

Monday Evening Bible Reading Notes: Acts of Apostolic Men: Some Notes 2nd Version

These notes draw on Bible Commentaries by Tom Wright, William Barclay, A C Winn, Loveday Alexander, and Phil Moore. The Commentaries disagree on quite a lot, but are agreed that this is part 2 of a narrative by Luke. Luke was probably a Gentile believer rather than a Jew, medically trained, and a friend and co-worker of Paul so witness of the Paul part of Luke's story. He is writing specifically for Theophilus – maybe just an imagined Roman of high standing; but possibly the judge in Paul's Rome trial, with the 2 volumes the case written for Paul's defence. In Acts, Luke says very little about most of the Apostles. His focus is on the on-going Jesus mission, and the named and un-named missionaries...and their core message. His history is not always reliable in detail, and his Old Testament quotes are not always what we find in our Old Testaments. The names in Acts can confuse: for example different people (e.g. the various Herods) have the same name, and there are two places called Antioch – not Luke's fault! Luke and Paul's Letters are not always easy to align. While today's churches like to claim that their practices and job titles date back to the Early Church, Acts shows clearly that practices and jobs were in flux: Being gifted with the Spirit can precede Baptism, and does not always accompany Baptism; and job titles such as Elder, Prophet, Apostle, Deacon, clearly developed over time (as one might expect!) Speaking in Tongues was sometimes used as a test of conversion, but does not seem to have been in any way a norm.

June 1st: Acts Chapters 1 and 2: Host Andy, Lead Toyin: *The Ascension. The core Christian Church team, and the wider group. Replacing Judas. Pentecost/Whitsun. The First Sermon, The "Last Days". The life of the Christian Community.* If today's norm is ordinary stuff Monday to Saturday, and some God stuff on Sunday if you are that way inclined, 7 day a week missionary activity looks rather atypical... indeed un-balanced. Worth remembering that a lot of the early Christians were slaves: 18 hour working days and 7 days a week. They, like us, were called to live Christian ordinary lives.

A lot of material, so our 40 minute session requires selectivity. Tom Wright suggests discussion topics.

At a time when many Jews were looking for a Last Days Jewish Messiah to replace Rome with a Jewish Empire, Judas may well have been someone trying to push Jesus into getting on with that job, Jewish Christians were heavily Jesus-dependant and having to adjust to carrying on the Jesus ministry in the Jesus Spirit but without the physical presence of Jesus. "The Kingdom" required a fresh understanding: heaven and earth being in a new relationship, and apparent failure being turned into Resurrection victory. If we take the 120 Christians literally, that was about 1 in 30,000 Jews had signed up to Jesus. The vision initially was Judaism becoming Christianity. Then some/many Jews becoming Jewish Christians and attracting Gentiles to join them as Gentile/Jewish Christians – just as many Gentiles had signed up to a greater or lesser extent to Judaism.

WE may or may not have a personal Baptism in the Spirit experience. I don't think we ought to be looking for that – rather for daily strength to be and to do and to say: every day a school day. Luke says the Church looked attractive to outsiders. Can we claim that for today's Church?

By the time Luke wrote his book, persecution was in the air, but his account shows a more open-minded Roman Empire. The Old Testament shows Jews as on the whole contemptuous of other faiths, though this is not the whole story. The New Testament message can be taken as "Only

Christians go to heaven". In an era when we are more conscious of our own short-comings, and more respectful of other beliefs, it is rather hard to argue that God only listens to Trinitarians.... once again a reminder that Jesus didn't ask the "penitent thief" to recite the Apostle's Creed.

June 8th: Acts Chapters 3 and 4: Host Toyin, Lead Evan: *The healing ministry. Preaching in the Temple, and upsetting the Temple authorities. Collective responsibility for the Crucifixion. Sharing.* Healing miracles are in some ways a challenge to us. There are churches which still believe firmly in miracles of healing: from the Protestant intense prayer versions to the Roman Catholic relic-related versions; and there are people who, with prayer, get better when the doctors were convinced they would not recover. Some shun medicine and rely on prayer. However, miraculous recovery does not always follow the laying on of hands or the visit to the shrine – though that is not to deny that the sick person may experience other benefits short of a miraculous recovery. I'm guessing that most Christians see prayer and medicine and human care working together for good, and don't expect dead cert miracles. The New Testament healing miracles are usually, not always, dramatically successful – in line with what was then believed about the origins of disability and sickness. The Christian bridging story between then and now is the story of monasteries as places of healing and missionary outreach bringing physical healing as well as Gospel healing,

In the status-conscious society of that time (with privileged Sadducees and privileged legal experts expecting to have the last word, and the former very much in uneasy league with the Roman bosses), the ordinary folk who preached and lived the Gospel were incredibly brave. Imagine the porter or receptionist challenging the Chief Executive, or the Clerical Officer lecturing the Permanent Secretary... or the junior staff member standing up to the Harrods boss (in times not long gone).

Repentance and Conversion is the message that change for the better is, in good company and with help from on high, within our reach.

