

Acts 28 – Luke’s Ending Is Our Beginning

In many ways, the climax to the Book of Acts should be Paul’s safe arrival in Rome. He’s got there despite being driven 500 miles across the Mediterranean, shipwrecked on an unknown shore, survived the ill will of murderous sailors and soldiers and a grumpy snake!

But no, in fact there is another whole section on the start of his ministry in Rome. Why is this? I want to suggest a couple of reasons for this.

First, Paul’s ministry in Rome, rather than simply his arrival in Rome is arguably the fulfilment of the initial commission. In Acts 1:8 Christ says to the apostles “But you will

1. receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you
2. be my witnesses
3. do this in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Now the apostle Paul stands at the gates of “the ends of the earth” and we have certainly seen the power of the Holy Spirit at work along the way. In terms of the journey, arguably his job is done. But he still needs to witness in that place.

As always, he starts with people like him. As he entered Rome, he met groups of fellow Jews, his kinsfolk, trying to sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land. A strange land where they have experienced persecution, danger, prejudice, and suspicion.

How can they be at home in this foreign land? This was a challenge then as it is for us today.

Paul knew the answer! And in v23 it outlines how Paul gathered a group of local Jewish leaders – and from morning till evening – tells them the answer!! “Explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, he tried to persuade them about Jesus.” That does not give us a detailed outline, but we know enough to take an informed guess. We have Peter’s full sermon in Acts 2 and one of Paul’s sermons in Acts 13 plus his various letters.

We can be confident that he would have worked through the scriptures – i.e. in our terms, the Old Testament. And this would lead to the central message that the Messiah had come, and he would have to suffer and rise from the dead thus sending a message of his sovereign lordship. No power on earth, not even death can defeat him. This is the essence of the message he had worked so hard to bring.

This is the Messiah in whose face Paul had glimpsed the glory of the living God!

This was not a one-off occasion, v30-31 tells us that “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹ He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!”

Christ’s command to the Apostles, given in Chapter 1 has now been well and truly achieved. Israel’s God, the creator, God of Abraham had in the Messiah claimed his throne as Lord of the World.

A complete contrast to the apparently dominant Caesar who was in fact a low-grade parody holding onto power through the point of a spear.

Because Jesus is Lord not Caesar. This is a political claim, a revolutionary claim!

And yet the fight is not really with Rome

- Roman officials are portrayed in a positive light in Acts – behaving in an open and tolerant way. In Ephesians 6 Paul writes “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”
- Jesus is Lord, but not by force of arms like a world leader relying on:-
 - Mighty Legions
 - A Nuclear arsenal
 - Fire and Fury

But by a radical commitment to love and justice

And this message is very challenging – it had certainly brought Paul a great deal of trouble. How will people respond? – then as now v24 “Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe.”

So, the story isn't over until the gospel has been preached!

The second point is that even so, the story is rather left hanging. Paul is happily preaching in his house, but the court case is still pending. Did he win his case or not?

I think this is deliberate; yes, Christ's commission to the Apostles has been completed and the gospel has been taken to the ends of the earth. But there is clearly a lot of back filling and in filling to do to bring the good news to everyone.

This I think is Luke's challenge to the rest of us. We too are called to :-

- Wait till you receive power from the Holy Spirit
- Live your lives as a witness to others

As we draw to a close, I want to say something about power. It can and often does mean amazing miracles - signs and wonders. But I think at its foundations it is about the strength to live out a life of radical love. Listed below are a couple of examples of how early Christians lived out their commitment to love unconditionally all those around them.

Antonine Plague – Circa 165 AD – 25% mortality - In a letter to the high priest of Galatia, Emperor Julian urged the distribution of grain and wine to the poor, noting that “the impious Galileans [Christians], in addition to their own, support ours, [and] it is shameful that our poor should be wanting our aid.” But there was little or no response to Julian's proposals because there were no doctrines and no traditional practices for the pagan priest to build upon.

Plague of Cyprian – 3rd century AD – Ebola like sickness 30% mortality – Bishop Cyprian preached about the plague and told his followers not to grieve for plague victims (who live in heaven), but to redouble efforts to care for the living. His fellow bishop Dionysius described how Christians, “Heedless of danger ... took charge of the sick, attending to their every need.”

John 14:12 says “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.” That's what these faithful disciples did, greater things, many more things, more simple acts of love, than Christ could do on his own.

It is not appropriate for, many of us to care for the sick, but there is much we can still do that is radically loving for others in this pandemic. To follow in the footsteps of Paul and many other saints who have gone before us. Amen