Loving, Learning, Living
Acts 2:37-47

We began this series in Acts by asking the question 'how did the one solitary life of Jesus of Nazareth come to have the kind of impact on the world that it has?' How did Christianity grow, within 30 years, from the seeming defeat of the cross of Jesus and 11 dejected disciples to having seeded itself across the Roman Empire and within 300 years to have become the dominant religion of the empire with the emperor himself confessing the faith? And how did this Christian faith have the profound impact on society – on the care of the newborn and the unborn, and the sick and the poor, on education and basic human rights that it has had? And of course, Acts tells us, or at least tells us the beginning of that story.

You see, just imagine throwing a pebble in a pond, and watching those concentric rings, or ripples spreading outwards. And the spread of the gospel, and all the societal changes for good that followed, like the formation of hospitals and hospices, and universities, and basic human rights, and the dignity of the person, those are all the outer ripples. But it's what happens here in Jerusalem, at the start, that is the pebble thrown in the pond. This is where it all starts. This is what starts the waves of change rolling. And this passage that we've just read shows what happens when a group of people are filled with the Spirit and get gripped by, and have their world turned upside down by the gospel – the good news of all that God has done for us in Jesus. And it's the beginnings of this movement that is going to have this profound impact. And it affects how you love, and learn and live.

So firstly it affects how you love.

How You Love
Now, by love I don't mean romantic love. I don't mean walking along the lake-front, holding hands, as the sun sets, staring into one another's eyes, feeling all gooey. Great as that is. And I don't even mean, principally, the kind of life-laying down love we are all called to as Christians – though that is part of it. I mean that single-minded devotion that captures your heart.

Look at v42: 'And they *devoted themselves* to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' So the first comment that Luke passes on this new community of 3000+ new converts that he describes for us here, is their devotion.

Now think about that word *devotion*: they *devoted* themselves to something, to somethings plural. What does it mean when you devote yourself? You're reading the newspaper, and there's an obituary and it says that Mr so and so who died recently was a devoted husband and father. Now, assuming the writer isn't simply putting a nice spin on the man's life, what does it tell you about him? It means that his wife and family meant everything to him. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for them. He loved them in a giving-himself-up-for-them kind of way.

And that's what devotion means. It means to give yourself up and away for something, someone, some cause. This thing or this person has reached such a

place in your heart and affections that it's captured your heart. It gets your (almost) undivided attention. All its competitors come second in your order of priorities. It's this that absorbs your time and your thinking and your resources. This is what you pur your life into. What you're devoted to is what you love.

So, it's interesting what Luke tells us this brand new Christian community devoted themselves to, what it was that captured their hearts in a way that profoundly affected how they spent their time and resources – and it was the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. And later on in v46-7 he says, 'they received their food with glad and generous hearts, *praising God*.'

So Peter and the others have been telling them all that God has done for them in Jesus – which is the gospel – and the Holy Spirit has powerfully applied that to their hearts, and it has done something fascinating in their hearts. In response they are giving themselves away – their time, their resources – in love towards God – they're meeting to pray and worship and hear about Jesus – and in spending time with and practically loving and caring for others – which we'll look at in more detail in a minute. So it's turned them from the kind of self-preoccupation and inward looking that we all struggle with, outside of themselves so that now their love and attention and focus is not on themselves but on God and the people around them.

Now why is that? Why has Peter telling them about Jesus in this sermon, and no doubt others that followed, had this giving-yourself-away kind of effect, an effect that is going to conquer an empire and end up spreading around the globe caring for the sick and the poor and building hospitals and universities as it goes?

Well, the answer is that when it dawns on you, as it did on them, that Christ has given himself up for you – that he loves you so much that he gave himself away – devoted his life – for you; that he set his affections upon you, even though you don't deserve it; then it does something incredible in your heart, and it draws you out of yourself and pre-occupation with self, and out into loving thanks and worship of God and care for others.

So when the Holy Spirit fills you and applies the gospel to your heart, it seriously affects how and what you love.

But secondly the gospel profoundly affects how you learn.

How You Learn

Now, maybe one of the hallmarks of our modern western culture is resentment of authority and authority figures. And deference is out and disdain is in. And very few of us like to be told what to do or how to think. So we chaffe against authority. And yet – none of us likes a know-all, do we? And you've probably met them – the kind of person who thinks they know it all, who can't see an opinion other than their own, who thinks if you don't agree with them you can't have heard them, so they say it again, only louder. No one appreciates the person who lacks the humility to be teachable.

