

We begin a new series today. Sometime back I asked for suggestions for the next series, and received two. Bringing these together, we shall explore the enigmatic, often misunderstood and habitually misquoted evangelist, Paul. We shall follow his journey of faith and his travels across the Med, and trace his teaching to the churches as he travels and discovers people and their needs.

The book of Acts, which we said would be better titled, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit of God", is also the history of the **first** Church. It starts with suspense as the disciples wait in faith, in obedience to Jesus' final words, *Wait here in Jerusalem and do not leave it. Wait for the Father to deliver on His promise: John baptised with water, but you **will be** baptised with the Holy Spirit.*¹

It is an interesting distinction: **You** take a personal decision to be baptised by water, but you **wait** on the Father to be baptised by the Holy Spirit. The first is an act of personal surrender to Christ in keeping with John the Baptist's last words, *He must increase and I must decrease*²

The second is an act of God, who accepts your act of surrender to the supremacy of Christ, and **baptises** you, clothes you and gives you a new identity, with which you exhibit His power to the world in which you live, so that everything you do, will naturally, without any effort, be to God's glory.

Both baptisms are valid and important. In modern times, we have caricatured the baptism of the Holy Spirit describing it as *airy-fairy* and *spooky*, and referring to people baptised in the Holy Spirit as *happy-clappy* and *babbling* people, and we say this out of ignorance, because we do not

¹ Acts 1:4-5

² John 3:30

understand what is going on, and why. We need to set a task before us to dialogue more about both baptisms so that you are clear the importance and meaning of **both**.

After the initial suspense, the book of Acts takes off with a bang - literally - as the Holy Spirit *explodes* into life through a hurricane force wind which is heard but not felt, and flames which are seen but have no heat and do not burn. Responding to taunts about men speaking in different languages as being drunk, Peter lives unto Jesus prophetic words, and becomes the rock on which Jesus builds His church, as he silences the skeptical and negative voices, and traces the prophetic voices in history that declared the coming of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus the promised Christ who was crucified. To those who portray Peter as the illiterate fisherman from Galilee, lets point them to the fact that Peter quoted from the prophet Joel, one we call a **minor** prophet (!), and not from the popular greats like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Although Peter attributes his eloquence to the Holy Spirit, he was not a illiterate as we make him out to be!

A few chapters later, Paul then takes centre stage, and it seems as if the rest of the Bible is all about Paul and his journeys, his teaching, and his life. What then happened to the 11 chosen by Jesus, and Matthias who replaced Judas? Where did they go?

Before we proceed, lets clarify two words we use frequently and interchangeably. First, a **Disciple** is a person who makes a conscious decision to commit themselves to learning from the Master, and to live their lives by the teaching of the Master. When Jesus called each of the disciples, He asked them to, **Follow ME**. Learn from me and live by the principles I teach you. Jesus invited them, into a disciple relationship.

Second word is **Apostle**, a person who is **sent** with a message, an emissary who carries a specific message to a place or to a people. Believe it or not, you are, each one of you, an **apostle!** If you take your Sunday benediction seriously, you are an apostle. You leave this worship service with a teaching to live by, which makes you a Disciple, and you faithfully carry a message to share with others around you, which makes you an apostle.

So what happened to the 12 Apostles, to whom Jesus gave a specific message to deliver?

Matthew tell us of the Apostles' first "mission", which was to be a *practice run* for the 12. He writes, *Jesus sent the twelve out and COMMANDED them, "Don't go among the Gentiles or into a Samaritan city. Go instead to the LOST sheep, the people of Israel*³. There is lot packed into this sentence; if you are interested, come on Thursday morning and we can explore this further, but suffice it to say at this time, the LOST sheep of Israel are the 10 lost tribes of Israel, the tribes that were forcibly moved to Babylon by the Assyrian invasion.

As the 12 Apostles carry their mandate to the lost sheep of Israel, they encounter serious opposition from the Jewish religious hierarchy, who felt threatened they were losing their way of life, their practice of religion and their hold over the people.

The social culture and religious practice they had developed over centuries was centred around, being a Jew (an exclusive people called by God), being male, being rich (being poor was a curse) and being healthy (being sick or having a disease was a curse from God).

³ Matthew 10:5-6

Matthew tells us, *Jesus went through all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom of God, and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.*⁴ So the people who followed Jesus in mobs and droves and crowds, were the sick and with disease whom Jesus healed, the poor whom Jesus comforted, women from all backgrounds who were marginalised whom Jesus gave a sense of worth, the gentiles who were made to feel inferior to the Jew, and the sinners who were looked down upon and shunned by society. All who were made to feel inferior by the Jewish religious leaders came to Jesus. No wonder they **felt** threatened by Jesus!

This was the worldview into which a young Jew named Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin, was raised. At the age of 10, his wealthy family in the city of Tarsus sent him to Jerusalem to be personally trained under the famous scholar and Rabbi, Gamaliel. If you can imagine a young 10-year old being sent to Oxford by his *uber*-rich parents to study law, **exclusively** under one of the brightest legal minds in Britain, this would be the equivalent of Paul's education. Paul was a practicing Jew of high standing, and by virtue of his birth, a Roman citizen.

