

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

In this series in the Book of Acts, we see how God's Spirit changes the lives of Jesus' followers and begins to change the world, too. May we too be inspired afresh in our generation!

Day 1 – Acts 1:1-11 'The kingdom of God'

'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' Famous words from the world's most famous prayer. It's one that many of us use every day, and it shapes the heart of Jesus' teaching about how we humans can relate to our loving God. Every day, through this beautifully simple but profound prayer, we bring our needs before him: for grace sufficient for that day, both material and spiritual; for forgiveness and a heart to be able to forgive others; for strength in times of trial and temptation; for protection.

But that of course is the second half of the prayer. The first half is all about God's purposes in the world. It's the bigger picture stuff, and sometimes, if you're anything like me, it can kind of wash over us. We know that God *is* at work in the world, and one day everything will conform to his will – because he alone has the power and the glory. But we're not there yet. We live in this interim season, when Jesus has won the victory over evil, sin and death – but the world is not yet all it could be, and will be. *And so we pray for God's will and reign to keep increasing – on earth, as in heaven.*

And at the heart of God's ever-expanding presence in the world is this idea of the kingdom. The Kingdom of God is the central theme of Jesus' teaching – it's mentioned almost 100 times in the gospels, and right here in our passage today, as Jesus ascends into heaven, we note that after Jesus rises from the dead, he makes the kingdom the heart of his final teaching to his disciples: v3 '*He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God.*' In other words, it was the major topic of conversation just as Jesus was about to leave, which means it must be incredibly important.

But what is it? In a nutshell, 'the kingdom' defines wherever God reigns in the world. It's not a physical kingdom, of course – it lives in the heart of Jesus' followers, and, beyond that, everywhere that human behaviour conforms to the pattern of Jesus' teaching and lifestyle. When we gather in Jesus' name, the kingdom comes. When we give time to growing in our understanding of faith (just like you're doing now), the kingdom comes. When we pray, the kingdom comes. When we bless our neighbour, the kingdom comes. When we serve all who are marginalised, the kingdom comes. Basically, whenever we do something that Jesus can put his name to, the kingdom comes.

And as we begin this new series in the Book of Acts, let's observe that *this book is really an answer to the Lord's Prayer* – as the Holy Spirit is poured out and the church is birthed, as the followers of Jesus spread out across first Israel and then across much of the known world, so we see a real-life answer to that simple phrase in the world's greatest prayer: 'Your kingdom come...'

And we too can celebrate God's kingdom in our lives. Today, take a moment to give thanks that the kingdom has come *in you*. And pray to receive the 'power' that Jesus promised, by his Spirit. Amen, come Holy Spirit!

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 2 – Acts 1:12-26 ‘Just 120’

How many people do you need to change the world? It's a good question, isn't it? I read once that to change any culture you need 2% of the population to be passionately inspired and committed to whatever cause they believe in – given enough time, that 2% will be enough. In Britain, that would be about 1.3 million people. In Milton Keynes, about 5,000.

But what about the kingdom of God? It turns out that all you need is 120 people. Take a moment to dwell on that – 120. That's what we learn in v15 of today's passage. The second half of Acts chapter 1 is rarely looked at – mostly we jump between the twin peaks of Jesus' Ascension in the first half of ch1 straight to the Spirit being poured out at Pentecost at the start of ch2. And there are so many interesting, or even curious, things to notice in this passage: the constant prayer (v14), the need to replace Judas and still have 12 apostles (v21), the casting of lots to let God decide who takes a job. (Is that something to practise now?? Would save a lot of time with interviews and scoring grids!)

But what struck me today is this throwaway phrase – stuck in brackets in verse 15. The total group left to continue God's work on earth was 120. Think of all the people whose lives Jesus had impacted: at least 5,000 people were fed miraculously, there are 53 separate miracles recorded in the gospels, huge crowds still hung on his every word even a few weeks previously at the Passover celebration in Jerusalem. And yet, three years of dedicated ministry of the Son of God here on this earth had left a committed group of just 120.

But our God is the God who multiplies. What Jesus preached is what he practised: the kingdom of God is indeed like that mustard seed – apparently so small and insignificant, and yet grows to become the largest of all plants. All God needed to start a worldwide movement which changed the world was 120 people, filled and empowered with his Spirit.

One of the words that God has consistently reminded me of during my time here has been this: 'You have all you need.' I've often not wanted to believe it, praying for this extra provision here, or new resources there. But time and again, the word has been proved true – and it's true for you as well. God's resources in your life are always enough. His grace is sufficient. God is well able to achieve his purposes in you, and your family.

Take heart. God (plus you) is enough to overcome whatever you face today. By his grace and his life-giving Spirit, you have all you need.

And may that cause faith to rise in us, and to pray with confidence to the God who multiplies.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 3 – Acts 2:1-13 ‘What does this mean?’

And so we come to the famous story of Pentecost – and many of you will be very familiar with the scene. A group is gathered, praying, and suddenly the place is filled with wind and fire. On Pentecost Sunday we usually look at what it means for God’s Spirit to manifest as fire and wind – how we need the fire to ignite our passion for God and whatever God calls us to; how we need the wind to blow us to the places God wants to be and the people God wants us to love. And that is vital.

But let’s look today at the immediate aftermath. This dramatic experience was not for its own sake. It set about a chain of events. The outcome for the disciples is that many of them received the gift of new languages. The gift of tongues is usually understood now to relate primarily to a form of ‘heavenly language’, unintelligible to most people – and that is the most common form of the gift today. But here at the start these were *actual* languages. What the disciples spoke was understood by a large multi-lingual crowd who had gathered from across the known world to celebrate a big Jewish festival. No Google Translate in those days: God was equipping a group of largely ‘unschooled’ people (Acts 4:13) to do his work in a remarkable way.

The second link in the chain is perhaps not surprising: this large crowd was ‘utterly amazed’ (v7) to hear their own language being spoken. More than that, they were ‘perplexed’ (v12). It is almost inevitable that they ask the million dollar question: ‘What does this *mean*?’

A lot is spoken – and mis-spoken – about spiritual gifts. Some make them a requirement of real faith, others a dangerous distraction. All I can say, from my own experience, is that such gifts are not faked, or forms of self-deception: they are absolutely real, and wonderful – but they also have a purpose. They are never given just to provide us with an ‘experience’. They are Jesus’ gifts – and as such, they are there to do Jesus’ work in the world. The exercise of such gifts in a Christlike way always prompts people to explore further: ‘What does this mean?’

Faith in Jesus is not just true, it’s *real*. And sometimes people need a divine prod to back up what we speak and how we live. Most of the most ‘noticeable’ gifts of the Spirit happen in the context of mission – in other words to demonstrate that Jesus is real, and exactly who he says he is. Just as we see here. This chain of events in today’s passage sets the scene for Peter’s great speech that comes next.

You may or may not have experienced this kind of thing. It doesn’t matter – there is no place either for pride or a false sense of inadequacy in the journey of faith. But perhaps we can all take a step today to pray for more of God, for openness to whatever gifts he may graciously want to give us – and for opportunities to meet those asking: ‘What does this mean?’ Our God is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 4 – Acts 2:14-21 ‘On all people’

We all love a bit of ‘secret knowledge’. Access to information that others don’t have. Recently I watched a documentary about the group of spies who created the deceptions that allowed the Allies to carry out the D-Day landings. It was absolutely fascinating to see how this group of five (codenamed Treasure, Tricycle, Garbo, Brutus and Bronx – great names!) played on a very human trait – our shared love of insider knowledge – to achieve something remarkable.

For most of us, it’s not that glamorous. A bit of gossip here, a tip about a sale item there. Early in 2020, as the pandemic took hold, we swapped endless stories of which shops had anti-bac or toilet rolls. And in the religious life most cultures have always been drawn to the idea of special people, or secret wisdom. Call them seers, shamans or senseis, it’s thought that certain people have privileged access to the spiritual realm.

At one level, we can recognise the value of this: humans have always needed leaders, in the spiritual life as much as in other spheres. But – humans being what they are – this brings with it the risk of unhealthy control, manipulation or downright deceit. God is the Lord of the whole earth, and every *human being is made in God’s image*, we carry the divine imprint. Is it right in the spiritual life to grant privileged access only to some?

At Pentecost, amazingly, the answer is ‘not any more’. The great gift of the pouring out of God’s Spirit is not just the new power it brings, or the energy for mission, or the birth of God’s great community (the Church) – it is the possibility of *direct access to the presence of God for all people*. ‘In the last days,’ Joel prophesies on God’s behalf, ‘I will pour out my spirit on all people.’ (v17) Young and old, women and men.

God’s Spirit has always been at work in the world – but until Pentecost, it tended to be for particular people at particular times. But from now on, *all of us* can encounter the presence of God, can have Jesus dwell in us by his Spirit, can know the joy and intimacy of a real and close relationship with the Almighty Lord of all creation. Or to use St. Paul’s words 25 years later: ‘By the Spirit we cry “Abba, Father”.’ By God’s grace and the gift of his Spirit, we can all become children of God.

So today, give thanks that this gift is for *you*. Not just for the great and the good, for the specially chosen and those privileged with ‘secret access.’ The secrets of the kingdom of heaven are laid open to all! Ask God to draw close to you again, to fill your heart and to grant you the joy of sharing in this remarkable gift with hundreds of millions of people across the world. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 5 – Acts 2:22-28 ‘Death cannot keep its hold’

I spent time looking at my patio today. A strange thing to do, you might wonder. About 50 slabs of paving stone, grey and uniform. Pretty dull, I guess. But what I was really looking at were all the things pushing up between the cracks. Grasses, weeds, the occasional wild flower. Every few months we clear them – and they always just grow right back again.

For those of you who love order, it’s a mess – perhaps a headache you’re aware of in your own garden. But I like to look at it another way, and not just because I’m a lazy gardener. What I love about seeing all those plants pushing their way up and out into the fresh air is the sense of *irrepressible life*. However hard we try to destroy it, abundant life just keeps reappearing.

This has long been a passion of mine. Until we moved to MK, I’d lived virtually all of my life in urban areas, many of them on the rough and ready side. My world was concreted, bricked and paved. And yet, what was remarkable was *how often life would push out through the cracks* – up the side of a wall, through a crack in the pavement, peeping out through a fence. We usually dismiss them as weeds – but in the city, I used to call them beautiful. Signs of irrepressible life, no matter how hard we tried to stamp it out.

‘This is the testimony: God has given us life, and this life is in his Son.’ These words of St John remind us of a simple but profound truth. God is the author of life – and as people made in God’s image, *we are made for life, too*. Where God is, there is life.

So when God comes to earth, how does this play out? At one point, not as we expect: the author of life dies. Wrongly charged, corruptly convicted – innocent and betrayed, alone on a cross. But this could never be the end of the story. How can you destroy irrepressible life? Or as St Peter says in today’s reading: ‘But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.’ (v24)

The agony of death was not so much the physical process of dying, but momentary separation from his Father. And yet it could only be temporary, because life cannot be held back forever. The resurrection reminds us that God has life within himself, and God’s purpose, not just for Jesus but for all of us, is life. Death is not the final answer – the ultimate destiny of all those who choose to live their lives in God *is life*.

May our prayer today be David’s cry of joy at the end of this passage: ‘You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.’ And, perhaps, take a look at the weeds on your patio or your path and give thanks for irrepressible life! It’s what we were made for.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 6 – Acts 2:29-36 ‘God had promised’

Promises, promises. It’s something we all find ourselves doing, but fulfilling them is not always straightforward. During the covid pandemic, so many promises have had to be postponed or cancelled, through things outside our control. Is it better not to promise at all?

Interestingly, God doesn’t have an issue with making promises or vows. Jesus’ teaching on not swearing oaths in the Sermon on the Mount is more to do with abusing language to manipulate people than the idea that we shouldn’t make firm commitments. Indeed, our integrity should be such that a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ is enough for people to know that we will do what we said we will do.