June 15th: Acts Chapters 5 and 6:1-7: Host Toyin, Lead Peta: *Pretending. Imprisonment. Gamaliel – the voice of reason. Food banks. Unlikely converts.* Then, as now, we live in different communities: church community, family community, work community, neighbourhood community (if any), sports community, club community..... The relationship between individual and community can be tricky temptation to fall in line with group norms, temptation to do your own thing and blow the community. Taking from without giving to: someone else will do that job. Or always wanting to be in charge, and not letting others contribute and flourish,. Gamaliel is a great example of encouraging a community to think about what it is doing. Apart from denying the Resurrection, the Sanhedrin was not really questioning the reality of the healings or the content of much of the Gospel message _ just saying, These un-qualified outsiders should not be preaching and healing!

A good community is one in which everybody is valued....and their gifts recognised.

In a sense, it is right to say that there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. But the reality is that some Christians are very much, physically at least, on their own. Acts shows team work as a preferred, though not inevitable, approach to outreach[and Christians living their daily lives in a (small) Christian community. It was very difficult in those days for the wife or children (or servants) to believe/practice differently from the man of the house; but clearly that did happen .

June 22nd: Acts Chapter 6: 8-end and 7: Host Toyin, Lead Miranda: *Stephen brimming with grace and energy. Stephen's sermon takes the Council over familiar ground but with fresh insight. Initially, the Council listened. Stephen is highlighting faith in action as meaning listening and moving forward – as opposed to hanging on to Temple and Law as “givens” which left no room for learning and change, God safe in, and only to be found in, the Temple, and Law a matter of detailed rules not love. Note the role of Saul in all this. Christians are adventurers and learners, not people who have arrived and who know it all. In Jewish folk lore, Moses had been a very successful adopted Egyptian, leading armies and ready to become Pharaoh – so had to give all this up to become a leaders of the Jewish under-dogs. Note God's timescale is not a human convenience time scale! And God requires us to go forward in the face of uncertainty about what comes next: our certainty is God with us, not God doing what we want with outcomes we can be sure of. Stephen is opposing Jewish nationalism and what might be called a “tribal God” God is God of all the earth and of all peoples, You can see why Jesus being born a Jew in the line of David, and circumcised, left some early Jewish Christians free to believe that salvation and the Church were for Jews and circumcised Gentiles – not for uncircumcised Gentiles who couldn't even be bothered to learn and keep the Law in all its detail. The importance of circumcision speaks for male dominance at that time.*

The Council could not condemn anyone to death, This was a lynch mob.

June 29th: Acts Chapters 8 and 9: Host David, Lead Oliver: *Persecution . Scattering of ordinary believers might have mean frightened people hiding. It actually meant inspired people becoming missionaries. Philip and the (hated) Samaritans. The wizard man sees himself becoming a better wizard if he can buy The Spirit: not quite what the missionaries were looking for in converts! Note that the wizards of the time (lots of posh folk had a wizard) did seem to be able to do stuff. The Ethiopian “Eunuch” may just have been a royal official – not actually castrated. Reading Hebrew meant he was better educated, as a Jewish convert, than many Jews, Striking that the Jewish faith was not a missionary faith as Christianity became, but really did catch on with many non-Jews. It was not least popular with Gentile women, because it was (relatively) favourable to women,,,,,and no circumcision requirement for full conversion. Paul and the Journey to Damascus: conversion maybe in the offing since seeing Stephen's death. Not the Ananias of Chapter 5. Seems anyone could Baptise, Seems Spirit gift could precede or accompany or follow Baptism. Paul needed Barnabas on his rather complicated post-conversion journey.*

You might describe the old Paul as a radical young top-of-the class fundamentalist. Tabitha is one of the first prominent women to be mentioned: doing her own thing, for the community, and doing it very well. Laying on of hands not yet a special person only rite. You can see why these things get formalised (who can do what); but I rather like the early flexibility (I once said “Bless you!” to a bishop (of Zanzibar), and he grinned, and said “That makes a nice change!”) A lesson from these chapters is “If you want to convert someone, listen to them first: start where they are, not with where you want them to be!” Another lesson is that belief in resurrection does not make it wrong to mourn death! (Jesus wept.) Note that “saints” are ordinary believers doing their best, not high-powered world-renowned miracle workers: imagine a church in which all the members are saints..

July 6th: Acts Chapters 10 and 11: Host David, Lead David: *Peter stays with a tanner. I lived for some years next to, and for a short time worked in, a tannery: they are very smelly! Cornelius is a great example of the powerful Gentile lined up with his Jewish neighbours and sharing in their faith and fellowship. He is on a learning path. So is Peter...and he finds it hard: not a man to welcome change. Note Cornelius's trusting relationship with his own troops and servants. This is a good guy. Peter invites the Gentiles in. Cornelius doesn't take it for granted that Peter and his Jewish support group will want to come into Cornelius's home. "No race is better than any other race" is a powerful discovery. The Holy Spirit grabs the gentiles without laying on of hands or Baptism. Speaking in tongues again – not something St George's majors in! Back in Jerusalem, Jewish Christians are suspicious: the Chosen People way of seeing things is hard to overcome. Some Jews regarded Gentiles as just Hell fodder! Barnabas, as always, is open-minded.*

In (Syrian) Antioch - the Empire's third largest city: 10 times the population of Jerusalem, HQ of sex goddess culture - people are first called "Christians". The first missionaries to the Gentiles (the complete outsiders) are given credit, but not even named.

