

**Martin White. 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 2010**

## **Introduction to Acts**

Often working out the preaching rota is one of my most important and difficult jobs in the year – sense of responsibility hear what God is saying and to steer the church forward for the year.

Last year though it was easy because I sensed God speaking so clearly about Moses and the Israelites in the desert, so that's what we preached on for the first part of the year, and it seemed that that mirrored some of our experience as a church going through some difficult times – especially financially, but still aware – very powerfully at times, of God's Presence.

This year's planning has been an easy one as well, because again I believe that God has spoken to us.

And I believe that, just as much of last year was a time of teaching us to trust God, so this year will be a year when we see God's Plans unfolding. And the book of the Bible that has been on my heart for some time is the book of Acts; and so for part of this year, that's what we will be preaching on.

So today I want to try to set the scene.

Acts is an amazing book that tells the story of how the Church grew and expanded from its beginning on the Day of Pentecost AD 33 to Paul's arrival in Rome, probably around AD63.

It was written by Luke – who wrote the Gospel of Luke! And is the second volume of his "orderly account" of the life of Jesus and the establishing of the Church; Luke starts like this:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

(Theophilus may have been an actual person, but the name literally means “God-lover” so maybe he had in mind all believers.)

Often when we think of Acts, we think about the Baptism and Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and certainly that is a wonderful ingredient of the Book.

But actually there is much, much more.

In Acts, Luke tells the story of how the Church was established around the Mediterranean Sea between about the years 30AD and 67AD.

It is not the whole story of what was happening at the time, because around the same time, the Gospel also went East and South.

Churches were also established around this time to the East in Jordan, Iraq, Iran, India and possibly China.

And to the South, churches were started into Ethiopia, Libya, Arabia and Egypt.

But Acts tells the story of how the Church expanded out of Jerusalem, into the surrounding area, then into western Asia – Syria & Turkey, and then across into Europe.

It is fully called “The Acts of the Apostles” but actually, most of the apostles hardly get a mention! Actually it mainly follows the stories of Peter and then Paul – explaining how the Gospel spread from being a movement among Jews, to spread to the Gentiles (all other non-Jewish people) as well.

Sometimes Acts is called a handbook for the Church, as it outlines “normal” New Testament church life – looking at how the church was structured; how people related together; how they did evangelism; what their priorities were; what they believed; how they preached; how they crossed into different cultures with the Gospel.

It also deals really honestly with things like disagreements that they had and how they resolved them; persecution; loss; mistakes they made.

And in all of this, the Church in Acts is our model – our blueprint for the Crown, and also for Newfrontiers, the family of churches we are part of, which would

call itself a “Restoration” movement – aiming to restore the church as much as possible to the vision, mission, theology and structures of the Acts Church.

And as we build a church that is crossing cultures and aiming to bring the Gospel to “hard to reach” groups in the city, wonderfully we have a model to follow in the Church in Acts.

Once the Church had understood Jesus’ Great Commission, and that the Gospel is Good News for all nations, not just the Jews, it passionately and powerfully and skilfully brought the Gospel to many cultures which were every bit as hard as any culture we are likely to meet today!

A few months ago I went to the ruins of Ephesus, which was the second largest city in the world at the time, and where Apollos and then Paul get to in Acts 18 and 19.

When I was walking round the ruins of the city I was struck by how many pagan temples there were – temple; temple; brothel; temple; temple! And yet, a church of 100,000 was built there, literally next door to all the pagan worship – even in the midst of persecution and all sorts of opposition.

And through the Book of Acts, the Good News of Jesus goes to zealous Jews, and Greek philosophers, and Roman leaders and Corinthian slaves and Ethiopian officials and sophisticated Philippians and brutal Scythian barbarians and Gentile kings.

So as we look through the Book, I believe that we will be challenged and stirred and empowered for mission in this city and beyond. It is a Missionary Book, and the acts it will stir us to are missionary acts!

But there are two ways you can read the Book of Acts; one way is as I have just described – as Luke’s ordered, historical account of the birth of the Church, with all the lessons to be learned from it that are so applicable to us.

But the other – and I believe, more important way to look at this is as the continuing work of Jesus, building His Church.

The Book of Acts starts like this:

**In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:1-3)**

Luke starts by saying that the Gospel of Luke is what Jesus **began** to do – in other words, He hasn't finished!

