

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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## **YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES**

**29<sup>th</sup> May 2016**

Matthew 28:16-20

Acts 1:1-11

Since Easter we have spent a bit of time looking at some aspects of the beginnings of the church. We have seen how the good news of Jesus was proclaimed to people from all over the Roman world, when they were gathered together in Jerusalem for Pentecost. We have seen how later Peter was prompted to open up the good news to those who were neither Jews nor prepared to take on a Jewish identity. We have seen how there was opposition and how their faith gave the disciples something to sing about no matter how bad their situation from a human point of view. For the next two weeks we are going back to the beginning of the history of the church. Next week we will look at how as the disciples found their feet, the church began to take on different aspects of Jesus' ministry. But today we are going to look at how it spread.

When Jesus was ascending to his Father, he told his disciples that "You will have power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8.) Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, chronicles how this promise and prophecy was fulfilled.

A couple of weeks ago we saw that the first thing the disciples did was to hide away and pray. And then on the day of Pentecost, God came to them in the power of his Holy Spirit, just as Jesus has promised, and they knew that they had to begin the work. So, in all the languages of the people who were gathered together for the feast, they told the good news that God had sent his Son, his Messiah and that it was Jesus. This was them bearing witness to Jesus in Jerusalem.

They remained in Jerusalem for quite a while. After all there were many people there who needed to hear, and many who had heard and believed who needed to know more. This was the infancy of Christian fellowship and it was wonderful for them to be able to meet together, eat together, remember Jesus in bread and wine as they ate, and to praise God together. And at first they had the goodwill of all the people, and daily more and more came to join them, attracted by the message and by the way that they lived it out in togetherness and joy.

It wasn't until Peter and John healed a lame man at the gate of the temple that the believers ran up against opposition. The problem was that they were talking about the resurrection of Jesus, and there was a branch of the religious leadership which did not hold with this idea – the Sadducees. They made complaint and Peter and John were arrested and the next day told not to speak in Jesus' name any more. But they promised the authorities that they couldn't do as they were asked, and went out to speak of Jesus all over again.

Still in Jerusalem we find the believers holding their goods in common and we read the awful example of Ananias and Sapphira who thought that they would deceive the community by pretending to give more than they actually did. Still in Jerusalem the principle was established of having some people specially appointed to care for those in need to free others for the work of spreading the good news. And one of those so appointed was Stephen.

Stephen no doubt did do his job of providing and distributing things, but he also managed to find time to perform wonders and signs and to preach the word, and so he was arrested. We have an account of his speech to the Jewish authorities, a speech designed to appeal to Jewish leaders, since it dwelt heavily on the nation's past, but also to enflame them, as he accused the present leadership of the nations' faith of standing in direct line of succession with those of their ancestors who failed to heed the prophets and who even hounded and killed them. And so Stephen was stoned to death, the first martyr.

And now we see the next part of Jesus promise and prophecy coming true. The death of Stephen led to a more wide-spread persecution, largely due to a young man named Saul of Tarsus, and the leaders of the Christian church were scattered fleeing to other parts of Judea and even to the despised (and therefore reasonably safe) Samaria. Many of the leaders were scattered, but we are told that the apostles stayed put in Jerusalem. The apostles, who had been the original twelve disciples, knew that there was still a work to be tended here, and that there needed to be a home base for the believers, and dangerous or not, they stayed.

Philip, not the disciple Philip, but another man of that name who had been appointed to serve the needy, went to Samaria, and once there he saw no reason why he should remain silent. He preached the word, and when there was a response, he sent for Peter and John to help him teach the new believers. The good news was now established in Jerusalem, in Judea and in Samaria. In the narrative Luke lays out for us, we will keep coming back to these places, but from the beginning of what we call chapter 9 onwards Luke is concerned to show us how the good news went to the ends of the earth – or the ends of the Roman empire at least! And it wasn't just through Saul, who became Paul. It was through God telling Peter that the Gentiles were to be accepted as Christian brothers and sisters, it was through the faithful work of Barnabas, and the work of John Mark, of Timothy, of Titus, of Apollos, of Priscilla and of others. Jesus said that his disciples would be his witnesses and they were.

And they are. We are. In the almost twenty centuries since the ending of the book of Acts – and ending which shows us Paul under house arrest in Rome and preaching to his friends and his guards – since then, the good news about Jesus has spread to the real ends of the earth, to places and across distances and to peoples of whom the first disciples had no inkling. It has spread in various ways, sometimes by simple proclamation of the good news, sometimes by the Christians acting out of love to those they came to, sometimes, in the many centuries since the Roman emperor Constantine, going hand in hand with political power, which surely would have surprised, if not shocked the early disciples considerably.

The territorial spread of the good news, which Jesus foretold and promised, is important. It is the best way to be systematic about bringing the good news to everyone, by making sure that the whole territory of a country, of an area, of the world is

covered. Within the Church of Scotland, there is a firm determination to hold to what is known as the Third Article Declaratory, which says:

*This Church is in historical continuity with the Church of Scotland which was reformed in 1560, whose liberties were ratified in 1592, and for whose security provision was made in the Treaty of Union of 1707. The continuity and identity of the Church of Scotland are not prejudiced by the adoption of these Articles. As a national Church representative of the Christian Faith of the Scottish people it acknowledges its distinctive call and duty to bring the ordinances of religion to the people in every parish of Scotland through a territorial ministry.*

Of course there have been parishes in Scotland for a long, long time, way before the Reformation of 1560, indeed from at least the twelfth century. And the priests and then the ministers of these parishes have had the task of making sure that the people under their care hear the good news of Jesus. As the Church has evolved and grown in its understanding we nowadays usually think of the job of bringing that good news as belonging to all in the church, not just the minister or other leaders.

Because the thing about the geographical spread of the good news is that it can't be done once and then be assumed to be all done with. There is an old proverb which says "God has no grandchildren" and the meaning of it is clear: each new generation needs to hear the good news again, to hear it for themselves, to make their own response to it. We may well be a part of what Jesus meant when he said that the disciples would bear witness to the ends of the earth, but that doesn't mean that there is nothing for us all to do.

After all, when Matthew wrote of Jesus' last words to his disciples, he emphasized the command that was given to go and make disciples of all nations. "All nations" brings in the "ends of the earth" idea again, but here the stress is also on making disciples. Disciples are those who learn from their teacher. To be a disciple means more than giving brief acceptance to a basic idea. It means more than thinking "Well, that gospel sounds interesting, there might be something in it." To be a disciple means continuously learning and changing as you learn. Jesus also told his friends to baptise in the name of Father Son and Spirit, and to teach people to obey "everything I have commanded you." Now, that is a definition of discipleship – to obey all that our leader and teacher has commanded!

The good news still has places to spread in its journey to the ends of the earth. Nowadays, many of the places it needs to come to are places where it has been before. As the church, the community of those who follow Jesus, grows and flourishes in Africa, in South America and in China, to name but three main areas, so it seems to shrink in the areas where it has been for longest.

In the Middle East tragic events have almost entirely unseated the church from its long home, and who knows when and in what guise it can return there.

Europe is ready for a new hearing of the good news, one that is not too obviously aligned with the political, power-heavy dogmatic, sometimes oppressive church of the past. Europe is ready for a hearing, and so a telling, that is fresh and new and relevant and rooted in love and service. Next week we will think more about that.

Jesus said that his friends would be his witnesses, that we would be those who by word and deed show the truth of his life and his teaching and continually bring him forward in a world that cries out for light. And Jesus promised that in everything he would be with

us for ever, to the end of this and any other age. As we bear witness, let us remember and hold fast to that promise. Amen

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