And God makes promises to us, too. Indeed at the heart of what we call ‘faith’ is that sense of trust that God will do what he said he will do. That God does wonderfully forgive us, fully and freely; that God does send us the Holy Spirit – what Peter indeed calls in this passage ‘the promised Holy Spirit’; that God will take us to enjoy eternal, abundant life in heaven. *Faith rests on the promises of God.*

And God also promised many centuries ago that a new anointed rescuer would come, a king to sit on David’s throne. ‘God had promised’ this to David – and it is now remarkably and perfectly fulfilled in Jesus.

The result of these promises: ‘God has made this Jesus.... Lord and Messiah.’ (v36) Our great rescuer and now the One we can worship and follow.

When life is tough it’s easy to get weary of commitments and promises. But a deeper truth is at work: a certain foundation on which our lives can rest. God’s promises never fail. He has not forgotten you. He still loves you. He is still with you. And you are still with him. Take a few moments today to call to mind some of the great promises of God. And may that lift your heart and soul in praise.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 7 – Acts 2:37-41 ‘In the name of Jesus’

The week after Pentecost (in the traditional church calendar) is Trinity Sunday, a day when we celebrate the fact that the God we love and worship is one being with three natures: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On this Sunday of the year we reflect on why this profound idea is such an amazing thing: it means we worship a *uniquely 3-dimensional God*, someone we can relate to in many deep ways - a magnificent monarch, a wise teacher and judge, an inspiring example, a comforting presence in our lives, a close friend. God is both up in heaven and in our hearts. If God had only one nature, think what we would lose!

Today though, we remind ourselves that there is a ‘way in’ to this extraordinary relationship. God is Christlike – and Jesus (the Son) is also the way to the Father and the Spirit. The Christian faith is ultimately a *Christ-centred* faith: we trust in, and follow, Jesus. And this idea runs throughout the last part of Peter’s sermon:

- We are forgiven in the name of Jesus (v38)
- We are baptised in the name of Jesus (v38)
- As a result we receive the Holy Spirit (v38: noting it was Jesus who received the Spirit from the Father and pours it out on us – v33)
- Ultimately we are called by God (v39) to believe in the promises fulfilled by Jesus.

It’s all in the name of Jesus. This is how we change our lives (the meaning of the word ‘repent’ – a word sadly obscured sometimes by too much religious baggage).

What always touches me when I read these amazing stories of the early church is how much Jesus is at the centre of everything – how much the apostles loved Jesus, and built everything they said and did around this love. Every time I read it, I think to myself: I want a bit of that! Maybe you do, too.

The good news is that this is not just a historical record. As Peter insists, this kind of life is available to everyone: us, our families, and even those who are far off. No-one is too young or too old, too good or too bad, too cynical or too gullible. *Jesus is for all of us.* And in his name we have forgiveness, a new life, and power by his Spirit to live that new life. May that new life be ours today, this week, and for eternity.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 8 – Acts 2:42-47 ‘The blueprint’

Many of you know that I love playing records. There’s something about the theatre of it that’s unbeatable. Even though I have a music streaming subscription, I love to get one of my 12-inch discs of black plastic out on a regular basis. I only own one record, though, that’s worth any money. Bizarrely I bought it by accident, but it’s by a band who split a couple of years later and deleted their whole back catalogue. You can’t buy this record new anymore, only second-hand copies.

Funnily enough my copy also has a little white sticker in the top-right corner, which adds £50 to its value. The sticker is worthless in itself, but it proves that my copy is one of the original pressings, as it was only these that had this sticker. I’m glad I accidentally bought the wrong record that day!

For all that we love new things in our culture, there’s a huge amount of interest in finding originals. We love the idea of having something that’s the *original version* – whether it’s a first edition of a book, the first series of a classic car – or the actual original piece of art, rather than a print.

It’s true in church life, too. There are so many denominations now, so many different types of churches, we find ourselves asking – *what was the original church really like?* Before there were human institutions and organisations, before we owned buildings and created hierarchies of trained professionals, before we decided that this particular practice defined our particular brand of church?

And in today’s famous passage we get a glimpse of the original church. The church newly anointed by the Spirit, led by the original leaders who’d been with Jesus. And as we read these verses, we’ll see some things that remind us (thankfully) of the church we have now, and others which are more challenging.

It’s no surprise to know that they devoted themselves to study of their faith (the apostles’ teaching now being written down as the New Testament), to unity (usually translated as ‘fellowship’, but the word means one-ness), to hospitality (breaking of bread referred to the act of sharing a meal, which probably included remembering Jesus’ death but not in the formalised way we have it now) and to prayer. So far, so good – we might recognise something of our own church family, even if the season of the covid pandemic has restricted us in various ways.

But we also see a church which was extraordinarily generous, where miracles were normal, where the whole community admired what it was doing and where people joined it every day. These things are unusual now – and perhaps as you read this, you might have found yourself longing, as I did, that we might see more of it!

There is no perfect church this side of heaven. Which is just as well, or I couldn’t join it. But let’s be inspired by what we read today to lift our eyes, enlarge our vision, and declare over our church, our community, our nation – come, Lord Jesus, bless your church!

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 9 – Acts 3:1-10 ‘Give what you have’

Lots of us love a good Christian biography. We find stories of great people doing great acts for God inspiring: whether it's Jackie Pullinger in the slums of Hong Kong, or Nicky Cruz working with violent gangs, or Brother Andrew smuggling bibles into the Eastern Bloc, or Corrie ten Boom risking her life to protect Jewish families during the Second World War. It's good to remember what an awesome God we have.

And yet, if you're anything like me, reading such stories can sometimes make us feel inadequate. We think of our own lives in comparison with these heroes of the faith, and wonder where we've gone wrong or missed out. Never mind that in at least two of the examples above, their calling largely came out of their own circumstances, rather than a dramatic change of direction – we can find ourselves reflecting that perhaps we somehow fell short.

But this is not how God sees it. Comparing ourselves to others is rarely a smart move in the journey of faith. Today's wonderful story reminds us of one simple principle which we can all offer for God's glory: *give what you have*.

The scene is not an unusual one. Peter and John were doing what they usually did – going to pray at the temple – and almost certainly taking their usual route there. They passed someone who they'd probably passed many times before, who made the usual request for financial assistance. This is not a unique, one-off, dramatic encounter. It's an encounter they *might* have had dozens of times previously. But today they took a step of faith and applied one simple principle: they gave what they had, and trusted God for the rest.

And so when the chap asks them for money, Peter says, in effect: 'I don't have cash, but I'll give you what I can, something else you don't have – a prayer for healing in the name of Jesus.'

Today we can give thanks for this extraordinary miracle. But I also want us to note the very *ordinary* circumstances in which it took place. Two normal, working-class blokes making their usual journey at their usual time, passing someone they'd passed many times before, and doing one simple thing in the name of Jesus. Give what you have, and trust God for the rest.

Jesus teaches the same thing in that famous parable of the talents. He doesn't ask everyone to deliver the same amount of impact for the kingdom – only to make the best of what they have. In the kingdom, everyone gets to play. And all God asks is that we use what we have.

So in your circumstances today – however ordinary they might seem – take heart! God is simply asking you to give what you have, and trust him for the rest. By the grace of God, extraordinary things might come of it.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 10 – Acts 3:11-16 ‘Where there’s blame...’

Just down from where we live, on the notorious chicane which leads out of our village towards the next community, they’re closing the road this morning for some roadworks. Almost certainly it will be to fill in the large pot holes which have appeared (again) over recent months as extra buses and lorries, alongside thousands of cars have taken their toll. We’ll certainly be glad not to have to weave the car all over the road to avoid them, but it reminds us that the real reason these potholes are attended to so promptly is the risk of being sued.

We live in a culture nowadays which likes to apportion blame. We can no longer hold up our hands and insist that ‘accidents just happen’. If something’s gone wrong, someone has to take the blame.

And whilst we now take this to extreme lengths – good for potholes, bad for insurance policies! – this attitude is nothing new. In fact, it’s as old as the serpent itself – when God confronts Adam and Eve in the garden right at the start of the bible, the newly-shamed man says ‘blame the woman’; the woman says ‘blame the serpent’.

And in today’s passage, St. Peter doesn’t pull any punches either. He is of course talking about one of his best friends, so the pain is raw, but his words have a curiously modern ring to them: ‘*You* handed him over... (v13); *you* disowned the Holy and Righteous One... (v14); *you* killed...’ (v15). Where there’s blame, as they say, there’s a claim.

But the claim in this case, wonderfully and miraculously, is the very one paid in full by this innocent sufferer. The very moral failings that put Jesus on the cross are also the ones that God deals with on that same cross. The point is not that Peter is targeting particular groups with causing the death of the Messiah – that was a pernicious belief of mediaeval Christendom, which caused untold suffering for the Jewish minorities who lived in those societies – but rather *their story is our story*.

We can read these words knowing that we all carry the same guilt as Adam and Eve, the same guilt as the Roman and Jewish authorities referred to in this passage. We too put Jesus on the cross... and yet we too can make the same claim: that in the name of Jesus we can be forgiven, set free, restored.

God was not thwarted by human wickedness. God achieved his purposes regardless, and gloriously raised Jesus from the dead. This same God raises us too – the name of Jesus brings us life. Today, give thanks that nothing you’ve done can separate you from God’s love. You are forgiven, you are clean, and your only ‘claim’ is the life-giving power of the name of the Son of God. Hallelujah!

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 11 – Acts 3:17-23 ‘Times of refreshing’

As a student, I spent two of my long summer vacations working as a brickie’s mate. It was hard graft, albeit in glorious weather. And when I got home, my routine was usually the same: a long soak in the bath to wash off the grime and soothe the aching muscles, followed by a couple of hours with my feet up to rest.

It’s a familiar routine for many of us in the evenings – as we prepare for bed, we wash and then rest. It’s something we adopt as children (or for our children) – ‘bath and bed’ – and it remains a lifelong habit. Wash, and rest.

Funnily enough, there’s echoes of it in the spiritual life too. What does it mean to come to Christ? What’s the outcome – what does it look like? As Peter talks to the crowds in today’s passage, he describes what happens for those who come to believe in the name of Jesus, who change their lives in that direction (remembering that this is the meaning of the word ‘repent’ in v19). And it’s the same pattern I’ve just described: wash and rest. This is the force of the two words Peter uses in the second part of v19.

First, our sins are ‘wiped out’ (to use the NIV translation). The word literally means to wash off or erase. Its most common usage in the language of the day was to describe how a wet sponge would rub off a mistake made by ink on a piece of papyrus. The writer would rub the papyrus and ‘wash off’ (same word) the ink from the paper before re-writing.

What a wonderful image to demonstrate how Jesus deals with our own selfishness and wrongdoing! It’s like a wet sponge is applied to our lives, literally washing off the stains of the mistakes. We are, quite literally, washed clean!

But it doesn’t stop there – God’s promise is also that we might enjoy ‘times of refreshing from the Lord’. I love that phrase, and how we need that kind of refreshing at the moment. How good to know that this is God’s plan for us. Again, the word literally means rest, relief, respite or refreshment, and it reminds us that our good news is not just ‘sin management’ – it is the restoration of wholeness. God desires not just that we wash, but we also rest.

‘The rest of God’ is a theme which weaves through the whole bible. After creation God rests on the seventh day, and then institutes rest every seventh day for us too. And ultimately, that season of rest will be perfected for eternity in heaven, where we will enjoy, forever, the rest of God. Peter even alludes to this in our passage as he promises that when Jesus returns God will ‘restore everything’ (v21).

