

responded to the message were so great that the apostles had to establish the pattern of church life. Questions of how the widows were to be helped loomed large and had to be addressed in a way that left them the time to do what they had been called to do. But it was still a very Jewish fellowship. It took the very drastic circumstances of martyrdom and persecution to rekindle the focus of the church on going to all peoples everywhere.

“Baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” This is not just a formula for baptism. It is bringing people into the life of the God who has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – publicly identifying them as part of the community of believers, committing them to the mission of Christ in the world.

“Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” The life of every believer, every member of the Christian church, is to continue to be forward and outward. According to the gifts and calling of the Lord we are all to be involved in his life and mission to the world.

“I will be with you always...” The disciples had been deserters. But Jesus, about to commit the mission to them, was not about to desert them! Yes, his physical presence would be removed, but he would always be with them through the Holy Spirit.

Reflect:

- Forward and outward... To what extent is this still the direction of Christ's people in the world today?
- What more can we be actively doing to fulfil our Lord's commission in this community?
- How can we be more dependent on the empowerment of his presence through the Holy Spirit?



Studies for Home Groups
by Peter J Blackburn

6. YOU ARE WITNESSES

Reading: Luke 24.36-49; Matthew 28.16-20

You have had a job to do and you pause a minute to consider just how you are going to tackle it.

Now, let's see. I have my plan. Saw, nails, hammer, glue, sand paper, sander, brush, a tin of clear finish... I seem to have all that I'll need – except, of course, for the timber. That's right! I can't make it without the timber! What sort of timber should I use? It's so hard – and expensive – to get solid timber these days. But chipboard isn't what I have in mind. Not even that fine-grained custom-board will do.

But if I have to join the timber to get a wide enough piece, that might be taxing my tools and skills a little too far! Perhaps a melamine finish might give me the best of two worlds... How can my great plan be achieved most effectively?

Some people just seem to jump straight in – and get it right most of the time! Every congregation has people who are handy. In one previous parish there were two handy men, and I was told to contact one of them if I needed a job done quickly. The other would do a better job but would take longer.

Jesus had come into the world with a task to do – to seek and to save that which was lost, to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many...

At the beginning of his ministry, we hear the devil tempting Jesus as he pondered and prayed in the wilderness about his mission in the world. How would he go about it? Turn stones into bread? No! Jump off the highest point of the temple and expect a divine rescue? No! Bow down to Satan...? No!

When he was on the cross, we hear those temptations surfacing again. “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!” (Mt. 27.40b). Use your divine power for your own needs. He had never done that. Even in his dying, he was there for others!

“He trusts in God and claims to be God's Son. Well, then, let us see if God wants to save him now!” (v. 43) Surely the Father's power is here to protect you! Jesus was trusting the Father. He had already accepted the cup of suffering! No turning back!

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (27.46) – the words of dereliction. Yes, deserted! Perhaps worshipping only the Lord wasn’t the best thing after all! You should have listened to me! Just look at you now! You haven’t used your own power or the Father’s power, and now he’s deserted you! Don’t you want the kingdoms of the world?

“IT IS FINISHED!” (Jn 19.30) Jesus had resisted the temptations and completed the work the Father had sent him to do!

Reflect:

- What was the work Jesus had come to do? What is the work Jesus wants us to do?

You are Witnesses

Read: Luke 24.36-49.

“Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (v. 44).

The Hebrew Scriptures are in three major sections – the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. The book of Psalms is the first of the “Writings”. Jesus is saying that the whole of Scripture was pointing towards his life and ministry. It had to be fulfilled or completed in him.

“This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (vv. 45-47). What teaching that must have been! There are, of course, a number of specific passages and texts – such as Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 – which speak to us so clearly of the suffering Jesus endured, and Psalm 16.8-10 quoted on the day of Pentecost as pointing to the Messiah’s resurrection.

Jesus was giving them an understanding of the essential message of the Scriptures – the seriousness of human sin, what God has done to provide an appropriate sacrifice for sin and the gracious call of God for people to repent of their sins, to receive forgiveness and to live on the basis of a new relationship with God. Yes, there are individual texts, but these are core themes of the biblical message. In Jesus they are fulfilled.

Reflect:

- In Jesus the message of the Old Testament is fulfilled. What significance does that have for our understanding of Jesus’ life and mission? That was important for Jewish listeners, but how important is it for us as “Gentile” Christians?

“You are witnesses of these things,” Jesus tells them (v. 48).

A witness is a person who has seen or heard some evidence. Some witnesses just don’t want anything to do with legal proceedings. Jesus was meaning that, as those who had witnessed these things, they were now to take that witness out into the community and world. Our English word “martyr” comes from the Greek word for “witness”. We think of a martyr as a person who has died because of their witness to Christ.

They don’t face this task alone and unsupported – “I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (v. 49). The task cannot begin until the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The task isn’t finished. The commission has been passed on to us, to the Church of today. We are the witnesses. The Scriptures have been fulfilled. The message about repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations. The task is still impossible without the “power from on high”.

Reflect:

- To what extent do we need to re-think the distinction between “being witnesses” and “doing witnessing”? How can the evidence of who Jesus is and what he has done be translated into the evidence of our lives and words?

Therefore go...

Read: Matthew 28.16-20.

Jesus’ plan was to send out this small group of disciples who had been with him for these three-and-a-half years – the very ones who had so recently denied him and deserted him! He is placing the next phase of the great mission in their hands!

“Make disciples” – in the Greek original that is the operative verb to which three participles are attached. You have been my disciples. You have learned from me. Your great mission is to make other people from every nation my disciples. Jesus has died on the cross for the sins of the world. He has been raised to life. You are to call on people to repent of their sins and receive the forgiveness that Jesus has died to make possible.

“Going then to all peoples everywhere, make them my disciples...” Their focus – and the focus of the churches they would establish – was to be forward and outward. On the day of Pentecost, the numbers who