Barnabas is called/named a Counsellor, but note that the giving of counsel is very much associated with listening to the other person, and with having an open mind. It isn't just, or even mainly, about being a good talker! Note the generosity of these very small and new churches in sending out missionaries to far distant place: no "But they are needed here. Charity begins at home" argument. This morning a Welsh politician was grumbling about money being spent on foreign aid

Sunday July 13th: Acts Chapters 12 and 13: Host David, Lead Peta: *Why was Peter saved and James (John's brother) not saved? This is a new Herod! The rescue story is wonderfully human: Peter doesn't know what is happening to him, the disciples are praying for a miracle but clearly not expecting it, Rhoda has completely lost the plot. Peter exits to protect others, and the Paul story begins. Sad the guard are executed: someone to blame. (Not much has changed here!) Simon NIGER: a black man in the story again, and no signs of prejudice in what often seems a very prejudiced world. Another wizard story. Sergius very open-minded; and I think this is more than "Let's keep all the gods happy". Prayer and fasting essential part of selection process.*

The head of a local synagogue was off a patron rather than a rabbi. We tend to focus on synagogues rejecting the Christian missionaries, but synagogues or Jewish worship spaces were the most fruitful recruiting ground – and one has to admire the open-ness. If someone turned up at St George's on Sunday morning, and asked to speak.....?????. Herod Agrippa was much more popular with the Jews than most of his Edomite royal line: he had resisted Emperor Caligula's attempt to get his statue erected in the Jerusalem Temple, among other things. Not only did Roman Law protect the disciples in the big cities; but Roman roads enabled them to travel relatively quickly and safely: Tiberias once covered 200 miles in 24 hours. It could be argued that travel in many of these areas was easier then than it is now!

There is a theory that Paul's travels were affected not just by the Holy Spirit, but by his proneness to malaria in low-lying coastal areas..

Sunday 20th July: Acts Chapters 14 and 15: Host Miranda, Lead Andy: *Not deterred by threats of violence – often returning to places they have been chased out of. Paul is beaten up and left for dead, and then goes back immediately before moving on. You wonder about the converts left behind; but maybe the mobs just liked occasional excitement. Mobs are still easily stirred and fickle: then by word of mouth and rumour, now by social media. In Lyconium the initial threat is of being identified as two of the gods who had once (in popular belief in an ancient place) visited the town. The Council of Jerusalem – really interesting to see the brother who had once suspected Jesus was a nut case now heading up the Church of Jesus. The Gospel reaches what we now call Europe.*

The Jerusalem debate is fascinating, as is the firm ruling of James – generally seen as a traditionalist. “The Bible says Jews first and last” is countered both by the evidence that Gentiles were becoming Spirit-inspired, and by texts which said God was God of all nations. These are two very different arguments: the first one says in effect that the Bible as we have it doesn’t bind the God who inspired the Bible. We would tend to add that God didn’t write the Bible: the Bible was written by people who in the context of their time were trying to understand God.

Very wisely, the Jerusalem Church leaders send their decision back with two extra witnesses to what had been decided – perhaps in case anyone should say Paul had made it up. And the personal touch has an edge on the written letter. In reporting the Barnabas/Paul split over Mark, Luke is ready to report squabbles which perhaps don’t show Paul in the best light. I like the prayer over the new church community: “Put grit into this congregation!” Note that when Paul preaches to those familiar with the Jewish faith, he starts with the Old Testament. With others, he starts with God’s Creation as common ground.

Sunday August 3rd: Acts 14 and 15: Host Miranda, Lead Brian: *Circumcision of Timothy sits oddly with the recent Council of Jerusalem ruling; but Timothy **was Jewish** – Having a Jewish mother. The Council had not tried to overthrow the tradition of male Jews being circumcised, though that would have been logical in the new faith and grace community. Paul’s call to Macedonia might have been a vision of Alexander the Great. Lydia is added to the great women list. Interesting that a female slave had the spirit of prophecy – you wonder what happened to the poor girl. Roman justice is not so strong a safeguard in more remote areas, Though it has to be said that the missionary targets were very strategically placed.*

Paul finishes up in Athens on his own, and has to deal with cultured Greek philosophers for the first time. There is a story behind The Unknown God. Long before there had been a plague of considerable scale in Athens, and in its aftermath a flock of sheep had been released to wander old the city. Where each sheep lay down to rest, if this was near an existing god shrine, that sheep was slaughtered in honour of the local god. If there was no shrine near-by, a shrine was erected to The Unknown God. Paul’s two named converts are interesting. One was a member of the top intellectual circle. The other a woman, and, it seems, not one of the female intellectuals who tended to respond to the Gospel preachers.

You wonder how Paul really felt about folk more interested in ideas than in action. But he met them on their own intellectual ground.