Daily readings to prepare for session 7

Day 1: Spirit, power, and a Jesus mission – to the ends of the earth

Read: Acts 1.1–5,8

Reflect:

Peter Parker, aka Spider-Man, is famous for roaming the skyline of New York and beating up the bad guys. This character first appeared in 1962 and he's still a favourite with many. But why? Perhaps it's because Peter Parker is as ordinary as they come and yet, within him, there's something extraordinary.

Followers of Jesus shouldn't expect to develop Spidey-senses or sticky fingers any time soon, but they should expect to receive power. Jesus' followers are both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time – everyday people with real power to do a lot of good.

What do we learn from the opening of the book of Acts?

The book of Acts was written by the same author as Luke's Gospel – it's a sequel, telling us what happened next. The key is in the symmetry of the accounts. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus healed the sick and preached the good news. In Acts, Jesus' followers continued his work, healing the sick and sharing the good news of Jesus with the world.

But how was this possible? How can ordinary Christians do the things Jesus did? If you were told to write like William Shakespeare, or sing like Pavarotti, or run like Usain Bolt, you'd probably have to admit, 'I can't!' And when it comes to continuing Jesus' ministry, perhaps your initial thought is, 'I can't!'

What does the promise Jesus made to the disciples mean for us today?

But what if the same Spirit who empowered Jesus came to live in you? What difference would that make?

The word translated as 'power' in Acts is the Greek word dunamis, from which we get the English words dynamite and dynamic. The Holy Spirit empowers God's people to be dynamic agents of the Kingdom, continuing the ministry of Jesus in the world.

Note the scope of this mission. Ages before the invention of aeroplanes or the internet, Jesus charged his people with a global mission. He knew the scope of the Holy Spirit's power within each follower of his. Like fire, it spreads! And early

Christianity spread like a wildfire despite fierce persecution. That fire is still burning today.

We have arrived at our own chapter in the Bible story. This is where we fit in, both ordinary and extraordinary, all at the same time. Jesus has empowered you to do good in the world! Are you up for it?

Respond:

With the Holy Spirit empowering you, how could you do good in the world today?

Day 2: The fire, the tongues and a new community – Pentecost

Read: Acts 2

Reflect:

The story of Pentecost speaks of a new normal. It was a moment that meant the world would never be the same again. Pentecost invites us into a new normal as well, a life of fresh purpose and unshakable hope.

What happened to the disciples at Pentecost?

Pentecost was an important Jewish festival celebrating the beginning of harvest. So imagine the streets of Jerusalem crowded with pilgrims from many different nations. Meanwhile, 120 of Jesus' followers had gathered to pray. Suddenly, a sound like rushing wind filled the room and 'what seemed to be tongues of fire … came to rest on each of them' and they began to speak in other languages (verses 2–4). What on earth was happening?

Firstly, the tongues of fire symbolised God's presence: remember Moses at the burning bush (Genesis 3) – unable to come near and told to remove his sandals because he was standing on holy ground, in the presence of the great 'I AM'. Remember Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), calling on the Lord to send heavenly fire and make his presence known to all the people as the one true God.

But whereas there was a distance between people and the fiery presence of God in the Old Testament, on the day of Pentecost, this same holy fire came to rest on God's people. God was taking up residence in the hearts of those who believed in Jesus.

And it wasn't just the 12 apostles who were filled with the Holy Spirit, but more than a hundred ordinary Christians. Whereas in the Old Testament, the anointing of the Spirit was reserved for kings, priests and prophets, now all God's people can experience this life-changing power.

Secondly, the foreign languages they began to speak symbolised international unity. As the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other languages. They were able to declare the wonders of God so that everyone in the international crowd that was gathered in Jerusalem could understand.

In a dramatic reversal of the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), people from different tribes, nations, and tongues are being reunited in God. About three thousand people accepted Peter's message and

joined the believers that day (verse 41). The gospel hadn’t even been spread beyond Jerusalem yet, but this gave a glimpse of a future day when people from all nations on earth will worship as one.

