

The gospel message spreads

15 May 2022 – Easter 5

BIBLE READINGS

[Acts 1:8 – the theme verse for the whole book of Acts ...](#)

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

[Acts 5:12-14, 6:7, 9:31 – the Christian community continues to thrive ...](#)

The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people in Jerusalem. All the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade at the Temple. ... More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

... The word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

... After the conversion of Paul, the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

[Acts 11:19-21, 13:1-3, 47-49, 14:24-27 – the church spreads into Gentile regions ...](#)

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. ...

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers ... including Barnabas and Paul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Paul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. ...

At Pisidia in Galatia, almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds they were filled with jealousy and contradicted what was spoken by Paul. He responded by saying: 'This is what the Lord has commanded us:

"I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. ...

When Paul and Barnabas eventually returned to Antioch, where they had been

commissioned for the work they had completed, they called the church together and related all that God had done through them and how God had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles.

MESSAGE The gospel message spreads

People make plans all the time ...

- Plans to go away on holidays, which for many of us have been on hold for the last two years
- Plans for upcoming birthdays or how we will spend Election day
- Plans for getting fit or losing weight



There's a well-known verse in the book of Jeremiah that suggests that God has plans too, good plans ...

I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jer 29:11)

It seems that Jesus had a plan too, for what his followers would do when he was no longer with them. This plan is what I've called the theme verse for the book of Acts, namely ...

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

For the last two weeks we've explored what it means for us to be **witnesses** of Jesus through both our words and our actions. Today I want to explore the last part of Jesus' commission, namely that his followers will be witnesses where they are in Jerusalem, gradually extend their witness to Judea and Samaria and



eventually take their witness to the ends of the earth.

This progression of their witness may well reflect a verse from one of the so-called servant songs in Isaiah that is quoted by Paul in one of our readings today, namely:

*It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6)*

We don't know whether Jesus intended a neat three stage mission of bringing light to the nations – first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and then to the rest of the world – or whether this was Luke's view in hindsight.

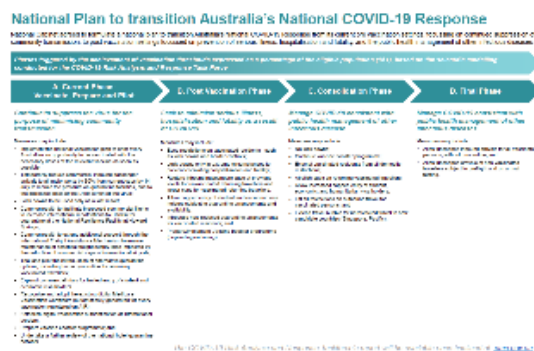
Either way it's perhaps similar to our government's plan to move Australia out of covid – by ramping up vaccination rates to different age cohorts, easing restrictions and then finally learning to live with the virus. The government's plan of course, didn't allow for the super infectious Omicron strain of covid to arrive mid-way through the plan, which almost overwhelmed our hospitals and caused significantly more deaths than earlier strains.

Yet here we are today with very few restrictions in place – but with many people still being infected every day – so that each of us must learn how to live with this disease in an ongoing way. The neat four step plan has turned out to be somewhat messy and there have been major challenges along the way.

So it was for the early followers of Jesus.



The first major step in Jesus' plan happened at Pentecost when God's Spirit was poured out upon the disciples and they gained new courage and confidence to speak about Jesus. The more they spoke and witnessed, the more people joined their new movement. Luke suggests that many joined them that



first Pentecost day – 3000 odd people – then some time later it was up to 5000 people, and Luke reports that many priests later joined the movement. All of this was happening in Jerusalem and the message was being shared only with other Jews.

Several years after the events of Easter, a Greek speaking disciple, Stephen, was murdered, which Luke describes in Acts chapter 7. This resulted in widespread persecution against the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, effectively forcing them out into Judea and Samaria where they continued their witness of Jesus, thus fulfilling the second step of Jesus' plan.

