52

GRASP IT WITH BOTH HANDS

Sometimes it is so easy to miss the different and varied opportunities that are constantly thrown in our direction. If these chances are ignored and not grasped with enthusiasm they can be lost completely.

Paul and Barnabus were in the Jewish meeting place in Antioch on the Sabbath. One of the leaders stood up, "Friends, if you have anything to say that will help the people, please say it." (v.15). The worshippers meeting there were desperately seeking something more; new insights and further clarification of their Biblical knowledge and understanding.

Paul immediately grasped the opportunity presented. He went through the history of God's guidance, help and protection for His chosen people. He gave leadership through the desert, the gift of the rich land of Canaan and finally the promise of the Messiah from David's family who would come to save the people of Israel. God had now kept His promise to us.

As Paul and Barnabus were leaving, the people begged them to come back the next Sabbath and say more of these same things. We also need to hear the message again and again. We must not look at the Sunday service as just a repetition of last week but a real opportunity to consistently recharge our batteries, to hear more about God's great plan in our lives and his wondrous gift in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is a gift that we can never merit or deserve but one that opens the gate to eternal life.

Dear Lord, it is only in hearing and listening to your Word that we gain a deeper understanding of the amazing love that you have for us. Help us to repeatedly grasp the chances of hearing your Word spoken to us and living it out in our daily lives. Amen.

Read Acts 14

THE WORD OF THE LORD CONTINUES

In this chapter Paul and Barnabas travel to Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Antioch, Perga and Attalia. The pattern has been set. They travel to a new town. They go to the synagogue to preach to the believers. They speak boldly. Trouble is stirred up. They flee to the next town. They go to the synagogue in.....

In Iconium, they get stoned. In Lystra they healed a crippled man, and then they were assumed to be Gods, only then to be dragged out of town to be left for dead.

From then on they are better received. They were able to strengthen and encourage the believers to remain true to their faith. The Good news was preached and many disciples were won.

God is establishing his church.

The work of planting new churches and strengthening existing ones has never ended.

We have evidence of that right here in our congregation. We have the development of our Chinese congregation, our African congregation, our evening worship service encouraging young adults; these all complementing our established English worship services and our Estonian congregation.

The LCA Board for Mission, now known as Mission International has developed an appeal to the church community to support the new mission outreaches that are happening throughout Australia.

God is bringing new neighbours from Africa to our Lutheran congregations - from Toowoomba and Woodridge in QLD, to the northern suburbs of Adelaide, and to rural and urban Victoria. The LCA has launched a nationwide 'African Ministry Appeal' to make sure that we can support the ministry efforts. The appeal will help building church plants, supporting lay workers and Special Ministry Pastors, and will care for the special needs of these people.

Our international brothers and sisters are a wonderful blessing given to us by God.

Dear Lord Jesus, strengthen and grow our new worshipping congregations here at St Stephens. Bless us as we fellowship together. Amen.

26TH DAY IN LENT

Sunday, 30th March 2014

Read Acts 15:1-21

RUMOURS AND MORE RUMOURS

Early Christians from Judea came to Antioch wanting to use old customs that had to be met before Gentile believers could join the church. They were teaching that unless they were circumcised in the custom of Moses that they couldn't be saved. As the apostles explained it is a free gift not a series of rituals.

All those leaders met with the apostles and they debated and discussed scriptural arguments, experiences and testimonies to show that those conditions weren't part of membership. We can't put conditions or standard on others to join the church: 'follow the commandments', 'read the Bible', 'dress in a certain way'.

We know that God looks at the heart not just at our actions as they can give a false impression to an outsider. If we believe wholeheartedly we would want others to know the joy of belonging to Him. So he has chosen us to help to spread the Good News.

It is often easier for us to help a neighbour who is sick, do errands for them, help someone who has had a fall get comfort, invite a new neighbour in for a coffee and so the list goes on.

We should encourage others to join but it has to be of the person's free will. People sometimes are in a situation when they are looking to fill that empty hole in life. To show love, care and compassion can go a long way in showing God's love to others.

We as Christians will always strive to follow God's law and strive to let the Holy Spirit shine in our loves. Membership is a free gift from God out of His love and mercy.

Heavenly Father give us an open mind to help others around us and to grasp opportunities to be a 'friend in need'. Help us to be a blessing to others. Amen.

Read Acts 15:22-41**ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS**

On study leave from my position as principal of Luther College (Melbourne) in 1990 I visited a number of Lutheran, government and other independent schools in the USA and England. I observed a much stronger focus in the American schools on explicitly documented policies relating to key aspects of school life than in the English schools. However, the clear impression I gained was that the operations and tone of the English schools were superior in many cases. What they were doing was more important than what they might have said they would do.