God has called you to enjoy his rest. We may have to work hard today – or we may be fortunate enough to enjoy the sunshine – but it makes no difference. Thanks to Jesus, our hearts can be at rest: and one day, we will know that rest forever.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 12 – Acts 3:24-26 ‘Heirs of the covenant’

Since we live just a few miles from Bletchley Park, one of the features of our community is that over the years, a number of our parishioners and church members worked there during the war. Thousands were billeted nearby, and some of them stayed and made their permanent homes here after 1945. Sadly, the last of our church members who worked in one of the famous huts passed away a few years ago – and she is much missed.

In the time that I knew her, although she had so many extraordinary experiences to recount, she was always very reluctant to speak about her work during the war – even 60+ years later, she only ever mentioned it a few times, and rarely gave specific details. Her reason was very clear: ‘I took an oath, and I can’t break it.’ Even though others had begun to talk once the statutory 30 years had passed, for this lady her oath was lifelong, permanent.

How long are we expected to keep a promise? It’s a good question, and I imagine most of you would answer: ‘It depends on the promise.’ In today’s passage we look at perhaps the greatest of all promises ever made: one made by God to an obscure Mesopotamian almost 4,000 years ago. The promise was this: ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’ Quoted in v25, the original promise goes all the way back to Genesis, the first book of the bible. God promised Abraham that one of his descendants would be the means to bless the whole world.

In a sense, *the rest of the bible represents the outworking or fulfilment of that promise.* And it took a long time coming – at least by our human calculations. There were many up and downs, pitfalls and sidetracks along the way. Viewed through human lenses, it almost didn’t get going at all – Abraham couldn’t have children, and the long-awaited heir took 25 years. The second generation fought and the third generation was exiled to another country in a time of famine. Hundreds of years later, the genocidal ruler of that nation tried to wipe out the heirs of the covenant – unsuccessfully. Then the heirs themselves repeatedly failed to trust the God who made that promise, eventually split into two and were again exiled. Various leaders had threatened to be the ‘person of blessing’ promised to Abraham, but had ultimately come up short. By the time of this sermon, nearly 2,000 years later, it would be fair to ask: when would the promise be fulfilled?

Peter’s answer is remarkable: ‘the time is now! We have now seen the fulfilment of those promises. However long it’s taken, God’s covenant can’t be broken, because God never breaks his promises. You are still heirs of that promise: and the servant has now come – his name is Jesus.’

With the passage of time, it’s easy to lose the force of how amazing this is. Never mind ‘30 years of hurt’ (to quote the famous song), how about 2,000 years of waiting? But God is good, and faithful. As Peter reminded the crowds in our reflection two days ago, God is ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’. *It’s the same God, keeping the same promise – faithful then and now.*

We too inherit this same blessing – since we are part of ‘all peoples’ that the promise was for. This faithful God is our God. Bring to him today whatever your needs are, and trust in his faithfulness for you – for you too are an heir of this amazing covenant.

Day 13 – Acts 4:1-4 ‘A dangerous freedom’

‘Like a mighty tortoise moves the church of God.’ This parody of a famous old hymn is one that a friend of mine told me many years ago. He’s a Christian – and there’s no harm in not taking ourselves too seriously! – but the sentiment is shared by many both within and outside the church: the church is seen as something very conservative, safe, unlikely to take risks or challenge the status quo. While other radical forces might shape society, the church moves relentlessly forward... but oh so slowly and carefully.

It’s funny that this is how many in the West see the church, when in many other cultures, the perception of our faith is totally different: the church is seen as dangerously subversive. This has been true throughout history, and right from the beginning, too. To preach the Lordship of Jesus is an implicit challenge both to other worldviews, and also to human power which likes to believe its own hype. The ‘Powers That Be’ are unsettled by those who worship a different boss, or insist that above this world sits an even bigger Boss than them, to whom one day they will give an account.

It’s funny when you think about it, that a group of people committed to peaceful living, loving their neighbour, serving the disadvantaged, giving generously and obeying the general law of the land wherever it doesn’t contradict the will of God, should be seen as such a threat. 99% of the time we are model citizens.

But the other 1% matters. The fact that ultimately our first loyalty is to the Lord Jesus is what makes human authorities uncomfortable. And so, in today’s passage, we see the first sign of trouble for the fledgling church, the first time that the authorities start to oppose what’s going on. Until now, the new community has been only a blessing – but as it grows to several thousand (v4), it starts to be seen as a threat. We get this marvellously ironic sentence in v2: The religious authorities ‘were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people.’ Not inciting them, or bullying them, or oppressing them – just enlarging their minds and hearts!

Of course, the real issue is the second part of the verse: ‘proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.’ The troublesome rabbi they had just got rid of a few months previously is the last name they wanted to hear being spoken of openly in the heartland of their faith.

Perhaps you’ve come across this type of opposition personally: at work, or within your family. If you haven’t, give thanks for the peace and freedom most of us still enjoy. But let’s pray today for all our fellow brothers and sisters for whom this type of opposition is a daily reality – both in this country and around the world. Many do so in secret, some openly – and all with great courage. In the end, their conviction that resurrection life is found in Jesus outweighs every cost. May their courage inspire us, and, like the early church, may it also bear great fruit for the kingdom of God.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 14 – Acts 4:5-12 ‘Called to account’

In 361 AD the Roman Emperor Julian, a fierce opponent and persecutor of the church, wrote a tract regretting the progress of Christianity because it pulled people away from the Roman gods. In this tract he wrote: 'Atheism [i.e. the Christian faith!] has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that *the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well*; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.' (italics my own)

It might seem remarkable that one of the reasons this emperor hated Christians so much was his sense of outrage that their care for others was so great that it extended to those of another religion. But it is a sobering reminder that not everyone likes followers of Jesus doing good!

That said, what we also see in today's passage is the reality that showing care and kindness for others has been at the heart of our faith from the beginning. God is self-giving love, and this God calls us to love others in the same way. So Peter and John bless this man with prayer and kindness, and now find themselves hauled before the authorities to explain themselves. And Peter is not slow to point out the irony of what is going on here: 'we are being called to account for an act of kindness...' (v7)

Whilst this is certainly unusual, it reinforces the observation we made yesterday that radical love unsettles corrupt human power, because it exposes the myths of their authority. Peter understands that this is the real reason: 'know this.... it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.... that this man stands before you healed.' (v10)

In the grand scheme of things, if we are to get into trouble for anything, much better that it's for showing great kindness than great hatred or indifference. And the Jesus in whose name this mighty miracle happened is the same Jesus who empowers our lives today, who still gives his name to the acts of love and faith which we offer.

Thankfully, few of us face the sort of opposition Peter and John did. But if you do: know that God is with you, and will bless your integrity, just as he has always done. Psalm 37 reminds us: 'Do not fret because of the ungodly... for like the grass they will soon wither.... Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.' (vv1,2,4) In good times and bad, may that last sentence be our hope and prayer – God, grant me grace to delight in you and you alone, shape my heart to desire what you desire. Amen!

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 15 – Acts 4:13-22 ‘They’d been with Jesus’

Recently I’ve been reading ‘Conspiracy of the Insignificant’, the autobiography of Patrick Regan, the founder of a Christian organisation called XLP, which has done brilliant work sharing and showing the love of Christ in inner-city schools and among the toughest estates in London. It wasn’t the kind of area where Patrick grew up, but he felt called to it at a young age. Visiting Cardboard City in Waterloo as a 16-year old, he writes:

‘It was there that my bubble burst for good and my heart broke. I returned to the church hall we were staying in that night and prayed a prayer that changed my life. As I tossed and turned on my air bed, tears ran down my face and my heart was overwhelmed with the things I’d seen... There was no Hallelujah Chorus, but there on the church floor I was suddenly intensely aware that all these people were made in the image of God and that as a Christian I had to respond in some way.’

And so began decades of faithful service on one of God’s frontlines: a journey which not only took Patrick into some of the most challenging areas of this country but also to places of great hurt and poverty overseas.

We worship an extraordinary Saviour. One of my prayers is that I’ll never lose sight of just how amazing Jesus is, that my heart would continue to be captivated by him. As yesterday’s passage concluded, ‘There is no other name...’

But as we marvel at Jesus’ saving love, today we can also remember that this amazing Saviour also empowers *ordinary people to do extraordinary things*. People like Patrick Regan. And people like Peter and John – ‘unschooled, ordinary men’ (v13). These are not people who were always destined for greatness: they had normal upbringings in ordinary places. But something made the difference. Or, we should say, Someone. The rest of v13 gives it away: ‘they took note that these men had been with Jesus.’

Being with Jesus makes the difference. Three years of personal friendship and investment from their Lord had turned Peter and John into bold evangelists, people with purpose and authority. Still flawed, still human: but ordinary people now able – through Christ’s power – to do extraordinary things.

There is nothing like being with Jesus. And because it’s not about us and our abilities, our capacities, our talents, Peter’s and John’s and Patrick’s stories can be ours too. We too can be ordinary people doing extraordinary things. We may not have books written about us, but all of us are privileged to witness little, ordinary, everyday miracles. The longer I go on in pastoral ministry, the more convinced I am that God gifts so many people to be part of these ‘ordinary, everyday miracles.’ No-one is excluded because Jesus is the same Lord for each of us.

Let’s be uplifted by Peter and John, by what God can do in ordinary people like you and me. And let’s pray with St. Richard of Chichester: ‘Dear Lord, of you three things I pray – to know you more clearly, to love you more dearly, and to follow you more nearly, this day and every day. Amen.’

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 16 – Acts 4:23-31 ‘Stretch out your hand’

‘Stretch out your hand.’ There’s a phrase guaranteed to send a shiver down the spines of those of us old enough remember corporal punishment at school. (I am... just!) Those fateful words were usually the prelude to sharp pain a matter of seconds later, as the cane/strap/palm swung down.

But today is a chance to redeem this phrase: there’s a noble background to this phrase in the bible, because – despite the modern connotations of punishment associated with it – in the bible this phrase is used *to signify the activity of God*. Moses is told to stretch out his hand by the Red Sea, and as he did so, the waters parted (Exodus 14:16). Jesus tells the man in the synagogue to stretch out his hand (Mark 3:5), and as he does so, it is healed.

And here in this passage the disciples ask God to stretch out a divine hand, in order that they might see great miracles and wonders performed. Or rather, we might say that these disciples were asking that every time they stretched out a human hand in the name of Jesus, God’s divine hand anointed and empowered their step of faith to do something wonderful.

It’s a remarkable prayer, not least because it is made in the context of the onset of persecution. Peter and John have been briefly imprisoned, and then sternly warned not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Their response: to pray fervently to do so even more! And with more miracles, too.

It’s hard not to be inspired by such faith. But there’s an encouragement here for us, too: a reminder than whenever we stretch out a hand to do something in Jesus’ name, we can pray for God to bless and empower it. It might be something spectacular, but it might also be a simple act of love. Anything that Jesus can put his name to God can bless.

And that is (part of) the wonder of what it means to follow Jesus. *Nothing is wasted*: even a cup of cold water offered in Jesus’ name has its reward (Mark 9:41).

So let’s pray for grace to stretch out a hand in some way today – that God too might stretch out his hand to bless it.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 17 – Acts 4:32-37 ‘One in heart and mind’

‘The night has passed, and the day lies open before us: let us pray with one heart and mind...’

So begins one of the lovely opening prayers in the Church of England’s Daily Prayer. Its inspiration comes from today’s passage, which starts with the striking description of the early church: ‘All the believers were one in heart and mind.’

It’s a wonderful image – but what does it mean? We talk a lot about the unity of the church, and how important that is: but this seems to take ‘unity’ to a whole new level! These early chapters of Acts provide a good definition of what a church which is truly ‘one’ looks like. It involves deep friendship and regular meeting together, a love of (and commitment to) growing in wisdom and prayer, a common vision and mutual support in achieving that vision – and crucially, the capacity to meet each other’s practical needs. What is interesting is that the main example of what it means to be ‘one in heart and mind’ is the very down-to-earth financial support that was provided for any who had need (verses 33-35).