It was almost like God's Spirit was blowing on a dandelion flower and the seeds went everywhere, carrying with them Jesus' message of good news. Some of these seeds went north into Syria to the city of Antioch, which in turn became a major Christian centre and the impetus for further mission into what is modern day Turkey, into Greece and also to Rome. Other seeds went south and west into Africa and some went east into Asia.



In the book of Acts these seeds that are scattered carry 'the word of God' with them. This word seems to have a life all of its own and is presented as the active agent of God's Spirit, carrying the good news to new places and helping it take root.

There are probably further allusions to Isaiah with this focus on God's word. In Isaiah we read that while

people are like grass that withers and dies, the word of God will stand forever (Isa 40:8). This word will go out from Jerusalem and teach the nations to walk in God's ways (Isa 2:3). And this word will not return empty but rather shall accomplish God's will (Isa 55:11).

What we see in the book of Acts is this powerful and purposeful word of God at work, as more and more people in more and more places learn about Jesus and about the ways of God. This movement of God's Spirit helps build new communities of God's people from all the way Jerusalem to Rome, where the narrative concludes.

But there was a major hurdle to overcome before this plan could be fulfilled. The next big step was to extend the conversations and the witness from **Jewish** to **non-**



Jewish people like us, the Gentiles. We don't know who first took this bold step ... but Luke, himself a gentile, suggests that it was unnamed and unknown Jewish Christians who shared the message with gentile Greek speakers at Antioch.

This was a big deal for a movement that came out of Judaism, which is what Christianity was in

these early days, as Jews generally didn't mix with non-Jews. It proved to be **controversial** and caused **conflicts** between the Christian community and the Jewish synagogue. Back in the first century it was **BIG news** that **Israel's** God would embrace **non-Jewish** people, not to **replace** Israel but rather to be a **renewed Israel**, the people of God.

In our readings today we hear about some of the early faltering steps taken by Paul and Barnabas as they embark on this step of Jesus' plan to bring good news to the gentiles and to the ends of the earth.

As we take a step back from Luke's account of the early Christian movement and some of its struggles and successes, what might we learn for ourselves and where might we fit into God's plan?

First, we might be surprised that after all these years God still has a plan. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray the line ...

Your will be done, on earth as in heaven

which suggests that God **does** indeed have a plan for what happens on the earth. Sometimes of course it's difficult to understand what that plan might be ... in situations like the war in Ukraine ... what is God's purpose in allowing such destruction and suffering to continue for week after week?

Second, it seems that God's plan was to work and speak through Jesus and then to work and speak through his followers. When we look at the decline of the church in many places in our day, we may wonder if this was such a good plan. Maybe God should have had a Plan B or a Plan C ... but no, God chooses to work through ordinary, fallible people like you and me, and in the words of Paul ... shine light through the cracks of our lives and bring good news to those around us.

Third, when we think about Jesus' plan for how the message will be shared, the starting point is where we are, our version of Jerusalem. We're invited to make God

and Jesus' name known to our friends and our neighbours, right where we are. As we travel or move around, we take that message with us to places further afield, sometimes even to the ends of the earth if we travel that far.

A final lesson for us is that God has no favourites and that **everyone** is invited to become part of God's worldwide, forever family. That means we witness to our friends – through our words and our actions – but it also means we witness to people whom we think may have no real interest in God or in spiritual things ... perhaps clients who come to Helping Hand or to the meals program at Croydon North, or the families who come to playgroup. We may never know the impact of our witness in what we say and through our love in action, but who knows, we may be planting the seeds that one day will sprout and grow up to be healthy plants that in turn point to Jesus.

Our call then is to make **everyone** welcome, as our next song declares ...

HYMN Let us build a house

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive;
built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:

All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where prophets speak, and words are strong and true,
where all God's children dare to seek to dream God's reign anew.

Here the cross shall stand as witness and as symbol of God's grace;
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:

All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where love is found in water, wine, and wheat:
a banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet.

Here the love of God, through Jesus, is revealed in time and space,
as we share in Christ the feast that free us:

All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the Word they've known.

Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger:

All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word.

Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:

All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place

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