In this reading, concerns relating to false teachings had arisen within the new congregations in Asia Minor. The Council in Jerusalem reacted to this situation by preparing a written response, to be delivered to the churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. The apostle Paul and Barnabas were to deliver the Council's letter. Also selected by the Church in Jerusalem to accompany them on this missionary journey were two prophets – Judas (also known as Barsabbas) and Silas (a Roman citizen). At this time prime functions of prophets were to encourage and strengthen the members of these new church communities.

We learn that the letter, clarifying issues relating to the eating of sacrificed food and the blood of strangled animals, as well as sexual immorality, was well received. Its message was further strengthened by the witness of Barsabbas and Silas, through which the church members gained encouragement and renewed strength for their daily spiritual walk. Through their caring and supportive actions these prophets had a positive impact in restoring the situation of the congregation.

Here at St Stephen's we are blessed by the regular faithful teaching of the Gospel truths by our pastors and other congregational leaders. Equally important are the ongoing contributions of the many "prophets" within our congregation – those members (ranging from the young to the older) who regularly provide encouragement and support for fellow members, and for folk in the wider community.

We give thanks at this Lenten time to the example of the apostles and prophets of the early church. We also give thanks for our pastoral team and the many lay members who provide encouragement and support to others. In the strong name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

28TH DAY IN LENT

Tuesday, 1st April 2014

Read Acts 16:1-15

JESUS' ENTRY INTO EUROPE

Each Christmas we celebrate Jesus' entry into the world as the Christ child of Bethlehem.

On Palm Sundays we decorate our church with palm fronds and celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, where he was lauded as 'king' a short time before his journey to the cross.

In today's reading we learn about Jesus' entry into Europe – the message of his life, death and resurrection for our salvation, taken there by the feet and on the lips of Paul, Silas and Timothy.

The Holy Spirit was instrumental in guiding the travels of the missionary trio to Macedonia, where they met Lydia who under the influence of that same spirit became the first Christian in Europe. So the story, which celebrates the entry of Christianity into Europe – to which most of us at Stephens can lay heritage, began with a woman!

At our Baptism with the splashing of water in the name of the triune God Jesus entered into our lives. Luther urged that we celebrate this event every day, through repentance to a renewed life as a child of God.

Lord Jesus, thank you for entering into my life to be with me through all the highs and lows of my days. Amen.

Read Acts 16:16 – 40

WHAT LEADS TO PERSECUTION?

The actions involving a lowly slave girl landed Paul and Silas in prison in Macedonia, persecuted for preaching the word of the Lord and thus advocating customs outside the accepted Roman law.

We ponder her significance in this story - she was possessed by a spirit of telling the future and from this her owners made money. She shouted for all around to hear that: These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.

Paul was troubled by this way of attention being drawn to them and commanded in Christ's name that the spirit leave her and it did.

Like the slave girl, we speak about and draw attention to those proclaiming God's saving love through Christ, whenever we broadcast and invite others to listen to the teachers of the Christian church. We may be among those teachers when we share and explain God's message along with our own actions.

But the spirit in us is the Holy Spirit because we already know and have been saved by this Most High God through the life and death of his dear Son, and so are enabled to share our good news.

With this confidence, how carefully might this make us listen to people outside of our known and already trusted community of believers?

Do we demonise them? Might we persecute them?

Could we, instead, find ways to listen and engage with them so that we can each share our stories about the God who saves those who listen and believe?

Saving God, Help us to listen carefully to those who we meet and who proclaim news and knowledge of you. Keep us secure in your truth so that we may discern your wisdom especially when spoken by outsiders. Amen.

30TH DAY IN LENT

Thursday, 3rd April 2014

Read Acts 17:1-15

A SPIRIT OF SEARCHING

Revolution to Individuals and Society.

The coming of Christianity to Thessalonica caused a revolution both in the lives of individuals and in the Thessalonican society. The Jews knew that Christianity was supremely effective and tried to stop the truth of the word from spreading.

Reading this passage reminded me of the following two other revolutionary events in jurisdictions where the truth is attempted to be censored by authorities:

Attempted assassination of Malala Yousafzai.

Malala sought for rights to education for women in a society where the Taliban were banning girls from attending school. She was shot in an attempted assassination, but recovered. In this Pakistani society, education was attempted to be denied to women by the Taliban thereby preventing women from receiving an education.

Authoritarian Systems and the Internet.

The internet has allowed individuals access and freedom to information including those individuals that live in authoritarian systems. The censorship of information by Dictatorships has therefore been diminished by the internet. There is the possibility that Dictatorships may become vulnerable to collective action facilitated by social media.

In conclusion, I consider revolutions are likely to occur in societies where authorities attempt to censor individuals from their search of the truth.

Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus as the Messiah and causing a revolution to both the lives of individuals and society. Thank you for the scriptures that allow us to learn and spread the truth of the word. Amen.

Read Acts 17:16-34

When Paul reached Athens he had been engaged in his missionary pilgrimage for a considerable time and represented the Gospel in a large number of other cities and to people of widely differing cultural and religious customs and persuasions. He was obviously a seasoned ambassador and well able to negotiate the hostility, debate and even indifference he encountered. The personal dynamic to Paul's testimony was the exceptional spiritual and personal experience of his conversion. Whatever his detractors thought of his discourse and manner, it seems clear that he was a compelling and frequently convincing man, with an imperative message for everyone.

The Athenians engaged him in a serious level of debate, and the request to attend the Areopagus was an indication of the degree of anxiety and consternation his personal testimony and account of the Gospel had aroused. The power of personal testimony can be engaging, but subjective disclosure on any matter is always open to doubt and contradiction. Paul seems to have had an innate ability to overcome derision and keep his critics and listeners engaged. The best outcomes to his testimony were the conversions, and the life hope he was able to share with the people who heard the Gospel who came to a new sense of faith, divinity and salvation. For those who did not respond to his message and the intrinsic invitation in the Gospel, he would remain a subversive and threatening influence. Paul understood the dark dynamics of human relationships. He'd made it his business to literally demonise the earlier Christians and pursue them relentlessly over their faith experience. We know from his own account, that after conversion Paul was diametrically positioned and he made no secret of his past, his intolerance and his active hostility. Who then to better represent the Gospel to these hardened cynics that formed the religious culture and quasi-spiritual life of these communities?

Historically some of the "greatest" men of Faith have been tough personalities. Their journey to a point of mature faith might have been incredibly difficult, and they may have needed all the intellectual nous and energy they could muster to survive and arrive. Most of us can find our faith experience gently, gradually and often in an environment of love and acceptance as we grow and develop. That blessing is not necessarily available to everyone. The Pauls of the world are necessary. We need to be mindful of the intellectual and spiritual vigour that possess some people, and be thankful that they are there to speak for the Gospel. We also need to be gracious in owning that we do not have such arduous demands placed on us. In fact, our faith is an unconditional gift to revel in.

Father God, thankyou for faith that is tough, durable, gentle, gracious and above all constant. Help us to see the merit in the person of faith who walks beside us, even if we don't understand their voice, their inspiration or their place. Amen.

32ND DAY IN LENT

Saturday, 5th April 2014

Read Acts 18:1-23

THE LORD OF PAUL - THE LORD OF US ALL

On his way to Damascus, Paul experienced Jesus stepping into his life and it turned it around completely. Paul committed himself to Jesus and the purpose and focus of his life changed. It would never be the same again. And, then, in this reading, Jesus steps into Paul's life again - this time to give Paul support for the commitment he made to Jesus.

It seems a vital practice in our church to highlight and herald Paul's amazing encounters with Jesus. We put them forward as vital to the formation of the church and as we hear about them we get hope and spiritual nourishment.

Sadly, in our church people rarely share how Jesus has stepped into their lives. If we get so much hope and spiritual nourishment from Paul sharing, then, why do we not do it?

Back in my early twenties (1970) I committed to leaving the family farm, going back to do Year 11 and 12 at Concordia College in Toowoomba, getting a university scholarship, going to university and working in the church. And I did so with no more resources than this plan. Needless to say I received no encouragement from anyone. About three weeks into Year 11, I understood better what I had done and I remember praying one night (in the dormitory with other kids about eight years my junior) "Well, Lord, here I am – use me". It may have been the next day (I am not sure) I was in morning chapel with the other students when this huge wave of absolute joy came over me like nothing I had ever experienced. My reaction was extreme embarrassment. I tried, but I just could not hide the huge grin on my face as the others around me worshipped most solemnly. Then it passed. I had no idea what had happened. A week later the absolute joy (and the embarrassment) happened again. It passed again and I still had no idea. I left the chapel thinking about God calling Samuel during the night in the temple. But then, I soon became very aware that God provided all those things that I had not planned. He continued doing so through university and then through church work. I now live knowing God always stands by me.

I did not share this experience for many years. Partly because others did not share theirs, but also because of my embarrassment at how God works. And yet, in spite of my embarrassment, God has taught me that he is not only the Lord of Paul - he is the Lord of us all. I pray I learn to testify to that like Paul.

Thank you Lord for the support and protection you give even in the face of my embarrassment about you. Lord, help me deal with my embarrassment. Amen.

33RD Day in Lent

Sunday, 6th April 2014

Read Acts 18:24-28

ADEQUACY AND INADEQUACY

Sometimes it is about adequacy or inadequacy, not right and wrong.