In these days long before the welfare state, the only safety net people had – apart from their immediate family – was the generosity of others. The early church provides an inspiring model of what a heart touched by the generous love of Christ, and a mind able to make wise choices as to how to meet others’ needs, looks like. In doing so, they fulfilled one of God’s original desires for his people, given in the law: ‘There need be no poor people among you’ (Deuteronomy 15:4) – something our author St Luke makes clear in verse 34.

Nowadays most commentators describe the life of the early church as an ‘ideal community’, a utopian society which couldn’t last long in its original state, and we must admit of some truth in that. But we should beware getting too comfortable with the idea that this kind of radical community is ‘just not for now’. It remains a prophetic vision to lift our eyes to a greater horizon, and our hearts to a higher love. My prayer for myself is that I would remain open to hear its voice – perhaps that is a prayer you can pray, too. And can I also offer this wonderful follow-on prayer to the invitation which began our reflection today:

As we rejoice in the gift of this new day, so may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love for you, now and forever. Amen.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 18 – Acts 4:36-5:11 ‘But to God’

This is not a passage many of us enjoy reading! Reflecting on it today, we too might feel, as the rest of the church did, ‘great fear... about these events.’ (v11)

And it is certainly a difficult passage to get our head around. The judgement seems extremely harsh, perhaps something we’d be more likely to read in the books of Judges or Samuel than in the New Testament. We have to remember that at this very early stage of the church’s life, its reputation was at stake. It was still a tiny, fragile community, its leaders were already being held up to close scrutiny (and overt persecution begins later in this chapter), and they were also expecting the return of Jesus within their generation. The timescales on which they were operating in order to prepare the church for Christ’s return were a matter of years or decades at most, not millennia.

This backdrop created a dramatic urgency for absolute integrity. Think today of the howls of hypocritical outrage from the press whenever any person or organisation with a reputation for goodness gets caught doing something less than upright – and multiply the stakes by ten for a community awaiting the last day and the restoration of all things.

The key phrase here – and the simple takeout for us now – is this: *what matters is what God thinks of anything we do*. Whilst we might receive praise or judgement from other humans, the only audience we do things for is The Audience of One – the Lord.

This cuts both ways: our good deeds might be praised by others, but it is only God’s opinion that really matters. Hence beginning our reading to include Barnabas’ gift at the end of chapter 4. This is a deliberate comparison in the text which is lost by a chapter division. Barnabas is one of the great characters of the bible, and someone held in very high regard by human society. Even the apostles decided that he needed a name which befitted his wonderful character: he was no longer just Joseph, but ‘son of encouragement’, which is the meaning of the name Barnabas.

But although this act of great generosity is such that it gets a specific mention in scripture, we know from the other stories about Barnabas that he’s not really interested in human praise, only to be right before God. Barnabas lives for the Audience of One, whether that gets him plaudits (as here) or criticism (15:36-40).

In the same way, the problem for Ananias and Sapphira was not that they let the church down, but they lied to God. The one opinion which really mattered was God’s – and it is this that led to their downfall.

As we offer our lives to God today, may he grant us all grace to live more and more for The Audience of One – and may he also grant us confidence in his love and mercy towards flawed and broken people like us. There but for the grace of God... and thankfully, the grace of God is very much alive and well for us today.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 19 – Acts 5:12-16 ‘Open heaven’

After the scandal of Ananias and Sapphira, what would happen next? That was the big question that must have been playing on the minds and the lips of both the inhabitants of Jerusalem as well as the fledgling Church. What I think is significant about this short but dynamic passage is firstly what it does say, and secondly what it doesn't. Allow me to explain...

The most striking thing about the start of this passage is where the apostles chose to lead their ongoing meetings: in Solomon's Colonnade, the exact place where they had gathered after the lame man had been healed and the very place from which they had got in trouble with the authorities! They were absolutely true to the word they had spoken to the religious authorities: 'Should we listen to you, or to God?' (paraphrase of 4:19) Indeed they had also prayed for boldness, and it seems this boldness was there in abundance (4:29).

Similarly, their prayer for more signs and wonders (4:30) was being wonderfully answered – indeed their reputation for miracle-working was such that people even believed in the power of Peter's shadow (v15)! And this is where what the passage *doesn't* say is helpful too. Many cults and sects have started when a gifted leader starts to believe their own hype, as crowds of followers ascribe special status to them. Power corrupts, and sadly the history of the church has seen it happen numerous times.

It could have happened to Peter – imagine people wanting even to experience your *shadow* – but it didn't. There is no sense in this passage or what comes next that Peter's ego is inflated, or that he changes his determination to offer his gifts for the Lord with humility and a servant heart. Perhaps the greatest miracle in this passage, among all the healings, is the one in Peter's heart. He stayed true, he stayed surrendered, he stayed humble. And as a result, 'more... believed in the Lord' and 'all of them were healed'.

It's wonderful to be used by God, to be fruitful. But let's all pray for grace to have a heart like Peter: bold, humble, giving God the glory.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 20 – Acts 5:17-24 ‘At a loss’

If you're anything like me, you'll be very familiar with the experience of going to some room in the house to retrieve a particular object – and finding to your bemusement that the item isn't there. 'I'm sure I put it there,' I suspect you'll say to yourself. 'Where can it possibly be?'

I had that very experience recently with the special ink we use for weddings: I went to the drawer where I keep it, and.... 40 minutes later, after searching every other place where it might conceivably be, I went back to the original drawer in desperation – and there it was, hiding in a corner I hadn't searched properly. Welcome to my world.

Well, if you've had this kind of experience, imagine what it was like for the prison officers in today's passage: heading over to the prison, as instructed by the authorities, to the place where the apostles were being 'kept' – and, lo and behold, they weren't there! Never mind a missing household object... To misquote Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell, if losing one apostle would be unfortunate, and two looks like carelessness – what does losing twelve apostles look like?

No wonder the authorities were 'at a loss' (v24). It was a loss they would have to get used to: this is the first of three such heavenly prison breaks over the following chapters. And it reminds us that our God, who created the laws of nature, occasionally overrides them at his will. With good reason, in this case: the church is very new and very fragile, despite its explosive growth. Arguably, the future of the new community which Christ's work has brought about is at stake.

This kind of situation needs a miracle – and it certainly gets one! But what is most striking about this passage is not the miracle, but *the obedience of the apostles*. They go straight back to the location which got them in trouble in the first place. They don't even hesitate: as soon as it gets light (v21), they are back in the temple courts proclaiming the good news.

And this good news is about 'this new life' (v20). And that message remains as true for us today as it was then. God is about *life*, and we can share this life, thanks to Jesus. If you find yourself dealing with disappointment today, let's take heart that our God is still the same, yesterday, today and forever – and this wonderful, amazing God has come to give us life to the full. A fullness which is not ultimately dependent on our circumstances, but on his grace, love and power.

May that life be ours today – and may it give us hope, even in trying times. Amen.

Day 21 – Acts 5:25-32 ‘Wood for the trees’

It's easy to lose perspective – especially in situations of dispute or conflict. Many years ago we attended a weekend away for our church group in a remote location in Herefordshire. The house was set in lovely countryside, with one village nearby, and another down the road. As we went out for a walk on Saturday afternoon to explore the area, we were advised that the two villages in question hadn't fraternised for decades. No-one could even remember why they fallen out in the first place! It was a beautiful part of the world – but under the surface, there was darkness.

Such stories like this abound. Sadly, even in families this is true. Sometimes the source of the fall-out is clear and the blame obvious – at other times, we find ourselves clinging on to a sense of right which, were we to see it in others, we would challenge them to justify.

In today's passage, the authorities are getting increasingly angry at the success of the new 'Jesus' movement. In fact, they are downright jealous, as v17 yesterday made clear. So once again the apostles are arrested and called to account (vv26-27). And I think it's significant to note what the authorities' principal beef is: 'You are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.' (v28)

It's a classic case of failing to see the wood for the trees. Never mind the incredible good this group was doing: the people being cared for, and healed, and given new hope and life and purpose. Never mind the power of the Holy Spirit and the miraculous signs which accompany them. Never mind the complete absence of violence or menace associated with this pacifist sect. What they're bothered about is incurring some sort of blame, with an underlying current of envy at this group's popularity.

And whilst it's true that the apostles are uncompromising as to who made sure Jesus was killed (3:14-15, 4:10, and here v30), the authorities have been blinded by their need to win, to be right, to cling on to power. They're missing all the positives: the promise of new life, the gift of the Spirit, the renewal of the nation's life implicit in the teachings of this dynamic new movement.

It's an object lesson for us, too, of the dangers of letting either blame avoidance or a need to be right cloud our judgement and stain our lives. Sometimes we need to step back and see the wood for the trees. To see those we fall out with as God sees them. To see what God is doing in a given situation. Or just to acknowledge that we might have been wrong about something.

It's never easy, but it is the path of grace and life. My prayer is that we can all retain an open heart and open mind, that we might never miss what God is up to, nor allow conflicts to endure longer than they have to.

Lord God, grant me an open heart and an open mind. Give me the courage to admit where I'm wrong, the grace to restore relationships in conflict, and the eyes to see what you're doing in me, and in others. In the name of Jesus, the author of life and forgiveness, the maker of all things new. Amen.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 22 – Acts 5:33-40 ‘By its fruit....’

Today’s passage revolves around this million-dollar question: *how can we judge if something is of God, or not?* Think about the radical changes we’ve made to church life forced by the covid pandemic: should we be celebrating or mourning? Or, as society tries to return to some form of ‘normality’ (whatever that is) – is that a good thing or not?

What about our own journey of faith over the last year, which might have felt different to most years before it: what’s worth keeping, and what is only temporary?

This is the central question which often faces us – just as it did the religious leaders questioning Peter and John. Instinctively they don’t like this dynamic new group – they feel threatened, jealous. They’re all for fire and brimstone, shock and awe, threats and repression.

And then a voice of reason intervenes. Gamaliel – who we later learn was St Paul’s teacher – stands up and effectively says: it’s too early to judge whether this is of God, or not. Time will tell: if it isn’t, it won’t last. If it is, we won’t be able to stop it, because God is blessing it.

In effect it echoes exactly Jesus’ own teaching on the same question – how do we recognise the value of something? *By its fruit.* Look at the long-term outcomes – are they good ones? Are lives being changed, people helped, virtues growing, prayers answered, newcomers not just joining but flourishing, communities changing – in other words, are there real positive outcomes, good consequences?

We may not suffer the sort of opposition the early church did – for which we are very thankful – but it’s a great question to apply to our lives as well. What is really bearing fruit? And take heart, there will be something! Probably several things.

Change is slow – always slower than we’d like. But as we look back, we can usually see the hand of God at work –and often others can see the change better than we can. If you know someone to ask – ask them. You’ll be pleasantly surprised by what they say.

So let’s be encouraged by this great bit of practical wisdom., modelled by old Gamaliel – and let’s give thanks today for the fruit God has matured in our lives, and the lives of people around us.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 23 – Acts 5:41-42 ‘Counted worthy’

In the summer of 2021 my daughter finished her Duke of Edinburgh Gold Expedition. It had been delayed numerous times by the pandemic, and eventually she was spared having to travel to Snowdonia and camp out in the heavy rain we’ve had the last few days (can you imagine?!). Nevertheless, the days were arduous – up to 17 miles each day hiking, carrying a 20lb rucksack on your sodden back. Her ankles were very sore and swollen, so the last couple of days were more of a hobble than a walk.

But, she did it! And we’re very proud of her. And with the rest of her Gold Award completed, she will now hopefully get her invite to Buckingham Palace to receive her award sometime next year. Sadly the Duke himself of course won’t be there to give it, but it will be quite the occasion nonetheless.

