

Bible Study 3: Acts 1:12-14

Text: Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. 14 All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

1) Having witnessed Christ's ascension on Mount Olivet, the apostolic church returns to Jerusalem as instructed: Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away (12).

a) The apostolic church has received its final instructions and mandate from the Lord Jesus on Mount Olivet and witnessed his ascension. Just like the symbolic nature of the cloud that hid Jesus' ascent that we considered in last week's study, so mountains also have symbolic significance in the Bible. Think of how Moses received God's law of love on Mount Sinai or Horeb in the form of two tablets on which was written the Moral Law or the 10

Commandments in readiness for the Promised land. Or think on how Elijah met with God in a day of small things on the Holy Mount and was given reassurance that God was not finished with his people. Think too on how the Lord Jesus revealed the Beatitudes in his Sermon on Mount and similarly of how on another occasion he revealed his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. And of course, the Temple where his sacrifice was daily typified and symbolised in the ritual slaughter of animals, and Calvary where he was actually crucified are situated on Mount Moriah where God provided a Lamb for sacrifice – even the Lamb of God who would atone for the sin of the world. And so, Mount Olivet was the place where Christ ascended to glory. To the Father's side and his eternal rule as King of kings and Lord of lords.

b) The apostolic church returns to Jerusalem from Mount Olivet which distance is described as a Sabbath Day's journey. In other words, it is a short journey of somewhere in the region of around 2000 steps or a half mile. The apostles would have arrived in the Holy City via the famous East Gate. The Sabbath Day's injunction was not a biblical one but rather an institutional one. A tradition or convention that had been introduced and enforced to preserve and propagate the sanctity of the Sabbath which God commanded to be kept holy. Similar traditions were once the norm here in Scotland. For example, men would not shave on the Sabbath, or food was prepared the day before, shoes were polished, clothes were laid out etc. And the Lord's Day was given over to wholly worship, fellowship, and rest – and that was even within our own lifetimes.

c) The apostolic church readily returns to Jerusalem to await the promised power from on high for their mission. It will start in the Holy City where Jesus was presented at the Temple as a child. Where he had kept the annual feasts. And where he was betrayed, suffered, died, and rose again. The apostles were called to proclaim his gospel among and to the very people that had rejected him. Who had cried 'crucify him, crucify him!' Such is God's love for sinners. The Apostle Paul could rightfully say: but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.... For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life (Rom.5:8, 10). God offers reconciliation, redemption, and renewal in Jesus Christ, who is offered to all, without money and without price, in the gospel.

There is also maybe an important lesson here about mission. It begins near rather than far! At home rather than abroad. Among that which is familiar to us. And no one is beyond the pale of God's forgiveness via faith in Christ and repentance towards God.

2. The apostolic church waits together for the promised Holy Spirit as a prelude to their mission: And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying (13a).

a) The apostles patiently wait in a place familiar to them. A place they associated with the presence of Jesus. They returned to Jerusalem and ‘went up to the upper room’. While not explicitly stated, the use of the definitive article ‘the’ before upper room is highly suggestive that the apostles returned to the same upper room where they had celebrated their final Passover meal with Jesus. Where Jesus had delivered his famous ‘Upper Room Discourse’ recorded in the Gospel according to John, and where he had taught them and showed them what true love is and had instituted the sacrament of the Love Feast known to us as the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion, which he calls us to keep in remembrance of him.

b) The apostles prepare faithfully in the upper room for their mission where they await the promised Spirit to enlighten and empower them for ministry. The Lord Jesus had assured them: Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. 8 And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; 10 concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; 11 concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged (John 16:7-11).

c) The apostles purposefully and collectively await the church’s new birth into this New Covenant era as we shall see. For Pentecost and the Baptism of the Spirit mark the birthday of the church in this New Testament age.

