

Although this book is called 'Acts of the Apostles', perhaps it should be called 'Gospel of the Holy Spirit'. The sequel to Luke's Gospel is going to be a Spirit-filled story of a Spirit-led movement of change. Luke is passionate and enthusiastic about the presence and the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church. He writes the account of the ascension, but his focus is on the work of the Holy Spirit, which is the continuity of the presence of Christ in the world. Jesus is not with us in the flesh, but he is always with us through the Holy Spirit. Both books are addressed to someone called Theophilus. We're not sure who this is but his name means 'beloved of God'. In which case, let's imagine it's us! God's beloved, invited to share in his story.

We start at the Ascension. The perplexed disciples stare into the sky, wondering where Jesus has gone. This is one of those hinge events for Luke. His Gospel ends, and this book begins, with this strange story of arrival and departure. Final farewells are sad occasions, whether they take place at an airport or by a graveside. So it is surprising that Jesus's final goodbye to his disciples appears positively joyous. Gone were the fears and the doubts mingled with joy at his resurrection appearances; now the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

Jesus' mission is complete. He departs from the earth and takes humanity into heaven. The mission of his Church begins. The apostles await the arrival of the Spirit, which is the new presence of Jesus no longer limited by space and time. It is about absence and presence. Jesus is absent to them in the flesh, but will soon be present to them in a new and dynamic way.

Resurrection and ascension belong together. Without the ascension, while knowing that God raised Jesus, we do not know what happened ultimately to the risen Christ and have no firm hope for ourselves. The ascension completes the incarnation – the second person of the Trinity who took human flesh and was born among us has taken humanity into heaven, opening the door for us to enter in.

Jesus' departure and ascension into heaven was both an end and a beginning for his disciples. While it was the end of Jesus' physical presence with his beloved disciples, it marked the beginning of Jesus' presence with them in a new way. Jesus promised that he would be with them always to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20). Now ascended to the right hand of his Father in heaven, Jesus promised to send them the Holy Spirit. When Jesus departed physically from the apostles, they were not left in sorrow or grief. Instead, they were filled with joy

and with great anticipation for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The ascension is the work of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose love reaches out, sending witnesses to all creation.

Whether the ascension is a story of an ending or a beginning, Jerusalem became the place of dispersal. The disciples were to begin their witness in Jerusalem, then to go to all nations and the ends of the earth. So, while the ascension is about Jesus returning to heaven, it is also about a new beginning for all who follow him.

Jesus' last words to his disciples point to this key mission he has entrusted to his followers on earth, to us, - to be his witnesses and ambassadors to the ends of the earth so that all peoples, tribes, and nations might hear the good news that Jesus Christ has come to set us free from sin and death and has won for us a kingdom of peace, joy, and righteousness that will last forever.

How can we be effective witnesses for Christ? Jesus told his disciples, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you (Acts 1:8). Jesus gives his followers the same power he received when the Holy Spirit came upon him and anointed him at the beginning of his mission (John 1:32-33).

Just as ambassadors are appointed to represent their country and to speak on behalf of their nation's ruler, we, too are appointed by Jesus to speak on his behalf and to bring others into a close and personal relationship with him. This is the great commission which the risen Christ gives to the whole church. All believers have been given a share in this task - to be heralds of the good news and ambassadors for Jesus Christ, the saviour of the world. We have not been left alone in this task, for the risen Christ works in and through us by the power of his Holy Spirit.

Ascension as the ending of Jesus' physical presence on earth must have been a bittersweet moment. Ascension, as the beginning of the mission of the Church, anticipates the wonder of Pentecost.

We are caught up in this beginning. Each of us is challenged by Jesus' ascension to be witnesses of the wonderful works of God who has raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the heavenly places. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Luke described Jesus' vocation as bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free. Jesus changes people's physical as well as their spiritual situations, since both are

interlinked. That work goes on today, for we are to be witnesses wherever we are placed.

This is an account of hope and power. Even today, we celebrate the age of the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Through our baptism and the Eucharist, we go out into the world as the disciples of Christ, the risen and the ascended Lord, empowered just like the first disciples with the Holy Spirit. Through the same power of that same Spirit, we continue Christ's mission to light and salt in the world.

By living our faith well, people do not see us – they see Christ in us. This is how we shine and how we become true agents of the Holy Spirit.

The Ascension led to joyful worship and service for the disciples. Nothing has changed.

There were two things the disciples learned through these experiences: they learned to stick together and they learned to keep praying. Just as Pentecost came after constant prayer by the disciples, the history of the Church shows that revival also comes after persistent prayer. The prayer that happened in Jerusalem was persistent and this can happen today too. God sometimes speaks into someone's heart to pray for something or someone and they share this with others who pray with them over an extended period. Then with time they find that God has wonderfully answered their prayers. It is a simple principle, but one that we need to remind ourselves of regularly, given our natural tendency to drift toward prayerlessness.

During this week of "Thy Kingdom Come Prayer", will you undertake to pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and for God to move in the life of someone who does not know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour? In Jesus' name. **Amen**