

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Services on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2009

### Acts 5:12-16 - "An unstoppable movement"

I remember reading a striking saying of J.B. Phillips who was well known last century as someone who had devoted himself to a contemporary translation of the New Testament. He once said that translating the Bible was a little bit like rewiring a house... with the mains electricity still on.

He simply meant that the Bible was different from any other book and translating it wasn't just a matter of words on the page. There was supernatural power flowing through the text and you were likely at any point to receive a serious jolt or at the very least to find your hair standing up on end.

That phrase of J.B. Phillips came to my mind when I began thinking about the life of the early church in preparation for last week. If you were here you will remember that we saw God's power present in the church in the supernatural generosity where people like Barnabas sold off their property to give money to the needy Christians. Then God's power was also seen with terrifying impact in the supernatural judgement which fell on Ananias and Sapphira – two bodies laid out cold, dead and buried in just a few hours.

So there is nothing tame about the church – it's not the same as any other human society. God himself is present; the electricity is on and that should signal danger as well as delight. Not surprisingly that episode ended with Luke saying 'Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events'. So the Christians were taking God seriously and even those outside the church were afraid.

The theme of God's power continues into the next few verses of Acts Chapter 5 which we are looking at today. Only here you may be relieved to know that we move on from the theme of the divine curse on sin; the emphasis is on divine blessing again. But I want us very much to hold onto the theme of God's mighty power being at work in the life of the church.

I imagine it is a lesson that we all need to learn, whether we would consider ourselves committed members of the church or just interested onlookers at the moment. Those of us who are Christians easily slip into thinking that All Saints is not particularly special; and those who are on the fringes of the Christian faith need to know that with Christ a thorough-going transformation is possible for them.

He can deal with the past and forgive all our sin through Jesus' death on the cross; and he can completely transform our future too, because Jesus is not dead, but alive and he can send his Holy Spirit to change us from the inside out. God can do amazing things in all our lives.

I want to highlight two instances of Jesus' transforming power which these verses demonstrate.

- 1) The power to unleash a new creation
- 2) The power to gather a new community

To begin with, Jesus has power to unleash a new creation.

And I want to try to convince you that that is how we are to understand the first sentence of our reading. The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. It is spelled out a little further in verses 15-16, isn't it? <sup>15</sup>As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. <sup>16</sup>Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil<sup>[a]</sup> spirits, and all of them were healed.

Now, I am aware that that doesn't mention Jesus by name at all. But in mentioning very clearly that it was the apostles who did the signs and wonders, Luke is making the point that it was Jesus who was at work.

Remember, Acts is the second part of a two volume work. In his Gospel, Luke records the life and ministry of Jesus up to his Ascension. But in his introduction to Acts he calls that earlier period covered by Volume 1 'all that Jesus began to do and teach'. In other words even though Jesus was no longer physically present, he continued to act and to teach in the life of the early church. And chapter 5 verse 12 tells you how: The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people.

In fact when you read the word apostle it is actually making that point very clearly if you understand exactly what that word means. It is the root word for someone **sent**, as a messenger, with the authority of the sender. Perhaps you can remember from earlier in our series in Acts that there was a point when the early church replaced Judas Iscariot – and they listed the essential qualification for any apostle – that they had been with Jesus the whole time of his earthly ministry. How else could they be sent by him and have his authority?

What you find in the apostles' ministry is that they replicate what Jesus had done – because Jesus is working through them as his authoritative messengers. So if touching the hem of Jesus cloak was enough to heal a lady with twelve years of internal haemorrhaging, then positioning yourself so that Peter's shadow would fall on you was effective as well. The apostles are Jesus' agents. If you're taking notes and you want a cross reference to spell that out a little more, you might jot down 2 Corinthians 12:12 where Paul describes signs, wonders and miracles as the 'things that mark an apostle'.

