

Acts 1:1-11

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The Spirit-filled Church – Acts 1:1-11

I wonder if you have ever heard of the Choluteca Suspension Bridge.

It was one of the best constructions in the whole of Honduras in Central America. It crossed the wide Choluteca River, and it was built to last for a long time and withstand even the worst hurricane.

In 1998 Hurricane Mitch poured down 2m of rain on the bridge in 4 days. 150 other bridges in Honduras were destroyed but the Choluteca Bridge stood firm, which was very impressive.

But after the Hurricane there were two problems. The first was that the storm completely washed away the roads on each side of the bridge; the second, was that it changed the course of the river, so that it no longer flowed under the bridge.

The mighty Choluteca Bridge had become a bridge from nowhere to nowhere: very impressive, but completely useless!

For me as a pastor, that bridge stands as a warning to the local church; a warning of how we can forget our mission and focus all our effort on the people who already come, while the world walks past the church door unreached, unloved and forgotten.

What a huge contrast with the church in the book of Acts; a church which began with 120 disoriented people shut in a room Jerusalem, but which became a movement that changed the known world in a generation.

How? By the power of the outpoured Holy Spirit.

Each section in the story of Acts finishes in a similar way:

6:7 – read. “So God’s message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem.”

9:31 – read. “The church then had peace... it became stronger. And with the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it also grew in numbers.”

12:24 – read “The word of God continued to spread, and there were many new believers.”

16:5 – Read “So the churches were strengthened in their faith and grew larger every day.”

19:20 – Read “So the message about the Lord spread widely and had a powerful effect.”

Finally in Rome...28:31 “[Paul was] boldly proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.”

So the gospel of Jesus is not just an idea, it’s a power! And when it is released, it grows, it spreads, it increases!

That’s what happens in Acts. The gospel spreads from the centre of the Jewish world in Jerusalem, all the way to the centre of the gentile world in Rome. But it happens through the witness of the Church, focused on its mission and filled with the Holy Spirit. He is...

God's Gift to the Church - Acts 1:4-5 – read.

("4 Once when he was eating with them, he commanded them, 'Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before. 5 John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'")

For centuries God had promised he would pour out his Spirit on his people, and Jesus is saying that the promise is about to be fulfilled.

It is a powerful image: you (together) will be baptised or bathed or drenched with the Holy Spirit.

A whole new era in God's work is about to open: the age of the Holy Spirit, who is not an 'it' or a 'power', but a powerful person: he is the living presence of God among his people and in his people.

The promise was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to the Church in powerful wind and holy fire (chap 2).

As they were filled, the believers began to speak the praises of God in languages they hadn't learned, so that the message could be understood by people from the nations gathered in Jerusalem.

3000 people put their faith in Jesus in a single day.

This is not surprising; it's exactly what Jesus had said – read 1:8 "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere — in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

But we must see the connection: the Spirit fills us for mission.

Mission without his power is fruitless, and tiring! We need him to fill us. But experience of the Spirit without mission misses the purpose!

He fills us to overflow in mission, until we've have filled the whole earth with the praises of Jesus – just as those early disciples did!

The Holy Spirit: God's gift to the Church at Pentecost. A gift he is always giving: a ceaseless, unending flow of living water and refreshing grace, proceeding from the Father and the Son.

So because he has been given to the Church, we seek more and more of his presence and power, opening our hearts and our lives to pray, come Holy Spirit! Come today! Come to fill us again. God's gift for...

God's Mission for the Church (1:6-8)

Read v6 – "So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, 'Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?'"

The disciples' question is full of misunderstanding.

They want Jesus to be on their side, to affirm their national identity; to give them security and independence by defeating the Romans.

But Jesus tells them in v7 that they must leave those things in God's hands. Their task is to be to be witnesses, who speak about what they saw Jesus do & heard him say – read v8, "But you will receive power

when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere — in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And we are witnesses too: witnesses to the truth of what they saw and heard and witnesses to the fact that message of Jesus works because we’ve seen his power in our lives!