Apollos was a learned man. Knowledgeable, passionate, and genuine. When Priscilla and Aquila invited him to their home, they explained to him the way of God more adequately.

More adequately, again, this is not a question of right and wrong, and “Holier/better than thou” mentality. Apollos was like a gem in the kingdom of God, and the best thing we can do to this kind of gem is to give him a finishing touch, a little bit of polishing. That was what Priscilla and Aquila did.

Their effort finally pays off. “When he (Apollos) arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.” (v. 28)

Priscilla and Aquila, wife and husband, woman and man.

In the Book of Acts, a more common way of introducing this couple is not in the form of “Husband and Wife”, nor “Man and Woman”, not even in alphabetical order, but quite differently.

Some commentators make a point here that it is due to Priscilla’s leadership that makes her name being listed first. Perhaps they are right. No matter what, however, this was extraordinary in that time. Ladies first, this is not only a courtesy, but also a reminder that women can be such a great leader that their names supersede their men.

Lord it is through your Spirit that our adequacies and inadequacies can be together and work together. Amen.

34TH DAY IN LENT

Monday, 7th April 2014

Read Acts 19:1-20

DID YOU RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT?

During the '80s the charismatic movement became stronger than it had ever been in Adelaide. Popular music artists like Amy Grant (whom I loved) held sold out concerts here that even included prayer at the end. I was invited by friends to attend Pentecostal churches and even went forward at one of their "altar calls". As a young Lutheran at the time I struggled with the evident differences in worship styles and practices between what I was familiar with and the exuberance of a typical Pentecostal service.

I worshipped in both different churches. I experienced some people (in the Pentecostal church) telling me I hadn't yet received the "Baptism of the Holy Spirit" as I hadn't had a full immersion Baptism. The implication was that I hadn't been saved and this caused me much concern!

As humans, who are we to try and give a prescriptive shape and form to the power of the Holy Spirit and claim how He is to manifest and be evident in one's life? I believe I have experienced the Holy Spirit at work in: the simple words of a child (just when I needed to hear them); at the moment of my mother's death; in the peace I have felt being near the ocean; in the strength and courage I have been given (when I had none left) and yes, in a variety of church settings, from Bach being played on an organ to the exciting sounds of a loud praise band (especially when my ASD daughter literally jumps up and down, clapping her hands in the air!)

Lord where would we be without your Holy Spirit? We can't see it but we can see what it does and when we can't it's still there, working in our lives, sent through whatever means you choose. Thank-you almighty God, that when Jesus left this earth you sent your Holy Spirit to all believers, we are never alone. Amen!

35TH DAY OF LENT

Tuesday, 8th April 2014

Read Acts 19:21–41

GOD VERSUS MAMMON

The appropriately named English magazine for seniors, The Oldie, has a regular page divided in two: the top half is devoted to religious issues (still surprisingly totally Christian), the bottom half to financial matters. The two halves are titled respectively God and Mammon. This dichotomy neatly summarises the incident at Ephesus in which Paul found himself on his second missionary journey.

In this important trading crossroads - where Asian products delivered by caravan were shipped to the Roman world - The Way (as the early Christian sect was known) had obviously grown beyond a few adherents by this time and their preaching of Christ crucified stirred up the commercial interests of the silversmiths who had been making a tiny living from producing statues of the multibreasted fertility or mother-goddess Artemis. She was the Greek version of the Roman goddess Diana but based on a much older religious tradition of Asia. Her patronage was important in all societies dependent on the annual cycles of nature, reproduction, birth and growth – crops, stock and human fecundity. Her temple at Ephesus was four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens, so great was her importance. This growing sect's message spelled danger: God Vs Mammon.

The theatre, capable of holding 25,000, still exists. The acoustical shape of these theatres is such that modern tourist guides stand on the stage and strike a match, the sound of which can be heard in the back rows. How else could the local officials be heard above the clamour!

Lord, we see even in our own time how easy it is to rouse a crowd to anger and confusion over religious issues. Lord, preserve our community from such chaos where hatreds, self interest, bigotry and smouldering violence gain the upper hand and evil is allowed to run riot. Give strength and courage to our civil authorities to maintain peace and good governance among us. In the name of Jesus, the peacemaker, we pray. Amen.

36TH DAY IN LENT

Wednesday, 9th April 2014

Read Acts 20:1-16 A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT IS LIKE FRESH AIR

Paul travelled a lot, speaking words of encouragement to many people. We to really wanted to know what he said, don't we? Read his letters/epistles.

There is also a good reminder for us all, not only pastors. Encouragement is just like oxygen. It gives people fresh air, new strength, and new way. It also reminds those who are in the ministry – a Chinese saying is that “Never turn the pulpit into an artillery battery” (不要把講台變為炮台). Some pastors always tend to preach so-called prophetic messages (proving that they are truly God's sent servants), but they need to re-read the meaning of what Jesus said in Matthew 11:13 and Luke 16:16.