What does Pentecost mean for us today?

Pentecost shows us that we can have real courage and community. The Holy Spirit set Peter free from fear and brought together a community of believers that served and supported each other like no other.

Respond:

If you took a red-hot coal out of the fireplace and put it on its own, it would quickly grow cold. Position yourself in community with followers who are full of the fire of the Holy Spirit today and stay hot!

Day 3: Stephen, the speech and the stoning – persecution

Read: Acts 7.1–60

Reflect:

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch Christian who helped to hide Jewish people from the Nazis during the war. In the end, she herself was imprisoned.

As a young girl Corrie feared that she wouldn't have the strength to suffer or be martyred for her faith. She told her father this and he responded by asking her, 'When you take the train from Haarlem to Amsterdam, when do I give you the money for the fare?'

'Just before we get on the train,' Corrie said.

'That is right, and so it is with God's strength. Our Father in heaven knows when you are going to need things too. Today you do not need the strength to be a martyr. But as soon as you are called upon for the honour of facing death for Jesus, he will supply the strength you need – just in time.'

Corrie's story proved her father right. God gave her all the courage and power she needed.

What did the martyrdom of Stephen mean?

Stephen was not one of the apostles. His role among believers was to look after the needs of poor widows. Still, full of faith and the Holy Spirit, he was performing great signs and wonders which attracted attention. He was brought before the Jewish authorities and accused of speaking against the holy place and the law (Acts 6.13). He responded with a bold speech taking them all the way through the Old Testament to show how in following Jesus he was not against the law, because Jesus had fulfilled it.

This made the Jewish leaders furious and they stoned him. Stephen became the first Christian martyr, dying for his faith in Jesus. His vision of heaven standing open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (verse 56) shows that in that moment he knew God's presence with him.

After this, hundreds of Christians were forced to flee Jerusalem in fear for their lives. But far from stopping Christianity in its tracks, it ended up spreading far and wide! Imagine the Jerusalem Church as a dandelion. The wind of persecution came and scattered the seed so that new churches took root and sprang up everywhere.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus made his way towards Jerusalem in order to provide salvation for all people. In Acts, we see a reversal in the direction of travel. Jesus' followers made their way out of Jerusalem to offer the good news to the world. Christianity spread out, crossing national borders and cultural barriers. Stephen's martyrdom was a spark that ignited an unstoppable flame of gospel expansion.

What does Stephen's story mean for us today?

In many places around the world today, following Jesus means risking your life. In other places, while a Christian's life might not be threaten, persecution remains. The gospel is always counter-cultural, putting believers at odd with the ways of the world. But just as Stephen knew the Scriptures and shared the gospel, so can we. And the strength Stephen found when he was persecuted is available to us too – God will never leave us or forsake us.

Respond:

Give thanks that you don't need to fear persecution because God is always with you.

Day 4: Paul's conversion and calling – Damascus road experience

Read: Acts 9.1–31

Reflect:

Have you ever 'done a 180' and completely changed a long-standing opinion or made a significant lifestyle change?

The original Damascus road experience was Paul's 180-degree turn – from persecutor of the Church to follower of Jesus. Paul's life changed completely – and, in turn, he played a part in changing the entire Roman empire. God chose the most unlikely figure to change the nations.

What happened to Paul on the road to Damascus?

Paul was en route to imprison Christians in Damascus. From his perspective, it was not only blasphemous but ridiculous to worship Jesus of Nazareth – the man who'd been crucified by Israel's enemies, the Romans. How could he possibly have been God's chosen king, the Messiah?

But all it took was one encounter with the risen Jesus for everything to change for Paul. In his blindness, he saw the truth: Jesus is indeed the risen and victorious Messiah – he's the Lord of all!