In our church we run Alpha Courses to help people explore the Christian faith and it is so wonderful to see people’s lives changing.

I attended last session of the course last month, and I sat beside Lennox. He is a new Christian and he told us how Jesus had broken his dependence on drugs instantaneously!

Someone else described how the course had helped him understand the gospel clearly, and made him realise he needed to marry the woman he was with. Someone else became a Christian that night!

The gospel works! And we are witnesses of that fact!

And it doesn’t stop when we become Christians; that’s just the beginning! Jesus walks with us through our struggles and shares our joys with us too. And we tell that continuing story too!

We are witnesses: the only question is whether we’re silent bad witnesses or good witnesses who are heard.

Acts emphasises that the mission of the witnessing Church kept breaking into new communities: it was a boundary-crossing mission.

Cornelius was the first gentile convert, and his story is told 3 times!

Paul was the apostle to the gentiles and his conversion is told 3 times!

And three times there is a special outpouring of the Spirit, when the gospel crosses a new boundary, from the Jewish world, on to Samaria and then the gentile nations.

The message could not be clearer: the good news of Jesus isn’t only for people like me; it crosses boundaries because it’s for everyone.

And in our mission we are called to cross boundaries of culture, age, education and wealth with the gospel.

We are called to adapt and change to make sure we don’t restrict the gospel to our cultural identity and preferences. It’s for the whole world because God loves the whole world. That is our mission.

But the danger is that we miss that mission, and that we just focus on ourselves. If we do, we become like that Choluteca Bridge: a bridge from nowhere to nowhere – impressive, but useless.

But if we will grasp that mission and make it our own, crossing the boundaries around us with the love and truth of Jesus, we will discover that this mission is the most exhilarating, satisfying purpose for living!

God’s Mandate for the Church (1:9 – don’t read)

What is the mandate for our mission? After all, not everyone wants to hear the message. But the Jesus who gives us this mission (v8), is immediately taken into heaven, the place of authority (v9 – “After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him.”).

This Jesus says in Matt 28:18 “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me therefore go and make disciples of all nations.”

The early Christians had to remember this mandate, because their mission was often opposed. But though they were weak and marginalised, they were ultimately unstoppable, because they were filled with the Spirit of God.

So they witnessed in Jerusalem; they witnessed wherever they went as they were forced out by persecution (Acts 8); they witnessed across the Mediterranean world, and they changed their world for Jesus.

God's promise to the Church (10-11 - read)

(“10 As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. 11 ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!’”)

Jesus who came from heaven to earth now ascends from earth to heaven; but the promise is that he will return heaven to earth, bringing heaven – the home of God - with him as he comes.

Rev 21:3 describes that moment like this: “Look, God's home is now among his people.”

So our mission will be completed. The home of God will fill the whole earth, gathering and uniting people of all nations in the new creation!

The Bible does not finish with our souls floating off into heaven; it finishes with heaven coming to earth to make everything new – including us, who will rise to meet the returning Christ, to reign with him in his new creation, and share his home forever.

But as we finish, let's feel the impact of the angel's question – read v11 again. “Why are you standing here staring into heaven...?”

Christians are not to be so focused on another world that we lose focus on our mission in this world; the church is not meant to be a bridge from nowhere to nowhere; impressive but useless.

No, since Jesus is coming back, we have a job to do; we have a mission to accomplish: to cross every barrier and jump every obstacle, to make sure his love is seen and his truth is heard in every community and every nation, so the world is ready for his return.

So may I ask you, what is your response? Do you want to be on the sidelines of the mission, staring into the clouds, hoping someone else will do it, and that the church will just look after you?

Or are you going hear the call of the risen Christ, open your life to the fresh filling of his Holy Spirit, make God's mission your mission. and be part of building a Spirit-filled, mission-focused church?