Notes for Church and Group Leaders

These notes are designed to help you understand and communicate the way the course is designed so you can use it most effectively with the people you are working with. Each church will have varying expectations of the purpose of groups, and in particular Lent groups. As you read through the notes you will see the expectations this course has upon those who participate. These notes will help church leaders shape prospective members expectations as they invite people to attend.

These notes include:

- Leading a group
- Course purposes
- Group leaders: getting the best out of the sessions and session structure
- Further resources for group lectio divina
- Bible texts background notes for group leaders

Leading a group

Thank you for agreeing to help run this group! We hope you have a fulfilling experience of this ministry, whether you are leading on your own or with others, whether this is new to you or you are still learning how to do it better.

The group leader’s task is to ‘facilitate’ (which simply means ‘to make easier’). How can you shape the prayer, reading and discussion in the group so people will learn and grow? You are not on your own. The group is there to work with you and the Holy Spirit is yearning for you all to grow in grace! This usually involves moving out of our comfort zones and discovering or rediscovering something more about God and one another.

This Lent course is not primarily a bible study, although it is primarily about the bible in the life of the early church. Therefore the role of facilitator will be to hold the group boundaries and encourage learning through prayer, sharing of experiences and listening to what we hear God saying to us through the scriptures. It is not primarily a study group, where we gain new information; it is not just a prayer group, nor a ‘sharing’ group where we simply share experiences. All these things should happen, but first and foremost we are here to attend to the scriptures and the story of the risen Christ to hear what God may have to say to us in the places where God has put us.

Some things, of course, are still needed. If you have ever led a group before, you’ll know the importance of creating a safe place for people to build up trust. This might still be true when a group has already been meeting for some time.

It will be helpful to:

- Make practical arrangements regarding the meeting space, comfort, refreshments.
- Time keeping:
  - It is usually best to aim for about 1½ hours for each group session.
  - You will need to make decisions about what you do and don’t do of the suggested exercises, etc within the materials. Course writers never get it right in regards to what ‘fits’ into a session- only group leaders can get this right. For some the course materials will seem a bit thin and for others too full. (We do read your feedback!)
  - As the course proceeds you will get a sense of what your group most needs. Let this be the priority in planning each session. You will need to discern the balance as to whether you plan according to their ‘needs’ and ‘wants’. They may not be the same and one of your tasks is to work this through with them!
- Contact people before the first session to make sure they know where the session is being held and check out if they need transport help. Let them know they will find a welcoming place before they come. They will need to know if you are providing copies of the course or if they need to download it. They will need to bring a bible. This part of the preparation shows a hospitality that will enable people to be valued within the group.

- During the first session you will need to agree ground rules e.g. confidentiality, respect for one another, nothing is too simple or too silly to say, the importance of really listening to one another, taking responsibility for what we share, etc. It is usually a good idea to identify these and encourage people to define what they mean by each phrase also.

You'll also be aware of the need to take seriously different people's preferred 'learning styles'. The course is about learning about learning at many different levels, and people will engage with the material and group dynamic in different ways. Some love the theoretical approach, and will be interested in the background, the 'questions behind the questions'. Some will learn by doing, and will need practical ways of praying, for example, using their hands, eyes and bodies. Others will be much more pragmatic, and will want to know what we actually do with the things we're discovering, and if they 'work' in real life. Still others will want to reflect on what others are doing and draw their own conclusions in their own time, rather than jumping in first. We're all different, but it is very easy for leaders to assume that everyone works as they do. Use the session outlines creatively and provide opportunities for different kinds of activity. You will need to make decisions on your own and from feedback from the group as to what is working for them. They will help you do this if you let them! (For more on learning styles see http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/teaching/theories/honey-mumford.)

Course purposes

1. To focus attention on the way the early resurrection community told the Jesus story using their scriptures.
2. To engage with the Acts chapters one and two through group lectio divina so that the transformative word of Christ ‘for us’ is heard.
3. For participants to tell enriched ‘Lenten’ stories of their faith because of connecting with the experiences of the early church.

These purposes are what the course is designed to help groups to do. Attending to these purposes will help those who especially need to know how the course is held together and flows. Coming back to these will also help shape the expectations of the group and gauge what they are learning.

