

THE LIVING WORD OF GOD: DISCOVERING ITS RICHES

A Parish Introduction to Study of the Bible
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ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

During the Easter season liturgies, we hear readings from the Acts of the Apostles, a book that records the opening of a new era, following upon the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. A small group of believers in Jesus gathers together in daily prayer, as instructed by the Lord, awaiting the coming of God's gift upon them from heaven. This book recounts an extraordinary event that took place, and tells of the wonderful things that resulted from it.

The author, St. Luke, speaks in this book of the new community that has come to new life, energized through the power given by the coming of the Holy Spirit. The evangelist is intent on revealing God's plan in all that is unfolding, showing how that body began to grow, moving out from the center of its origin, and now reaching into the whole world. His account seeks to inform and inspire Christians to continue on this great mission: the work that Jesus himself inaugurated at his coming.

St. Luke opens this book of Acts by referring to a previous account, his gospel. The earlier work was itself written to address a need. We hear St. Luke speak to a particular disciple, a person of some prominence, Theophilus. Luke speaks of what prompted him to take accounts of the life of Jesus, already being circulated, and then to fashion them into a version that gives light to their conditions of life, and to questions arising among some Christians—questions that were not readily answered in earlier versions (Lk 1:1-2). And so Luke writes the gospel story again, adding to it references that would serve the faith and conviction of devoted followers of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles was meant to follow upon the gospel account, and continued to address questions that seem to be among the disciples.

One such question would be "Why is there a delay in the second coming of Jesus?" The teaching of Jesus in the 12th chapter of St. Luke's speaks of many aspects of the final coming of Christ, but leave many unanswered. The Lord teaches that this generation will see the power of his coming. Yet he has not come. The Acts of the Apostles describes the Lord's work as being accomplished over time. The coming of the kingdom is being accomplished throughout time; the power is working, but not yet have we arrived at the final hour. The spreading of the Gospel message must reach into future times, as well as throughout the entire expanse of the world.

Another difficulty seems to be prominent among Christians of this new generation of disciples: the distance in time between Christ present and working among the people, and now, much later, the disciples of another generation lacking that very real contact with him. These now are experiencing a sense of longing for the immediacy of Jesus whom they want to know as their Lord. St. Luke speaks to these sentiments. In phrases that differ from the other evangelists he relates the same event with helpful words that bring needed light. And so with this attention in mind, we can see better the mind of St. Luke as he strives to make clear the importance of the Holy Spirit throughout his gospel account and in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The Spirit that came upon Jesus as he began his mission at the Jordan river is the same Spirit that came upon the Church at Pentecost. This same divine power is at work in the individual Christian and in the community of believers, bringing the life of Jesus alive in us.

The gospel of Luke tells of the prophesy of John the Baptist: "He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire" (Lk 3:16 & repeated in Acts 1:5) The descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism while he was praying (Lk 3:21) is mirrored in the scene at Pentecost: the descent of the Spirit upon a new community being brought to life, prepared for by the fervent prayer of the body of believers. (Acts 1:14 & 2:1) To further authentic the role of Jesus in all that is to happen, St. Luke records the final words of Jesus as he approaches his Ascension into heaven: "[I] am sending down upon you, the promise of my Father. Remain here in the city until you are clothed in power from on high." (Lk 24:49)

Adding another dimension of Christ's plan in his time and for the time ahead, the prominence of the Twelve Apostles is made noteworthy in the very name of this book. Beginning with the opening verses St. Luke relates the close connection between Jesus and the Apostles: Jesus was taken up heaven, "having first instructed the Apostles whom he had chosen by the Holy Spirit". (Acts 1:2) Again, looking back to Luke's gospel account, we hear him speaking of the specific designation of the Twelve Apostles after a full night of prayer. (Lk 6:13-16) In the Book of Acts, the frequent reference to the miracles wrought through the hands of the Apostles harkens back to the heavenly power manifest in the acts of Jesus, and to the Apostles being prepared and sent out at his command.

The Christians of that time need to understand that the mission of Jesus was accomplished under the power of the Holy Spirit, who was continuing to be among them, guiding them all the while. Scripture presents this perennial message: as it was experienced by Jesus, so does the Church face its challenges. Empowered by the Spirit, it still experiences temptation and opposition. Having received the anointing of the Spirit, it is still being sent out on the mission to do God's work, performing the miracles of his grace. (Lk 4:1, 14 & 18)

As we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit at the feast of Pentecost, let us continue our prayers that the light and power may bless our parish and the whole Church with many gifts for our world and our time.