Jesus' question in verse 4: 'Why are you persecuting me?' (ESV) teaches us so much about his close identification with the Church. When Paul hurt Christians, he was hurting Jesus himself. Perhaps this was the origin of Paul's favourite analogy of the Church as the body of Christ, with Jesus himself as the head. Christ and the Church are one – we can't truly love Jesus and ignore his Church.

What was Jesus' call to Paul and how does it relate to us today?

The Damascus road experience was a game-changer. Until that moment, the gospel had only really spread from Jerusalem to Jewish regions – including Judea and Samaria. But after a period of preparation, in AD 46 Paul set off on the first of several mission trips to non-Jewish regions. The rest of the book of Acts is like a travel journal, recording what happened.

The former persecutor was now God's chosen instrument to proclaim his name! Paul went from cheering on the stoning of Christians, to being cheered on by God in the work of spreading the gospel.

An encounter with Jesus changes everything. God saves people on purpose and for a purpose. Your life as a Christian isn't one of just waiting to get to heaven.

There’s more for you: God has given you good news to proclaim and people to serve!

Respond:

Do you feel as though you’re stuck in a rut? Has your faith gone flat? It only takes one encounter with Jesus for everything to turn around. Ask him to meet you today in the quiet and fill you with faith for what is to come.

Day 5: Controversy, the council, and the conclusion – simply grace

Read: Acts 15.1–35

Reflect:

In the world of sport, 'transfers' happen all the time. In the Premier League, when a transfer completes a player's allegiance changes. He has a new training ground, new kit colours, a new team culture to buy into and, for foreign players, perhaps a new language to learn.

Change can be disorientating and difficult. It can also take longer than we'd like. The gospel brings about a new normal – it's our own transfer! We have a new team, new purpose and a new way to live – but let's not downplay the fact that sometimes gospel change can be trickier and slower than we'd like.

What was the issue facing the Church and why was it crucial for the Church to address it?

Let's not underestimate the scale of the change the gospel brought in the days of Acts.

In the Old Testament, Israelite males were required to be circumcised as a symbol of their covenant relationship with God, and all of the people of Israel were required to keep his laws. These included restrictions on the foods they could eat and the extent to which they should associate with non-Jews. Gentiles who converted had to be circumcised to belong to the people of God and then keep the same laws.

But the life, death and resurrection of Jesus had changed everything. In his life, he perfectly fulfilled God's covenant law; in his death he atoned for the sins of everyone – both Jews and Gentiles – who had sinned and broken that covenant; and in his resurrection, he gave his followers salvation and new life. Anyone, Jew or Gentile, who believes in Jesus is no longer under the condemnation of the law, but alive in Christ. They've entered into a new kind of covenant relationship.

Today's passage sees some Jewish Christians struggling to catch up with the new normal. They weren't sure if they had to continue operating under the old ways or what should be required of the Gentiles who were coming to faith. There was a lot of confusion.

So this is why a crisis meeting took place in Jerusalem. The apostles and the elders of the Church needed to consider what was at stake and make an authoritative decision for believers everywhere. The message went out, it's not

keeping the law that saves you, it's your faith in Jesus. You don't need to live under the heavy burden of all the old laws.

What are the implications for believers today?

God never intended for Gentile believers to remain on the outside. He promised a tent so large it would reach to the ends of the earth. God always intended the good news to be for all the nations. 'He gave his one and only Son, that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3.16).

Believing in Jesus is all that matters. This truth remains powerful today – being saved does not require Jesus PLUS being born in a Christian country, giving to charity or any other outward show of commitment. It all centres on Jesus.

Respond:

Consider: do we create barriers that make it more difficult for people to receive the good news about Jesus today?

Day 6: Philippi, Lydia and a jailer – church planting in Greece

Read: Acts 16.1–40

Reflect:

Have you travelled much in your life? People love to travel for the sights and the stories, and some even travel to 'find themselves'.

Paul travelled a lot – not to find himself, but because he lived his life in step with the Spirit. As you read on in Acts, you'll see that saying 'yes' to God and going where he was sent made for a life full of adventures and many stories to tell …

How did God use Paul in Philippi?