Group leaders: getting the best out of the sessions and session structure

You'll see that each session comes in four parts, Entering, Encountering, Exploring and Engaging. Like the header with arrows on each page depicts, the sections are more of a process that we follow through together. Each section will flow into the other and the boundaries between them might seem quite porous. Key to the process is not letting go of what you have heard in the group lectio divina and helping it shape how you engage for action as you leave.
1. Entering

Whilst this section is about forming a group together; it is much more than simply an icebreaker. It both introduces the material and sets the tone for the session. It invites people to communicate so that they will feel more comfortable about sharing experiences or testing ideas as the session, and the course, proceeds.

This section is where we consciously enter into the presence of the God and one another. This is a time to help each person do what they need to step into a special space for listening and being with one another. It is a time to acknowledge that we need to make a conscious effort to be present to each other. Sometimes it is harder than at other times and the set ‘Entering’ exercises might need to be ditched or to spend more time processing them. Whatever the case, the whole group will need to know that this holy space is one where ‘my’ story joins together to create ‘our’ story and is enriched by sharing in ‘his’ story.

2. Encountering

This section is at the heart of each session, as we use group lectio divina to encounter God's word to us through the Scriptures. The idea is that we encounter God through his written word and the voice of his Spirit who ‘underlines’ or ‘highlights’ particular words or phrases which are his word for us today, here and now.

This method of Bible reading was popularised by St Benedict in the 6th century, although its roots go back many years earlier. The name means ‘divine’ or ‘holy reading’. Critical to the value of this way of reading is our honouring or respecting of one another’s hunches, questions and associations that a reading of scripture might bring. The scriptures can act like a springboard into the most unlikely of places and the simplest of ideas. Like the Godly Play learning method encourages, so this is a time to ‘wonder’ with God together. Encountering is a time to trust God to encounter us with something we need to hear that will enrich ‘our’ story.

The pattern from the session is written below with notes in between:

*Taking verses in turns, read (the text) as if for the very first time.*

The passage of scripture in question is read, either aloud by the leader, or a verse each round the group. This latter way of reading has the advantage that everyone gets to speak. It doesn’t matter if people have different Bible versions, as long as they are not too paraphrased and therefore disregard the verse structure. On the second or third readings, you can start with a different person so that everyone gets to read different verses.

*Tell the rest of the group about a word or a phrase which struck you, or which you had never quite noticed before…*

Leave a time for silence and listening to the text, around two to three minutes, and in particular for listening for something which struck you afresh, even though the passage may
have been familiar. These insights are then shared briefly with the group—preferably with only a word or phrase. This is not a time for discussion, but simply for hearing one another and ‘holding’ each other’s insights.

**Read the passage again, and this time listen for a word of Christ to you; share together...**

After a second reading, encourage people in a further period of silence to listen for a word from Christ to them. This is not the same a Bible study: we’re listening to the Word through the words, the voice of Jesus directly to you, and through you to the group. Again, as appropriate, share your thoughts around the group. It's perfectly OK not to 'hear' anything, or simply to be reminded of something, or for ‘nothing’ to stand out- and people need to be prepared for this.

**Read the passage for a third time, and be attentive to a word from Christ that calls you to act; share together...**

As before, invite people to listen for and share something which they feel they could do as a result of having 'heard' the passage afresh. This ensures that group lectio divina is not just a sterile activity, but rather something which urges us on to obedience to Christ's call.

**Note down anything which feels significant from what you have heard together.**

Much of what people ‘hear’ will be personal for them (although it helps make it more concrete for them if they tell the rest of the group). But there may be things which feel more significant to the group or to the church. Some things will only be understood to be significant as the rest of the group shares. Store these insights away, as they may contribute to the rest of the session.

For some people group lectio divina will be familiar, but for others it will be a new experience, and like all new things may take some getting used to. But generally people have found it a helpful and exciting way of using the Bible, and its 1700 year history shows its enduring appeal.

3. **Exploring**

In this stage we are in more familiar territory, with some questions to spark off discussion. For this section you may want to be familiar with some of the Background Notes compiled by the course author. They can be found later in this section and are particularly helpful in understanding how post resurrection disciples were seeking to ‘understand’ Holy Week! These notes might help answer or add to some of the background questions that have arisen, and offer some insight to the scripture’s context.