3. The eleven remaining apostles enjoy unity in Christ, his church and cause: Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer (13b-14a).

a) The apostles were of one accord despite their different personalities and political or philosophical outlooks. This is not the place to provide a detailed assessment of each apostle’s background and viewpoint, but I simply wish to point out that they were one despite their obvious differences. Hence, Peter tended to be impetuous, while his brother, Andrew, was more reserved, while Thomas was hesitant. John and James are described as sons of thunder such was the expression of their zeal or passion for Christ’s kingdom. While Simon and Matthew had once, and possibly continued to have, different political opinions. However, they are now all one in Christ. There is unity in diversity. And division of labour. The church is not like some Communist dystopia where everyone must look and sound the same, whose individual identities are nullified by an authoritarian state or tyrannical leader!

It is not coercion we use but persuasion in faith, hope and love through the proclamation of the gospel. God makes people willing in a day of his power. And while we are many, we are nevertheless one in Christ by the Spirit.

That’s why Paul writes to the Romans: so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another (Rom.12:5). Or elsewhere: There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph.4:4-6). Or again: For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal.3:27-29).

b) The apostles were of one accord in God’s revealed plan and purpose. They are part of the one body. They are united in mind and heart. They are one in their understanding of the Old Testament scriptures. They are one in their commitment to Christ as Lord and Saviour – and

to keeping his commands. They are one in the Spirit of Christ who will shortly baptise them with power.

Again, there is a vital lesson here for the church which sadly, has periodically failed to keep Christ's commands, and lost confidence in his creed, and which has confessionally divided into a plethora of competing denominations and congregational entities. God's way is the path of unity in truth and love.

c) The apostles were of one accord in prayer. They continued earnestly and passionately in prayer. They were persevering in prayer like Jacob who wrestled with the Lord at Peniel and who poignantly declared 'I will not let you go until you bless me.' In chapter 6 they will boldly state: But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word (Acts 6.4).

Again, the contemporary church needs to take note. There is a danger that our denominations develop into mere charitable causes. Into mere political and social organisations with burdensome bureaucracies. We can so easily lose sight of priorities and confuse and conflate such things as the offices of minister, elder and deacon. We can spend too much time in administration and committees and think we are actually doing God's work! And then we wonder why the church continues to decline. We can formulate our own plans and programmes of renewal and miss the very vital one that God has given to us. Yes, the one that turns the world upside down and through which Christ builds his church!

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20). ...And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42).

4. Finally, this week, note that the embryonic apostolic church comprised not only the apostles but other disciples of the Lord Jesus: together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers (14).

a) There are present the women who had accompanied and served Christ since Galilee like Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and others. Also, the sisters of Lazarus might have been present. Men and women were praying, worshipping, and ministering together for the advancement of God's kingdom of love.

b) Also, we are specifically told that our Lord's mother was also present who has a special place in the affections of God's people, as the King's Mother, the woman blessed above all others, the Theotokos – the Mother of the God-man, Jesus Christ. Mary provides a wonderful example to us of faith and humility, of care and compassion. Tradition teaches that she ended her earthly days at Ephesus where she lived with the Apostle John in compliance with Jesus's dying words.

c) Lastly, mention is made of his brothers. We read in the Gospel of Matthew: And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, 54 and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? 55 Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? 56 And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" (Mt.13:53-56)

There has been much dispute and contention down through the centuries over the meaning of the word, 'brothers' in this instance. The Greek word translated brothers is 'adelphoi' and it can mean different degrees of blood relationship or consanguinity. The church catholic, that is, the majority of the church, has always taken the view that the 'brothers' in question were

not the sons of Mary but rather were cousins of Jesus, either sons of Joseph to a previous marriage or as the church father, Jerome, argued, the sons of Mary's sister, Mary of Cleopas. I personally hold to the catholic position and its accompanying belief in the perpetual virginity of our Lord's Mother. We will leave it there for now and pick up at verse 15 next week, DV. God bless.

Questions:

- 1) Where is the church's ultimate authority?
- 2) What should be the church's priorities?
- 3) Who belongs to the church?
- 4) How might we recognise and cultivate our gifts in the church?