

Text: Acts 28.30-31
St Stephen's

July 26th, 2008
Sun

Acts 29

We have now come to the end of 11 months in the book of Acts... 11 months covering 28 chapters that span the first 30 years of the movement we call Christianity. I'd like to think back with you for a bit today about what we have seen.

Before I started working in churches I spent a couple of years working in Cleveland in **Public Relations**. I learned during those years how to write a **news release** about upcoming events – to always make sure that you had the 5 'W's' covered: **who, what, when, where, and why**.

Who...

The decades after Luke wrote Acts, the book picked up the name, '**Acts of the Apostles**', and you could understand that title. Starting in Jerusalem, **we trace the ministries of the 12 Apostles**, with chapters on John and Peter. We also track the ministries of Philip and Stephen and 7 deacons. **Peter**, though, is the dominant figure of the first half of Acts. By the time we get to chapter 13 we meet Saul, spectacularly converted and known as **Paul**. For 16 more chapters we track his ministry through 3 missionary trips. Along the way we meet Barnabas and Luke, Timothy, Silas and John Mark, Priscilla, Aquilla, and Apollos. The list keeps growing!

What becomes unavoidable, though, is **the presence of someone else, someone greater**. You see it in the miracles and the narrow escapes, in the sudden reversals and the unexplainable instances of provision. Sometimes in a moment of prayer or prophecy, in a brief vision or a night visit we catch direct sight.

Luke alerted us to this back in chapter 1:

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

Acts 1:1-2

Luke's perspective comes in the little phrase in verse 1 (I have it underlined on the screen), *'all that Jesus began to do and teach'*. That, Luke says, was the subject of **his 'first book'**, the gospel of **Luke**. You remember that the Gospel of Luke covers Jesus days on earth, and ends with his death and resurrection.

But here the implication is that Luke's second book, **Acts**, is all about **what Jesus continues to do and teach, after his resurrection**. In these 30 years his presence is unavoidable, and over and over again **his presence changes everything**.

I read a remarkable book a month ago... **'The Shack'**. It is a **fictional story** about a Christian family who suffers a horrific evil – their young daughter is kidnapped and attacked and killed in a wilderness shack. They never find her. And as the years go on **'the great sadness'** descends on them. The book is about how decades later the Lord invites this dad to meet him at that shack, at the place of his greatest loss - and meets him in an extraordinary series of encounters that bring healing, the deepest kind of healing.

It is a book I **recommend with caution**, because I don't think everything in it is right – but overall it is a **wonderful book about the power of God's grace** to touch and heal the deepest and darkest places of our lives.

In one incident the dad is **talking with Jesus about his fears**, and Jesus asks him what he fears. The dad lists a quick number of things, **all in the future**, that might happen. Jesus asks him, 'When you think about these things, do you see me there with you?' And the Dad says, 'no'. And then Jesus responds, 'That is very common.'

I thought, **'I always do that!!'** I wake up in the night worrying about difficult things that might happen in the future, and when I worry like that, I form a picture in my mind about these possible things, and Jesus is never in that picture! I thought, why do I do that? I had some fears about a particularly **difficult meeting** coming up, and I

began to remind myself that Jesus would be there with me – I pictured him standing in that room. My fears immediately evaporated. I knew **he would work all things out** for his purposes. All things... And he did, by the way.

“Who, What, When, Where, Why - Summary of Acts”

What...

The ‘What’ is about ‘what’ Jesus is doing in the world. Paul had a special phrase for this that he picked up from Jesus:

Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 28:31

Acts is about the spread of the Kingdom of God. We would never use that language – we would say Acts was about the spread of the gospel. But Paul uses this different phrase because Jesus used this phrase over and over again. The message about the Kingdom was shorthand for “The King is here! He’s come, he’s come, he’s come at last!!” That’s how exciting it was.

In the view of the bible, **the world is not right**, not the way it should be. And neither are we. No one argues with this. Down deep, the bible tells us, the world is **longing to be set right**. So are people. In the language of the bible, **the coming of the King** is the time when **the world will be fixed**, will be **renewed**. When that happens, we are told, trees will clap their hands and mountains will dance and the stars will break out into song – lions and lambs will lay down together.