We have deliberately put ‘Exploring’ after 'Encountering'. Questions about the text are important, but for the purposes of this course they come after we have listened to the text ‘raw’. This avoids the temptation of trying to 'listen' having already explored what we think the text 'really means'. As we use our thinking functions more fully about the passage, we come at it having already heard something from Christ from it.

Exploring the context of the first disciples encounter with Christ will offer us insight as to how we respond to the ‘Word’ now. It will help us wonder about their experience and help make connections between their context and ours. It might actually help us understand our own contexts better and have more confidence in using the scriptures more freely.
These questions try to encourage the group to explore:

- What were the situations they found themselves in?
- What were the things that enabled them to know they were doing the things they most needed to do?
- How did they use the scriptures and what was foremost in their minds as they remembered their experience of Jesus?
- How did the Holy Spirit guide them then, and how does the spirit ‘lead us into all truth’ now?

Exploring doesn’t mean we will find the answers we seek, but will hopefully make us more able to take steps of faith into the future, trustful of God and one another. The emphasis here is not on theological study, however important that is, but rather on engaging our hearts as well as our heads.

Can we examine what we think we have heard from God against the background of the way that the church’s understanding has grown over the centuries? Again, exploring is not just a time for interesting ideas; we integrate what we have heard through ‘Encountering’ and seek to discern what we might actually need to be doing together.

4. Engaging

Like all good group learning, this part aims to earth what we have heard and discovered into further explorations and action. We go out from where we are gathered and engage with our life commitments and activities: home, work, school, neighbourhoods and networks of relationships.

Our aim is to engage purposefully. Having encountered God and explored the word with others, we take intentional steps to be a community of action. So make sure you manage the time well and don’t skip this section if you can help it!

Bishop Trevor has written: ‘With our full creative powers and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit we are called to know and make known the story of God in every context we live in’. Engagement is where we show that we are people living the ‘Word’. This section is designed to help this happen.

We begin our engagement through prayer and commitment to action, and each session concludes with different way of praying with the Bible, to give people a taster of how else they might pray to root prayer and action. We broaden our horizons with methods of prayer you may or may not be familiar with, using the scriptures as the early church might have done. For each session a poem is offered that might be used for meditation. Feel free to use other medium such as song, some music, a film clip or anything which contributes to the theme. Finally a collect closes the session. This collect may have been used in your previous Sunday services as part of the liturgical provision for the course.

This course is designed not just to help you explore the Bible passages for each week, but also to be aware of how you are using the Bible, to learn, to pray and to listen to the voice of the Spirit. The very first Christians about whom we will be reading based their faith on their scriptures, and used them to hear the voice of God: let us learn more and more to do the same within our Christian communities.
Further ‘models’ and resources for group *lectio divina*

Another group *lectio divina* model:

Three question to introduce each reading of the text:

Listen and wonder…
What did you hear? (a phrase or word that seemed to stand out…)

Listen a second time and wonder…
What is God saying to you? (to you, personally, just as you are…)

Listen a third time and wonder…
What is God saying to us? (your group, your church, our world…)

Another group *lectio divina* model- sometimes called the discursive style:

Read the text aloud and discuss the questions in this order:

- What does the text say to me?
- What does the text say to our Christian community?
- What does the text say to our world?

Using group *lectio divina* with Evening Prayer:

O God, make speed to save us.
All O Lord, make haste to help us.
My trust is in you, O Lord.
All I have said ‘You are my God.’
Psalm 31.14

*God, who taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen*

**group lectio divina**
We listen as three different people read the passage. Each time we listen we will have a different focus.

**Text for reading**

First time “Listening for Christ the Word”

Listen for a word or phrase that attracts you
Silently repeat the word or phrase to yourself

*Sharing aloud* – just say the word or phrase out loud – don’t add anything else! Or if you prefer, say ‘pass’.
Second time “What is Christ the Word inviting me to do”
Reflect on ‘I believe God wants me to…..’

Sharing aloud – Say something about your reflection. Listen carefully to the person on your right.

Third time “What is Christ the Word inviting me to pray?”
We go round the group in turn one more time, this time each one of us praying in turn for the person on our right. This can be done alone or in silence. If you pray silently, please say ‘Amen’ at the end so that next person knows it is their turn.

