Three Foundations for Holy Spirit Empowered Mission
Acts 1:12-26

Last Sunday we began our series in Acts, by considering 'how could one solitary life – the life of Jesus - have had the impact it has?' and how to answer that you've got to begin with this book of Acts. Because Acts tells the story of how the gospel, the good news of all that God has done for us in Jesus, spread out into the world, turning it upside down.

And last week we heard Jesus tell the disciples to wait in Jerusalem, after his ascension, before they went out on mission as his witnesses, until they had received power from the Holy Spirit.

Well, today, we're going to read what happens immediately before the Holy Spirit comes, at Pentecost, and then we're going to look at three foundations for Holy Spirit mission that I think Luke sets out here.

Acts 1:12-26.

And the three foundations for Spirit empowered mission are: United Community, the unstoppable power of the word of God, and the Unwavering Purpose of the Spirit.

United Community:
Now I'm sure you've heard of Steven Covey's book Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. And there's something about looking at a community of individuals who've achieved something you want to emulate and trying to work out, ok how did they do it? How did they get there? What are the characteristics of this group of people that have achieved what I want to achieve, and what can I learn from them: whether in business or marriage or family.

Well, in this passage, Luke gives us a fascinating insight into this community of men and women who achieved so much against so many odds.

Firstly, they were united in obedience. Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem until they had been immersed in the Holy Spirit. And the incredible thing is that they obeyed him. Luke says in v12, 'Then they returned to Jerusalem' and they waited. Now, why is that incredible? Because often we're not very good at obeying are we? Especially when waiting is required.

If you were to take the list of the fruit of the Holy Spirit that Paul gives in Galatians 5, love joy, peace, *patience*, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, and asked my girls to circle in red which one their dad fails at the most, I can almost guarantee it would be patience. Now maybe you're better than me, but waiting can be hard, can't it? To wait when you're itching to get on with something; to wait when you're desperate for an answer; to wait when you want someone, or God, to sort something for you. And like a child badgering and fussing their parent, we can wait impatiently, or we can wait trusting, knowing that our heavenly father will deliver on his promise.

And the disciples waited, and obeyed, and resisted the urge to take matters into their own hands or to think they knew better. And I say that, because often when

we struggle with obedience to what God says in his word, it's not because we don't know what it says, but because we do know what it says, and we don't really like it, and we think we know better.

But the funny thing is that disobedience to God's word can often cloak itself in the disguise of humility, can't it. I mean, just think about some of the hard things the Bible says about relationships, or sex, or family, or money. We can read it, and there's this clash with the prevailing culture. The Bible's out of step with how we want to live our lives. We want to sleep with our boyfriend or girlfriend, to marry our non-christian partner, to keep hold of our money and ignore the call to care for the poor, to keep feeding our gluttony. And we don't want these things to apply to us. And so we do something clever: under the guise of humility we think things, or say things like, 'but I wouldn't dream of telling others how to live their lives, and it would be wrong to impose hard and fast rules, and we shouldn't be judgmental.' And it sounds so good doesn't it? But the hard truth is that deep down it's really coming from pride – that I think I know better than God what should happen here, that I know better than our good and loving creator what makes people flourish and thrive, that I know better than him how a relationship can last, that I know better than him about the timing of when something should happen – that I shouldn't have to wait.

But if these guys were to see all that God had in store for them, they had to obey, and to obey by waiting. And that's what they did. And the bottom line for you and me, as individuals and as a church, is that obedience to what Jesus says, is really a non-negotiable foundation to Spirit-empowered living.

Secondly, they were united together. And I mean they were *together*. They were together in a place – v13, 'And when they had entered [Jerusalem], they went to the upper room.' But they were also together in heart, Luke says in v14, they were together, 'with one accord.'