‘Counted worthy....’ – it’s a striking phrase, isn’t it? Our daughter went through significant pain and challenge to be counted worthy of her gold award. No doubt as you look back on your own life, you’ll think of some challenge or goal where you too made a significant effort to be counted worthy – a qualification you completed, a new skill you mastered, a promotion you worked hard for, perhaps a competition you succeeded in. And you were counted worthy....

Most of us are wired to enjoy challenges, and the rewards that come with them – even if it’s just personal satisfaction. And pretty much all of us like the feeling of praise or affirmation from our peers. To be counted worthy is, we think on the whole, a thoroughly good thing.

And yet, here in today’s passage, we see the opposite. The apostles rejoice because they too had been counted worthy – but to what end? ‘Worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (of Jesus).’ It’s an extraordinary, upside-down, topsy-turvy view of the world. Most of us fear disgrace, or punishment. These early Christians delighted in it. What’s going on?

The answer can only be found in where they seek their affirmation – or rather, *from whom*. They didn’t care what people thought of them, only God. For them, they could endure any sort of human negativity as long as they were confident of their Lord’s approval.

Many of us are fortunate that we don’t have to choose between human approval and God’s. But we can take inspiration from the example of these extraordinary early Christians to recommit ourselves to live our lives for The Audience of One this day and this week. For that is more precious than any (even gold!) award.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 24 – Acts 6:1-7 ‘Practical solutions’

A man is walking on a cliff top when a sudden gust of wind blows him over the edge. In a moment he is left clinging by his fingernails to the last remaining ledge between himself and a 100-ft drop onto the rocks below. A devout Christian, he begins to pray fervently, seeking the Lord’s rescue. A minute later a couple walking along the same path hear his cries and lean down to offer him assistance. ‘It’s OK,’ the man says, ‘the Lord will save me.’

Barely has he heard their footsteps departing when a fisherman calls from the sea, offering assistance. Again, the man refuses: ‘The Lord will save me.’ As his fingers begin to slip, a search-and-rescue helicopter hovers ahead and a harness begins to descend. But the man shouts up, his voice by-now fading to gasps: ‘Don’t worry, the Lord will save me.’

Eventually his fingers slip... and when he meets the Lord in heaven a little while later, he shouts angrily: ‘Why didn’t you save me?’ ‘Well,’ says the Lord, ‘I sent you a couple, a boat and a helicopter – what more did you want?’

We can sometimes over-spiritualise the journey of faith. Yes, we believe in the life-changing power of God; we believe in answers to prayer, the gifts of the Spirit and ‘divine appointments’ – those moments when God seems to intervene in very direct ways in our lives. But God also gives us practical skills, and the capacity to organise ourselves. We don’t put our trust in them, only God – but they can be a great blessing nonetheless. Sometimes, it’s the way God works in a situation.

In today’s passage, the church faces a very practical dilemma. The food distribution programme is failing, and people are getting resentful. How are the apostles going to fix it? Do they preach on the value of fasting, do they counsel the grumbling groups to show patience and forgiveness, do they pray for the gripes to miraculously disappear? Not a bit of it: they come up with a very pragmatic solution. They find a new team of appropriately gifted leaders to run the welfare programme, while they continue to preach and pray.

But let’s note: it’s still a spiritual solution: they take counsel together (v2), they make spiritual maturity a requirement for the job (v3), and no doubt the time freed up for prayer (v4) was invested at least partly in making the right appointments.

Our God is the God of the whole of life. There is no ultimate divide between sacred and secular, practical and spiritual – it’s all God’s. Let’s take heart today that God is interested in the practical details of our lives, and values the practical gifts he’s given us. Yes, we soak everything in prayer – but then we act, offering real solutions which bring real hope to a real and hurting world.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 25 – Acts 6:8-15 ‘In Jesus’ footsteps’

A long time ago, when I worked in the marketing industry, one of my clients asked me to lie publicly on their behalf. We were producing a research report in support of a controversial planning application: 9 out of 10 results were very positive, one was ambiguous – the one I was asked to remove. I refused, which caused 48 hours of very difficult negotiations with our client.

Eventually the report was released in its entirety, and went straight onto the front page of the local press – at which point I was immediately reported to the Market Research Society by the group opposing the planning bid for breach of professional standards. It was a crude tactic to devalue the impact of our research, but since I had released the report in full, it backfired. The case was dismissed, at which point the developer which had commissioned the research splashed our success over the front pages of the local news. The bid was eventually approved, and the development built.

The irony in all this is that, had I succumbed to our client’s pressure to lie, the smear tactic would in fact have worked, I would have been fired and the research would have been worthless. The developer’s reputation would have been severely undermined and quite possibly the new development would have been denied. Doing the right thing brought me a significant amount of trouble – but ultimately also blessing.

I can’t pretend to have suffered the sort of extreme opposition that the early church faced – only isolated examples of what you might call ‘low-level pressure’, like the one I refer to above. The discomfort I felt for taking a stand for my faith gives me only the merest insight into what inspirational characters like Stephen must have lived with. But it’s striking how Stephen’s predicament mirrors Jesus’ own so closely just a year or two beforehand: a backdrop of great miracles (v8), jealousy from the religious establishment (v9), false witnesses (v13), including a very specific one about the future of the temple which is very close to the one also quoted by the gospel writers (e.g. Matthew 26:61).

Stephen’s story is most definitely Christlike, and a sobering reminder that, throughout the ages, some are called to walk in the footsteps of Jesus in a very literal way. Today’s passage is a great encouragement for us to pray for all those who face similar troubles around the world: if you feel drawn to seek specific examples, organisations like Open Doors and Barnabas Fund will give you plenty of situations to pray into.

For us, too, we may not be called to pay the ultimate price like Stephen. But there will be occasional challenges for most of us – like mine above – where we taste something of what means to take up a cross. May God grant us grace in those times, and may we too find joy and peace in knowing that Christ is with us especially in those times, and his grace is always sufficient, for his power is made perfect in our weakness.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 26 – Acts 7:1-16 ‘The God of glory’

I wonder how you would define glory? With sporting events now back after lockdown, use of the word ‘glory’ in the press has risen exponentially again. We hear daily of Euro glory, Wimbledon glory, Olympic glory, and so on – in essence we use the word as shorthand for victory or success.

In the bible, the Hebrew word for glory is *kabod* – it literally means ‘weight’. So the glory of God was God’s ‘weight’ being felt in the world. It became synonymous with the manifest presence of God, so overwhelming that people usually fell on their faces when they experienced it – see for example when God’s glory (‘weight’) fell on the first sacrifices in Leviticus (9:23-24).

Naturally this kind of dramatic experience associated God’s glory with sensations of dazzling light and power – but it’s as well to remember that the original meaning is simply God’s real presence in the world.

And this matters, because God’s glory isn’t always what we think it is. Far from always being associated with ‘victory’ or ‘success’ or dazzling light and power, there is another golden thread running through Scripture. St Paul summarised it later in reflecting on his own experience: God’s ‘power is made perfect in weakness.’ When Jesus predicts his forthcoming death, he says: ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.’ Glorified by being wrongfully convicted and dishonourably killed.

God’s ways are not ours – and this upside-down kingdom, where the first are last and the last are first, can be seen at work throughout Scripture. So when Stephen begins his extraordinary history of God’s people by referring to the work of ‘the God of glory’ (v2), we might be expecting a list of great victories and spectacular successes. Instead virtually all of these first 16 verses describe struggle and challenges. God calls a solitary man and his family (v2), to a land he did not own (v5), with the promise of slavery to come (v6) and well known issues with securing an heir (v8).

God’s plan had to survive iniquitous behaviour from a set of siblings (v9), famine (v11) and effectively exile away from the land promised to them (vv13-14). With the exception of Joseph’s personal flourishing – which saved his family, indeed the future of God’s people – there aren’t many overt ‘successes’ to speak of here.

And yet *this* is the plan of ‘the God of glory’. It reminds us that, even in times of trial and difficulty, God’s presence is real and at work, often in ways we can’t see at the time. What made these early generations great was their capacity for faith, even in the dark times.

Maybe you find yourself in such a dark time – or know of others who are. May this passage inspire you again – the God of glory is still at work, making his grace and power perfect in our weakness. Take heart: God is *still* with you.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 27 – Acts 7:17-38 ‘The invisible hand’

The life of Moses is one of the most famous in all scripture. It is a story both of personal and corporate redemption, and Stephen before the Sanhedrin reprises some of its most famous scenes here. We get a wonderful summary of Moses meeting God in the burning bush, rescuing God’s people from slavery in Egypt, and then through the Red Sea, and finally receiving the ‘living words’ of God’s law, which shaped the life of God’s people from that time on.

These iconic stories have the supernatural activity of God writ large throughout – a bush which doesn’t burn, the signs in Egypt, the parting of the waters. But this whole sermon of Stephen’s is a testament to the outworking of God’s plan for his people, and what strikes me today is how God was also very much at work in Moses’ life *before* his dramatic call beside the burning bush.

God isn’t mentioned at all in verses 18-22, and yet there are at least three miraculous interventions: the midwives who saved thousands of Hebrew children from a genocidal Pharaoh (v19, referencing Exodus 1:17-21); the saving of Moses’ life as a baby (v20-21, referencing Exodus 2:3-6); and then his raising in the royal household, equipping him for his great life’s work many decades later (v21-22, referencing Exodus 2:7-10).

Were it not for these miracles, the much more obvious ones of Moses’ later years would not have happened as they did. Throughout Moses’ life – a microcosm of God’s saving presence among all of his people – an invisible, divine hand was at work. For all the disobedience and unfaithfulness of God’s people, God was ‘fulfilling his promise to Abraham’ (v17).

We live in uncertain times. And the future seems even less clear – both in the short-term and the long-term. We may too face personal challenges and uncertainties: with our health, with our family, with our work or direction in life. This passage reminds us that we are not alone, nor without help. God is at work in our chaotic world. God is at work in our lives, too – and in the lives of those around us. We may not always see his invisible hand, and the outcomes we hope for may take longer than we’d like (they usually do): but we can trust, as Moses did, that God’s word is sure, and his will is good. ‘Put your hand into the hand of God: that shall be to you better than a light, and safer than a known way.’

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 28 – Acts 7:39-60 ‘True worship’

Like Ananias and Sapphira, this is another difficult passage! The martyrdom of Stephen proves a turning point for the church – though not for the reasons we might expect. More about that on Monday.

And there’s so much we could say about this intense reading. But today I want to focus on a theme which bubbles under the surface of so much of Stephen’s sermon. What does true worship of God really look like? This passage gives us some invaluable pointers:

True worship always remembers that our God is a great big God (vv48-50) – as someone once sang. For all that it’s lovely to have beautiful buildings in which to worship, God can’t be contained in even the grandest and most impressive of boxes. God is Lord of the whole earth – indeed the earth is a ‘footstool’ for the Almighty Creator of the universe. A ‘big view’ of God is always a healthy starting point for our lives.

True worship prizes humility (v51) – whatever blessings and privileges we have received in the journey of faith, we retain a humility of character that guards us from pride. Our necks are willing to bow in the service of God and others.

True worship is always sensitive to the Spirit (v51) – this is a natural outworking of cultivating humility in the sight of an awesome God. We keep our hearts and minds open, we try to listen and discern what God is up to. God never contradicts his (already written) Word, but he does prompt us to new insights and opportunities. The humble of heart are most likely to hear them.

True worship obeys God (v53). Our lives match our lips match our hearts. It’s one thing to know the right thing – and quite another to actually do it!