In fact the book of Proverbs tells us that one of the essential criteria of wisdom – of the wise person, the kind of person who can navigate their way through life with all its complexities, is to listen to advice and accept instruction.

So, for all our modern and post-modern dislike of authority, the wise person – and who here doesn't want to be wise? - knows *one* thing and that is that they don't know *everything*, they don't know it all, and so we're going to have the humility to look for instruction and guidance in life from somewhere. But the question is, where? Where is that source of authority that is going to teach you and lead you and guide you going to be? Where are you going to look to for that? And there are multiple sources aren't there: your family and the traditions you've grown up in – this is the way we've always done it, stay like us. Your friends and peer group – this is how *we're* doing it, be like us. Or the media and the surrounding culture, the modern day authority figures – you need to conform, become like us.

And it's in this context of trying to find your way in life that the prophet Jeremiah recorded the Lord as saying, "Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls." (Jer 6:16).

So, it's in that understanding that there is guidance and instruction that leads you in the good way, that results in rest for you soul, that Luke says of these brand new Christians, that they devoted themselves to 'the apostles' teaching.' (Acts 2:42). They gave themselves to learning about Jesus, at the feet of the men who knew Jesus best, who could pass on the stuff he had taught them, who had shown them how all the Old Testament scriptures pointed to him.

And it's this teaching about Jesus, and learning about him, which Luke tells us was vindicated by the apostles doing many wonders and signs, that was the foundation for this incredible movement that turned the world upside down.

So it wasn't all mystical. The Spirit falls upon them, applies the gospel to their hearts, and they don't just sit around having nice experiences holding hands and singing kumbaya – they give themselves to learning about Jesus. And of course, for us, we've also got the apostles teaching here in this book, it's called the New Testament, and so just as for them, the foundation of a community that wants to see real, needed transformation in community and society begins with 'let's talk about Jesus.'

But if it wasn't all mystical, it certainly wasn't all dull either was it. I mean this little passage is just brimming over with life isn't it? Dull it was not. Their hearts are full of gladness and they give themselves to praise and worship and prayer. So it certainly wasn't dull.

But neither was it a free-for-all. They devoted themselves to the *apostles'* teaching, not to Mrs. Joint, the butcher's wife's teaching, or Mr. Dough the baker's teaching – there was this authority – 'if we're going to learn let it be the truth of what Jesus actually said and did'.

But it also wasn't a free for all in the sense that they were learning *in community.* Because if the gospel profoundly affects how you love and how you learn, it's not surprising it's also going to affect how you live.

How You Live

And I want you to see three things about the way the gospel impacted the way they lived. Firstly, they shared this deep, rich, vibrant community life; secondly that community life led them to care for one another in very practical ways; and thirdly, that community life, far from ending in a closed, inward looking community, reached out to those outside the community around them.

So let's look first at this deep, rich, vibrant community they had going there. Look how Luke describes it – and the multiple times he mentions it in just a few verses. V42: 'they devoted themselves to… the *fellowship*' to the sharing of life together. V44, 'And all who believed were *together* and had all things in *common*.' V46, 'And day by day, attending the temple *together* and breaking bread *in their homes*.'

So there were these big events – where all 3000+ of them would go to the temple and worship together, a sort of mega church version of what we do together on a Sunday, and there was stuff going on in their homes – like what we do in our home groups, and they'd share meals together and take communion together, and learn together and pray for one another. But whether in the large gathering or in their homes, there was this sharing of life together.

Which is interesting, because it essentially runs counter to the spirit of our age which is all about you, the individual. And it's about self-fulfillment, or self-actualisation and the idea is that we should be king or queen of our own island. But of course the problem with that kind of thinking is that it leaves you with this aching void of loneliness on the inside, as you long for some kind of community of friendship, where you know and are known and are still loved.

Mark and I are reading a book together and the author, who's a pastor, tells as story of how he would go to an old people's home and take a mini service. And at the end of the first time he went, after he'd sang a few songs on the piano and read from the bible and explained it, one elderly lady came up and thanked him. And in response he simply took her by the shoulders, gave her a little hug and a gentle kiss on the cheek, and off he and they all went. But the following week, as he concluded the service and the same elderly lady came up for her hug and kiss, he was amazed to see all the other old people in the room form a queue, so they could all be hugged and kissed and have their hand shaken. They were longing to be seen and noticed and loved and touched again.