And if their obedience was noteworthy, just think how remarkable it is that these guys should ever have stuck together. I mean, what was Jesus thinking in choosing this lot? You've got headstrong, impetuous Peter. You've got argumentative and ambitious James and John, ready to call fire down on villages, pushing for seats of prominence. You've got Matthew, a tax-collector, sitting alongside Simon the Zealot, whose paramilitary political party advocated the slitting of tax-collectors throats.

And yet, these guys are in the same room, and so are women – who were considered second-class citizens by the world outside. And it won't be long before Samaritans and gentiles are added to their number.

So, whilst you and I would never have hand-picked this lot, or given them a snowball's chance in hell of turning the world upside down, Jesus' power is made perfect in our weakness, and that should give us rabble great hope. Because in this upper room, Jesus is creating his new community, where mutual hostility and stepping over one another for prominence, are out, and mutual love and and costly grace and forgiveness and forebearance are in. And whilst so much could

have divided them, what has united them is Christ and the gospel. And so hard as it undoubtedly was, and as we go through Acts, we'll see the strains, because Luke doesn't gloss over them, they were together in one place and with one heart.

So, it wasn't 'well I'm going over here with my little clique', or 'I'm going to push my issues, or my vision – regardless of what that does to you'. The foundation of their Spirit empowered mission that turned the world upside down, was a unity in obedience to Jesus, but also a togetherness – a oneness of heart that showed itself in a togetherness in place.

Now, I know there's a danger of preaching to the choir, because of course you're here, but there will always be times when you're tempted to drop out and stop gathering together with the family of the church, whether that's dropping out of home group, or dropping out of coming to church. And when life is hard, and words seem empty, or when everything is pressing in on you and you feel the need for space, or when there are personal hurts caused by others, the temptation comes along to drop out.

And all I would say is, resist that temptation. Now, I'm not trying to make an 11th commandment: 'thou shalt be at every meeting' – like the children's nursery rhyme: Mary had a little lamb, then it became a sheep, it joined a local church, and died, through lack of sleep. And there may be times when it's ok to take a break, but the writer to the Hebrews says, 'don't give up *the habit* of meeting together'. Make coming together in place and in heart your *habit*. You need your brothers and sisters to keep you rooted, but also, they need you. They need your encouragement in home group, your wisdom, your prayers, your spiritual gifts. And if the church is a body, as Paul describes it, and you're a foot, then the church walks with a limp if you're not there.

But before leaving this togetherness, did you notice one particular group that Luke points out who were there from the beginning? Verse 14, 'Mary, the mother of Jesus, *and his brothers*.' And you might think, so what? Wouldn't you expect Jesus' family to be there? Well, no, because these are the same brothers who just a few months earlier had been trying to drag Jesus away from the crowds and take him back home and get him to lie down in a dark room with a cold flannel over his forehead. Because if your older brother goes around claiming to be the Messiah, the son of God, you've got a problem haven't you? I mean, several years ago a certain television presenter in the UK claimed to be the Messiah, and said that the world would shortly end, and of course the ridicule and the shame that brought on his family was huge. People couldn't disown him fast enough. Now, if that's the case in the UK, imagine what it would be like in a society where such claims were met with the threat of execution. And the gospels tell us that Jesus' family was deeply unhappy about what he was doing. Now add to that the shame of crucifixion, which implied in Jewish eyes that the victim was dying cursed by God, and you'd have every reason why his family would be as far away from this gathering as possible. Yet they're here, in the upper room. And that's important especially for those of you who are investigating Christianity. Because something must have happened to move his brothers from outright opposition, to

worshipping him as God, because normally you don't think your big brother is God, do you? You know better than that. And the only thing that could explain that is the resurrection: that they had seen him die and they had seen him alive again. That they were now fully, powerfully, life-changingly persuaded that he was who he said he was.

So, this community prepared for Spirit empowered mission were united in obedience to Jesus, and united together in place and heart.