The Lord’s Prayer
The Conclusion
May Christ our Saviour give us peace. Amen.

group lectio divina in silence:
The framework is the same, but it is all done in silence, with no group sharing.
A brief passage is read three times.
At the first reading, listen for a word or phrase that attracts you. Repeat it silently.
At the second reading, ponder how it is developing or challenging your understanding.
At the third reading, ask what action it invites you to take.
Prayer – silent or aloud

For further reading on group lectio divina try the following. These include resources on group lectio divina for individual reading:

http://marshill.org/pdf/hc/practices/LectioDivinaINDGROUP.pdf
http://www.valeromo.com/ld-art.html
http://www.lectio-divina.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=category.display&category_id=2

Bible texts’ background notes
These notes on the main text of each session are intended for the group leader’s background knowledge. These will supplement knowledge about Acts of the Apostles. If they are helpful during the Exploring section please use them, but they are not designed to be discussion points for the session.

Session 1 ‘Waiting’ Acts 1.1-11
Over the next 5 weeks we will be looking at texts from the first two chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Lenten themes will be viewed from the fresh eyes of the Early Church. During our time together we will practice group lectio divina (divine reading) and in addition to burrowing into the text we will look at how the New Testament writers read the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), how the Bible can be addressed for corporate and individual discernment in our time, and creative ways of reading the Bible.
The Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke who also authored the Gospel named after him. The Gospel is about the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah (Christ), the Acts is about the life and the ministry of the (early) church of Jesus Christ. Sometimes this book is informally called ‘The Acts of the Spirit’ due to the preponderance of references to the Holy Spirit (52 times in total), especially in the first few chapters.

‘Theophilus’ (Lk 1.3; Acts 1.1) is a proper name, but from early times (Origen in the early 3rd century) it was also interpreted symbolically as the name means ‘beloved of God’ or ‘loving God,’ and so the works are addressed to a man called Theophilus, but also to all who are lovers of God. The first order of the risen Lord to the apostles in this book is to wait (1.4). Yet Jesus is alive! He appears to them over a period of 40 days ‘speaking about the kingdom of God’ (1.3) but they are not to leave Jerusalem, they are to wait. Surely it is time for the kingdom to come, right now! For who will be able to withstand a man who has conquered death? The apostles’ question is very understandable, they are urgent – ‘is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ (1.6). Why must they wait?...

Did you notice how many times the Spirit is mentioned? In verse 8 the Spirit enables the apostles to be Jesus’ ‘witnesses.’ The Greek noun is martus, as in one who testifies in court or who bears witness to the truth. From this is derived the word ‘martyr,’ one who witnesses even unto death. The verb form is martureo, ‘to bear witness.’ In Lent we reflect that Jesus bears a cross, while we bear witness...

The beginning of this witness is Jerusalem, the city of the Temple, God’s habitation on earth, and so witness extends outwards from this hub. Luke’s Gospel began and ended in the Temple in Jerusalem (Lk 1.8-9; 24.52), now Acts recounts the witness of Jesus outwards from Jerusalem ‘to the ends of the earth’ (1.8). This echoes Isaiah 49.6 where the prophet speaks of Israel as a ‘light to the nations’ such that God’s ‘salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.’ However, the story of Acts ends in Rome (28.16), the centre of the empire, so the book indicates that the ends of the earth are yet to be reached, Acts ends in an open-ended way.

Later in the Lenten series, and the Novena that follows, we will suggest that the church is still engaged in mission to the ends of the earth. Acts 28 is the last chapter in the book, so we are Acts 29, living in the new age of the Spirit, Christ’s witnesses in the parts of the earth wherever we find ourselves. How does the idea of being an Acts 29 community strike you?...

Each story throughout Acts is a witness story, pointing to the ultimate reality – God, Christ and the Spirit – who also bear witness (14.3, 17; 15.8; 5.32). Christ reveals himself through his witnesses, even as they make him known (26.23), for it is only the Spirit that can make persons into witnesses (1.4, 8).

For the Spirit to come, Christ must depart. Why?... We call this the ascension of Christ for Christ is no longer walking the dusty roads of Palestine but is ‘exalted at the right hand of God’ (2.33), Lord of the cosmos. As Christians speak of God, they must also speak of Christ. The ascended Lord operates in the power of the Spirit through his witnesses so his work, word and power are available to all those who are full of his Spirit.

