

Hearts Aflame: A Passion for Change ... Acts 1:1-11

I love the book of Acts; it has what I would call, the Michelin factor – it's gripping stuff.

'Sensational' is another word that springs to mind. It's action-packed. We see the triumph of amazing grace; we trace the early days of mission as the gospel went out to the regions beyond; we detect something of the dynamic of God in the lives of very ordinary people; we meet some fascinating individuals with unbelievable stories to tell; we see the awesome power of answered prayer; we see a church that turned the world upside down!

Acts may be a history book, but there's nothing dull or boring about this volume – to be honest with you, it's one of those books that when you pick it up, you can't put down. It's a good read! On page after page we see God at work, we see miracles, we see personality clashes, we see bust-ups and blow-outs, we see tears and heartache, we see phenomenal blessing coming out of persecution, we see what God can do with people fully yielded to Jesus.

The story of Acts is the story of the Christian church – it's an unfinished story. Doctor Luke has put down his quill, the ink from his pen has long since dried, but the work goes on, the kingdom grows, and right now we are in Acts chapter 29. Yes, the flame is spreading!

You and I have picked up the baton of gospel truth. All over the world the Spirit is moving

and people are embracing the love of Jesus Christ; to the uttermost ends of the earth, men and women are saying 'yes' to Jesus. The living Lord is working, God is blessing the proclamation of his Word, precious souls are being gloriously converted; in that sense, we have set our sails to catch the wind of God as it blows here and there.

A quick look at the book tells me, these first-century believers were authentic in their faith – they talked the talk, they walked the walk, there is a ring of reality to them. They are the real McCoy, they are effervescent, they are sparkling – they are 'up' people in a 'down' world!

Their hearts are burning with a zeal and a passion for Jesus, their lives are aglow – they are on fire for the Lord. It reminds me of the all-consuming desire of the Irish missionary, Amy Carmichael, when she prayed: 'Make me thy fuel, O flame of God.'

Whether we realise it or not, you and I are part of something so big and so beautiful that God is doing in today's world. There is a revolution happening all around us – a crimson revolution, a revolution of grace; in fact, it began 2,000 years ago. Right now, no power on earth can alter its course, nothing and no one can defeat its purpose; we say with confidence, even the 'gates of hell will not overcome it.'

When we think of revolution, we think of tanks on the streets, the sound of gunfire, buildings on fire, bodies on the pavement, panicking people on the move, frightened children ... but, a grace revolution is so different: Jesus builds love, not hate; he promises peace, not turmoil; he offers forgiveness, not spite; he imparts gentleness, not anger; he gives life, not death. You see, the gospel changes people from the inside out!

The big questions we face are these: how can we be pacesetters for our generation, how can we impact and influence our world for Jesus, how can we be instruments of change in a community that desperately needs Christ? I believe the answer is found in these verses in Acts 1. Very simply, the answer is Jesus!

Did you see how Luke started his book in verse 1? The first thing he does is talk about the Lord Jesus! In other words, Jesus is the central figure in his thinking, he is the main character in the story. We see that in his Gospel narrative – that’s where Luke portrays him as the incarnate Son of God. Yes, Jesus is the living, eternal, all powerful God of heaven; see him, he’s dressed in human garb. Here, in flesh and blood, was God in all his power, rubbing shoulders with humanity.

The gospel of Luke was only the beginning – the book of Acts is the sequel. Acts tells us what happened next ... Jesus is no longer on Planet Earth, but his great work continues unabated. He works in us and through us by

the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s the heartbeat of Acts 1. That was true back then, it’s no less real today.

We are an army of ordinary people: people who are fired up by Jesus, people with a passion and a burden for the lost, people on the sharp edge of faith, people with a keen enthusiasm to see a turnaround in men’s attitude to Jesus. That’s what transpired in verse 2 ...

Jesus was going back home, back to heaven, back to the throne of God. Even though he wouldn’t be around very much longer, the message would go on. It would be heard near and far, not through an angel or through God’s booming voice, but through frail, fallible people; common five-eight folk; Mr & Mrs Average. These incredibly ordinary folk would blaze a trail for Jesus as they carried the torch east and west. The Lord would use them to carry out a revolution that only he could engineer.

Luke reminds us of God’s plan for revolution, he spells it out for us in verses 3-4. One day Jesus was having a meal with his disciples, that’s when he told them: ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.’ You see, the Lord developed his strategy for this momentous moment from two key events in his own life on earth. These events form the historical basis of his plan.

One of these was the resurrection – Easter Sunday saw a vivid demonstration of the unconquerable power of God, it tells me that the Lord Jesus is invincible. It didn't happen in a corner, it was out in the open for all to see – Christ revealed himself to a lot of people in the forty days afterward. For them, that was a major milestone, it told them that their Lord is alive – that they were in touch with a risen Saviour.

They saw him with their own two eyes, they heard him speak; the evidence won't go away. Their doubts were dispelled, and their fears were banished. Their God is a living God! For each of them, the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead, that was all they needed to keep on going. It gave them an impetus, a huge reason for living. It enabled them to do what God wanted them to do. They discovered that God would take them as they were, and he would transform them into the people he wanted them to be. That's what happens when you have power at your disposal – our God is a hands-on God.

And the same power that God used to raise Jesus from the dead was available to every one of them. But, not just to them, to us as well! That power, that Holy Spirit power, is what Pentecost is all about.

