

This is week 24 of our journey through the Acts of the Apostles, Luke's account of the origin of the Christian Church. The good news is we have only three weeks to go!

Through it all we have been reminded of the key text which sets the scene for the whole story. Right at the beginning Jesus appears in his resurrected form to his disciples in Jerusalem. He offers them, and through them, us – this encouragement:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the world.
(Acts 1:8)

Two figures dominate Luke's account of the early church. The first is the Apostle Peter, and the second is the Apostle Paul. Paul was once a Pharisee named Saul who was unflinching in his persecution of the church, but who after his Damascus Road vision of Jesus was transformed from the church's greatest persecutor into the church's greatest evangelist.

Up to now we have spent our time in the first 16 chapters of Acts. Paul's story dominates that last next 12 chapters, and we are going to race through some of that story today. Before we do, it is helpful for us to examine the chronology of Paul's life as best we can reconstruct it.

In 5AD Saul was born to wealthy and devout Jewish parents in the cosmopolitan city of Tarsus.

When he was 12 years of age he moved to Jerusalem where he studied under the most famous Jewish Rabbi's of the day, Gamaliel, eventually becoming a Rabbi.

As a young man in the prime of his life and with a devout commitment to his religion, Saul was a leader of the persecution of the early church.

It was while he was travelling to Damascus to round up some Christ-followers that Saul had a blinding encounter with the resurrected Jesus, after which he was baptized with the Holy Spirit and immediately began preaching.

For around 13 years we don't know much about Saul's life, except that he spent time in Syria, south in Arabia and then in Judea, eventually becoming a leader in the church at Antioch in Syria.

But then over a ten year period from 37-47AD Paul embarks on a number of mission journeys westward from Palestine and Syria into Asia and Europe.

Eventually he returns to Jerusalem where he is arrested, imprisoned first at Caesarea by the Sea and then in Rome where he was executed under Emperor Nero in around 64AD.

By any measure, Paul's life was one full of adventure and incident. But it is the ten year period between 47 and 57AD that I want to focus on today.

Let's look at what Paul achieved during this period:

First, over this period Paul preached thousands of sermons in synagogues, in house churches, before kings and governors, while in chains and while free. Paul could not, would not - would never contemplate shutting up about the Gospel. **Paul was an Evangelist.**

Second, Paul either planted, or built up no less than seventeen different churches through Asia and Europe on three separate Missionary journeys. **Paul was a Missionary.**

Third, Scholars estimate that over this ten year period, Paul travelled at least 25,000 kilometres, at least 14,000 of those by land. Paul walked through hail and sleet, sand and heat, over mountains and across deserts. When walking, Paul would average 30 kilometres travel a day through often treacherous terrain. **Paul was an Adventurer.**

Fourth, Paul did not just walk, he also wrote. In fact nine of Paul's letters we have today were written during this time, as well as two 'lost' letters to the church at Corinth, which makes eleven in total. Most, if not all of Paul's letters were written before the four Gospels we have in our Bibles. **Paul was an Author.**

Fifth, during this period, Paul radically expanded the scope of Christian mission. Christian Mission began in Jerusalem as a message for mostly Jews. Soon it was also non-Jewish God-fearers, those who were sympathetic to the faith who also heard and responded to the gospel - men like the Roman Centurion Cornelius. But Paul did not stop with Jews and God-fearers; he preached to pagan idol worshippers who had not concept whatsoever of the Jewish God. For Paul, the gospel was Good News for everyone without exception. **Paul was a Pioneer.**

Sixth, in the passionate rhetoric of his correspondence and the sacrificial use of his time, Paul demonstrated a heart that beat for the church. **Paul was a Pastor.**

Evangelist, Missionary, Adventurer, Author, Pioneer and Pastor - all this in ten breathtaking years.

It is no overstatement to say that Paul was and is a spiritual giant.

Spiritual giants cast a long shadow and in that shadow it is easy for us to feel small and insignificant.

But before anything else, Paul was a sinner saved by God's amazing grace. Just like us. And he was committed to following Jesus wherever he led – all in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As a fellow follower of Jesus, Paul's life can teach us a lot about how we serve Jesus in our day. When you examine Paul's life carefully, you will discover that for him there were four essential, non-negotiable components to his life as a Christian; evangelism, community, training and service.

Paul was a passionate evangelist. His common practice when entering a new town was to go the local synagogue or market place and engage in spiritual conversation with anyone who would give him their ear and their time.

Paul knew he had precious treasure to offer. He knew that in the gospel was God's power to change lives.

Paul said this of his mission:

We preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called...Christ the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:23-24)

Paul was committed to establish Christian Communities. The Greek word for these communities is ecclesia. In the Roman Empire of Paul's day, when a town or city was conquered by Caesar they were required to pledge allegiance to the Emperor, declare Caesar as Lord, and so they became an ecclesia – a community of the Empire.