Mt 11: 13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.

Lk 16:16 The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John.

Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into it.

Lent is the time for the preaching of the good news of the kingdom of God. For those who are keen to be prophets, never turn the preaching of the good news into a show business (不要把福音信息變為商業化表演), please!!

Preparation of the service is helpful, if not essential.

There was a young man who fell to the ground from the third story (St Stephens only has two stories, so you are a lot safer here). Poor Eutychus! But, to be fair, here are some considerations:

I always admire those who are falling into a deep sleep during the service. The reason is that, even though in deep tiredness and exhaustion (late-night shift?!), they attended the service anyway. My only wish is that he/she won't snore too loud and wake up the one sitting next to him/her.

Too many candles that night, and the oxygen in the room was not enough (perhaps windows were not many, or not opened wide enough). And it was a full-house service that night, too. Many people. And the young man was being seated in the window (experienced, with proper safe-place awareness, ushers badly needed here).

Paul intended to leave the next day, so he kept on talking until midnight...he talked on and on and on. Was it the longest Pauline sermon? Eutychus was meant to be asleep in the middle of the night, and we all see that he did!!

Thank you for the season of Lent. Amen.

37TH DAY LENT

Thursday, 10th April 2014

²² “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.”

Here we have Paul, very much like Jesus, having what can only be described as an obsessive compulsion to go to Jerusalem.

Jesus had met his death there, but because of His resurrection, became, for us, the way of our resurrection. He gave us the promise of eternal life through faith in Him. Even our faith is imputed to us by the Spirit.

Paul went to Jerusalem essentially to argue his case for Gentiles being Christian without the restrictive obligations of Judaism. This was the catalyst which eventually saw him in Rome and his own death.

I've often thought about the acts of the Holy Spirit, particularly in my own life. Many years ago I left Perth for Adelaide. Like Paul, my family wasn't positive about my decision to go, but I had a strong conviction it was right. Now I'm sure it was God's leading as following a personal crisis, which led me to seek a Pastor's counsel, I became a Christian and my life was completely changed. I sometimes think about the many, many convoluted and disparate events which led to my life in Christ.

In times of facing crossroads in our lives, we can always know that “all things work together for good”, even when decisions are tough and the way forward isn't clear.

Father, we are often confronted with decisions and are unsure of which way to turn, even after asking you. Help us to remember that you will work in and through us, irrespective of our final resolve. Thanks for that; in Jesus' name. Amen.

38TH DAY IN LENT

Friday, 11th April 2014

Read Acts 21:1-26

ACTING THE PART

As an enthusiast of drama and live performances, verse 11 of this reading jumps out at me.

“[The prophet Agabus] came to us, took Paul's belt, tied up his own feet and hands with it, and said, “This is what the Holy Spirit says: The owner of this belt will be tied up in this way by the Jews in Jerusalem, and they will hand him over to the Gentiles.”

A real-life demonstration will always have far more impact than mere words or arguments. I can visualise people watching with fascination as Agabus grabs Paul's belt and starts knotting his feet together! What's going on here? Street theatre?

People had been discouraging Paul from going to Jerusalem, but to no avail. Will this dramatic live performance have a better effect? Sadly, no. Paul answered, “What are you doing, crying like this and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be tied up in Jerusalem but even to die there for the sake of the Lord Jesus.”

Tied up by the Jews ... handed over to the Gentiles Ready to die. Sound familiar? This little drama is predicting a re-enactment of Jesus' own sacrifice. What's really amazing is that Paul, who once violently perpetrated the deaths of Jesus' followers, was now willing to be on the receiving end of that violence.

Paul is about to take up a role he learned from his Lord, no matter what that performance entails. And we begin to witness a higher bondage here than being tied up. Paul's entire life is now captivated by conviction and love for his Lord Jesus Christ. In Paul's own words (1 Cor 7:22) “A free person who has been called by Christ is his slave.”

Lord, may our convictions be courageous, may our actions speak louder than words. Set us free from anything that imprisons us. Amen.

39TH DAY IN LENT

Saturday, 12th April 2014

Read Acts 21:27 – 22:16

ACCUSATIONS AND FREEDOM

For Paul, the temple was home. Paul was a Pharisee; trained by the renowned Gamaliel in the temple and his zeal for his religion even led to leading a crusade against Christians. Paul was entitled to be in the temple. Yet, he was close to being lynched for an unfounded accusation that he had defiled the temple. Then, when Paul was arrested and bound, the Roman tribune thought Paul was a wanted Egyptian. Twice falsely accused and detained.