I think it’s hard to place ourselves in the middle of this story. But we can mine gold from its lessons. Let God speak to you one particular word that will bless you today. And may God grant us all grace to worship him anew, in Spirit and in truth. Amen.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 29 – Acts 8:1-8 ‘Unintended consequences’

At the end of November 2013, a few weeks after we'd arrived in Milton Keynes, the heating system at St Mary's suffered a catastrophic failure – a major pipe burst, which was then discovered to be clad with asbestos. It took more than two months to fix, meaning the building was without heating during the coldest months of the year. For eight weeks we were forced to hold our services in the school hall, who kindly let us use their premises for free, setting up from scratch every Sunday morning.

It was challenging, but most of the congregation remarked at the end how many unexpected blessings had come from it. The 'blitz spirit' had created a great camaraderie; more people had pitched in and helped out, and the unfamiliar environment meant that people sat together who hadn't before, and made new friends. In the first 6 months of 2014 we had the highest average Sunday attendance of any period in the last 15 years, prior to the lockdown of spring 2020.

Lockdown itself, as we have noted, saw a similar pattern. An unexpected disruption, an energising solution, and then significant growth. Today there are far more people connecting with our services online than we've had since the days a century ago when attending church was a social expectation. For all that we might have worried whether closing the building would weaken us as a community, in fact, by God's grace, we have seen growth in all kinds of ways – both deeper and broader.

Both of these disruptive (and productive) periods were triggered by external causes which were 'morally neutral'. No-one was opposing us, as it were – unlike, say Joseph, who was able to testify to his brothers once he was ruler of Egypt: '*You* intended to harm me, but *God* intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.' (Genesis 50:20)

But the point is the same in all of these circumstances – God is able to bring good and growth out of unfavourable circumstances. What might have damaged the community of God's people actually blessed and strengthened it. And so we see in today's passage: a great persecution breaks out against the church, triggered by Stephen's martyrdom. This is a terrible situation, and the intent is clear: to destroy the church (v3), to stamp it out once and for all.

But what *actually* happens? 'All except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (v1)... those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went (v4)... so there was great joy in that city (v8).' The plan to destroy the church backfired totally – all it achieved was to *grow* it, both in leadership – Philip, previously one of the feeding programme organisers (6:5) now takes on an apostolic role – and in reach, as the refugees spread out across the whole country, spreading the faith and winning new believers as they go. As a 'church destruction project', it's an epic fail. God '*works all things for good for those who love him.*' (Romans 8:28)

May this be an encouragement to us, too. Whatever circumstances we face, our good God is able to bring unexpected outcomes – pray in faith and trust today that this would be true for you, for those you love, and for our church community.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 30 – Acts 8:8-13 ‘A greater name’

We live in a spiritual world. Nowadays you can dip your toe into all kinds of interesting waters, and our media is full of curiosity in the supernatural. From programmes about real-life haunted houses, to psychics on-demand, to endless stories about beings with special powers, ‘modern’ humanity is no less fascinated by the spiritual realm than ever it was. Materialists and secularists who expected our Brave New World to be an atheistic one must hold their heads in their hands.

That said, it is possible to argue that our love of watching stories about ghosts and goblins, or great battles between heaven and hell, could be taken to suggest that we have relegated ‘the spiritual world’ to the level of myth and fantasy. But I’m not so sure. The ‘God-shaped hole’ is an idea which seems to be hard-wired into all of humanity – the opening chapters of Genesis record that the earliest human beings after The Fall began ‘to call upon the name of the Lord’ (Genesis 4:26) – and if this innate longing is not filled with God in the traditional sense, we’ll look for it in all kinds of other places. We are spiritual beings, wired for eternity.

And so we see human attempts to harness the power of the spiritual world run like a fault line through all of human history. It remains widespread today, but it was just as much a feature of ancient society as well. In today’s passage, we meet Simon the sorcerer, who had a large local following in Samaria. We don’t know exactly what his sorcery entailed, but he was certainly not shy about his success, calling himself the ‘Great Power of God’ (v10).

But Simon was about to meet his match. The early Christian leader Philip arrived in town and even Simon was blown away by the ‘great signs and miracles he saw’ (v13). The ‘Great Power’ had just met the Greater Power. And the source of this greater power was *a greater name*: Philip proclaimed ‘the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ’ (v12). Jesus’ name is shorthand for his authority and greatness, and it remains the source of our hope and blessing too. Philip declared the greatness of this name to be ‘good news’, and it is still just as good today!

It’s easy to be troubled by the wide range of so-called spiritual practices which seem to be popular now. Some of them are phony, but others are sadly unhealthily real, and bring only darkness rather than light. We, however, live under the blessing and protection of a greater Name, the greatest in the universe, a Name before whom one day every knee will bow.

Give thanks that you know and trust this greater Name, and may that name be your comfort, your inspiration and the source of all you do today.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 31 – Acts 8:14-17 ‘Receiving the Spirit’

In Holy Week 1906 a small church in Los Angeles met to pray. On the night of April 9, a preacher called William J Seymour and seven others were waiting on God on Bonnie Brae Street, ‘when suddenly, as though hit by a bolt of lightning, they were knocked from their chairs to the floor.’ The seven other men began to speak in tongues (angelic languages) and shout out loud praising God.

The news quickly spread; the city was stirred; crowds gathered; and a few days later Seymour himself experienced the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit. It wasn’t long before services were moved outside to accommodate the crowds who came from all around. The supernatural experiences continued, even outside the building: people fell down under the power of God as they approached, and others were spontaneously healed. The ‘outpouring’ – which became known as the Azusa Street Revival lasted until 1915, and birthed what became known as the Pentecostal movement. Today Pentecostal churches number some 500 million believers around the world. Countless others within historic denominations – myself included – have been similarly blessed.

Today’s passage in Acts 8 is a pivotal one in Pentecostal theology, which teaches that even after someone comes to Christ, they are saved but have not yet received the fullness of the Spirit. This comes in a second and subsequent experience – like that of William Seymour and his friends, and also, crucially, like the one described in our passage. The text is very clear: ‘the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of [the new believers in Samaria]; they had simply been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus’ (v16).

What is going on? Is it really true that we need this ‘second blessing’ to truly thrive as Christians?

This debate is one that has preoccupied significant sections of the church for the last century. Conservative scholars will point to the fact that the situation was unique: this is the first church planted outside Jerusalem, and in particular, the first outside traditional Jewish borders. Samaritans were not orthodox Jews, so – the argument goes – this is not a theological justification for a ‘two-stage process’ in becoming a Christian, but rather God deliberately (and only temporarily) withheld the obvious signs of the presence of the Spirit so the apostles could see for themselves that God really intended all people to become followers of Jesus.

It’s a fair argument, albeit one weakened by the fact that the same thing happens in Acts 19 as well! Thankfully there is also a middle way, a ‘both/and’ approach which affirms that *everyone* who comes to Christ receives the Spirit (as explicitly promised in Acts 2:38), *but also* affirms that we need to keep seeking the fullness of the Spirit, and the gifts that the Spirit gives. The risk of relegating this passage to a unique experience is that we miss out on the very real blessing and growth that such experiences bring. The risk of over-emphasising these experiences is that we create two classes of Christians. Neither of these outcomes is desirable.

What today does affirm is that God’s Holy Spirit is *real*. Amazingly, the presence of Almighty God graciously comes to dwell in us (yes, us!), transforming us from the inside out. We may sometimes also experience this presence in tangible ways, and there’s no harm in seeking God for more of his presence. ‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.’

Today, give thanks that God is a real presence in your life – and why not ask him for a fresh outpouring of his love and grace into your heart?

Day 32 – Acts 8:18-25 ‘Heart of the matter’

The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart. This pithy summary of Jesus’ teaching is one I’ve long relied on. Throughout his ministry Jesus teaches that *the key to living right is to get our hearts right* – that is, our desires, motives, and ambitions, what you might call our ‘inner life’, the core of our being. If we get the heart right, then the actions/behaviour will follow.

This was Jesus’ real beef with the Pharisees, and why he called them ‘hypocrites’ (literally ‘actors’). They paraded a form of behaviour that was thought to be righteous – particularly by themselves, though also by others – but it masked their corrupt motives. They wanted reward for their righteousness, it didn’t flow from a humble love for God. Their eyes were on human recognition not God’s affirmation, on worldly power not spiritual authority.

And we see something similar here today. Simon the sorcerer has nominally become a follower of Jesus and been baptised, but his heart hasn’t changed. When he sees the apostles blessing people in the power of the Holy Spirit, he wants to harness that power for himself – but not for good reasons. He misunderstands completely the massive difference between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, and therefore the true nature of godly spiritual authority. As someone who has spent years practising occult arts, Simon sees the spiritual world as a power to be manipulated and profited from, not as a gift from Almighty God. He wants fame but not humble service; he wants to enjoy control, not release people into freedom.

And so Peter quite rightly unmask the darkness within Simon’s heart. He sees that this is not really about money but about what the offering of money says about Simon’s motives – his heart, in other words. That has to be right before anything else can be right, too.

We probably have never tried to buy a spiritual gift! But we too may sometime fall prey to jealousy of others’ gifts, or perhaps make requests of God for motives which are more to do with our issues than God’s glory. It’s not easy to admit this, but it’s good for us to be honest with ourselves. And there is good news: if the diagnosis is sin, the cure is repentance. This was true for Simon, but it is also true for us. We worship a loving Saviour whose name is salvation and whose heart is forgiveness. Jesus loves healing hearts – ours included. Let’s pray for this healing grace again today, and receive it with joy.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 33 – Acts 8:26-31 ‘The invitation’

How proactive should we be in sharing our faith? That’s a huge question, and one which many Christians wrestle with. I don’t think there’s a ‘right’ answer to that, but it’s interesting that the general pattern of the New Testament suggests that for most of us, our role is to be ready to share our faith when invited. A few people are gifted to ‘take the initiative’ and actively lead people to faith – but for the rest of us, we should be ready but wait for the invitation. St Peter puts it like this:

‘Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.’ (1 Peter 3:15). It’s good advice.

Similarly in today’s passage, Philip receives a clear divine instruction to head for a particular place (v26), and then a particular chariot (v29). Philip is obedient - he makes himself available to God, and comes up beside the chariot. He also asks a helpful question, which gives the official the opportunity to engage, or indeed to say a polite ‘thanks but no thanks’. But as a result it’s the official that makes the invitation to discuss matters of faith. At this point, Philip is only too happy to chat with him and share the good news.

I think this is a great model for the rest of us. It balances faith with human action, and enthusiasm with politeness and gentleness. God graciously invites us to partner with him, to be available to him – and then we can pray and wait for the right opportunities. We don’t have to ‘force the issue’ or manipulate a conversation. That kind of thing is what damages the integrity of the church. We share grace graciously!

May that be good news for us today. We’ll all have people we’d love to share our faith with, and much of the time we don’t know *how*. How liberating to know that it’s not all about us! Let’s pray to be ready, let’s pray for God to prepare the way, and let’s entrust the rest to him.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 34 – Acts 8:32-35 ‘Good news’

Today’s reflection is a very simple one. Jesus is good news!

It’s so easy to forget this. We can get bogged down in the challenges, the doubts, or just the machinery of church. We can miss the wood for the trees. And every so often, God just invites us to stop, to breathe and to remember that, at its heart, what we believe is good news. Following Jesus is good news: being forgiven, having a purpose and a future, having the presence of God with us always, having a Christian family to share it with, having the bible and prayer, having the fruit of the Spirit slowly transforming us from the inside out – in short, having God at the centre of our lives is good news.

My simple suggestion today is that you spend a few moments reflecting on *why this is good news for you*. Perhaps turn to a favourite passage. Perhaps remember the joy of hearing the news for the first time – like the official does in today’s passage. Give thanks for all the ‘good news’ you’ve brought to mind. And, whatever you face at present, grasp a mustard seed of faith to believe that God is bigger and better than all of it.

‘The time has come, and the kingdom of God has come near... Good news!’