Thirdly, they were united in prayer. Verse 14, 'all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer.' So, despite the fact that they have Jesus' word that the Spirit is going to come, and that they will receive power when the Spirit comes, they still pray. For them, waiting for God was not the same as doing nothing. Now, why is that? Why not just say, 'guys, we know the Spirit's on his way, so… let's go skiing'? Well, there are two reasons. Firstly, rather than God's promises being a reason *not* to pray, they are *the* reason to pray, they're the grounds *why* we can pray with boldness and confidence, and know we aren't wasting our breath.

But secondly, prayer is not so much about us twisting God's arm and trying to get him in a kind of spiritual armlock so we can get something from him. Waiting, and persevering in prayer is often more about our hearts coming right. About our wills and desires coming into line with his, as he works on our motives and ambitions. I mean just imagine that you're in a conflict with someone. And you bring this situation to God, and you start off praying, 'God would you please sort her out, would you get her to change, 'cos she's doing my head in.' But as you pray, and continue to pray over days, you find a change happening, and you begin to see some of your issues, and as you spend time in Jesus' presence his love and grace to you begins to change you and soften you.

And so I suspect that these disciples in this upper room, they're not praying *begging* God to send the Spirit, but as they pray and worship they're coming before God and their lives and their wills, and their ambitions are coming into line with His: this waiting and this praying is about their heart preparation.

But if we're honest, for many of us, our natural tendency is not to pray isn't it? Either because of our busy-ness, or because we think we're sufficient in ourselves, or because of our lack of faith, we tend not to pray. And yet in 20 out of 28 chapters in Acts, we see God's people praying. It's as if the work of God's Spirit in his church, moving us out into the world on mission, is undergirded by prayer.

So church, let's learn from them. Whether it's as a family at home, with a friend one on one, in your home group, or here on a Sunday. Let's grow in this unity in prayer that God might see the gospel take ground here, amongst us, as he did among them.

But fourthly, they were united under a leadership, leading by the word of God.

Now, it's always difficult for someone in my position to talk about leadership and not sound self-serving. So please just take what I say at face value. But here they are, gathered, united in obedience, united in heart, united in prayer, but it still required someone, Peter, to stand up and take a lead. Verse 15, 'In those days Peter stood up among the brothers.'

Now, if you know Peter's story, you know that the mere fact that he is here, in Jesus' community, having denied Jesus, and that people listen to him and follow him, is a wonderful testimony to the love and grace and restoring power of Jesus. And that should tell everyone of us that there is hope of usefulness despite our failures – that Jesus never leaves you on the scrapheap of life, that he never says of you, 'I give up'. Jesus never gives up on redeeming and restoring you.

But did you notice how Peter led this congregation? He didn't bully them, or impose himself upon them by the sheer weight of his character. He didn't get his teeth done, or quiff his hair (I wish!) – he leads by taking the people to the word of God. They're faced with the aftermath of Judas, and Peter takes them to the Scriptures: verse 16, 'Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke.' That's the first move the leaders of this first church make… and we're going to see them repeat it time and again, 'ok, what does the Bible say.' That's how they're leading.

And notice how this crew who are going to turn the world upside down in the power of the Spirit view the Scriptures: v16 again, 'the Holy Spirit spoke.' They have this incredibly high view of the Bible, 'these are God's words. Let's listen to what God has to say, let's hear the Spirit's voice.'

So I want to say two things there. Number one, when you move on from here and go to another church, choose one where the leaders are leading by the word of God. And when you're reading books, or listening to podcasts, don't go for the ones who just give you a feel good or a self help message, read or listen to teachers who take you to the word of God. Number two, you are surrounded every day by multiple voices that mold and shape how you think: the voice of friends, the voice of media, the voice of the surrounding culture. The voices you listen to will determine how you think and see the world, how you see money and sex and life and issues. So let the pre-eminent, and pre-dominant voice in your life be the voice of God, through his word.

