

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse – September 6th 2009 Acts 1:1-14

Ian begins by showing how Jesus offered proof to the disciples that he was alive. The resurrection of Jesus was as much a surprise to the disciples as it would have been to us; in fact it was such a surprise that the only conclusion they could make was that this was the time that the kingdom would be restored to Israel. So they asked Jesus if this was so, and Jesus did not dismiss that conclusion, and yet, this restoration was not going to be an exclusively Jewish thing, nor was the Gospel the preserve of any one nation. The restoration begins in Israel, to be sure, but it is not a sudden apocalyptic event from heaven with times, dates and charts, but by a mission on the earth, a gradual yet explosive spreading out from Israel to the ends of the earth. After all, the mission of Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles. Instead of speculating about what is *not yet* Jesus insists that we get involved in the mission that is begun *right now*. Ours is not to know the times or dates, but to receive power from the Holy Spirit when He comes, not that we might indulge ourselves, or compare ourselves with one another, but in order to send us out into the mess of the world with the love of Christ in our hearts.

And so the two men in white tell the disciples 'There's work to be done': preaching the gospel, evangelising our communities, healing the sick, giving to the poor, giving hospitality – all the things that Jesus spoke about, to bear witness to the reality and Lordship of Christ.

Luke's gospel is the story of all that Jesus began to do and teach, and Acts, Luke's second book, is a continuation of the record of all that Jesus does and teaches, this time through the life and witness of the Church. And there is nothing more glorious in the world to be caught up in. But there is no guarantee of a permanent rose garden; Christians are not immune from so-called tragedies. But what's a tragedy? Dying in a car crash after giving 60 years of one's life in reaching out to the poor and sick, or wasting a life in retiring to a life of playing softball, and collecting shells? No, it is better to exhaust oneself in the greatest enterprise on this planet – the Kingdom of God.

So the enterprise is launched and what do the disciples do – they go back to Jerusalem and organise a prayer meeting! What are they waiting for? They had the mission, the call, the need, and yet they call a prayer meeting! They understood, in ways that we don't, that you can have all of this, but unless you receive the power of the Holy Spirit, it will end up as nothing. It may be nice, or even successful, but it will be nothing unless the Holy Spirit sustains it in our lives.

So having that deep instinct that unless the Lord builds the house, we labour in vain, they entered into what Karl Barth called a 'significant pause', a pause in which the Church's task is to wait and pray 'Come, Holy Spirit'.

This is so difficult for us – in a world where everything is instant – so that waiting for a day, and especially an unspecified amount of time is onerous. Waiting implies that we are not in control that there are things that are beyond us, but we reckon we can fix it! We are achievers. In the Kingdom of God it is not about achieving, but about receiving the grace of God in the Holy Spirit, so that we do the work God's way and not ours. Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. We wait if only to remember that it is not by might, nor by power, not by our good intentions, our good ideas or by our programmes, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.

So don't rush into the day, seeing how many appointments you can keep but stop, sit down and ask the Lord what he wants you to do. We are so busy and so hurried we are not even conscious of it. God's institutions were not devised in the interests of the world's speedy evangelisation. The waiting energy of the church is just as faithful as its forward movements and at certain times more needful.