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 35 – Acts 8:36-40 ‘The water of life’

A member of the youth group once approached her minister asking to be baptised. The minister held quite strong views on the subject, and as they discussed what method to use, the minister was quite forthright that she should be fully immersed in the water. The young woman had been hoping for a different answer, so she quizzed the minister a bit more: ‘What if I went in up to my waist, would that be OK?’ ‘No, it must be right under the water.’

‘What if I went in up to my neck?’ ‘No.’

‘What I went in up to my nose?’ ‘Again, no.’

‘What if went in above my eyes, leaving just an inch or so?’ ‘I’m sorry, but no.’

‘So what you’re really saying is that as long as I get the top of my head wet, then that’s the bit that matters.’

It’s a cheesy old joke, but it highlights an important point. The church has long argued about baptism, and the ‘right way’ to do it. But the truth is that no church in any of the main denominations nowadays actually baptises people like they did in the New Testament. Every time we read of it in the Book of Acts, it’s an immediate and spontaneous event in the nearest body of water. No catechism or preparation classes, no gap of months or years between first believing and ‘sealing the deal’, no required church attendance, no candle or oil for that matter. Just an immediate dip, as soon as possible after hearing and receiving the news.

Sometimes it’s good just to recover the sheer joy of what baptism signifies. A new spiritual life has been birthed! The cleansing death and resurrection power of Jesus are ours, by God’s grace. Never mind *how* you do it – and wouldn’t it be great if we just embraced the diversity of our practice, trusting in the capacity of God to anoint our human ceremonies with his divine blessing – what matters is that we *do* do it, and continue to celebrate the large numbers of people who find their hope and joy in Jesus.

I love the way the official sees a pond by the road and says: ‘What can stop me from being baptised?’ May we as the church never get in the way of what God is up to in our lives. And perhaps, too, today is a day to give thanks for your baptism (or confirmation), to celebrate the significant markers along the way, the people who have blessed you, the ‘lightbulb’ moments that changed your life and your future – to remember the story of God in your life.

And if you’ve not been baptised – well, what can stop you?

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 36 – Acts 9:1-4 ‘The body of Christ’

Jesus loves his Church. It’s an obvious thing to say, really – but it’s easy to forget that this love affair cuts both ways. Much of the time we think about how we put our love for Jesus into action: in our worship and singing, in our prayer, in our lifestyles, in how we love and serve others.

But no matter how hard we try, Jesus loves us more. He’s crazy about us. We are the apple of his eye, the object of his affection. We are his body, not just in a spiritual sense, but a literal one too. We are Jesus’ hands, feet, eyes and heart on earth – and when we suffer, Jesus suffers too.

It’s striking that when Paul meets Jesus on the road to Damascus in this iconic story (which we’ll reflect on some more over the next couple of days), he doesn’t say: ‘Why do you persecute *them*?’ He says: ‘Why do you persecute *me*?’ What we suffer, he suffers. When his body hurts, Jesus hurts too.

For Paul, this was a life-changing experience, in all kinds of ways. But it begins with the realisation that his own relationship to God has been mediated through zealous rule-following and not a deep intimacy with the Lord. He comes to understand Jesus’ deep connection with his followers in the most direct of ways: ‘Why do you persecute *me*?’

‘We love because he first loved us.’ This was old John’s conclusion in the first of his letters – and this passage echoes that sentiment. For all that it’s good to put our love for Jesus into practice, let’s never forget who initiated it; nor that Jesus’ love for us didn’t stop at the cross, or the resurrection. It goes on – and on. It is a constant, a given, and something we can come back to and rely on again and again.

To say that Jesus loves his church means Jesus loves *you*. And whatever you face at the moment, know that Jesus cares, he feels it with you, he suffers with you. As the puritan Thomas Goodwin observes: ‘Take our hands, and lay them upon Christ’s breast, and let us feel how his heart beats and his affections yearn towards us, even now he is in glory – to encourage believers against all that may discourage them, from the consideration of Christ’s heart towards them now in heaven.’

And may Christ’s deep heart of affection for you lift your heart today.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 37 – Acts 9:5-9 ‘I am Jesus’

As we reflect further on Paul meeting Jesus directly on the road, we face the challenging question of Christ’s heart for all people, even those who have committed great sins. Decades later, Paul still described himself as ‘the worst of sinners’, yet this very realisation gave him an awesome grasp of God’s immeasurable grace, and a profound intimacy with his Lord.

The great comfort for us is that, *if God can save Paul, he can save any one of us*. Such deep reserves of grace are plenty enough for the likes of us. Today I’ll share excerpts from a marvellous book I’m reading by Dane Ortlund, called ‘Gentle and Lowly’:

‘We do not come to a set of doctrines. We do not come to a church. We do not even come to the gospel. All these are vital. But most truly, we come to a person, to Christ himself....

‘We cannot present a reason for Christ to finally close off his heart to his own sheep. No such reason exists. Every human friend has a limit. If we offend enough, if a relationship gets damaged enough, if we betray enough times, we are cast out. The walls go up. With Christ, our sins and weaknesses are the very CV items that qualify us to approach him. *Nothing but coming to him is required* – first at conversion and a thousand times thereafter until we are with him upon death.

‘Perhaps it isn’t sins so much as sufferings that cause some of us to question the perseverance of the heart of Christ. As pain piles up, as numbness takes over, as the months go by, at some point the conclusion seems obvious: we have been cast out. Surely this is not what life would feel like for one who has been buried in the heart of a gentle and lowly Saviour?

But Jesus does not say that those with pain-free lives are never cast out. He says those who come to him are never cast out. It is not what life brings to us but *to whom we belong* that determines Christ’s heart of love for us. The only thing required to enjoy such love is to come to him.’

Paul on the road to Damascus experienced a transforming glimpse of Christ’s extraordinary heart – and fallen though he was, he simply came to him. May we too hear the same voice, calling us – ‘I am Jesus’ – and may we too simply come to him. For ‘whoever comes to me I will *never* drive away.’

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 38 – Acts 9:10-17 ‘Yes, Lord’

Keep saying yes to God.

That piece of advice was given to me many years ago by a wise older Christian. It’s been one of the best and most important pieces of practical wisdom that anyone has ever given to me, and one I’ve tried – not always consistently! – to put into practice. Keep saying yes to God.

Free will is both a remarkable and a difficult thing. The fact that God lets us make choices is a great blessing and can also lead to great wrongdoing. Many of our deepest questions relate to situations when God doesn’t intervene as we’d like, or where the free choice of someone else has caused suffering for us, or perhaps for someone we love.

And yet we also know that the capacity to choose is one of the most precious things any human being can exercise. Think of the sacrifices people made to win the chance to vote – because the freedom to choose was seen as something so precious. On a more prosaic level, the joy of shopping for many people lies precisely in the fun of making choices. Leisure time is precisely that because it defines the periods of time when we can *choose* what we do, rather than the expectations that come with employment.

During the pandemic of 2020 and 2021, one of the most difficult and controversial questions which society has divided over is to do with the consequences – for good or ill – of giving people freedom to make choices. Here is not the place to comment further on that, but we simply observe that what dominated our public narrative in that season also lies at the heart of many of the challenges of the spiritual life. To trust in God’s guiding hand in our lives is not to say that all our decisions are mapped out for us. *God gives us opportunities, but also gives us freedom to choose whether to accept them or not.*

We see this in today’s passage – God meets Ananias and gives him a task. A difficult, possibly dangerous task: but one that will change the course not just of one life, but of history. Ananias is troubled, and questions aloud whether this is a good idea or not. But I’m struck that his opening words to his Saviour are simply this: ‘Yes, Lord.’ He is open to listen – and ultimately he obeys.

I think of times in my own life when I’ve been prodded to do something. Sadly on some occasions I’ve resisted, and said ‘no’ to God. But as I’ve journeyed through the life of faith, I’ve tried to take to heart the advice of my friend, and to say yes to God. Sometimes those ‘yesses’ seem risky, but always the safest place to be is in the centre of God’s will. Ananias discovered this through today’s life-changing encounter, and ultimately played a part in changing history.

May we too keep saying yes to God – and may God grant us grace and courage to obey whatever he calls us to do.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 39 – Acts 9:10-17 (ii) ‘My chosen instrument’

Today’s reflection is something of a ‘counter-balance’ to yesterday’s! Don’t get me wrong, I do endorse what I wrote yesterday, but most deep truths in the spiritual life require us to hold things in a certain degree of tension. Life-changing faith is rarely a case of ‘either/or’ – much more often ‘both/and’.

The tension in this case is the risk that what I said yesterday reduces God’s authority in the world too far. It becomes *all* about our choices. Push that too far and you end up with God as something of a passive onlooker in our world, or perhaps a distant manager who has ideas but is totally reliant on frail or fickle human beings for any of them to happen. Whilst we give thanks for the freedom God gives, we also acknowledge that our sovereign God is, at the same time, very much at work and gradually transforming things in conformity to his will.

My spiritual director talks about ‘friends for a reason, friends for a season, and friends for life’. That’s a great way of understanding the complex web of our relationships. Today I’d also like to apply that to the idea of callings: in the journey of faith there are callings for a *reason*, callings for a *season*, and callings for *life*. In fact we see all three here in today’s passage.

Yesterday, we saw Ananias receiving a calling for a reason. He was to go to find Saul and lay hands on him. It was a one-off event, and God spoke to him for this specific purpose. And with callings like this, it’s possible to say yes or no to God. I don’t doubt that if Ananias had said ‘no’ God would have called someone else, as he needed someone to do this – but he gave Ananias the chance, and Ananias was faithful to the call. A calling for a reason.

Then there’s Judas – the chap who hosts Saul (v11). We don’t know *how* Judas comes to play host, but the fact that he agrees to look after such a dangerous man suggests a certain degree of divine conviction. I suspect this was Judas’ calling for a season. There’s nothing in the text to indicate that Saul moves again after he regains his sight, so it’s likely that Judas continued to host the new evangelist Saul during his stay in Damascus. God gave Judas a task, and in being faithful to this task, he too played a quiet but significant part in the growth of the kingdom of God.

Finally, there are callings for life – this is clearly where Saul comes in: he is tasked by God to proclaim the good news to non-Jews (v15), and this becomes his life call, something he testifies to 20+ years later in the letter to the Romans: ‘It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.’ (Romans 15:20) Just as Saul had planned to break new ground taking persecution to Christians in Damascus, so God saw, transformed, and then greatly used this pioneering skill for his glory.

If we have a lot of freedom to say yes or no to ‘callings for reason’, and perhaps slightly less but still significant capacity to ignore ‘callings for a season’, it is certainly harder to say no to God when a ‘calling for life’ is concerned. Or rather, we can say no quite a lot, but God usually gets us there in the end! God does have plans for us – ones he doesn’t force upon us, but I think we can all say that we are ‘God’s chosen instrument’ for *something*. I wonder what that would be for you?

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 40 – Acts 9:17-22 ‘The scales fell’

Wednesday, May 24th, 1738: ‘I think it was about 5:00 this morning that I opened my Testament upon these words, “There are given to us great and exceeding promises, even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature.” Just as I went out I opened it again upon these words, “Thou art not far from the kingdom of God”... In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society on Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine while he was describing the change whereby God works on the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and the assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and He saved me from the law of sin and death.’

This is how John Wesley described his conversion to Christ. Although he had been a minister for some years, he had never fully grasped the deep reality of what Christ had done for him – until May 24th 1738. Thereafter he became one of the greatest evangelists the world has seen, who changed the culture of our nation and influenced many others besides.

Wesley's conversion is one that resonates for many of us because it is quite ‘normal’. We can marvel at Saul's experience of blinding lights and audible voices from heaven, but perhaps feel a bit distant from it, in that it represents an experience quite outside of our experience. However, what they both have in common is that sense of an ‘awakening’ to God, and an internalisation of truth, so that it is not just something which impacts our intellectual understanding but sits deep in our heart.