I can tell you, it was worth waiting for – the difference in their lives before and after is ginormous. Look at the big fisherman, Peter! Ordinary man, extraordinary God. Feeble

man, omnipotent God. Struggling man, a can-do God. Before, when he opened his mouth, he put two big feet in – now, he preaches Christ, and thousands are converted.

If we take a closer look at this revolution, we'll note that it was empowered by four vital dynamics. Now, some of these might surprise us, but they're all there in verses 5-8.

The first is that the church is not a symbol, but a reality, that's in verse 5. John baptised people as a symbol of their desire to identify themselves with the Messiah; they wanted to be linked with his ministry and purpose. But Jesus promised something totally different – a baptism not with water, but with a Person, the Holy Spirit.

As a direct result of this baptism, the One who empowered the Lord Jesus Christ now indwells us. The moment we give our lives to Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our hearts. This is God's gift of himself to us, so that all that Jesus is, is made available through all that I am.

Number two, the words of Jesus to his disciples teach us that the church is not a program, but a power. That's the thought behind his comments in verses 6-8a. These guys had their own agenda, they were preoccupied with the kingdom, they wanted to know the where, when, and how of God's revolution.

Jesus told them quite simply that there were certain issues that only he could handle – the

rest was up to them. He requires no clever programs, he has no bag of tricks, he has no eye catching gimmicks.

Jesus didn't immerse himself in a program; rather, he houses himself in people, he encases his power in flesh and blood. He was more or less saying: 'Forget about the kingdom, don't be sidetracked by what's happening all around you, focus on the King. Shine the main beam on Jesus – keep the main thing, the main thing!'

Number three, Jesus' church members are not promoters, but witnesses; he says specifically in verse 8b: 'and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' A witness is someone who tells what he sees and knows to be true – that's our prime role in life, we're here not to talk about ourselves, or to talk about others, we're here to tell the world about Jesus.

Our job is not to peddle a product, we're not knocking on doors trying to get people to join a religious club; see what the early church did; they gossiped the gospel. It didn't matter who they were or where they were, they never stopped talking about their Lord and Saviour. That's why the flame spread so rapidly, and that's why in 30 years they had reached their world for Christ. You mightn't have all the answers, you mightn't understand the theology behind it, but no one can argue with a changed life. It speaks volumes!

Number four, the church is not restricted, but universal. This is tremendous! The gospel of grace reaches all men everywhere; red or yellow, black or white, all are precious in his sight. The Great Commission is highlighted here – because, in the words of the Steve Green song: *People need the Lord*. Every culture, every clime, every continent. You can read how it grew and grew in the book of Acts; the good news is, it's still growing today. Breathtaking stuff. At the end of the day, we know from John in Revelation 7 that in heaven itself, an uncountable number of people will be there from every corner of the world, praising the name of Jesus.

It seems to me that today's church has a few things in common with the early church – one, they faced a population with little or no knowledge of the gospel. Yes, that's true – the polls tell us that we are living in an age when men are ignorant of truth, they have no idea who God is!

Someone asked a little boy: 'Son, do you know who Jesus is?' He thought for a while, and then he said: 'No, I don't, he's not in my class at school!' The pagan West – hey, we once talked about the dark continent of Africa; the reality is, it's so much closer to home these days!

Two, their society was a pluralistic society with many gods and many religions – well, what do we have today? It's a potpourri of faith – it's like Heinz, there are 57 varieties! The Irishman

says there are forty shades of green; I reckon, when it comes to faith, there are forty-one shades of grey.

And, three, they faced a hostile society with all the potential of persecution – I believe, if we stand up and be counted for Jesus, there will be a price to pay; Bible believers are often seen as radical, as right wing, as politically incorrect. It seems to me that the day is soon coming when we will have to make up our minds to ‘obey God rather than men’.

See what happened next in verses 9-11?

Wow! The Lord Jesus ascends to heaven, he’s going home. In front of their eyes, the Lord was taken up into glory. What a wonderful moment for him! What a day for them – truly unforgettable.

That’s when a couple of angels appeared and asked them why they were looking into the sky! The message they heard was potentially life-changing ... this same Jesus, who has gone up into heaven will one day return from heaven. In other words, Jesus is coming back again! One day, our Lord will return, he will break through the clouds!

This is the great hope in the heart of every Christian; this is what enables us to keep on going; this is what helps us fire on every cylinder for Jesus; this is what stimulates us to get our house in order; this is what sparks in us a desire to obey him.

You see, when we read of the Lord’s blessing in the good old days of the first century, those

halcyon days of the early church – there should be a longing in our hearts for God to do it again. There is so much apathy, so much complacency, all around us; so many in today’s church are saved and stuck in cement; the fervency isn’t there the way it once was, the thrill has gone, the sense of awe and wonder has flown, the fire on the altar of their heart is almost out ... well, the God who has done it before is the same God who can do it again.

No wonder William Booth prayed: ‘Tis fire we want, for fire we plead; the fire will meet our every need; for strength to ever do the right, for grace to conquer in the fight, for power to walk the world in white – Lord, send the fire, send the fire!’

When the God of Elijah comes, he can revive us, he can restore us, he can rejuvenate us, he can reinvigorate us, he can renew us ... yes, we can be history makers; we can rock our world for Jesus; we can make a mark for God and leave a lasting legacy.

John Wesley was once asked the secret of his ministry, this is what he said: ‘I ask God to set me on fire and let people watch me burn!’ My friend, the Lord wants us to be men and women of passion ... let’s be a church on fire for God, let’s be a people with hearts aflame!