I mentioned earlier that their signs and wonders are unleashing a new creation. And I need to unpack that a little more now... if you cast your mind back to the very start of the Bible, we learn there that one of the tragic consequences of human disobedience to God is that we live in a fallen world which is under the sentence of death. The curse of human mortality was God's judgement on our sin.

So when Jesus comes into the world as our Rescuer he sets in motion not just an undoing of human sin; he also begins to undo the consequences of human sin – notably sickness, disease, the power of the devil over us.

The victory over all that wrecks our world was won not so much in the miracles of Jesus as in his death. Because by taking sin's curse on himself at the cross, Jesus dealt not only with sin but with sin's consequences. So he opened the door to a New creation where all that mucks up the old creation is completely eliminated.

I've mentioned before that we love those small tester pots of paint in The Rectory: the one that you can get from Homebase, where you just do a splash of a colour and you get a sense of how the whole thing will look in Sunflower surprise.

The miracles of Jesus in his lifetime and in the ministry of the apostles are like that. They are just splashes of colour – we still live in a world where human sin leaves its ugly marks – for every healing here there is still a terminal illness there. So it is just splashes of colour that are seen. But they tell you the colours which will be everywhere in the new creation.

Jesus has power to unleash a new creation. Let me just say as a footnote on this heading that I don't personally think that these verses are meant to encourage us to adopt a ministry of signs and wonders today.

I did a literature degree at University and people often ask me whether I think that was a waste of time. I'm always happy to tell them it isn't a waste of time. Because the Bible is never less than literature. I certainly think it is more than literature. It's unlike any other book, in that it is God-breathed. But it's not less than literature. So the rules that govern interpreting literature apply to our understanding of the Bible

This is a case in point here: Luke never gives us an editorial comment that his lesson here is that the church should have a signs and wonders ministry today. And the author's purpose and intent must govern how we understand what he is saying.

C.S. Lewis made this point very well: 'the first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used.' You do not read a parking ticket the same way you read a love letter.

The basic reason Luke wants to tell us that there were signs and wonders done by the apostles is not to tell us to do them; it is (would you believe it) to tell us that signs and wonders were done by the apostles.

So I want to enter a gentle protest against what I call the Google method of Bible interpretation: where we type in our question: what is the strategy for evangelism and then out pops a link to Acts 5:12 – answer Signs and wonders. That is a lazy route to reading the Bible.

Am I saying that we never pray for healing miracles in life of the church today? No. Am I saying that God will never use dramatic answers to prayer to open the eyes of onlookers to his reality? Again – no. We've seen some remarkable happenings at All Saints in answer to prayer over the summer.

But the main point here is different: it is that the same power which was at work in Jesus' lifetime was also at work in the apostles because Jesus Christ is still alive. And therefore Jesus is still in the business of doing through the apostles what he had been doing all along: unleashing the new creation. Therefore the lesson is that contact with the apostles gives us contact with Jesus.

It's not my business to tell God what he can or can't do. There is well documented evidence that occasionally, when the gospel breaks new ground – maybe in a context of animism or pagan religion, something miraculous is how the Christian faith has an initial impact. And maybe too in our rationalistic, Western background again, occasionally, it seems that God challenges that sort of anti-supernatural thinking with an event which is obviously supernatural.

But tentatively I suggest we don't normally see miracles on the scale of Jesus or his apostles today, for the simple reason that Jesus and the apostles aren't physically around.

However we do have access to the apostles and therefore to Jesus **through their written message**. And make no mistake that message has power to unleash a new creation and to undo the effects of human sin, if not always now, at least in the future when Jesus returns to bring his kingdom fully in.

And for those with eyes to see that there are tester-spot splashes of that kingdom colour all over the place in churches today which take the apostles to heart. Because those are churches which have contact with Jesus – and Jesus has power to unleash a new creation.