When Ananias prays for Saul in today's passage, we read that ‘something like scales fell from Saul's eyes’ (v18), and this may indeed have been a physical sensation. Saul had been afflicted by a temporary blindness, and the cause of this may well have been some sort of actual growth or blockage which covered his eyes, and which was now loosened and released.

Nevertheless, this famous phrase has sunk deep into our culture, and is now used as a way of describing an important moment of realisation. We don't know if this was the exact moment that Saul's heart turned to Christ – I suspect that happened gradually over the three days between his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road and the encounter with Ananias here – but it certainly represented the culmination of Saul's conversion process. Following it, he was baptised, recovered his strength and ‘at once’ (v20) began to preach the very opposite of what he had come to do: the message that Jesus was in fact the Son of God, and the Messiah God's people had longed for.

Many of you reading this may remember a specific moment when ‘the scales fell from your eyes’ with regard to Jesus and God's grace. For others it was a gradual process. Either way, there is always more to learn. Every time God reveals a beautiful new scriptural truth that we hadn't perceived before, *some more scales fall from our eyes*, and we see Jesus more clearly.

May God continue to bless us all with such revelation, and the gift of seeing Jesus clearly, each and every day.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 41 – Acts 9:20-30 ‘Barnabas brought him’

Everyone needs a Barnabas in their life. Someone with the gift of encouragement, willing to see the best in people, who in turn become the better people that the encourager sees.

It's not easy to find stories of great encouragers. By definition, they often act out of the spotlight, behind the scenes. One well-known example was recently showcased in the film 'The King's Speech' – Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Mother) was shown to have played a huge role in supporting and encouraging King George to overcome his stammer, which had always prevented him from being able to speak to the nation.

Another less well-known example is that of Abraham Lincoln's stepmother Sarah Bush, who saw the young Lincoln's love of books and learning, and was the one to encourage him to build his own bookcase, and to light fires in the evening so that he could read and develop the great mind that would one day exercise such a huge influence on his nation.

But the Barnabas of the bible (and today's passage) is perhaps the greatest example we have of this gift. Indeed his very name means 'Son of Encouragement'. His real name was Joseph, but such was the depth of his gift, it also became the name we all know him by. And here we see the second of four great examples in the book of Acts to the power of this extraordinary gift. Back in chapter 4, we saw Barnabas giving generously to the church, so that it could support those in need. Later in Acts, Barnabas plays a decisive role in the growth of the church in Antioch, and then defends the nurturing into leadership of young John Mark, even to the point of falling out with the man he meets here and who becomes his great friend, Saul (later Paul).

As I read today's passage, I find myself wondering: if I was a member of the church in Jerusalem, and the famous persecutor Saul suddenly turns up, claiming to be a Christian and wanting to join our fellowship, how would I respond? Much as I like to believe that I would choose to see the best in Saul, it's hard for any of us to know exactly how we would react. There would be fear, suspicion, maybe cynicism. People have suffered, and died – can that be forgotten, even if it is forgiven?

'But Barnabas....' (v27) – one of the great phrases in the bible. For all that it would be understandable to be suspicious, one person sees Saul both as he is and also *as he could be*, one person takes a risk to offer unconditional welcome into the community of grace – and that person was Barnabas.

The long-term effect of this was extraordinary. It is possible that Saul's/Paul's history-changing ministry could still have happened regardless – but surely not to the same extent. The fact that Saul/Paul was welcomed at an early stage to the leadership of the early church (thanks to Barnabas) must have played a huge part in the growth and development of his calling.

So, as we give thanks for Barnabas today, let's also take a few moments to give thanks for the encouragers in our lives. Maybe take a moment later today to call them or drop them a quick note to thank them. And, perhaps, you too can be a Barnabas to someone else this week?

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 42 – Acts 9:31-35 ‘A time of peace’

When I lived in London, one of my favourite moments of the day was the moment I climbed into bed at the end of the day and just... enjoyed the silence. I loved living in London – I was born and brought up there – and I always found the intensity of the experience part of its attraction. I loved the buzz and the bustle, the sense of energy all around. But the moment when I could just lie for a few minutes in a dark bedroom and hear nothing but my own breathing was a beautiful one. The calm after the storm.

‘After the storm...’ would be a good heading for today’s reading. The church has been suffering its first extended period of oppression and even persecution. It had to make radical changes to what it did and how it met: large numbers of Christians had to leave their homes and relocate elsewhere, leaders were targeted and in some cases either imprisoned or murdered. But, eventually, the storm blows itself out: the church stands strong and in one last act of quiet defiance, Saul escapes the plots of his enemies and heads back to his home town (v30).

‘Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria (the South, the Midlands and the North i.e. the whole country) enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened.’ This lovely verse is like the first spring day with a warm sun and a gentle breeze after the climatic poundings of the end of winter. It lifts the heart, and puts a smile on our face. ‘Living in the fear of the Lord, and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.’ A sure sign that peace was restored is the fact that the apostles – who had stayed in Jerusalem and gone underground – were now able to move about the country freely again, doing good and encouraging believers (verses 33-35).

Many of us probably long for ‘a time of peace’ in our own nation, or perhaps our own lives. But it struck me as I reflected on the passage that my biggest issue is often that *I don’t recognise times of peace when they come*. There’s something in human nature that tends to forget our blessings and remember our troubles. And the great challenge of life is that times of trouble are inevitable.

But so are times of peace – and having the capacity to recognise those times for what they are, to give thanks for them, remember them and make the most of them is one of the wisest and healthiest things we can do.

To some degree, we all find ourselves in a difficult time at present. This too shall pass. But let’s also apply it at a personal level. The encouragement of this passage is that times of peace always come eventually. Let’s take heart from this truth, especially if this is a time of trouble for you. And, if you happen to find yourself in such a time of peace, give thanks, resolving to treasure it for as long as it lasts. God is the God of the storm, and the calm.

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 43 – Acts 9:36-43 ‘In Jesus’ footsteps’

Today’s passage feels like something of an interlude sandwiched between the famous episodes which describe how the gospel takes root among non-Jews (ch10), and the person whom God calls to spearhead this mission in the long-term (Saul/Paul in the rest of ch9). So, of all the stories which Luke could have used, why is it included?

Well, it does serve a very real purpose, one which becomes clear when we think about the story it reminds us of. I wonder if you made that connection as you read it... if not, take a look at Mark 5:35 onwards, and you’ll see that what Peter does here is very close to one of Jesus’ healing miracles.

The connection points are numerous: the person has just died; Jesus/Peter is sent for urgently; there is great collective grief; Jesus/Peter sends everyone out of the room; Jesus/Peter commands healing (noting as a lovely aside that what Jesus says to the girl in Aramaic is ‘Talitha koum’ and what Peter says here is ‘Tabitha koum’!); the dead person is miraculously restored to life.

I think the point that Luke is demonstrating is that Peter is very much a true apostle/representative of Jesus – to the point now that he is able to perform miracles (only in Jesus’ name, of course) just like his Master. And this forms the backdrop to Peter initiating the huge step forward in the mission of the gospel in the very next episode – the final link in the chain, you might say, whereby the good news of this same Jesus is now able to reach the whole world. Up to this point, it was still largely Jewish – from now on, it will spread like wildfire to everyone.

We too, follow in Jesus’ footsteps – perhaps not in the dramatic way described here. But whenever we do something in Jesus’ name, or manifest a spiritual virtue which echoes Jesus’ own life, in our own way we are doing as Peter did, following the Master, being a ‘little Jesus’ – i.e. a Christian. However small or great, it all matters, it is all for God’s glory.

God simply calls us to be faithful – he takes care of the rest. How can you follow in Jesus’ footsteps today?

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 44 – Acts 10:1-23 ‘God has made clean’

I must confess I only occasionally watch cookery programmes. One, however, that I found very memorable was when Jamie Oliver went on location to Italy. One of the tasks he was set was to kill the animal whose meat he would cook. He found this immensely difficult and upsetting; but also profoundly challenging because, as he admitted, most of us in our culture are insulated from the reality of what eating meat actually involves. As a result, he found the challenge to ‘kill and eat’ horrifying.

Peter faced a similar situation in today’s reading – albeit his horror was for different reasons. As a fisherman in that culture, and very likely a meat-eater too, he would be well used to what was involved in the preparation for meat. His issue was different – all the foods he saw in his dream were unclean according to the Jewish law. Although he was now a follower of Jesus, he remained very much an orthodox Jew – indeed, Jesus was the fulfilment of the law and of Jewish messianic hopes. Hence his blunt reply: ‘Surely not, Lord!’ (v14)

God’s reply to him is remarkable: ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ (v15).

Peter only came to understand the meaning of this later in the story, which we’ll see next time: but today, let’s marvel in the truth that *our God is in the business of making things clean*. As we sing in one of our favourite hymns: ‘He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace.’

To be forgiven is many things: to be free, to have a new start, to have hope – but also to be *clean*. We may not have done terrible things; but even small wrongs leave a stain. We need washing: and the great news of our faith is that through the cross, God wipes away the stains in our lives. We are clean.

Today, take a moment to say sorry to God, to confess anything that you feel is getting in the way of your connection with him. And then, even more importantly, give thanks that you *are* forgiven, you are free, you are clean. We may not always feel like this – but the reality goes deeper than our feelings. What Peter heard in his dream is true for us too: ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ That’s you, that’s me, that’s us!

Daily Inspirations in the Book of Acts (chapters 1-10)

Day 45 – Acts 10:23b-48 ‘A gift for all’

In my younger days I attended many summer camps – first as one of the overall leader’s family, then as a ‘happy camper’ in my own right, and finally as a leader myself. Probably the most memorable was in 1995, when I helped lead a camp for 12-15 year olds. The first half of the week was probably the worst camp I’d ever done: we were understaffed, we had real behavioural issues – eventually sending one boy home, the only time in my experience that this happened – the chaplain got up and gave the same talk every evening, and then we had a serious accident at the swimming pool where a boy broke a bone in his foot and was taken to A&E.

When the hospital party returned to camp, the boy (now with his foot in plaster) asked the chaplain to pray for him while the rest of us organised our usual mid-afternoon activities. All I do remember is that 20 minutes later this same boy was running round the camp. No plaster, no more foot trouble – he had been spontaneously healed after the chaplain had prayed a prayer asking for this to happen in Jesus’ name.

As you can imagine, the whole atmosphere in the camp changed. God had done something amazing. Suddenly the chaplain’s talk – still the same every evening! – was listened to with rapt attention. Other people wanted to be prayed for. Many experienced God in powerful ways – myself included. By the end of the week, half the camp had decided to follow Christ. What started as the worst camp had become the best.

What made the difference? The same thing that we read here in this passage: *the tangible presence of God at work by his Holy Spirit*. The pouring out of God’s Spirit in the world – which began the Book of Acts – continues to be the thing that activates and energises the church. Here, St Peter comes to understand that the good news of Jesus’ love is for everyone – non-Jews included – because *he sees the Spirit at work*, giving the same gifts, meeting people in the same way that he had experienced.

Jesus is not just true – he’s real. And his love in our hearts is not just a doctrine, it’s a lived experience. We don’t always feel things as dramatically as Cornelius and his friends did here – but the transforming power of Jesus’ love in our lives is still at work nonetheless. ‘God does not show favouritism,’ Peter concludes – and this wonderful promise is one to lift our hearts today, because it reminds us of that simple but profound truth that *these same gifts, this same love, is for all of us too*.

Let’s claim that promise – and may God cause our hearts to overflow with praise and thanksgiving again.

Lord Jesus, come to me again by your Spirit. Thank you that your love is poured out for all – I gladly receive it now. Fill my heart, and renew my life this day. Amen.