The ecclesia's that Paul and other leaders established did not pledge allegiance to Caesar, but to Jesus. As such Jesus was the head of these new communities that bore his name. Paul likened Christian Community to a body, with Jesus as the head, and with each person playing a vital role in maintaining the health and vitality of the whole body. Paul said to the church, the ecclesia at Corinth:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

Christianity is a communal faith. As the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are unique and yet unified, so too we are called to bring our individual uniqueness together to form a unified whole.

Third, Paul was committed to educating believers in the faith in order that they would know the Truth of Christ that sets people free. Paul was a highly intelligent man who combined remarkable insight into the human condition with a passionate understanding of the goodness and greatness of God. Paul taught through his preaching, his letter writing and his conversation. All of this had a goal in mind. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul states that the goal of the Christian life is to:

'...become mature, attaining to the whole measure of fullness of Christ.' (Ephesians 4:13)

Put simply, we are called day by day to become more like Jesus. For Paul, lazy thinking and sloppy living in Christians was sin - pure and simple. Paul's teaching was modelled on instructing people in doctrine – what we know and believe about God and his action in the world, and then on the basis of that belief, he instructed people on how then we should live – ethics. Right thinking leads to right behaviour.

Paul was committed to evangelism, establishing Christian communities, educating believers in the faith – and finally Paul was passionate about equipping people for service.

In the New Testament there are 100 people whose names are associated with Paul. Of those 100 people, 38 are listed as co-workers in the gospel. People like Timothy and Lydia, Silas and Barnabas and so on. Paul apprenticed and mentored dozens of Christian leaders in order that the legacy of his life would live in far longer than his death. Paul knew that every Christian believer was called by God into service that uniquely fitted and used their God given gifts. In his letter to the Ephesians he says this:

'For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.' (Ephesians 2:10)

The Greek work translated for workmanship here is the word *poiema* – which is the root word for poetry. I love that. We are God's poetry – created to bring life and beauty to a world too often void of it, all for Jesus and in his name. And the goal of those good works is to declare in both word and deed the Good News – the Gospel of Christ. And so the circle is complete.

This week I had the privilege of hearing our friend Siami share about the amazing work she leads in northern Thailand. Twenty six years ago, when a young woman she heard God's call to leave her home in India and go to Thailand – to the Karen people of the northern hills, eventually settling in this isolated village of Musakee. She did not know the language or the culture; there was no running water or electricity and she had few resources – but she had the Gospel and the knowledge that with God all things are possible. She served and she shared the gospel. She opened a hostel so that isolated and poor children could obtain an education and an escape route out of poverty. For me, Siami is a diminutive, feisty female version of the Apostle Paul.

In the early years, one of the children who lived in Siami's hostel was a small girl called Sawitri. Sawitri attended primary and then high school. Through Siami's leadership she heard and responded to the gospel, giving her life to Jesus. At the end of school she travelled to Bangkok to attend Bible College. And now Sawitri leads the church at Maedat which we have the privilege of supporting. And at Maedat, as at Musakee – the Gospel is proclaimed.

If Siami is an Indian-Thai version of the Apostle Paul, then Sawitree is a Karen-Thai version of Paul's student, Timothy.

Evangelise, establish communities, educate Believers, equip servants - this was the model of ministry that Paul and other New Testament leaders modelled. This was the way they lived out Jesus' prophetic words in Acts 1:8; that they and we, empowered by the Holy Spirit would be his witnesses.

So what could this possibly mean for us?

Newlife Uniting is a Pentecostal church; that is we are empowered by the same Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit empowers us for the same Acts 1:8 mission that the New Testament church was empowered for.

So we are committed to evangelism – to proclaiming the truth of the gospel, knowing that the gospel is the power of God that leads to salvation. When we preach the gospel in word and deed we will see God change lives and transform communities. So I have a question for you. It is on the handout should have received at the door.

Who is God calling you to share the Good News with? Who is God calling you to invite to church?

We live in a time and place every bit as pagan as the 1st century. People in our streets and suburbs, our schools and workplaces are thrashing around in spiritual darkness, desperately trying to address the thirst of their souls. All around us are friends, neighbours and relatives who are spiritually parched.

And yet in our so-called post-Christian culture increasing numbers of Aussies think that Jesus is an exclamation mark you use to pepper your language, Christmas is a Sale and Easter is a long-weekend. And to our shame this complete ignorance of even the basics of the Christian faith is not their fault. It is mainly the fault of a church that has failed to tell them about Jesus.

We live in a Bad News world. Our world is desperate for Good News. And we have it. In the message of Christ is all the life-transforming, soul-quenching power of God.

For God's sake, and for His glory we need to stand up, step-up and speak up and watch the miracles God works next.

I have a second and related question; is God calling you to be baptised or to reaffirm your baptism?

We are offering that opportunity in two weeks time. The New Testament model is that when someone accepts Jesus as saviour and Lord they then are baptized as a sign and symbol of that new faith. I have a sense that some of us have felt God nudging us in that direction but have been afraid to take that step. Some of us think that we are too old, or it's too late, or too soon for us to be baptized. But we are never too old or too young in our faith to publicly declare our allegiance to Jesus.