Speaking through a vision of a Macedonian man, God made it clear that he wanted Paul in Philippi. Why? Because he had lives to transform there.

First, we see Paul meeting Lydia, a wealthy and devout woman. God opened her heart to respond to the good news (verse 14) and he's still in the business of doing this for people today. From the wealthy to the poor, from the respectable to the downtrodden, God is working in people's hearts.

Lydia invited Paul and Silas to her home (verse 15). When the gospel opens your heart, it also opens your home. Hospitality and generosity are by-products of salvation. This may work itself out in slightly different ways in your life, but there's no doubt that the gospel causes us to fling wide the doors of our lives to love and serve others.

Next, Paul encountered a slave girl who had a spirit that enabled her to predict the future. She was a money-making machine for her owners. As Paul commanded the spirit leave her, so did her commercial value. We don't hear exactly what happened to her, but her old life was behind her, a new life was ahead!

Thirdly, when Paul and Silas found themselves in prison, they encountered a jailer. The foundations of the prison had been shaken and his prisoners supernaturally released. In fear of the consequences, he was ready to take his own life. But Paul and Silas led him to faith in the Lord Jesus, new life and rejoicing instead. And not just for him, but for his whole household (verses 31–34).

What do we learn about the power of the gospel in these conversion stories?

We learn that the power of the gospel is unstoppable. No evil spirit, no human authority, no physical chains can stop it. Starting with Lydia and the jailer, God planted a church in Philippi. It was a strange start, but later we learn, from Paul's letter to the Philippians, that this church became famous for its love for God and others. With Jesus as their model, generosity became their hallmark.

We shouldn't be discouraged today if we look at ourselves and our church community and wonder, 'How could God use this?' The gospel remains unstoppable. All we need to do is say yes to God.

Respond:

In what ways can you say yes to God today?

Day 7: The viper, the gospel and Rome – to the ends of the earth

Read: Acts 28.1–31

Reflect:

Do you love theatre? Seeing the Bible as an unfolding drama can be helpful. Hopefully by now you've seen and experienced the miraculous harmony of the Scriptures and how Jesus is its centre of gravity. But what if there's more? What if God, the ultimate screenwriter, has deliberately left space in the final act?

Drawing loosely on an analogy from Prof NT Wright: imagine a team of actors discover a long-lost Shakespearean play. Originally it would have had five acts but only four have survived. How should the actors perform the missing act and finish the show? Wright suggests that to do this successfully, they'd need to immerse themselves in the rest of the drama.

Knowing the story means entering the mind of the playwright and sensing the inner logic and heartbeat of his work. From this position they'd be able to improvise a fifth act in keeping with the whole. Today we hear the call of God to play our part in the fifth act of the drama of Scripture, to get to know him and his story in such a way that we act in a way that is consistent with his intention for us.

What do we learn about Paul and his mission towards the end of the book of Acts?

We may be nearing the end of the book of Acts, but God isn't finished with his mission. On the island of Malta he protects Paul from the viper's bite so that he can go on to heal many on the island. You'd think that having been through so much Paul deserved a break!

Life is unpredictable and opposition to the gospel will always be there. So don't be discouraged if the trials feel relentless. They never stopped for Paul and they may not for you either, but keep going because God isn't finished with you!

Acts concludes with Paul following up the letter he'd sent to Rome with a visit. But it didn't go to plan. Paul was put under house arrest, to await trial before the emperor in Rome.

On death row, guess what Paul was doing? He didn't give up. He went on sharing Jesus with his guards – they were literally his captive audience! Paul was set on finishing well. Are you?

What does the end of Acts mean for us today?

You'd be forgiven for thinking that Luke, the author, just ran out of ink at the end of this chapter. It feels so wrong to end here: shouldn't there be another chapter? But there is no neat ending. And that's the point: there's no Acts 29, because we are writing Acts 29. The story continues.

Respond:

How will you play out your role in the fifth act?