Jesus' work of redemption was completed on the Cross – Jesus cried out "It is finished!"

But Jesus' work with His People is ongoing; otherwise Luke would have written "This is what Jesus did."

But this says that the time up to Jesus' ascension was what He **began**; In Luke's mind – as it should be in ours, the Book of Acts is not the story of the Apostles, but an account of the ongoing work of Jesus in His Church, by His Spirit.

**After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.**

Luke understood that Jesus is alive – He proved it – convincingly! And His Ascension – His return to His Father's Side, didn't change that.

The fact that we cannot now see and touch Him does not change the fact He is alive.

And so, in Luke's mind, as he was writing his accounts, part one was all about the life of Jesus – God become Flesh; and part 2 – Acts, is all about the continuing work of Jesus in and through His Church.

When Jesus was on Earth, He said **I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. (Matthew 16:18)**. Acts is the start of Jesus doing this!

When Jesus was on Earth, (He) went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. (Matthew 9:35)

After His Death and resurrection – guess what? He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. (v.3)

As soon as He was back with His disciples, He carried on teaching the same thing

Acts is the story of the continuing coming of the Kingdom through the Church.

It is the ongoing, unfolding story of Jesus establishing His Church – in the face of opposition, disaster – Stephen, then James being executed; Peter and Paul – the key leaders being imprisoned; opposition from the Jews, the Romans, the Greeks; arguments between apostles; deep-seated racism that had to be dealt with and all sorts of wrong ideas and beliefs and false teachings needing to be sorted out.

Any of these things are enough to make us shudder if we thought about them happening here – but they don't sway Jesus from His Mission! In fact, as we will see, some of these things that from a human point of view are disasters; Jesus uses to spread His Kingdom even further!

If we look at Acts as an historical account of some of God's people – which it is; then we see all the ups and downs; advances and problems. And we can relate to that and be encouraged in our ups and downs; advances and problems.

But if we see that the Living Jesus – King of Kings is building His Church; advancing His Kingdom; preparing His Bride: and nothing – no opposition or delay or disappointment or loss – not even the very gates of Hades, can stand against His plans; then we understand what is really going on in Acts.

However amazing the Apostles were, Jesus built His Church despite them; it wasn't built due to them. Remember, the two key characters in Acts were a man who denied he knew Jesus and Jesus' most zealous persecutor! – But in His Grace Jesus restored and included both of them.

### **So how about the Crown in 2010?**

Mark Driscoll – the American pastor calls his group of churches “the 29<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts.” (a brilliant name which I wish I had thought of first!!!)

The point he's making is that Acts hasn't finished yet; Luke finished his bit in chapter 28, the start of chapter 29 may have talked about Peter and Paul being killed (on the same day around AD67) but then it would carry on to tell the story of Nero's persecution, but the Church continuing to grow and spread – unstoppably like yeast, through the Roman Empire, reaching Britain probably shortly after the Roman invasion in 43AD – certainly by 209AD when a Roman soldier – Alban was executed for sheltering a Christian priest.

Then churches were established in India, the Middle East, North Africa and Europe.

As Europe's churches got stronger through the ages, missionaries were sent out to Africa, China, India and the New World.

More recently, it is Europe that needs re-evangelising and so missionaries are coming to Europe from elsewhere in the world and world travel, technology and waves of migrations mean that the Gospel is spreading faster than ever.

There are more Christians alive now than there have ever been through all of history before. Of the Increase of His Government and Peace (and Kingdom and Church) there will be no end!

John's Gospel finishes with these words:

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. (John 21:25)

Jesus is still 'writing' His Book – He is still establishing His Church! He is still alive; He is still reigning on His Throne; His Kingdom is still extending and increasing!

The Crown is part of this.

Somewhere in Acts Chapter 21,000,958 there is a subheading "God's Kingdom grows in Birmingham" and the Crown gets a mention in it!

And for each of you, know this – Jesus' Kingdom is growing in your lives and will gain more ground through 2010.

Your life, from your perspective may seem difficult and uncertain; it may seem to you that things are going backwards rather than forwards.

Remember this though, from Jesus' Throne; from His Sovereign viewpoint, He sees His Word accomplishing things in your life; despite all the setbacks, He is writing His next chapter in your life.

Let's respond to Him – The Living One; let's look at the coming year from His perspective!