If you want to be baptized, or to reaffirm your baptism, or find out more – then just fill in the response form and give it to the Information Desk at the end of the service.

We are committed to establishing new communities. We are passionate about growing our small groups, knowing that as God grows us bigger, at the same time we must become smaller. We are committed to church planting. Crossroads Helensvale was the start, and with God's help, on June 12 next year we will plant our second new community, this time on the northern Gold Coast with Orrell leading us.

And so I have another question for you to consider.

How is God calling you to commit to and express Christian community?

Is God calling you join a small group, or lead a small group or perhaps even to join our church plant team?

We believe God calls us to love him with our minds as well as our hearts, and we are committed to maturing people in the faith through education in small groups, at GLS, through Winter School and so on.

So, I have another critical question.

How is God calling you to mature in the faith?

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Is God calling you to read your Bible more regularly?

And finally, we believe that every person that names Jesus and Lord and calls Newlife home is called to serve. All of us are gifted by the Spirit; and there is no gift without a corresponding arena of service. So we will do all we can to equip and engage and then challenge you into service.

So my final question is this; how and where is God calling you to serve?

What are the gifts God has given you and where is he calling you to use them?

An African-American Pastor has said this:

*There are two great moments in a person's life:
the moment you were born and the moment you realize why you were born.
(Pastor Kirbyjon Caldwell)*

We were born to serve God – to worship God and enjoy God forever.

Evangelism, Community, Education and Service; this is our Acts 1:8 mission mandate.

As we finish let me push you a little further. You see, I am under no illusions. I can give you these questions which pose their own challenge, but I can't make you respond to them. I think a lot of you are like me, you are very good at avoiding answering important questions. Let me put it this way. Some of us are very good at what I call the art of Spiritual Procrastination.

It's like me and my Exercise Bike.

When we moved to Queensland almost five years ago my exercise bike came with us. It came out of the removal truck and up the stairs and into our TV room where it has stayed ever since.

Over the last five years I have walked past that Exercise Bike on average twenty times a day. That is around 35,000 times. And on at least some of those occasions I have thought to myself, I must use that some day.

But in all that time going up and down the stairs, of seeing this Bike out of the corner of my eye – not once have I got on it and pedalled. Even last week when it was pouring with rain and I couldn't go for my regular walk – even though the Bike beckoned I found reasons to avoid it.

When it comes to my Exercise Bike, my procrastination knows no limits.

When it comes to Faith, for some of us, including me, our procrastination knows no limits.

We say someday we will get baptized. We're not quite ready yet.

We say someday we will tell our friends and families about Jesus, but only when the time is right.

We say someday we will join a small group, but at the moment we are too busy.

We say someday we will read our Bibles, but when life frees up a bit more.

We say someday we will have time to serve, but at the moment life is too full.

Someday, someday, someday, someday – the church is full of someday believers.

The problem is that 'someday' never comes.

The risk with becoming a 'someday' Christian is that the more we avoid stepping out in faith, the harder it becomes for us to ever do so.

This exercise bike is a sign and symbol of my Procrastination. I have walked past it so many times now I have made avoiding it an art form.

Tragically, for many of us the Cross has become a symbol not so much of God's saving power in our life – but of our Spiritual Procrastination. We walk past it, we sing about it, we read about it, we hear about it – but we never act on Jesus' call to pick up our own Cross in order to follow him.

You see, it is as we step out in faith, as we take a risk, as we take up our Cross – it is in those moments we will experience the tangible and life-transforming power of God.

When a cyclone hit hurricane-prone South Florida, Norena's home was one of many severely damaged. An elderly woman, she received an insurance settlement, and the repair work began. However, when the insurance money ran out, so did the builder, leaving an unfinished home with no electricity. Norena has been living without power ever since.

The amazing part of this story is that the hurricane hit Norena's house struck in 1992. Norena lived in that dark, unfinished house for 15 years, right up to 1997. No heat when the winter chill settled in. No air conditioning when the temperature climbed into the low 40's and the humidity clung to 100 percent. Not one hot shower. For fifteen long years.

Without money to finish the repairs, Norena just got by with a small lamp and a single burner.

Acting on a tip, the local mayor got involved. It only took a few hours of work by an electrician to return power to the house.

Norena told a local journalist:

'It's hard to describe having [the electricity]...to switch on. It's overwhelming.'

For fifteen years Norena had electricity running past her home but she remained disconnected, even though to connect was relatively straight forward.

All of us have the power of God available to us. Far more powerful than the highest voltage electricity, this is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. This is the Power of the Holy Spirit. But even though this power is available to us, too many of us fail to access it as we wallow in our Spiritual Procrastination.

But that power is a prayer away, a step of faith away, an act of obedience away. My prayer is that we would respond to God's offer of his empowering presence with our lives and watch with awe at what God does in our lives.