

SERMON: 13 MAY - Rev Alistair Cowper

“Clothed with power from on high”

(Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53)

William Barclay tells a story of a Hindu who decided to read the new testament for himself. The story fascinated him and Christ had laid his spell upon him. He read on into Acts and felt as if he was entering into a new world. The gospels were all about what Jesus did. Acts was all about what the disciples did. They had taken the place that Christ had occupied. The Church was continuing where Jesus left off at his death, resurrection and ascension. Therefore, said the Hindu, I must belong to the Church that carries on the life of Christ. The Book of Acts tells of the Church that carries on the life of Christ.

There are several things for us to learn from Christ's ascension to heaven and his last instructions to his disciples before departing this world in bodily form. They are things that are central to our true identity as fully fledged human beings. They are what make us fully human.

1. We need our minds opened
2. We need power from above
3. We are Christ's witnesses
4. We need a message to proclaim
5. We are made to worship Jesus continually

First things first - in order to understand life, we need our minds opened. Luke 24:45 Then he opened their minds **to understand** the scriptures

The Greek verb used here, *dianoigo*, means to open up and explain, in a sense, to prepare the heart to receive the truth. For example, there is this great story in the Book of Acts (16:14) where two of the early followers of Jesus, Paul and Silas, set out to take the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus out into the world. They are listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and one night Paul has a vision in which he sees a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come over to Macedonia and help them.

So they set off at once, and there's this great line in the story that says 'we could only conclude that God was calling us to preach the Good News there". They arrive at a place called Philippi where they stayed several days and then on the Sabbath they went outside the city to a riverbank where they assumed there would be some people gathered

there for prayer, outside the city - were these people outcasts. Well in a sense they were. They were a small Jewish immigrant community not large enough to have their own synagogue - they needed 10 male heads of household to justify that.

Sure enough there were people gathered by the river and Paul and Silas spoke about the good news. One of them was Lydia, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, an independent trader and householder, who probably acted as patron and benefactor to this small immigrant community of faith. Lydia was already a worshipper of God, and as she listened, Lydia's heart was opened by the Lord, and **then** she was able to accept what Paul was speaking about Jesus. She was baptised and so was all her family and immediately she began practising hospitality by inviting Paul and Silas to stay with her, and we know that she went on to begin a home group, a house church. And we know that by the time Paul writes his letter to the Philippians there is a well-established church there whom he describes as partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it. From such small fragile beginnings, something great grew. Never despise the day of small beginnings, of small prayer groups, of small attendances at times of worship. Great things can grow from small beginnings.

But the point I want to make from this story is that it illustrates that in order to believe people need the Lord to open their minds to receive the truth. That's a good prayer for us to pray for others who are resisting the Gospel.

Dianoigo is very close to the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, which literally means 'a change of mind'. So, as well as minds being opened, they also need to be changed, to about turn, or turn back, to the Lord.

In 1975, James Engel developed what is called the Engel's Scale to describe the process of conversion from no knowledge of God to mature faith. Engel argued that people undergo a long process in coming to faith in God. It can take years and years or it can happen very quickly, but either way, there is a conversion process.

- +5 Stewardship
- +4 Communion with God
- +3 Conceptual and behavioural growth
- +2 Incorporation into Body
- +1 Post-decision evaluation

New birth

- 1 Repentance and faith in Christ
- 2 Decision to act
- 3 Personal problem recognition
- 4 Positive attitude towards Gospel
- 5 Grasp implications of Gospel
- 6 Awareness of fundamentals of Gospel
- 7 Initial awareness of Gospel
- 8 Awareness of supreme being, no knowledge of Gospel

In order to understand life, we need our minds opened. In order to make progress in faith, we need God's help.

Secondly, in order to discover the fullness of life, we need power from above.

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power (clothed with power from on high - Luke 24:49) when the **Holy Spirit has come upon you;**

It's interesting in the Lydia story, how they gathered typically beside running water. That's what these small Jewish communities did. So baptism was possible, but this time not just to show repentance but to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The water is symbolic of the presence of the Spirit.

[I discovered this week that there is a fresh water spring below EC Church. We too are people gathered close to running water, and many of us have been baptised, and our baptism assures us of those streams of living water that lead to eternal life that Jesus promises those who believe in him and receive him.]

Jesus told the apostles to wait on the coming of the Spirit. Oh how we need to learn to wait. We will gain so much more power and courage and peace if we learn to be still and know God in our midst. Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength.

Thirdly, Jesus calls us his witnesses.

Acts 1:8 and you **will be** (when clothed with power) my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

A witness is one who says, 'I know this is true'. He tells the truth, with his words and with his life. I'm struck again and again by the importance of being a good witness for the life of Christ. People are watching all the time, making their minds up about how followers of Jesus live in front of

them, watching to see if there might appear anything attractive about their witness, watching to see anything of the life of Christ. And the life of Christ is the most attractive thing this planet will see. When the great explorer Stanley found David Livingstone in Central Africa and spent months with him, he said, "if I had been with him any longer, I would have been compelled to be a Christian and he never spoke to me about it at all". The witness of the man's life was irresistible.

Fourthly, in order to discover purpose in life, we need a message to proclaim.

Luke 24:47 and that **repentance and forgiveness** of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

The simple message is 'come back to God for he loves you and is ready now to forgive the things you have done wrong in the past; to give you strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.

Lastly, we are made to worship Jesus continually.

Luke 24:52 And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem **with great joy;**

Luke 24:53 and they were **continually** in the temple blessing God.

They no longer believed that Jesus was gone but that he would always be with them, and, in him, they would belong forever, they would live and grow and discover their true identity as children of God.

Let us pray,

Lord, send your Holy Spirit upon us and upon the people of KN and EC. Where minds are closed, open them up to receive your truth. Where life is shallow, clothe lives with the power from on high. As you have called each of us your witness, shine brightly through our lives. Let the message of repentance and forgiveness be loudly proclaimed. We give you our hearts, cause them to worship you, with great joy, forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.