Back in 2004 Cornelia Rau, a German born, Australian permanent resident was unlawfully held in immigration detention for ten months. Despite protesting her innocence, and her clear mental illness, the government of the day insisted that she was in Australia “illegally” and shifted her to the Baxter Detention Centre in Port Augusta. Falsely accused and detained.

What would you do in this instance? Later in the chapter we find out that, as a Roman Citizen it was unlawful for Paul to be bound in chains, but rather than use this to seek freedom, Paul looks upon his captors and the lynch mob... and preaches, providing freedom to others.

Dear heavenly Father, forgive us for jumping to conclusions about others; forgive us for allowing innocent people to be treated as criminals; help us to face adversity with your help in order that others may be free. Amen.

PALM SUNDAY

Sunday, 13th April 2014

Read Acts 22:17-29

TOO MUCH GOSPEL

“Then (God) said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you...to the Gentiles’. “Up to this point they listened to him, but then they shouted, “Away with such a fellow... he should not be allowed to live.” (vv 21-22)

There are pastors who are criticised for preaching and teaching too much Gospel. ‘People are becoming too complacent in their lives and faith,’ they are told. ‘Therefore you ought to be preaching more Law, laying it on the line about how people ought to get their lives in better order. Not all this wishy-washy Gospel and love stuff you talk about all the time.’

In the story in today’s reading Paul gets into deep trouble for preaching too much Gospel. The people who get angry with him believed that only they were God’s true people, and that anyone who did not meet their criteria for being part of the community of faithful – the Gentiles in particular – did not belong.

So, when Paul suddenly announces that his special mission is to reach out also to the Gentiles with the good news of God’s love for and acceptance of them in Jesus, these people are furious. ‘No way can God love and include these people as God does us.’ This is too much Gospel. Too much love. Too much grace. And they’re prepared to kill Paul because of that.

I wonder if you are like me and almost can’t get enough Gospel. Can’t get enough of God’s love and acceptance of me. It’s liberating. Life-giving. Empowering.

So, I’m with Paul. How about you?

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for loving this world too much. Amen.

MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK

Monday, 14th April 2014

Read Acts 22:30 & 23:1-11

INADVERTENT MISJUDGEMENT

Inadvertent misjudgement made by Paul.

Paul didn't know that the one he was facing was God's high priest, and advertently made harsh remarks about him. But that was a nice mistake.

There are so many mistakes that people can make every day, however, categorically speaking, some are nice mistakes, some are evil, and some ill (I mean physically, psychologically, or emotionally). For us, perhaps the best thing we can do is to distinguish all mistakes made by people around us and made a better understanding of them.

Jesus once said on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Lk. 23:33-35. Jesus had made a proper understanding of what people had done to him, and asked Father's forgiveness on their behalf.

Not all mistakes are evil, and not all mistakes are nice either.

Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead." When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

Dispute is not a nice matter among groups. No one wants to be a dispute-maker. But Paul was once again being called a trouble-maker. Acts 17: 6 "But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here." (cf Acts 24:5).

God's comfort for all these trouble-makers is that "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome".

Troubles and disputes shall not be excluded from worthy, scriptural testimony.

Dear Heavenly Father, may your comfort come upon us during this Lent season. Amen!

TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

Tuesday, 15th April 2014

Read Acts 23:12-35

SEEING GOD'S HAND AT WORK IN OUR LIVES

The book of Acts is full of stories about the apostles and the trouble they get into as they spread the word about Jesus and his life, death and resurrection. The Jewish leaders of course didn't want too many people to know about their part in Jesus' death and the fact that he came back to life, so they did everything to try and scare the apostles and other followers from teaching and preaching and even performing miracles.

And Paul was even more of a thorn in their side as he had once persecuted the Christians with them! This is not the first time they have tried to kill Paul. It happened a number of times, and each time God thwarted their efforts. It seems however that this just makes them more determined. This time it is 40 men who take a vow to have him killed!

Today we see 'persistence in the face of failure' as a good trait. However when an individual or a group are zealous about the wrong things, and are willing to lie to achieve what they believe is right, then this is not so positive. What struck me was how persistent God is too, in thwarting their plans.

I guess if you don't believe in God you could put it down to coincidence. The fact that the right person hears about the plot; the fact the courageous nephew goes to prison to tell Paul; the fact that the compliant centurion complies with Paul (a prisoner's) request to tell his commander; the fact that the commander is willing to act – sending a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to escort Paul to safety – all lead to the cunning plot being foiled. Are these acts of God or just 'fate'?

I guess that is what sets believers apart from those who have no faith. We believe that He has a hand in our lives and in the path it takes. And, when life is particularly challenging, it's what gives us hope. It was certainly what kept Paul going!

Lord, thank you for the faith that you have given me and for the hope and encouragement that gives me in times of trouble. Amen.