It was not easy to get Roman Citizenship. You could **buy** it⁵ and it was **very** expensive, you could **earn** it through military service, or as in Paul's case, being born in a Roman free-city, he was **entitled** to Roman citizenship.

The privilege of being a Roman citizen came with rights and privileges. When Nero blamed Christians for the burning of Rome and killed thousands of them very brutally, he crucified Peter, but not Paul: a Roman

⁴ Matthew 4:23

⁵ Acts 22:24-28

citizen could not be crucified. Instead, such was Nero's anger against Christians, Paul was beheaded in the summer of 64 AD.

After Pentecost, 12 active apostles became evangelists and the Kingdom of God grew by leaps and bounds. Around six months after Jesus' ascension, the apostle Stephen was stoned to death for proclaiming Jesus as the Christ within the Temple court. The Pharisees were so incensed at Stephen's teaching that they removed their costly and colourful robes, cast off their identity, left them in the custody of young Saul, while they stoned Stephen to death. Saul watched the stoning with great satisfaction.

Shortly after the death-by-stoning of Stephen, Saul asks the Chief Priest in Jerusalem for a letter authorising him to hunt down and bring back to Jerusalem, the leaders of **The Way**, the name of the Christian movement at this time. Armed with this letter, Saul sets off for Damascus. As he enters the Syrian plain north of the Golan Heights, with the city in clear sight on the horizon, Paul has the **Damascus Road Experience**: a blinding light threw him off his horse. The young and powerful Saul fell to the ground and he clearly heard the voice of Jesus saying to him, *Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?*⁶

Paul has no knowledge of Christ, but he asks the question, *Who are you, Lord?* This would, most probably have been the first time in his life, Saul would have addressed anyone as **Lord!**, and the first time Saul was forced to surrender to an authority greater than any he had ever known.

You see, an encounter with the living Christ leaves us with no doubt who He is. We may have other pursuits in life, we may have other things and

⁶ Acts 9:4

people which are **as gods** in our lives, demanding our attention, ruling over our time and resources, and exercising their control over us. But an encounter with the living Christ leaves us with no doubt, who He is.

Jesus replies to Saul's question, *I am Jesus whom you are persecuting* (a wonderful image of Christ suffering, feeling the pain, when we **His body** suffer with pain). *Now arise and enter the city (of Damascus) and **you will be told what to do!***

This is the distinctive feature of the Christian life - to surrender control over our lives, to the One who planned creation and knows where we would best be useful in His kingdom. Paul embarks on a journey for the rest of his life, over which he has no control. What will he be told to do?

In Damascus, a disciple of Christ named Ananias, was told by the Christ, *This man is a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings, and the descendants of Israel. Go and tell him.*⁷ With great fear and trepidation from knowing Saul's fierce reputation for putting down anyone who followed **The Way**, Ananias does what he is told. Saul is healed of his blindness, recovers his strength and *disappears* into the desert.

After several years of unlearning his world view as a practising Jew and learning anew about life in the Kingdom of God, when he is ready, Paul starts his journey by visiting synagogues in the towns and cities where there was an active diaspora of Jews, telling them of the Gospel of Christ and life in the **true** Kingdom of God. They quarrelled and rejected him and his message. So, Paul *shook out his garment* (a symbol of "washing his

⁷ Acts 9:15

hands off them") and said to them, **Your blood be upon you; I am innocent. From now on, I will go to the gentiles.**⁸

The 12 disciples whom Jesus chose and called, carried the message to the lost sheep of Israel, to the 10 lost tribes, and it was Paul who carried the message of Jesus' gospel and the Kingdom of God to the gentiles, the world of people who were neither Jews, nor idol worshippers (pagans), but who lived in chosen ignorance of God. The gentiles lived by a worldview which was very Greek in culture and nature: the pursuit of knowledge and a reverence for wisdom, a hedonistic life which granted them physical pleasures here and now, and the pursuit of health and wealth. As we shall see over the next two months, Paul's message to the world of his time, addressed these issues, and many of the issues he addressed, are relevant to us today.

We come to Church gladly, we serve the Church joyfully, we identify ourselves as Christians readily, **but from the early life and conversion of Paul, we learn that our calling as Christians, as followers of The Christ is first to be disciples, and when we have learned to be disciples, to be apostles of Jesus the Christ.** As disciples, we commit ourselves to learn and live by the laws of the Kingdom of God, and as apostles, we dedicate ourselves to be faithful in carrying the message of Christ wherever we go, teaching those who will listen and hear, what Jesus has taught us⁹.

Paul needed a "Damascus Road Experience" to turn his life around. Most of us do not need such drastic treatment, but all of us are called to be disciples, and to be apostles. **AMEN**

⁸ Acts 18:5-6

⁹ Matthew 28:19-20