Well on to my next point which amplifies this a little more:

## 2) The power to gather a new community

We have a new Vision Statement for the church which got approved by the church Council and I am hoping that it is straightforward enough for us all to be able to grasp it – it has two aspects to it: Growing together – which focuses on our relationships with Jesus Christ and with each other; Growing together is an inward focus.

But then there is a second element: reaching out – and that is an outward focus.

Now both aspects Growing together and reaching out are present in Acts because Jesus has power to gather a new community. Look at the growing together dynamic in the second half of verse 12 And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.

I commented last week that there were no spiritual lone rangers, opting in to church on their terms when it suited them – all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade – in the portico of Solomon's temple.

But that was not inverted fellowship. Reaching out was also going on as well.

The beauty of the location for their meetings that it was a public space – almost in the open air, so that the interested onlooker could watch from the edge what was going on.

What an important lesson that is for us – and how beneficial it was over the summer to move out of our usual building so that a few people could find their way onto the fringes of our gatherings.

Our meetings have to have permeable edges, which instead of putting up barriers allow the interested onlooker to observe the Christian community in action...

That's what happened here: and some found themselves drawn in, as they liked what they saw – Jesus gathered them into the new community.

The underlying process is described in verses 13-14. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. <sup>14</sup>Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

It's very striking how it says 'no-one else dared join them'. That points back to the previous episode when Ananias and Sapphira had died. It was as if God had posted a notice: 'none but the committed need apply'.

But that did not drive people away from the church, far from it. **It meant that there was a church worth joining.** People admired and respected the Christians and God in the end overcame their reluctance and added them to the new community.

There are lessons here worth learning today. For a start there needs to be a clear sense of a community amongst Christians in a church. If the extent of our association with each other is one hour on Sunday, I don't see how that sense of a Christian community can emerge. That's why in my thinking everyone at All Saints on a Sunday ought to find some midweek small group to belong to – a Bible Study or a prayer triplet, for example.

Furthermore we must not be too worried about being different from those around us. Too often we are so concerned about creating an 'us and them' mentality that we rub out the lines of demarcation between those inside and outside the church. The result often is that we are not clear that there is a distinction between believers and unbelievers – which is confusing for the unbeliever and dangerous for the believer.

I understand that Robinson Crusoe made a similar error when in kindness he made the enclosure for his goats so spacious that the goats inside were as wild as the goats outside.

In Acts there was a noticeable difference in attitude between the generosity of the Christians and the greed of people like Ananias and Sapphira.

Hypocrites couldn't fake the transformation and hope to belong to the church. In living Christianity there is always a powerful transforming effect when the Gospel really has an impact.

I'm told, for example, that when the 1904 revival happened in Wales large numbers of coal miners were gloriously converted and one result was that the pit ponies couldn't understand their drivers anymore – because they weren't being given commands laced with swear words. Overnight almost a third of the miners' language was dropped. That was an identifiable transformation. Jesus Christ made a new, transformed community.

And we cannot lose that element of transformation today.

What we need is both a distinctive lifestyle which challenges the world and an appealing warmth which draws them in. Then we can expect that lovely miracle in verse 14 to happen: more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

It is striking to see how the process of conversion is described there. From one side it is our own response: men and women believed in the Lord – taking a definite step of faith, committing themselves to rely on Jesus Christ.

That is something we do – and if you are not conscious of ever having decisively put your trust in Jesus Christ can I urge you to do so. Do it today even.

But there is another phrase to describe the process of conversion here. Do you see how it doesn't say People added themselves to the church. They 'were added' to the church. It was something God did – as conversion always is... I am very conscious of that, coming as I did from an absolutely secular background – with none of my family really showing any interest at all in the Christian faith.

I did not become a member of Christ's church so much as I **was added** to the church's number by Jesus Christ as he gathers people one by one to belong to his new community.

And that is the powerful community to which we must belong if we are Christian believers. Pray that we would be so – a church with the mains still switched on – because Jesus Christ is alive and present in our midst.

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