‘Why do you stand looking up towards heaven?’ ask the two men (1.11). Notice the number of references to sight in these few verses – ‘watching’ (9), ‘sight’ (9), ‘gazing’ (10), ‘looking’ (11), ‘saw’ (11). These followers are literally eye-witnesses. What does it mean to be Christ’s witness in our culture full of I-witnesses?...
It is said there are two theological languages in Acts, that of resurrection and that of ascension. The first signifies victory over death, the second is about sitting at the right hand of God and empowerment. Both these languages will be deployed in Acts 2, but here the emphasis is on ascension. Whether in a 1st century world dominated by empire or in a 21st century world dominated by secularism, it is important to know who is really in charge, who actually rules.

Session 2 ‘Preparing’ Acts 1: 12-26

Last session we read of Luke telling his readers that Jesus was with his apostles for forty days, and spent that time speaking about the kingdom of God. Jesus gave them a single instruction; ‘He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father’ (1.4a). This will be the Holy Spirit that will empower them to be witnesses of Christ in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. However, in the meantime, they are to wait. Following this Jesus left them in a manner the church has called the ascension (1.9).

The apostles return to Jerusalem to do as they are bidden, to wait and pray. This is an apt theme for us too during Lent. It is a time where we wait and thus await, we look forward to the manifestation of Jesus in Easter at which time may the Spirit enable us to again and anew experience the risen Christ following Good Friday. As the apostles came together they were joined by other disciples and they prayed.

There are several groups who gather to pray. The ‘room upstairs’ (1.13) reminds us of the Last Supper (Luke 22.10-13), the place where Jesus has his last meal with his disciples and where he announces the one who is to betray him (Luke 22.21-23). The apostles are named (Acts 1.13), as if to emphasise that they are not ‘the twelve’ anymore, for the number 12 is significant, that is, it signifies, or is a sign to something. In the ancient world a Rabbi was normally approached by people who wished to follow him, but Jesus appears to be the first Rabbi who called disciples to follow. He called 12, the same number of tribes that make up the complete Israel, the people of the Lord God. The new Israel, the Church, is also to begin with 12, the complete people of God, with Jesus as their Lord.

The apostles ‘were constantly devoting themselves to prayer’ (Acts 1.14). There are also ‘certain women’ there – likely those who followed him to his execution (Luke 23.27) from Galilee (23.49, 55), and those named as going to the tomb (24.10) – plus there is Mary, Jesus’ mother, and his brothers. Luke does not record Mary the mother of Jesus at the crucifixion (as does John – 19.25-27). The last time Mary and the brothers appeared in Luke’s account is at Lk 8.19-21, where Jesus explicitly indicates that his followers are known by hearing the word of God and doing it. The specific mention of Mary and the brothers indicates that they too have become disciples. No one is privileged in the kingdom of God, not even family, all have to believe and follow.

The number gathered is 120, a ‘crowd.’ By the time of Jesus each village community in Israel had a council, called a Sanhedrin, which exercised local judicial matters. The Great Sanhedrin of Jerusalem we come across throughout the Gospels and Acts, but each local community could have its own Sanhedrin if it had 120 members. This number in 1.15 may indicate that the followers of Jesus were like a formal community of their own. Furthermore, a council member represented 10 people (likely men), so symbolically it is also necessary for this new community to have a 12th apostle to make up the formal number, replacing the betrayer Judas (Lk 22.3-6, 22-23, 47-53).

Luke’s account of Judas’ death is quite different from Matthew’s (Mt 27.3-10), where he hanged himself. In Acts Judas’ death has similarities to Herod’s end in 12.23, where he too has catastrophic intestinal trouble, but Luke’s concern is not so much historical as theological. Theologically land was
hugely important in Israel/Palestine: is land an individual’s or is it Yahweh’s? If we are stewards of it then it will bring life (so Barnabas; Acts 4.36-37), whereas selfish ‘ownership’ may be dangerous (Judas; Acts 1.18-19, and Ananias; Acts 5.1-11).