Read Acts 24:1-27

WHAT-DID-I-DO?

“Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.” — Abraham Lincoln

In a society that values triumph and advancement, people rarely give up power. This was as true in St Paul's time as it is for us today.

It's interesting to see the extents to which people go to preserve their power. They can be calculating and devious, or panicked and irrational. They can meticulously plot and plan their continuing victories, or they can create such uproar and confusion that no-one actually has the energy or committed interest to challenge what is their empty grip on power.

St Paul annoyed a lot of powerful people. The back-story for today's reading began in Acts 20. Paul and his friends travelled to Jerusalem where they observed the religious rites of purification at the temple (Acts 21:26). From there things went horribly wrong. Some people assumed that Paul's friends were not Jewish and had defiled the temple by participating in a cleansing rite. Nobody bothered to check the facts, and in an instant a religious riot broke out. More would follow.

Throughout these escalating scraps St Paul's little voice is heard in effect saying: “What did I do?” Paul simply maintained his witness to God and testimony about Jesus Christ – legitimately drawing upon his own Jewish tradition to do it.

Paul's failure was that he didn't join with the power games that erupted. In the course of his simple testimony he managed to insult the High Priest, and he failed to grease the palm of the Roman governor. Without intending to, Paul had threatened their power and they were crazed as they tried to preserve it. They even brought in a hard hitting attorney (for goodness sake!). If only Paul had played the game. If only Paul had massaged a few egos. If only Paul had paid the bribes.

The ‘Way’ (24:14) that we hear about in today's reading isn't about power games. It's really not about any sort of power. It's about ‘giving’. It's about bearing faithful and truthful witness to the one whom we have seen and heard: Jesus Christ. Personal power has very little to do with the impact and effect of our witness. Sometimes things went well for Paul, sometimes they didn't (2

Corinthians 11:16-33). In bearing our witness, things will sometimes go well for us and sometimes they won't. That's life. That's real living. And that's how we might even end up giving gifts into the life of another person. What could be better? You can't fully give into another person's life when you're captivated and besotted with power.

God is totally committed to giving us the fullness of life that God won for us through Jesus Christ. Paul continuously states that throughout today's reading (24:15). It's inspiring to witness God patiently accomplishing that throughout the book of Acts. The human behaviour that might bring us to a standstill has no effect on God. In God life comes and keeps coming through the witnessing of some very unlikely people. That's a gift. That's God's Holy Spirit at work. There's our invitation and encouragement to join in.

God, in Jesus Christ you emptied yourself for us. You gave up every rightful claim to power so that we would receive fullness of life in you. Send your Holy Spirit to give us the grace and courage to empty our lives too. Guard us against desires for power. Instead, let our witness be self-giving so that other people will know of their fullness of life in you. We ask this through Jesus Christ. Amen.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Thursday, 17th April 2014

Read Acts 25:1-27

“HERE I STAND, I CAN DO NO OTHER.”
Luther before the Diet of Worms

Acts 25:18-19 ¹⁸“When the accusers stood up, they did not charge him with any of the crimes that I was expecting. ¹⁹Instead they had certain points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.”

Festus understood what was at the heart of the accusations made against Paul: they were not about wrong doing, but about truth. And the question of truth was a religious one, which could not be dealt with by Roman judicial processes. Nor could Paul be condemned through Judaic Law, as he remained a faithful child of Israel.

With his steady insistence that Jesus, the crucified one, is alive, Paul embodied “the Way”, the new religious movement that had grown out of Judaism and was being embraced by people outside of that faith, too. In the face of the rejection of this movement by many powerful Jews, the Romans had to work out how they were going to relate to it.

I may never have an experience like Paul had on the road to Damascus, where the reality of the resurrection was revealed in a way that left no room for doubts. And it is unlikely that I will be caught in endless political machinations and imprisoned for my belief that Jesus is the Christ. But the base of Paul’s steadfastness, the hope and freedom that he found in the person of Jesus, has been given to each of us, too. Whatever challenges we have to face, God also gives us the gifts of hope, courage and integrity.

Gracious and loving God, thank you that Jesus the Christ stays close wherever I am and whatever I am faced with. Thank you for the hope and courage this brings. Amen.

GOOD FRIDAY

Friday, 18th April 2014

Read Acts 26:1–32

SEEING THE GREAT LIGHT

For his fellow travellers and Paul on their way to Damascus, it had been almost exactly 2000 years since God made the promise to Abraham that began the chosen people Israel. God followed up this promise with actions, other promises and revelations.

Over these 2000 years, many Israelites had spent a lot of time and energy working God's promises and revelations into a set of traditions and rules that became the Jewish culture – the culture that Paul and his fellow travellers grew up in. And like Paul, many Israelites before him had been keen to make a difference and leave their mark on their history and their culture.