But even as Peter led, everyone else stayed engaged, didn't they. Peter takes them to the word of God, but it seems as if the two suggestions as to who could replace Judas comes from the people, the church. So they weren't being rolled over by the leaders, they didn't put Peter on a pedestal, their attitude wasn't 'we'll do whatever you say Pastor Peter'; rather they reflected on God's word and got engaged.

You see, they knew, and Peter knew, that their ultimate leader was Jesus, and they all bore a responsibility to bring this issue to him in prayer. And Jesus had chosen the original 12, and so they hand the final decision as to Judas's replacement over to him, v24, 'And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know

the hearts of all, show which of these two you have chosen." You're the heart-knower Jesus, you're the one who knows stuff we can never know, we put this in your hands.

So, they were united in obedience, in heart and place, in prayer and under word-centred leadership. But there are two further foundations that are here that set the stage for the Spirit empowered mission that's going to come, and we'll deal with these briefly: the unstoppable word of God and the unwavering purpose of the Spirit.

The Unstoppable Word of God

Now whichever way you look at it, betrayal is awful, isn't it? I mean you expect your enemies to stab you in the front but when your friend, or someone you trust stabs you in the back, it's terrible. When a friend, or worse a spouse, turns on you, or leaves you, or speaks ill of you, or when a colleague you trust tries to bring you down, maybe even succeeds, the pain can be terrible, and it can leave you reeling: 'God where are you in this, how could you let this happen?' And then there's the danger of bitterness taking root, and your heart can become hardened both to God and to others, as you struggle to trust others in the future, and you put an emotional guard up, you build a wall around your heart, because you don't want to be hurt like that again.

And Judas' betrayal could have destroyed this whole thing before it had even started. You can feel some of the disciples' pain as Peter says, v17, 'For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.' 'Guys, he was one of us.'

But do you see what Peter says, and does? He takes people to the word of God, and he says, 'guys, God has this covered. He is not sat in heaven saying, 'man how did that happen? How come Judas went rogue? We need to play catch up quickly, we need to implement our damage control plan.' No. Peter takes them, and us to the word of God, and says that God is in absolute sovereign control: v16, 'The Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand.' God has not been caught off guard, rather it's the opposite, even this betrayal, even this most terrible of crimes, to betray the Son of God, is part of God's unstoppable sovereign plan to see the gospel of his love and grace spread. You see, Jesus was betrayed so that you might never need to know what ultimate abandonment feels like. He knew the sting and the wound of betrayal so that you might know the embrace of his faithful, steadfast, never-ending love. He was handed over to death by a friend, so that you might know Jesus as a friend who sticks closer than a brother, for life.

And when you go through times of betrayal, or you feel under assault by others or by circumstances, you can know that God your heavenly father has it covered. Nothing takes him by surprise, he is never caught off guard, he is the one in total control, and he is working all this out, including what others mean for your harm, for your good.

But the third and final foundation we see here for Spirit empowered misson is the

Unwavering Purpose of the Spirit:

You see Peter takes this congregation, this community, to the word of God and specifically to these two quotes from Psalm 69 and 109. And the first quote says what would happen to Judas – v20, 'May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it.' But the second one says what their response should be, 'Let another take his office.' And Peter says, 'the Holy Spirit says that: Let another take his office. The Spirit wants Judas' space in the 12 filled.' But what was Judas' office, what had he been chosen to do? Well, when Peter sets out the essential criteria in the job description for Judas' replacement he says the man they choose has got to have been in the group of wider followers of Jesus from the beginning, from John's baptism until the ascension. But then listen to what he says, v22, 'one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.'

So, the unwavering purpose of the Holy Spirit, why he's leading and guiding them to replace Judas, is to glorify Jesus. To magnify Jesus. To put someone in place to witness to his life, his teaching, his example, his death and his resurrection, to let Jesus take centre-stage is the great unswerving purpose of the Spirit, and nothing derails it. Not Judas, not anything.

And you and I are invited to join that purpose, and to live for that mission, not in our own strength, but in the strength and the power of the Spirit, that God gives. So, let's live for that purpose.