In addition to the apostles evidently others followed Jesus throughout the course of his earthly ministry, women (Lk 8.1-3) and men (Acts 1.21-22), and from these the community proposes two names to replace Judas – Joseph, called Barsabbas, and Matthias. The final choice is left to God, through the casting of lots and they fall for Matthias. Although common in the OT through ‘Urim and Thummim’, this is the last time we see this decision-making method in the Bible. Once the Spirit has been given, casting lots is no longer appropriate.

Again the story is told theologically, on the one hand the community trusts in God who provides its leaders, yet on the other hand we never hear of these two men again. The ‘Acts of the Apostles’ is really the ‘Acts of the Spirit’ who provides at the outset, and will soon empower for witness.

**Session 3 ‘Receiving’ Acts 2:1-13**

The apostles, certain women, Mary Jesus’ mother, his brothers, and a crowd of about 120 believers, have been praying in Jerusalem since Jesus’ departure (Acts 1.12-15). Matthias has been added to the apostles, thus making up the twelve (1.26).

The day of Pentecost approaches. On this day the Jews celebrated the Feast of Weeks, which concluded the period of seven weeks which began with the presentation of the first sheaf of the barley harvest at the Passover. Original this Feast was an agricultural one and marked the end of the harvest in the month of Sivan (May/June). However, for some time the day was known by its Greek name ‘Pentecost,’ which meant ‘the 50th day.’ In the intertestamental book of Tobit the writer narrates that ‘at our festival of Pentecost, which is the sacred festival of weeks, a good dinner was prepared for me and I reclined to eat (with his family)... and an abundance of food was set before me’ (Tobit 2.1-2). For centuries Pentecost had been a time of celebration of the goodness of God, in thanks for harvest.

The believers are together in one place, likely praying (Acts 1.14). The last 50 days have likely been a time of mourning for them following the ‘sickle’ that slew their Lord. Lots of people are in Jerusalem, for Jews spread far and wide all over the known world (the diaspora) would pilgrimage to Jerusalem for such a Feast. Can this day be one of celebration for the 120 inside? ‘And suddenly from heaven...’

The word ‘suddenly’ for Luke always introduces a dramatic shift in circumstances:

- Luke 2.13 – And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God...
- Luke 9.30 – Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him...
- Luke 9.39 – Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him...
- Luke 22.47 - While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him...
- Luke 24.4 – While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them...

Now the ‘suddenly’ introduces a ‘sound like the rush of a violent wind (and)... divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them...’ Violent wind and fire are associated with God’s presence in two major Old Testament stories: at Mount Sinai with the lawgiver Moses (Ex 19.16-19), and at Mount Horeb with the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19.11-12). Now in Jerusalem, Mount Zion, not one person but all the
people are overwhelmed by the presence of the Spirit such that they are ‘speaking about God’s deeds of power’ (Acts 1.11) in the languages ‘from every nation under heaven’ (1.5).

This speaking of native languages is different from the ‘speaking in tongues’ Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians, ‘the tongues of angels’ (1 Cor 13.1). If one takes a map and identifies the places listed in Acts 2.9‐11 one sees that the pilgrims have come from literally every point of the compass. Jerusalem is the hub to which these pilgrims have come from all over the world, and will be the centre from which they will take the Good News about Jesus back to all parts of the world. Jerusalem has been the place of death (Jesus), and now God has made it a place of life (the Holy Spirit): when humans cause death, God brings life.

The event bewilders the listeners and intoxicates the believers. The listeners are ‘amazed and astonished.’ They know the believers to be ‘Galileans’ (Acts 2.7), in other words plain people from up North. How are they are so linguistically gifted? ‘What does this mean?’ Others, however, ‘sneered’ and interpret these people as drunks. Other translations have ‘jeered’ and the same root of the verb occurs in Acts 17.32 where Paul is preaching in Athens. There some want him to speak more, others ‘scoffed’ at his message of the resurrection of Jesus. Theologically Acts 2 indicates that right at the birth of the Church the activity of the Spirit brings amazed astonishment or scoffing jeers. The response is strong either way.