Everyone expected that this would all **happen at once**. The surprise was that God is doing it in **two steps**. The first step was the coming of Jesus. The great restoration began. The second step will be his return.

And so **he came**. And he has been raised from dead and is still here and He is healing the world. He is setting captive people free. He is bringing lost people home. He is giving dead people new life. He is

giving people a fresh start and a new heart and a different future. And he will soon come back and bring it all to breathtaking completion.

That was Paul's message as he told people about Jesus and his Kingdom. It is the **little mustard seed that grows** so large there is room for all the birds of the air – it is **the leaven that spreads** all on its own all the way through the lump of our life till every single thing is leavened – it is **the treasure hidden** in the field – **the pearl** we have been looking for all our lives so that we joyfully let things go that we have held onto too long. The Kingdom is tremendous good news. Gospel.

“Who, What, When, Where, Why - Summary of Acts”

When and Where...

The **easy answer** to this is '**Anytime**' and '**Everywhere**', and the easy answer is true. But I want you to notice something of the **pattern** of Acts.

Kingdom moments for people often came in **unusual places and times. Unexpected** places and times. Like when a newborn was born in a stable and laid in a manger in a count for nothing town called Bethlehem. Like when a religious teacher was crucified outside Jerusalem. Like 9 AM in the morning on the day of Pentecost. Like incidents of persecution, arrest and trial – it is Peter standing before the Sanhedrin. Stephen sees the Lord while he is being murdered. Paul stands before Kings in chains and speaks. **Kingdom moments all.**

You see the same pattern in **the unlikely people** involved: uneducated, working class disciples; sick and crippled people who are healed;

"You've had your chance. The non-Jewish outsiders are next on the list. And believe me, they're going to receive it with open arms!"

Acts 28:28 (The Message)

And receive it we did! When Acts starts, you could the number of

'Jesus followers' with marks on a small chalkboard. 28 chapters and 30 years later they number in many tens of thousands, and their churches are spontaneously growing in every known city of the Roman empire.

You see it in **unlikely incidents**: **Phillip** meets an Ethiopian eunuch traveling home in his chariot, reading his Old Testament, on a desert road; **Paul** is on the way to persecute Christians in Damascus and meets the risen Jesus; a **Roman centurion** and **Peter** have concurrent visions that lead to a meal together – and the gospel comes to Gentiles. As Acts winds to its long conclusion, we find Kingdom moments in trials and legal strategies, in secret plots and riots, in storms and shipwrecks.

I said last week that you couldn't get Hollywood to invent this stuff, but there it is. And not on the big screen of fantasy and imagination. But in words of **cold, hard, undeniable history**. This stuff really happened.

God chooses to make primary use of the **backside** of life, the **broken** places of life, the **edges** of life, the **upside down** places and times. These become Kingdom places and Kingdom moments.

Why...

Why would he do it this way? Paul himself has thoughts about this. Remember that he saw it happen like this again and again. He wrote these words to the Corinthians...

God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important.

1 Corinthians 1:28 (NLT)

What the world considers important is human competence, self sufficiency, human pride. But it simply won't work. So God has intended to bring us down in order to raise us up. His strategy, Paul says, is to use the weak and foolish things of the world to bring in his Kingdom. The broken things of this world.

We are in just a moment like that in the **Anglican Communion**. God is using the churches of the global south to bring an end to the arrogance and pride of the Western churches...

God chooses to make primary use of the **backside** of life, the **broken** places of life, the **edges** of life, the **upside down** places and times.

Leonard Cohen, Anthem: writing about how the broken places of life become something far more...

We asked for signs
 the signs were sent:
 the birth betrayed
 the marriage spent
 the widowhood
 of every government --
 signs for all to see.

You can add up the parts
 but you won't have the sum
 You can strike up the march,
 there is no drum
 Every heart, every heart
 to love will come
 but like a refugee.

Ring the bells that still can ring
 Forget your perfect offering
 There is a crack, a crack in everything
 That's how the light gets in.

It is **how the light gets in still today**. Acts is a remarkable story, a true story, a kingdom story and it is a story that goes on still today.

Acts 29. The names and the places change, but the themes are the same and **the Kingdom** is the same – because **the main character**, the King – he's the same, yesterday and today and forever. And it is all good news.