

A circus came to town offering a prize of £500 to anyone who could stay in the lion's cage for a minimum of five minutes. A Christian man who'd been down on his luck, was in the audience that day. He knew the story of Daniel in the lion's den and he was desperate for money, so he took the challenge. Once he entered the cage he began to have doubts as the lion quickly approached him. Frightened and anxious, the man knelt on the ground and began to pray for deliverance: *Please, God, watch over me and do not forsake me in my time of need.* Once the man had prayed he looked up to see the lion kneeling in prayer too. Indignantly the man asked; *What are you praying for? I'm the one in danger here!* The lion replied; *I am giving thanks for what I am about to receive.*

There are times when faced with certain situations, we are caught between trembling in fear and giving thanks for the opportunity that lies before us. God often tests us by taking us out of our comfort zone, and this makes us stronger. This exactly what the disciples went through when Jesus left them; they wondered how they'd carry on the work Jesus had called them to, without Him there with them. Yet these fearful disciples gave birth to the church and led an exciting time of phenomenal growth for the Church.

The first chapter of Acts records the disciples beginning their ministry and Jesus had left them with the Great Commission; **Matt 28: *I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age.*** And the key phrase is; *And I will be with you always, to the end of the age.* Jesus would be with them through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the Book of Acts, the Apostle Luke recorded the continuation Jesus' ministry through His disciples, who had witnessed Christ ascending into heaven (v9). They were alone and vulnerable at this point and not knowing what else to do, they remained in Jerusalem, waiting for the Holy Spirit as Jesus had instructed them. *Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift I told you about, the gift my Father promised. John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'* (v4 & 5).

Up to this point, Jesus' ministry was limited to Judea, but through the imparting of His Holy Spirit, Jesus' ministry could be sustained in many different places at the same time. At this point, the disciples did not fully understand this, but they were comforted by the promise that God would go with them. The Holy Spirit journeys with all Christians who are open to God and this truth gives us real strength and comfort. No one wants to face anxieties and uncertainties alone, and the disciples were empowered by the promise that Jesus would go with them through the Holy Spirit.

A lesson for us is to note the willingness of the early Church to rely on the power of God. Their anxiety regarding the future put them right where they needed to be, and it was through fear that they recognized their need for God. Only God could help them through the persecution they faced. It was God who would be able to guide and direct them out of their anxiety and into power.

Having been with Christ as he performed magnificent miracles must have been heady stuff for Jesus' followers. They may have felt important as the crowds clamoured around them and followed them from town to town. This reflected glory of being in Jesus' company must have been gratifying for them, and now Jesus was leaving them. And although the disciples had been with Jesus from the beginning, they understood little about the ways of God's Kingdom. Now Jesus expected them to carry on His work, and they needed God's power, and not rely on their own limited power.

There's a story about a boy who was hired to do odd jobs around a woodworking factory. One day the boy's foreman lost his watch in the piles of sawdust lying on the floor. The watch had great sentimental value for the foreman and he desperately wanted to find it, so he had his crew stop to look for the watch. Eventually they all gave up looking and went to lunch. When the foreman and crew returned from lunch, they found the boy waiting for them, and he was holding the foreman's watch. *How did you find my watch?* the foreman asked excitedly. *Everyone looked for it for hours without success to find it so how did you find it?* The boy said; *I just lay down quietly in the sawdust, and I listened for the sound of the watch ticking.*

We're not good at doing that, are we? How often do we stop and listen for the sound of God's voice? How often do we pause and wait for God's message? A secret of the early church is that they began by waiting for God's Spirit to empower and lead them. Their effectiveness in carrying out their mission was based on their willingness to seek God, then allow God to use them to fulfil His purpose

Another lesson we discover in Acts 1 is God's purpose for the Church. In the last verse of this passage as the disciples are looking heavenward, two angels appear to them and say: *This Jesus who was taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way that you saw him go to heaven.* The disciples have witnessed Jesus' ascension and they'd been assured that Jesus will return. The question for the disciples was what shall they do in the meantime? What's expected of them as they await Jesus' return? The answer is found in v8: *You will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* Jesus' followers weren't to waste time waiting for his return. They were to prepare others for Christ's return by sharing the good news. There's a fair chance that most people in Judea would have heard of Jesus. After the tumultuous events of His last week in Jerusalem, He would be known! But people would not be aware of the events of Easter and His resurrection.

Roman officials believed that Jesus' followers had stolen His body from the tomb. The Roman and Jewish authorities claimed that Jesus was dead, and they wouldn't accept the truth of the resurrection. Only the early Christians could share the news that Jesus was alive and forgiveness and eternal life was available to all who believed in Him. God's purpose for His church is for us to be witnesses!

A witness is someone who testifies to something from personal experience. They don't talk about what they have heard, they talk about what they've experienced first-hand. The Greek word for *witness* is the same as the Greek word for *martyr*, for a witness for Christ must be willing to sacrifice in order to promote Christ's message. Our direction from Christ to be witnesses is the same today as it was to the original disciples: ***You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.*** It's not enough to bear witness in places we are comfortable, we are called to go to the end of the earth to carry the message of Christ.

An American woman travelled with a group to Guatemala for a mission project. They were warned that they would encounter street children in Guatemala City and they should ignore them, and they were not to give these children money. The woman and her group encountered some street children and this woman seeing their poverty and hunger, felt compelled to give them money.

She challenged her group leader: *We came here in the name of Christ to convey the love of Christ. How can we be expected to ignore hungry children in the street?* The leader's response said little to satisfy her concerns, but she decided not to push the issue. Early next morning she went to the hotel bakery and bought all the bread she could carry. Each time she left the hotel she would carry bread with her and when she saw street children, lovingly and kindly she gave them bread. She was determined to convey the love of Christ in any way possible.

She took the children bread every day for the month she was in Guatemala and the children looked in eager anticipation of the *Mujer de pan*, which is Spanish for the *Bread Lady*, and because she was a missionary, they said the bread came from God.

Whatever else we do as Christ's Church we must be faithful witnesses, demonstrating to others the love of Christ. We must faithfully tell the story of how Jesus changed our lives and how He can change the lives of others. Our faith should be demonstrated through our actions as we respond to those around us. Sharing the gospel is important, but sharing a sandwich with the gospel really makes an impact.

The passage of scripture we've read today holds the key to effective church renewal, and like those first disciples, we can find assurance in the promise of the Holy Spirit. It's impossible to read Acts story of the early Church, and not acknowledge the vital role of the Holy Spirit in the Church's growth and ministry. If we want our churches to be effective then we have to pursue the promise of the Holy Spirit. It's through God's Spirit that our churches will receive much needed guidance and power. It's through God's Spirit that our churches will become God's churches, and we'll become God's agents for ushering in a new kingdom.

We can achieve a little through our own strength and understanding. But we can do so much more when God empowers us through His Spirit. As we read on in Acts 2, we'll learn that when we receive the Holy Spirit into our church and lives then: *Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old man will dream dreams*. It's only through the Holy Spirit that the Church will be properly empowered, and that we will receive God's greatest blessings.

Let us pray.

(1801 words)