So we're starting our new series in the book of Acts, a book which was written somewhere around 60AD. And I suspect we'll be in it for a good part of 2014. But before we look at the opening verses, I'm going to read you a poem by James Allen, which I'm sure many of you will have heard before. It's called One Solitary Life:

He was born in an obscure village,
The child of a peasant woman.
He grew up in another obscure village,
Where he worked in a carpenter shop,
Until he was thirty.

He never wrote a book,
He never held an office,
He never went to college,
He never visited a big city,
He never travelled more than two hundred miles
From the place where he was born.

He did none of the things
Usually associated with greatness.

He had no credentials but himself.

He was only thirty three,
His friends ran away.
One of them denied him.
He was turned over to his enemies,
And went through the mockery of a trial.
He was nailed to a cross between two thieves.
While dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing,
The only property he had on earth.

When he was dead,
He was laid in a borrowed grave
Through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone,
And today Jesus is the central figure of the human race
And the leader of mankind's progress.

All the armies that have ever marched
All the navies that have ever sailed
All the parliaments that have ever sat
All the kings that have ever reigned,
put together
Have not affected the life of mankind on earth
As powerfully as that one solitary life.

One solitary life. But ask yourself, how? How has the life of Jesus of Nazareth had such a profound impact on the world, when there was every reason to think that he would die unknown to history, that his name would never be known outside of the tiny slice of time, and the tiny geographical area that he lived in? And yet, that his life has had such a profound influence no one could really deny.

Well, if you want to know the answer to how and why it's had the impact it's had, you've got to start with the book of Acts. Because whilst it doesn't tell us everything, it tells us enough. And it's an incredible story.

It's the story of the message of God's love and grace in Jesus flooding out into the world, enveloping peoples and regions.

It's the story of how God pursues people everywhere, from every walk of life, and every ethnic background, and how no one, not then, not now, is beyond the scope of Jesus' saving power and loving embrace. It's the story of how the gospel, the good news of God's grace, draws people in and brings them together in community, and then sends them out into the world. It's a great story!

It's the story of how the gospel spreads from Jerusalem the capital of the Jewish world, to Rome, the capital of the then world. And the gospel spreads, not just in spite of, but because of weakness and persecution and suffering. It's the story of how the gospel triumphs over demonic forces and worldly powers and hostile governments and barriers of culture and language and race. It's the story of how despite all these attempts to hinder it, Jesus' grace just keeps on spreading.

And it's a story that every one of us here is invited to participate in. You see, unlike every other book in the Bible, the book of Acts doesn't have a formal ending. After 28 chapters, it just suddenly ends , with no real conclusion, leaving you thinking, 'yes but then what?' and the answer is, but then you, and me, because in a sense it's always waiting for new chapters to be written, for you and me to be Acts 29, and 30 and 31, as the church continues to take the message of Jesus out into the world.

So, if as individuals, and as a church, we allow the message of this book, and the tenor of this book, to shape and mold us, we are in for a wonderful year in the word of God.

So let's read the first half of chapter 1.

Acts 1:1-11

I've got four points: the work goes on, persuaded by truth, empowered by the Spirit and staying on message.

The Work Goes On

Last year as a family we read the book Robinson Crusoe, in fact Naomi ended up writing her gymnase thesis on it. But what you and I know simply as *Robinson Crusoe* was initially published under a rather longer title: *The Life and Strange*

Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoque; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pyrates.

And after that you've got to admit that Robinson Crusoe is a much snappier title. Now I know you're sat there thinking, what on earth has that got to do with Acts? Well, it's this. This book that we know as Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles, many theologians would argue should more properly be called, The Continuing Acts of the Risen and Ascended and Reigning Christ, which he performs through his Church, Empowered by the Holy Spirit.

And whilst Acts is way snappier, and we'll keep calling it just plain Acts, they've got a point haven't they.

Look how Luke opens the book in v1-2, 'In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all Jesus began to do and teach, until the day he was taken up.'