Session 4 ‘Telling’ Acts 2:14‐37

When God acts, how are we to interpret? In obedience to Jesus’ instruction (Acts 1.4) the believers had been waiting for the promise of the Father for 50 days. Then on the day of Pentecost they are overcome by a violent wind, divided tongues as of fire, and an ability to speak the languages of the earth proclaiming God’s deeds of power (2.11). Pilgrims in Jerusalem for the Feast are either amazed and astonished, or sneeringly they accuse the believers of being drunk.

Each one of the believers has the same type of experience: ‘a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Likewise for the hearers: ‘each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.’ This is an important theological point for the Holy Spirit is for each follower of Christ so that each person in the crowd hears the message of God’s power. In other words the gift of the Spirit is for mission. When the Spirit is given to Christ’s followers it is for the benefit of those outside the number, so that they may hear the Good News. The Spirit fills the Insiders to enable them to speak to Outsiders. The Spirit turns the people of God inside out.

Peter rises to address the crowd and explain the significance of what has happened. First he clears up the charge of drunkenness with a gentle put-down of his own, literally ‘for it’s the third hour of the day’ (about 9am) and Jews did not have their first meal until the fourth hour! Then he goes on to the more serious business of interpreting this astonishing activity of the Holy Spirit. Peter immediately refers to the Old Testament, which was the Bible for both the Jews and the early Christians. The Bible as we know it was not settled in its form until well into the second century, which meant that for many decades the Church’s Bible was the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. And so the early believers looked to these Scriptures to understand what had recently taken place through Christ’s ministry, his death and resurrection.

Speeches play an important role through Acts. Luke recounts speeches by Peter, Stephen, James and Paul (often). Each time there is reference to the Scriptures or to Moses and the prophets. The effect of this is to root the emerging Church in the history of God’s dealings with Israel, and as the Christ (Messiah) Jesus is the fulfilment of all that Israel had hoped and prayed for. Likewise the Church of
Jesus continues to study the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, in order to interpret the ways of God in our time.

Peter’s speech or sermon contains quotes from Joel (2.28-32) and the Psalms (16.8-11; 110.1; 132.11). He raises a number of points:

- the ‘last days’ of which Joel spoke have now begun with the advent of the Spirit;
- the Spirit is for everyone, young and old, male and female, slave and free;
- the Spirit is poured out; this verb was customarily used of a torrential downpour of rain on a parched earth;
- the consequence of this pouring out is that people ‘shall prophesy’ which in Luke means to proclaim the Good News of Jesus the Christ;
- the movement of history is eventually to a last day of judgment, preceded by portents and signs, that is called ‘the Lord’s great and glorious day’;
- although Jesus was killed by human hand God raised him from the dead, as foreshadowed by David;
- death and corruption cannot affect him, so he has been exalted to the right hand of God;
- and thus has the authority to send forth the Holy Spirit;
- for he is both cosmic Lord and Messiah.

The purpose of the sermon is to announce that all history is God’s, Christ Jesus embodies and fulfils the Scriptures, and that as cosmic Lord he empowers his followers with his life, which is the life of God, in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

There are two responses to be made: firstly, call on the name of the Lord to be saved (2.21), secondly, prophesy/proclaim the message of Christ crucified and raised from the dead (2.36).

Session 5 ‘Living’ Acts 2:37-47

Peter has completed a speech addressing the criticism expressed by some onlookers at the experience that has come upon the gathered believers (2.12-13). The miracle that has caused so much consternation to the pilgrims in Jerusalem is not so much ‘the sound like the rush of a violent wind’ or ‘divided tongues, as of fire’ (2.2-3) resting on the believers, but the bewilderment at hearing ‘each one of them speaking in the native language of each’ (2.6). The content of what they hear is proclamation ‘about God’s deeds of power’ (2.11), and some ask, ‘What does this mean?’ whilst others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine’ (2.13).

Peter’s response is a speech indicating that what has happened is fulfilment of what the prophet Joel spoke. This is the beginning of the ‘last days’ in which all are challenged to call upon the name of the Lord for salvation (2.21). Peter accuses non-believers of crucifying Jesus, however ‘God raised him up’ as David foresaw, and Peter concludes with the powerful announcement, ‘Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified’ (2.36).