And the gospel, what Jesus has done and is doing for us, creates that kind of community, firstly because God as Father and Son and Holy Spirit is the original community and, made in his image, it is no wonder we long for community, but also because Jesus came as our friend, to share his life, and live his life among us,

and give his life out for us. And when that captures our hearts, we'll want to do some sharing of our lives – seeing, and noticing and loving others in response.

So for these guys, the idea of a solitary Christian who didn't share life with others would have been a puzzle, wouldn't it? I mean they wouldn't have had a category for that. Later on the apostles will describe Christians as being like members of a body, or members of a family, but never as a solitary island. And if in an accident a part of your body, your hand or your foot, were to get severed from the rest of your body, it's an emergency isn't it? People do emergency surgery, get it reconnected to the body – why? Before it dies! And the Christian who isn't connected to the body, in the big events – going to the temple, sharing life in small group community, will shrivel up and whither. Just as a child without a family is an orphan.

So the Christian life – if it's being shaped by the gospel – of what Jesus has done – is all about belonging. Yes God loves you, as an individual, with this undying love, so he answers your need for inner significance - but he also puts you in a community – which answers your loneliness. In fact he takes you out of one community – as Peter wraps up his sermon, in v40, 'save yourselves from this crooked generation' - and places you in his new community, the church. That's what salvation is – having a community transplant.

So, if you haven't guessed it already, I'm going to give a plug for home groups. Can you see it here, in this passage: they're sharing life in the temple but also in their homes: the apostles teaching, - studying the bible, fellowship, breaking bread, sharing meals, praying for one another, in their homes. And there's no better time to get engaged with a home group than now, because starting in March we're starting a new series in all the groups on Paul's letter to the Colossians –which tells us some great things about Jesus and then applies it to our lives. So if you're not in a group – can I encourage you to join one? And if you've sort of let going to group slip – get reconnected.

But secondly this deep, rich, vibrant community life led them to care very practically for one another. Listen to what Luke says in v45: 'And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.'

Now, how different is that from the society that was going on around them, and even around us today. Because, as the saying goes, it's a dog eat dog world. And if certain ideologies were to have their way, as they have at times, it is survival of the fittest, and the strong thrive and the weak and poor are left in the gutter and babies are exposed on the hillsides or killed in the womb. And that's life. But not in this community. You see, the extraordinary thing is that whereas wealth and possessions can make you immune from the suffering around you, these guys were swimming in a river that was flowing in another direction.

And within a few years even their persecutors in the Roman authorities will be saying, 'see how they love one another!' And even as they put them to death they

will be acknowledging that they take better care of the Roman poor than the Romans do themselves.

So, where does this kind of giving yourself up for those who can't give anything back to you come from? Well think about what's going on as they gather together in their home groups. Luke tells us they're breaking bread together. Now on one level that means they're simply sharing meals together. But that phrase 'breaking bread' means something doesn't it. This is my body broken for you, this is my blood, shed for you. And when Jesus forms the centre of your community, when learning about him and him giving himself up for you, because he loves you, and him becoming poor for you that you might become rich, even though you don't deserve it and can never earn it, when him lavishing the riches of his love and grace and mercy upon you when you deserve anything but, when that is the foundation of your life together, you're going to care and love and serve those around you, even when it costs you, because he's done it for you.

But the third and last thing to notice about how the gospel affects how you live is that this didn't end in an inward looking, self-absorbed community, but one that was reaching out to and welcoming in those around them.

V47: 'And the Lord [that's Jesus] added to their number day by day those who were being saved.' So, these guys didn't spend so much time in Bible study, and fellowship and worship that they forgot to witness and reach out to the world around them. Rather this whole loving and learning and living in the power of the Spirit and the good news of Jesus became like a lighthouse in the city. And as the Spirit, through the gospel, built this strong centre, it just kept overflowing and spreading outwards, because there just is something contagious about vibrant Christianity. And here 3000 have just been added, and by Acts 4 (v4) they're up to 5000 men – which means they're probably at least 10,000 if you include the women and children; by Acts 5 (v14) Luke says the Lord is adding multitudes of men and women – and he uses the word multitude because most likely they've lost count.

And this was going on daily, and it's Jesus who was doing it: through the apostles teaching, through the miracles, through their love for one another, through their witness. This was the every day life of the church – more being added.

Let's pray that God in his mercy would do the same in our day. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our little problem about venue size became a major headache of venue size. Later on in Acts, the apostles are going to get accused of having filled Jerusalem with their teaching about Jesus. Wouldn't that be a wonderful accusation to be made against us – that through our loving and learning and living we, and all the other churches in this city, fill it, by word and deed, with the good news of God's love in Jesus.