Which is an interesting way to start isn't it? 'In the first book'. So Acts is vol 2, to Luke's first volume, which was his Gospel. But for Luke these weren't two different stories. You see, he doesn't say, in my first book, Theophilus, in the gospel that I wrote, I told you all that *Jesus* said and did, The Acts of Jesus if you like, but now I'm going to tell you all that the apostles, or the Holy Spirit said and did, the Acts of the Apostles, or the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

No. For Luke, the gospel and Acts are one story. 'My gospel told you what Jesus began to do and teach, and in this book I'm going to tell you all about what Jesus continues to do and teach.'

So right at the outset, Luke wants us to see that when we hear and see stuff happening in this book, it's Jesus who's behind it. When the apostles are preaching repentance and forgiveness, it's Jesus who's calling people to himself; when people get saved and added to the church, Jesus is doing it.; when people get healed, Jesus is the healer; when demons are expelled, when powers of darkness are confronted, it's by Jesus' power; and when the gospel spreads and the church grows, it's all Jesus' doing.

And that should tell you something. It's that the way Jesus continues to work in the world is through his people, his church. That's it's not for no reason that the apostle Paul calls the church, the Body of Christ. That the words and the deeds of Jesus continue as the church takes the gospel of his grace out into the world. But who's the church? It's you, and me.

But there's one other bridge from then to now in this intro that I want you to see. Just as with his gospel, Luke addresses this book to Theophilus – a name which means One Loved by God. And in the gospel Luke calls him, '*most excellent* Theophilus' (Luke 1:3), which was the kind of title you'd give to someone of social standing. And so it seems as if Theophilus was an educated man who was

either already a Christian and wanting to grow in his faith, or who was wobbling because of external pressure and Luke was writing to encourage him to stand firm, or someone who was investigating the Christian faith and wanting to know more.

And so, in some ways, Theophilus represents all of us, doesn't he? Because like him, you're an intelligent bunch, and cultured, and like him maybe you're investigating the faith, or wanting to grow in your faith, or feel like you are being squeezed by life and under pressure you are wobbling in your faith. But also, like Theophilus, you are loved by God, and so this book is just as much for you as it was for him.

And first off Luke wants Theophilus, and you and me, to understand that the kind of Christianity that Acts is going to describe is built on rock-solid facts.

Persuaded by Truth

Now Luke wasn't the only person in his era to be writing two volume works. And so we know that the intro to the first volume also runs good for the second. So do you remember how Luke began his gospel? 'Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.' (Luke 1:1-4)

And now listen again to what he says here in Acts 1:3, he's talking about Jesus: 'He presented himself alive to them [that's the apostles who he'd chosen] after his suffering *by many proofs*, appearing to them during the forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.'

Now, Luke's a doctor, so he's no fool. And like all doctors, he's seen plenty of dead bodies. And he knows that when you're dead, you're dead. But this guy has done his research, and he's interviewed the eyewitnesses, the apostles, and he is fully convinced that when they say they saw Jesus alive again, after watching him die on the cross, they're telling the truth.

You see, the point is that these first apostles needed proof. Convincing proof as you could translate Luke's words here. They weren't a bunch of credulous country bumpkins ready to believe every latest thing they heard. You know from the gospels that rather than being desperate to believe Jesus had risen from the dead, at first they dismissed as idle tales, stupid women's talk, any suggestion that he had, because they had seen him die. And, as we'll see as we go through Acts, the idea that someone could rise from the dead, was no more believable then than now.

So these first apostles that we're going to meet in Acts needed proof. And Luke's point is that they got it and got it in abundance. Over a period of forty days Jesus appeared alive to them in so many ways that it left them in absolutely no doubt

that he had died, that he was alive again, and that he was the Messiah. They saw proof enough that turned their lives upside down, and the world with them.

For these guys faith was not a leap in the dark, it wasn't wishful thinking on their part. As one of them, John, would write later, 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life… we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you.' (1 John 1:1-2).

