

Hello Deacon Paul here. Welcome to year 3 Theophilus. I say Theophilus because we all are friends of God which is what Theophilus means. That is how Luke starts the book of the Acts of the Apostles. He tells us in his Gospel that he carefully researched and wrote an orderly account of the life of Jesus. He continues Jesus' story in this book by telling us the orderly account of the early Church. Using Acts, we will explore how those beginnings relate to our journey in the next sessions.

The first two chapters of Acts are the focus of this session. They contain 5 themes which build a coherent message of hope and faith.

- The first theme is Prophecy and Enthronement: The gospel of Luke ends with the story on the Road to Emmaus and the Ascension of Jesus. Then, Acts chapter one verses one through eleven bridges the end of that Gospel and recounts the promise of the Spirit and the Ascension. Luke adds the bit about two men asking the Apostles why they are looking up into heaven.
- The Second theme is Preparing the People: The first community was formed in the upper room, and they devoted themselves to prayer. Peter decided that Judas must be replaced, and they chose Matthias by lots.
- The third theme is The Gift of the Spirit: The Holy Spirit came upon them; they spoke boldly in different tongues and were understood by various people representing the ends of the earth.
- The fourth theme is Peter's Pentecost Sermon: Here Peter tells the Jews that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, and that they killed him. He quotes passages from Joel and Psalm 16 to underscore the fact.
- The fifth theme is a Portrait of a Restored People: The people feel bad and ask what they can do. Peter baptizes 3000 of them. They live communally and this attracts additional people. The breaking of the bread is mentioned twice appropriately given its importance to the mission.

The first section is called Prophecy and Enthronement. You might have a better title. It bridges Luke's Gospel with this work. It's about Jesus no longer being with them in temporal form and the Apostles in search of what to do next. The two men prompt them to action by their question and promise. So, what do we do in the absence of Jesus in temporal form, but with Faith that He will return? Do we stand looking up to the sky or do we act? This passage applies to us in the here and now as well as it applied to the Apostles 40 days after the Resurrection.

If Jesus returned tomorrow, could we show Him that we have not been idle? Are we reading these events as if we were there with the Apostles or as if the Apostles are here with us?

(pause)

Luke advances the story in the second section as the apostles returned to the upper room where they were staying. They devoted themselves to prayer. What do we do when we do not know what to do? Perhaps more importantly, who do we do it with? The formation of a community is critical in keeping the Faith, the idea of Jesus alive. The Apostles and disciples felt that need to keep Jesus' promise alive and knew they were more likely to do so in community and through Prayer.

One result of those prayers was when Peter decided that they needed to replace Judas. He used Scripture to explain why, and they used lots to choose Matthias. It is worth noting that this is the last time the Church used chance to discern the will of God. After the Holy Spirit's engagement nothing is left to chance.

When we pray for guidance in making decisions, are we open to God's Spirit or our own appetite? How does community (in any sense) help us in making the right decision?

(pause)

The Third section recounts the birthday of the Church. The Holy Spirit descends, and things are changed forever. The Apostles make bold proclamations to the people, and the people understand them in their native languages. This portends the beginning of Evangelization, one of the key missions of the Church. The target audience is all people to the ends of the earth as exemplified by the variety of nations represented.

It is worth noting here that the Apostles are not "Speaking in Tongues" as understood by fundamentalist congregations (that is called "glossolalia"). They make reasoned and intelligible proclamations in a variety of languages. These were heard by the crowd in their native language. So, if Peter was speaking Aramaic, the English heard in English and the Italians heard in Italian. And if James spoke in Hebrew. he was heard in English, Italian or French. This is called "xenolalia". The point is; a miracle was affected by the power of the Holy Spirit, a very powerful miracle.

Miracles come in both large and small varieties. Have you ever witnessed a miracle?

(pause)

The fourth section continues the miracle and highlights Peter's sermon. He takes center stage and lays out the charge, bolstered by quotations from the Book of Joel. Prophecy has been fulfilled by Jesus. Then in Psalm 16, Peter furthers the status of Jesus until he makes the final point in verse 36, "Therefore let the whole House of Israel know for certain that God made him both Lord and Messiah ... this Jesus whom you crucified". They begin evangelizing by first proclaiming Jesus is God, the foundation from which all else is built.

The tradition of the Church from this early start even up to the present day is to back up theological points with quotes from the scriptures. If you look into the Catechism of the Catholic Church for instance nearly every point has a foundation in Scripture. It is important that the plan of salvation is one that is consistent in meaning. Peter sets the example for the nascent Church.

We believe the Bible is the Word of God. Do we find help there in times of trouble and uncertainty? Have you thought of Peter as a model of certainty in times of uncertainty?

(pause)

The fifth section, portrait of a restored people, sets up the church as directed by the Holy Spirit. Peter's speech stirred the hearts of those who heard and believed. Luke recounts that 3,000 accepted Peter's message, were baptized and added to what is now the Church. By accepting Peter's account, they are restored to God's favor. As Jesus and the Holy Spirit planned, starting in Jerusalem, the good news of Jesus Christ is starting to be spread to the ends of the earth.

By the apostolate of example in the form of communal life (they will know we are Christians by our Love) the church evangelized the message and the directive to share the Jesus story. Luke tells us they devoted themselves to the teachings of the apostles, to the communal life, to prayer and to the breaking of the bread.

I want to spend some time on the idea of Communal Living in the early Church because that is central to our journey in today's world. You see, humans are a social lot. We can do more, see more, understand more when we are in community.

A Christian community is not an echo chamber. We are allowed to review diverse ideas because most often, they force us to strengthen our Faith when we process the thought in community. A Christian Community is not a Hippie Commune. The early Christian communal life did not mean living all in one house or compound, but rather: It was a spiritual and practical unity in everyday life, substantial mutual support, especially for the poor, frequent gatherings in homes for prayer, teaching, meals, and especially, the Eucharist.

Communities that listen to the Holy Spirit as they journey through life are blest. They have the confidence in their belief to share. Alone it is hard to keep the evil one at bay. But with the support of like-minded pilgrims on the same journey we can overcome doubt and temptation. Then strengthened by the Breaking of the Bread we can thrive and expand to where God intends us to be.

I have come to think that we are not so far removed from the communities described in the Acts. I challenge you to discuss the ways of spiritual similarity this small group has with Peter, James and the rest.

May God Bless us: In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit

Discussion Questions:

- The two men advised the Apostles that this Jesus will return. What did the Apostles choose to do in the meantime? Are we still doing it?
- How is this small group an example of early Christian Communal life?
- Luke paints a picture of the early church as being joyful. Are we joyful?
- Is the breaking of the bread as important to us as it was to the early Church?