



THEMES IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

WEEK FOUR: THE FLEDGLING CHURCH

Throughout the book of Acts, the followers of Jesus were described as “*People of the Way*”. This was probably because the early disciples had listened as Jesus described himself as “*the way, the truth and the life*”. ([John 14:6](#)), so they were indeed, followers of The Way. When Paul (Saul of Tarsus as he was then), went to Damascus, ([Acts 9:2](#)) he carried letters to the synagogue there. These gave him permission to bind up men and women who were of The Way and bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

The Jews, or Israel, were God’s chosen people, descendants of Abraham who were, according to Isaiah 42:6 a light to the nations or to the Gentiles: “*I, the LORD, have called you to demonstrate my righteousness. I will take you by the hand and guard you, and I will give you to my people, Israel, as a symbol of my covenant with them. And you will be a light to guide the nations.*”

They knew they were special to God. He had delivered them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the land of Canaan as he had promised; a land flowing with milk and honey. Despite all God had done for them, the covenant he had made with them, and the miracles he had performed, they frequently disobeyed and worshipped foreign gods.

Right through the Old Testament we read many times that God would send a Messiah, a deliverer. At the time of the Gospels and the Book of Acts, the Jews were ruled by the Romans and so for Jews they expected a Messiah to come and overthrow the hated regime. Even the disciples didn’t realise that the Kingdom of God was not a physical kingdom but a spiritual one. This required repentance and belief:

Mark 1:15 “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.

The early apostles and their followers saw themselves as part of a Jewish movement, not understanding that God had a much bigger plan. The Jews had lost sight of the original truths of the law given through Moses. They had wrapped many rules around these truths hiding or distorting what God had really said. Read [Matthew 23](#). In this chapter Jesus describes the Pharisees who enforced these rules as hypocrites and vipers.

On many occasions Jesus told the disciples that he was sent to the Jews to bring them into the Kingdom of God. The disciples had not grasped that the Great Commission to go into all the world and preach the gospel to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem, would encompass both Jews and Gentiles. ([Matthew 28:18-30](#))

[Acts 8:26-40](#) Two important events happened to bring home the truth that God wanted both Jews and Gentiles to serve him together. The first when Philip was obedient to an angel of the Lord who told him to go to the south along the road that went from Jerusalem to Gaza – a desert road.

- What does this account of the Philip and the eunuch tell us about God’s plans for our lives?
- Did God bring someone into your life who was able to explain the Scriptures and point you to Jesus?
- Would you be able to explain to someone about God’s plan for our salvation and how we are to live our lives? Notice in verse 35 where it says that Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, found in Isaiah 53, preached Jesus to him.
- Try writing out your case for Jesus. Find scriptures that support your beliefs.

[Acts 10](#) Here we have a remarkable account of how God shows Peter that the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, were part of his great plan of salvation.

Cornelius was a Roman Centurion, responsible for one hundred men, “... *a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always*” (verse 2). The angel came with a clear message regarding Simon, whose surname was Peter, where he was to be found and what Cornelius was to do. Two of his servants, plus a devout soldier, were sent to Joppa to bring back Peter to his home.

- Cornelius was a man used to telling people what to do and where to go. Knowing this was from God he immediately acted. Have you ever experienced God speaking to you? It doesn’t have to be in the form of an angel, it could be through a verse of scripture or whilst listening to a sermon, or a fellow Christian says something to you. If this happens, make sure, like Cornelius, you act upon it. You might wonder how you know it is God. Do it and see the outcome. (Read Acts 5:39)

Even as they were on their way to Joppa, God was preparing Peter for this important mission. He experiences a vision from God that was way outside his comfort zone. The Jews had strict dietary laws as to what was clean or unclean and they would never eat anything considered unclean under the law.

- How did God emphasise his message to Peter?
- Does God constantly have to repeat messages to us because we don't act on them the first time? Have you ever felt you should go and speak to someone, maybe to pray for them or to encourage them. How did you react?
- The wonderful thing when we are obedient, is that we are blessed perhaps even more than the other person. There is an uplift in our spirits when we have done God's will.

Peter was confident he was doing what God had asked of him. However, when he went back to Jerusalem to speak with the other Apostles and leaders who had heard something about this, he came under fire. Read [Acts 11:1-18](#). You did what! It's not hard to imagine the reaction of the leaders. *"You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!" they said.*"

There is a great lesson here that we need to learn. When you do what God asks of you, it will not always be well received. People will ask if it really was God speaking to you. If we are convinced it is God, then we should take advice from one or two mature Christians, before we proceed. It is easy in our enthusiasm to get carried away. The more we read God's word, pray and share with other Christians, the more we start to grow – spiritually.

God was doing a new work in this fledgling church. The leaders were prepared to listen to Peter, who was always full of enthusiasm. And their verdict? Read verse 18. Whenever growth comes to the God's church, there will always be dissenting voices. "It's not how we do it here!" Well sometimes God wants to change all that and who are we to argue with him. Don't run away with the idea that this new move of the Holy Spirit was accepted by everyone without argument. What we do need to learn is that if we can come together in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God can deal with our differences of opinion and make a way in which we can move forward together. We must fulfil the great commandment: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, .. and your neighbour as yourself.* As we regularly hear said, *"On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

It is important not to have views so fixed that they can allow for no variation. **THE WORD OF GOD IS NOT BOUND, NEITHER IS THE MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.**

Prayer: Lord help me to listen and to obey you. Make me a willing participant in enabling the growth of your Church here at Hull Minster.