So, after 2000 years Paul stands proudly as one who knows and diligently practices these traditions and rules. For Paul the 'correctness' of these traditions and rules were self-evident, and they burned in him like a passion.

But, like many Jews before him, Paul went further. He expressed his passion as an irrefutable rule, which said something like – "If you do not know and accept what I know and accept, I will see that you are not included in God's people like I am." Driven by his 'correctness', Paul did everything in his power to enforce the traditions and rules on everyone.

But then, as Jesus does, Jesus stepped into Paul's life. Not with judgement, but a simple question that completely blind-sides Paul. "Paul - Why are you persecuting me?" To this point, Paul had been proud to admit that he was a persecutor of people – but a persecutor of the Lord?

As this year is 2014 we too are almost exactly 2000 years from when God gave his second promise and his second revelation (Jesus), which began his second people – the Christian community. During these 2000 years, this community too has been impacted by members, keen to make their mark on its traditions and rules. And like the Jews before us, we too have developed belief in the 'correctness' of many of our traditions and our rules.

In Paul's case, God was determined not to allow Paul's 'correctness' to disrupt his plan for his new more inclusive Christian community, and, to that end, he had Jesus step in. It is ironical and testimony to the power of the Spirit that it is Paul who articulates the new thought and benchmark for this new inclusive

community. In Galatians 3:28 Paul writes “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ”.

After 2000 years, we too are at a crossroads about inclusiveness in our church and we face the same questions as the Jews in Paul’s day. Will we too look to the traditions and rules that we helped developed and maintain? Will we take on Paul’s benchmark for inclusion? Will we too see some form of God step-in that ensures his plan for inclusion is carried out?

Jesus, we pray for your guiding spirit over our traditions, rules and protocols, so that we might become the radically different and inclusive community that you called us to be. Amen.

EASTER SATURDAY

Saturday, 19th April 2014

Read Acts chapter 27

LIFE CAN BE A WRECK

The Jews had made charges against Paul. Festus insisted that, 'You have appealed to the Emperor and to the Emperor you will go.' 25:12. Agrippa says to Festus, 'This man could have been released if he had not appealed to the Emperor.' 26:32. But God says, 'Paul, you must stand before the Emperor.' 27:24.

So in chapter 27 we have Paul travelling to Rome as a prisoner, by ship, during a storm at sea. We also have an itinerary of a Mediterranean voyage amazingly detailed in such a way that it could still be mapped out, including a weather report, to be enjoyed today, with the help from somebody at 'Flight Centre'.

Paul had, amongst many other calamities, previously been involved in two shipwrecks (2 Cor 11).

God had a plan. He was in control of all things, including the sea. God assured Paul that he would reach Rome. But what of the ship and its passengers? After all a number of passengers could not even swim. All their lives were spared. God's promises were answered.

Paul had stood up for God. He testified about his faith in God. He took courage from God. He trusted God. He gave thanks to God and he continued to tell others about God. And now he must stand before the Emperor.

Our lives, at times, seem like a sinking ship in a stormy sea. We are not in control. We don't have time. We don't have the energy. We are unwell. We are depressed. We have been rejected. We have failed.

God has a plan for us and he keeps his promises. We too, can take courage from God. We can trust him. And we can give thanks to him. We also can testify to others telling them about him. We can live our lives in the best way that we can, knowing that God accepts us and loves us.

Paul's stance before the Emperor would have been another huge step in the growth of Christianity, so that we too can stand in our Christian faith.

Dear Lord Jesus, We thank you that you keep your promises and that you continue to support us through all of the ups and downs of our 'stormy lives'. Amen.

EASTER SUNDAY

Sunday, 20th April 2014

Read Acts 28:1–31

SPIRIT HELP US TO WITNESS TO JESUS

The Book of Acts provides an account of the church's beginnings, its birth and growth in the early years. We see how the commission from Matthew 28 (go and make disciples in all nations) is being acted upon and fulfilled.

Throughout the book of Acts we see the Holy Spirit at work, using Paul and others to share and spread the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Paul takes whatever circumstances he is faced with and uses it to preach about Christ. In this chapter he survives a ship wreck and is bitten by a deadly snake but his survival provides a positive witness. In Rome, Paul preaches and teaches boldly to the good news even while under house arrest. His physical confinement does not stop him witnessing to Christ and establishing the Church in Rome.

The Christian Church, which started in Jerusalem, has spread through Israel and beyond, all the way to Rome, the most important hub in the empire. We see the church grow, not just geographically but ethnically. We learn that the Christian Church is not just for the Jews but for all people. The establishment of the Christian Church in Rome provided a base for the Church's continued growth, to the ends of the earth.

Holy Spirit, may we too use our lives and circumstances as a witness to Christ Jesus. Amen.



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