And so Acts opens by giving us one of, if not *the* major reason why the life of Jesus has so impacted the world, why the church and the Christian faith spread as it did, and it's the physical, bodily resurrection of Christ. These men were so convinced of it, they were so persuaded by the truth of it, that they came out of hiding and went around the world, telling people, at risk of their lives, 'look, I don't care what you do to me, but I'm telling you, we have seen Jesus alive again.'

And frankly, that is the only thing that can explain the spread of the early church. Something must have happened! Something must have happened to explain why a bunch of observant, law abiding Jews would shift from worshipping on the Sabbath – Saturday – to Sunday, the Lord's day, the day of the resurrection. Something must have happened to explain why these strict monotheists would start saying, Jesus was not just a good man, he was the god-man, God come to us as a man. You simply cannot, if you want to be intellectually rigorous say with Richard Dawkins, you know what, I'm not going to bother debating whether Jesus was real or not. You simply cannot bury your head in the sand like that. How has this one solitary life had the impact that it has? Where did it all start? How did it all start? It started because this group of men and women were so persuaded that Jesus was who he said he was, that he had died, and risen from the dead, that they were prepared to spend their lives at the cost of their lives, spreading that message.

But the proofs weren't just for the apostles, were they? They were also for Theophilus, and for us. And Luke is saying, Look Theophilus, you can believe this, you can trust this, they haven't made it up, the apostles needed persuading as well, but they were. So you can risk your life on Christ. And so church, can we.

So what makes Christianity unique, is not some kind of spiritual experience. What makes it forever opposed to religious, or moral relativism, 'and you can have your truth and I can have mine, and all paths lead to God'; what drove the missionary expansion of the early church that we're going to be reading about, the ground of the faith; is the truth of the resurrection. It stands or falls on that. And Luke, and the apostles, the eyewitnesses, had zero question that it stood.

And yet, despite the fact that their witness was based on fact, Jesus made it clear to them, they still needed the Holy Spirit.

Empowered by the Spirit

Verses 4-5, 'And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the father, which he said, "you heard

from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

So Jesus told the apostles that they weren't to leave Jerusalem, they weren't to begin this task of spreading the news of Christ's triumph over sin and death, until they had been immersed in the Holy Spirit like John the Baptist immersed people in water. That they weren't to start the mission before them until they were properly equipped for it.

You see, you can have all the facts, and still be lacking. As someone else has said, you can be absolutely orthodox, and absolutely dead. And so right at the outset, Acts tells us that the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church, is not down to man's amazing powers of persuasion, or great apologetic skills, or careful reasoning or planning. Jesus made it clear, you cannot start this work I've got for you until you are equipped and empowered by the Holy Spirit. And so in Acts what we see is this coming together of truth, the gospel, what God has done for us in Christ, and the Spirit. And the gospel is taken out into the world by ordinary men and women in the extraordinary power of the Spirit.

Now, I reckon there are two dangers here for us.

And the first danger is that subtly, we think this doesn't apply to us. Because let's face it, as a church we have so many resources of our own, don't we? We are so competent, we have so many good minds, we are financially wonderfully well provided for, and the danger is we rely on ourselves, and our own capacities. But if Acts tells us anything, it tells us that God is a God who is looking for men and women who will put their faith in him and his power and not in themselves.

But the second danger is that we over-apply this to ourselves. We read that the apostles were told to wait until they received power from on high, so we should wait too. That we need to wait for further equipping, or a fresh move of the Holy Spirit, or the church to be stronger before we go out there in the world with the gospel, that our focus should be on ourselves first. But the problem with that is that we live this side of Pentecost, when the Spirit came, not their side. And the Bible is clear that all who are Christians already have the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 12:13).

Now, saying we have the Spirit is not the same as saying we are as full of the Spirit as we can be, though to paraphrase AW Tozer we may be as full of him as we want to be, but not as full as we could be. Rather the apostle Paul's charge in Ephesians 5:18 is that we must be filled with the Spirit – to go on being filled with the Spirit, to come to God daily for the equipping and the empowering we need.

