



Sermon preached by Revd John Proctor on 19th April 2026

Readings: Luke 24:13-17 and 27-32; Acts 2:14a and 36-41

Easter III

Acts 2:36-41

Lord, will you open your word to our hearts and our hearts to your word.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We read today from the Acts of the Apostles, which isn't very common for us. The church's calendar usually gives you a standard Sunday dose of Old Testament, epistle and gospel. Acts is Cinderella, never invited.

But today Cinderella is at the ball. Indeed Acts is listed for reading in church every Sunday from Easter to Whitsun: today, that is, and a few weeks either side; eight Sundays in all. We follow that pattern every year, and hardly ever turn to Acts (in Sunday worship) at any other time.

Why value Acts – in the Bible, and now, and here?

I want to look today at Acts, and ask, 'Why is it here?' Why is it in the Bible: what does it contribute to God's ancient story, about the coming of the life of Jesus into the world? Why is it here in the calendar: what does it give at this season of the church's year? And why is it here in Downing Place: what might it offer to this particular congregation at this juncture in the life of our fellowship?

I think of Acts as a bridge. Most obviously when you start reading, it seems to be a second volume of Luke's Gospel. It addresses the same person, one Theophilus, and refers back to an earlier piece of writing. If Luke's Gospel gets you from roughly the year one to AD30, then Acts continues the story from about 30 to 60. The life of Jesus unfolding over thirty years or so, and then another thirty years of people who were shaped and inspired by that life.

A bridge across the New Testament

Which makes Acts a kind of linking point for much of the New Testament. At its start it joins onto the record of the gospels. And by the time we get to the end, thirty years later, local churches are starting to emerge, to worship and to witness across an international landscape of a thousand miles and more. Many of these are churches to which letters were written, letters that appear in the second half of the New Testament. So Acts provides a framework, some sort of back story to many of these letters, a sense of how the collection of writings we call the New Testament might fit together. It helps us to see more integrity and connection among the books of the New Testament than we would see without it.

A bridge across the world

A thousand-mile landscape. Acts is also a bridge across that landscape. It begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome. Acts traces the Christian good news from the Jewish capital (as it was) in Jerusalem to the imperial capital (as it was) in Rome. Along the way we watch the Jesus movement and its message developing from being national, a part of Jewish life, to international. Now the message can be heard 'openly and unhindered' (Acts 28:31) at the place to which all roads lead and out from which all roads spread. Here is a word for the world, a people who can find a home in any corner of earth, a faith with flexibility to adapt and address different contexts and cultures. Acts shows that process evolving.

A bridge across history

Which means that Acts is a bridge from the life of Jesus – one specific life – to the life of the church, as a fellowship that has started to find its feet across and around the world; a church that has been taking the good news to fresh places; a church that has begun to develop patterns of worship, prayer, pastoral care, and leadership; a church that has started to find ways of connecting people who have different roots, backgrounds and cultural habits; and a church that is learning resilience when neighbours dislike what they do and stand for. Acts gets you from the story of the Lord we trust, to the first episodes of the story of us, as the Christian family in the world.

A year in church worship

That's the reason Acts is in the lectionary – the church's calendar of readings – at this time of year. Our church year runs from Advent, near the start of December, round to November of the next year. We use the first four or five months of our church year to tell the story of Jesus – birth and baptism, travel and teaching, Lent and suffering, cross and resurrection. The major landmarks are about Jesus – Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter. Then for five or six months ahead, from roughly June to November, the idea is that we think more about our response to Jesus – how we follow his teaching, reflect his values, embody his life, share his love. Some major church landmarks in that June to November period reflect on human response, the joys and sorrows of what people do in God's world – Harvest, All Saints, Remembrance.

Middle of the church year

If that's what we're doing – a bit less than half a year telling of Jesus, and a bit less than half a year thinking about our response, then the slice of the year between Easter and Whitsun is a kind of hinge in the middle. It gets you from one phase to the other, from resurrection as the climax of the story of Jesus forward to the life of the church.

Acts in church worship – Easter

So when we read Acts in worship in these weeks, it starts by telling of the impact of Easter. Easter gives the church something to *say*. Last Sunday's message was about testimony to the risen Jesus. This week's reading is about Easter giving the church something to *do*. It calls for response, for commitment. Turn to Jesus. And next week Easter gives the church something to *be* – a people united in fellowship and mutual support. Together in Jesus. Easter has an impact. Because the Lord is risen, the church has a message; people are called to commitment; and those who make that response find a remarkable depth of belonging.

Acts in church worship – new confidence ...

Then the Acts readings in the couple of weeks ahead will start to look wider, to look at how vision, outreach and an international identity started to take shape.

Ascension and Pentecost

And the final couple of weeks of this season will look at the motive power for that outward movement. They go back to the start of Acts, chapters one and two, to talk about the two major festivals of Ascension and Pentecost.

Acts in church worship – three headlines

To set it out compactly – the impact of Easter, a wider vision, and motive power. Those are themes Acts puts before us in these weeks. It's the same every year. What, then, of this year? What's the value of this material in Downing Place right now?

Acts in Downing Place – question

As I read our church life, we're feeling in a bit of a quandary, a people perplexed. We'd like to get sorted and settled with a minister, preferably someone with all the talents Nigel had; and if there are any talents Nigel didn't have, we'd like those as well. But we haven't yet much of a clue about what it might feel like, for us or anyone else, to connect with three other churches. And we know we can't properly solve either of those issues – ministry or partnership – without solving both of them. Then there's the deeper, longer-term, issue of our purpose and calling: what are we here for; what can we realistically hope to achieve in these years – through our building, our fellowship, our gifts, our commitment? In that context what does Acts offer, for now or for the future?

Acts in Downing Place – Easter

A couple of things strike me. The first is this stuff about the impact of Easter. A message, a reason for commitment, the basis of our life together. We too are a people marked by Easter. Even the fact that we gather on Sundays labels us a resurrection people. 'The Lord is risen, he is risen indeed,' is a word for Easter morning. But it may also and always be the chorus of our heart, the mainstay of our mind, the delight of our spirits, through all life's changing scenes. This is good news that we carry within us and celebrate every time we gather. We are stewards of Easter. It's our greatest asset, as a congregation, and it isn't going to go away. It gives us something to say, a commitment to pursue, a reason for belonging. That is surely a source of steadiness and confidence as we try to discover and shape the future.

Acts in Downing Place – wide vision

Then there's the theme of a growing and wider vision. It didn't come naturally to Christians of the first generation. God had to help them, prompt them, encourage them, stir them, and lift them over one or two obstacles. I suspect that people who are seasoned in church life – certainly I include myself – are not always good at new vision. The more used we are to the way things have been, the harder it can be to recognize how they might move on. But God is good at looking more widely, more imaginatively than we are. God has a fuller vision, a clearer sense of what we might be, how we might grow, where we might contribute, what we might become. Perplexity is allowed; there's a fair amount of it in Acts. But we're not on our own. Alongside the perplexity, we walk with a God of possibility and purpose. We can be hopeful. We don't need to be afraid.

The impact of Easter – part of who we are. The thought of an enlarging vision – part of what God might want to offer us. We've not even got to the bit about motive power, about Ascension and Pentecost releasing the strength and majesty of heaven on earth. But those two festivals are still a few weeks ahead, and perhaps we shall want to reflect on those themes then.

John Proctor