

**SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY JULY 30, 2017 BY THE REVEREND HELEN  
GIBSON-WHITE**

**SIXTH SERMON IN SERIES ON HOLY COMMUNION**

**THE NEW TESTAMENT READINGS**

This is the sixth sermon in our series as we work our way through the service of Holy Communion. We are going to look at the writings of the New Testament, apart from the Gospels – which are next week’s sermon topic.

The New Testament book titled “The Acts Of The Apostles” – sometimes called “the gospel of the Holy Spirit” – provides a bridge for the writings of the New Testament. It is generally accepted that Luke wrote “Acts” as his second volume after the gospel that bears his name. It is a bridge that joins what Jesus “began to do and to teach” (i.e., the gospel) with what he continued to do and preach through the apostles’ teaching and the establishment of the church. “Acts” supplies the account of Paul’s life, from which we learn the settings for his letters. It presents the first thirty years or so of the church and is a bridge that ties in the church’s beginning with the church in each succeeding age.

To study “Acts” is to understand the principles that should govern the church in every age. The theme of this book is found in Jesus’ words, “You will be my witnesses ...” (Acts 1:8). Without “Acts” we would have little information about the early church, apart from what we could gather from Paul’s letters. In it we see the exploits of the figures of the early church, and the expansion of Christianity from its beginnings in a little corner of Palestine, and that in not much more than thirty years it had spread to Rome.

How do we account for this growth?

I was reading about Mother Teresa of Calcutta. The article told of the extraordinary growth of her work ... how the religious order she founded had grown from a membership of one to some three thousand sisters and four hundred brothers, all at a time when most religious orders were declining, and how there are branches of her work in many countries. The most captivating part of the article, for me, was the description of the impression she made when she visited a soup kitchen in London. Over a hundred tattered men and women were seated at long trestle tables waiting for some food. Her sudden appearance in the doorway was as if someone had switched on a light. There she was – elderly, bent wrinkled and obviously very tired. A tiny lady, only five feet tall.

How was this extraordinary woman to be accounted for? No answer will do except to say that she believed in God, had complete faith in him and lived so close to him that his love shone out of her, motivating her whole being. What is more, in and through her, thousands of people have been blessed.

How do we account for this growth both in “Acts” and in Mother Teresa?

God chooses people who, in spite of their faults and failings believe in him implicitly, trust him with their lives past, present and future, and the outcome can be extraordinary. When we look at the disciples and how it all began with the calling of the fishermen beside the lake, we see the truth of the saying that “God does not call the empowered, but empowers the called.” Such was the case with the apostles as they began the task Jesus had given them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judaea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

This was to be done in the power of the Holy Spirit, not in their own strength. The prime importance of the Holy Spirit is a distinctive note of the entire New Testament period. The disciples knew that the church was not a human society teaching a philosophy of life, but the sphere in which God was at work – God in action by his Holy Spirit.

The centre of their preaching was the resurrection of Christ. Peter preached “Let all Israel be assured of this: - God has made him Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:36). If it was not for that ...Christ risen and live ... we would not be here today, there would be no church. “If Christ is not risen, your faith is in vain.” (I Corinthians 15)

The rest of the New Testament consists mostly of letters written to churches or church officials and are directed to a particular concern or concerns, or to a concrete situation in the life of an individual Christian community. These letters shed light on becoming a church member by baptism, how they worshipped, how the church was organized and how the believers lived together – too much to talk about in this sermon.

The Book of Revelation was written when Christians were being persecuted most horribly, and emperor-worship was being enforced. The author – the apostle John – writes to encourage the faithful to resist, because some within the church were trying to compromise – and that had to be corrected before its influence spread, undermining the believers’ faith.

The Epistle To The Hebrews whose author is not known, gives a wonderful picture of Christ. He is God’s full and final revelation of himself, far surpassing the revelations given in the Old Testament. The prophecies and promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New Testament. Christ is shown to be superior to the prophets, to angels, to Moses (who was he mediator of the former covenant), to Aaron and the priestly succession demanded from him. The Epistle to the Hebrews could be called “The book of better things,” and chapter eleven is the great chapter about faith. Faith is “being sure for what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” And then the lost of heroes of faith is traced right back to Abraham. St Augustine said, “Faith is to believe what you do not see: the reward of this faith is to see what you believe.”

As the year passes and we read through these readings from the New Testament, what do they say to us, the church, today?

They say that God is still at work in the Holy Spirit, as in the early church, but we need to be attentive to, and to be aware of, his presence. Where do we see evidence of God at work? We can look back over our own lives and see where God has acted and led us, paths along the way which we may not have recognised as God's leading, but which, with hindsight, we now can see. In seeing these, our faith has grown and in sharing these experiences we can help others' faith to grow.

I like this definition of evangelism – “See what God is doing and join in.”

If Paul or Peter or the other New Testament writers were to write to today's church, I wonder what they would say. I'm sure they would well understand from their own experience the sufferings of the church at present under persecution, and they would give every encouragement and spiritual strength.

To those churches that are not being persecuted, who take for granted the privilege and being free to gather together, and to those churches that have their own issues (some big, some really of no great importance), what would they say? I believe they would tell us to remember that “We are the Body of Christ; his Spirit is with us,” as we say at every Holy Communion service. To remember, also, that Christ is the head of the body - - - so that in everything he might have the supremacy, and that he is the one on whom the life of the church is dependent. (1 Corinthians 12:27. Ephesians 1:22). Live and work, conscious of God's leadership. Then, as someone has said, “Christ will give us the power to do what he wants us to do, by the grace that he supplies.”