But that begs the question, doesn't it? Empowered for what? What is the Spirit given for? Because tragically, you can survey the Christian scene and think the Spirit is given for some kind of personal spiritual knees up, to give Christians a good time, and nice feelings, and fun meetings. But Jesus tells the apostles what the Spirit is coming to do. Acts 1:8, 'But you will receive power when the Holy

Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.' And that's the point, that's the empowering ministry of the Spirit. To make Jesus' name known, to testify to Jesus. To equip and embolden, and empower men and women like you and me to take this good news of God's love and grace in Jesus out into ever increasing circles of the world.

Now, if you walk around St. Sulpice at night, and come down here to the lake front, you'll see the old church there lit up by flood lights. And it's this beautiful mix of shadows and light and stone. And someone has described the Holy Spirit as being like an unseen spotlight, shining his light on Jesus, magnifying Jesus. And the danger when we talk about the Holy Spirit is that we want to make Him the focus of attention, when all the time the Spirit wants to talk about Jesus, and what God the Father is doing through Jesus.

Because at its root, that's what it means to be a witness. You see, if you think that you have to earn God's favour and blessing in your life, by doing certain things, or living in certain ways, or by making certain sacrifices, then you'll be tempted to think that the Spirit is given to equip you, or empower you to do great deeds, or take risks of faith, to earn God's favour, so that you deserve God's blessing. But the good news of the gospel is not 'hey this is what you've got to do for God'. It's 'hey, this is what God has done for you in Jesus. He has come as a man, and died in your place on the cross, and been raised from the dead breaking sin and death's power, and you don't need to be alienated from God, or keep running from him, but can know his love and grace and acceptance in your life, not because of what you have done, but because of what Jesus has done for you.' And the Holy Spirit comes to help us proclaim that message to the world, and to live out the wonderful consequences of that message in our lives.

But of course the wonderfully encouraging truth is that these guys who turned the world upside down through the Spirit empowered Gospel, were just normal men. 'Men of Galilee' the angels called them in v11. Men with all the frailties and inadequacies, and personal faults and failures typical of people like us. Which is why, as Jesus ascends to the Father, two gentle rebukes are required before they start on mission.

Staying on Message

In the forty days after the resurrection, Jesus has been teaching them about the kingdom of God, Luke says. And then Jesus tells them that the promise of the father, the Holy Spirit, is going to come, in fulfillment of all these Old Testament prophecies. And if like them you were a Jew, naturally you'd be thinking of what that meant for your own people, the nation of Israel. "Does this mean at last God is going to establish his kingdom here, and vindicate his people, and vanquish the Romans, and establish peace and justice in the land?" Verse 6, so they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And Jesus' response is gentle rebuke number 1: v7: 'It's not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power… and you will be my witnesses… to the end of the earth."

Then as they watch Jesus disappear from view into heaven for the last time, they're standing there gawping at the sky and the angels bring gentle rebuke number 2: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?"

And as I've thought about those two rebukes, it's struck me just how easily we get sidetracked and caught up with stuff, and argue about stuff that simply isn't Jesus' focus. We drift off message. You see, rather than being concerned with the end of time, their concern, your and my concern, was to be the ends of the earth. Rather than an earthly, territorial, ethnic, political kingdom, Jesus has something far greater and far wider in mind, that envelopes all people. Rather than Jesus just being interested in our church, or our pet issues, Jesus' agenda is much broader. And suffering under the Romans, they wanted change now, and sometimes we can be so taken up by the stuff of our lives, with all its problems, that we want change now, and Jesus says, leave the timing to the Father. Meanwhile, while you're waiting for everything to come right, and one day it will be made right, on the day Christ returns, there's work to be done, there's a mission to be about, there's good news of grace to proclaim.

And that mission is what this book is all about.