

Growing Church: Bishop's Charge

[Acts 4.1-22; Luke 10.1-12]

When they saw the courage of Peter and John ... they were astonished and took note that they had been with Jesus.

Acts 4.13

It has been said, if someone accused you of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict?

Clearly the apostles had shared Jesus' life and all too brief ministry. But when confronted by the Jewish council in Jerusalem they grasped the moment and demonstrated a courage which is the hallmark of the birth of the Church.

'Being companions with Jesus' nowadays, as the Church of Chapter 2013 of the Acts of the Apostles, is the challenge of contemporary discipleship that we have to get our heads around.

The Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles is a celebration of fulfilment and mission - light for the Gentiles and the glory of Israel. A single-authored, two volume account of the ministry of Jesus and of the beginnings of the first century Church in which the life blood is the activity of the Holy Spirit.

Recent biblical scholarship (Luke Timothy Johnson) has emphasised the prophetic qualities of the accounts of Jesus message and the mission of the early Church. It is not just that Jesus and the Church are the fulfilment of God's promise but that each individual Christian now embodies that fulfilment, in our words, our deeds and being.

Moreover, the Church that Luke envisions will develop in a prophetic spirit of shared wealth, itinerancy, prayer and servant leadership, themes abundant in Luke-Acts and which we catch a glimpse of in our readings this morning.

Such characteristics proved attractive and generated the growing faith, numbers and influence the fledgling Church.

Luke convinces his readers that things are meant to happen this way. The working of God's Spirit in human freedom did not cease with Jesus but continued in the life of the disciples and continues in us today.

'Salvation is found in Jesus Christ the cornerstone.' In multicultural Jerusalem this bold and clear message of the apostles was heard and believed.

Again, the sending out the 70 provides a glimpse of the missionary urgency, method and scope of the first followers of Jesus, sent out in twos (an approach much copied down the centuries). We note the theology of the potential

harvest, and anxiety concerning such a meagre labour force, and the Kingdom message: the mixture of courage, stamina and pragmatism which keeps the disciples moving forward, travelling light, and unafraid (as we might say in these parts) 'to be a wee bit sharp' with stubborn folk along the way.

So Luke-Acts can inform the challenges of today by providing us with a language, with the conviction and courage and a method for mission.

The opportunity therefore is to understand our Christian discipleship as a quietly subversive alternative fellowship serving, challenging and convincing the world in which we live today.

Going where growing discipleship leads us, not only in the life of the Church but, more importantly, beyond sacred walls in serving the world. Responding to community needs grasping the possibilities of public space. Reaching out to seekers of faith, to the uncommitted and the simply curious. Challenging doubters and the timid who say it can't be done.

My clear charge to us in our diocese is to grow in faith, in numbers and in outreach, a programme based on a lively discipleship in our congregations, Vestries and clergy and the ways in which we relate to wider society. It's an approach that has to be intentional, honest and possibility, not problem, driven. We must ensure that our clergy flourish and are effective. That our vestries are vibrant and visionary. And where this not the case be honest and deal with it.

My theological college principal (and former Provost of our Cathedral), Alastair Haggart was elected Bishop of Edinburgh aged 60 after three decades in orders. He described himself as 'an old man in a hurry' – echoing the words of Pope John XXIII. I share his sentiment and urgency. There is much to do in our diocese. And there is a vulnerability both in our moments of despair and our moments of optimism.

However two things I know. Firstly I have as much enthusiasm for the power of the gospel to transform lives as I did the day I was ordained. And secondly, that whatever we strive for, we ultimately live in God's time.

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