Peter’s speech is 23 verses long, which in the Greek comprises only 429 words, of which 212 words are quotations from Joel 3.1-5; Ps 16.8-11; Ps 132.11; Ps 110.1. This means nearly 50% of his speech, or open-air sermon, is Scripture and how Scripture is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ who sends his Spirit to those who believe. This is a feature of the preaching of the Early Church, the Evangelists read their Bible in conjunction with their experiences of Christ and the Spirit.
It appears that Peter has been addressing the crowd who have gathered at the sound of the believers speaking about God's deeds of power in their native languages (2.8,11). His sermon is extremely effective for the hearers are ‘cut to the heart,’ an expression meaning their inner feelings or conscience is lacerated with guilt. They are in an impossible position for as the people of God they have rejected and killed God’s messenger. So they plead with Peter and the apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’

Some big theological words and phrases are now used by Peter, but note that they are part of a process into which he invites his hearers to participate:

- Repent: the Greek word is *metanoein* which Luke often uses. It literally means ‘change of mind’ and for the early believers it meant a ‘reform of life,’ i.e. from a life of sin or selfcentredness. It is the equivalent of the Old Testament summons to ‘return to God.’
- Be baptized: repentance is an element of baptism, this is the way their repentance is to be expressed, a submission to a washing by which they become followers of Jesus Christ. Their responsibility for the crucifixion has been heavily emphasised by Peter so this repentance and baptism is a conversion from rejecting the Christ to an embrace of his forgiveness.
- In the name of Jesus Christ: this phrase connotes the presence of Christ, in that the hearers’ response in repentance and baptism is to and in Christ himself. It is personal.
- So that your sins may be forgiven: the verb means to ‘pardon, forgive’ and was used in the commercial world for the remission of a debt. The effect of the death and resurrection of Jesus that humanity has been forgiven. What has been achieved universally by Christ is 10 appropriated by believers through conversion to him through repentance and baptism.
- You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit: and the consequence, or gift, is the Holy Spirit, the invisible Christ to each who so believe. Note that the word ‘believe’ means ‘to trust in.’
- The promise is for you, your children those far off: the promise is that mentioned earlier (2.33) and is the Spirit, of which Joel and other prophets spoke, given in a new way.
- Everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him: this is the first hint of something that will boom out through Acts. The new way in which the Spirit is given in these last days is not just to Hebrew kings, prophets and priests, nor to the Jewish people, but potentially to the whole human race! This is an echo of what Isaiah had prophesied, ‘Peace, peace to those far off’ (Is57.19). From here the book of Acts will narrate the move of Spirit-filled believers bringing the Good News of Jesus to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, as Jesus himself had prophesied (Acts 1.8).

People ‘welcome’ the message and about 3000 people are baptized. Some argue about whether these are immersed or sprinkled, and question where they got the water from. Such questions miss the theological point that the preaching of Christ crucified and risen is hugely effective in terms of bringing forth repentance and faith. The number of believers has jumped from 120 to 3000 following the activity of the Spirit and public proclamation. A new era has dawned in that a man has comeback from the dead and a new kind of life can be found in him.

As a consequence a new kind of community or ‘people’ is formed, one devoted to teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. How central are these things to our Christian communities? Further, people were not in need, the better off provided for the less well off, so all had ‘glad and generous hearts.’ Not only is this pastorally effective – in that people are happy, glad, fed and cared for – it is missionally effective too, for this kind of community is attractive to outsiders resulting in ‘the goodwill of all the people’ and ‘day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved’ (2.47).
Postscript: Acts 29

By the time Luke wrote his Acts of the Apostles Christian communities had sprung up all around the Mediterranean world and Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), and many people, Jews and Gentiles, had come to faith in Jesus the Messiah (Christ). However, there are (at least) two pressing issues for followers of Jesus: the delay of the *parousia* (the so-called Second Coming of Christ), and increasing hostility to Christian communities.

Luke addresses these issues by indicating that the Spirit of Christ imbues the Church with his power, and that persecution, ironically, contributes to the expansion of the Gospel. At the opening of the book believers are closed away, praying but timid. When the Spirit comes, they become a public and bold presence, and at various times through the long story believers speak fearlessly to opponents, governors and kings.

Thus the book closes with Paul in Rome, the centre of the empire, 'welcom(ing) all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance' (28.31). Subsequent Christian communities spring from this example – welcoming all who come, proclaiming the kingdom of God, and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. This is Acts 29 in a nutshell.