



Pentecost 2024

*'Was not the Church we love commissioned from above?'*

*Fred Pratt Green, 'Let every Christian pray' (Singing the Faith 388)*

Dear friends,

What's in a title? Luke's second book after his gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, always takes a prominent place on Pentecost Sunday. Yet the book title, Acts of the Apostles, is not known before the end of the second century when it was first used by Irenaeus. It could equally be called, 'the Acts of the Holy Spirit', or even – my particular favourite, 'the Praxis' (meaning deeds or acts), 'of the Holy Spirit'.

The title we choose tells us something about what we emphasise or de-emphasise in our understanding of Church. Calling the book '...of the Apostles' emphasises the human dimensions of the story. It is about what human witnesses do in response to the commission of Jesus as he prophesied that his followers would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This is of course true. The apostles were human, 'Their acts were their own acts. They were not mere will-less instruments in the hands of another,' (Roland Allen). Church is then, in part, constituted by human actions, by our witness. The danger though is obvious. Church can very quickly become all about 'us' or 'me', about our actions, our strategies, our plans for the future. This way of thinking can also become debilitating, perhaps even paralysing. Church can come to be nothing more than an expression of human agency and power, a human instrument like any other, an exposure also of our failures and limitations. It is simply one more competitor for truth in a world of competition.

A quick review of Acts 1:8 though reminds us that the ordering is important. Before it is ever the praxis or acts of apostles, it is the praxis or acts of the Holy Spirit. Our witness is only possible because another Advocate, the Holy Spirit is given to us. That is where our power comes from – we should note here that 'power' needs to be interpreted in terms of power to be Jesus witnesses, following him in the pattern of his ministry – and that is what gives our agency its direction and life. This view turns on its head some ways of thinking about Church. It is not our plans or strategies that will make a difference. It is waiting upon the Spirit, praying and discerning God's lead, listening for and seeing what God is doing and

joining in: any planning and strategy follows the act of waiting, listening, seeing and discerning. The orientation is important. In the Acts of the Apostles, it is the guidance, direction and government of the Holy Spirit which is constantly recalled (Roland Allen).

As we approach the celebration of Pentecost and the season that follows, I wonder if there is something we need to learn here. Is there something that we need to relearn or recall? Tom Stuckey in his year as President of Conference in 2005 often spoke about the Church living on the edge of Pentecost. Living on the edge of Pentecost emphasises the spiritual rather than the institutional reality of being Church. Is this something we need to recapture as we prepare for the future?

*Holy Spirit, Christ proclaimer,*

*wisdom bringer, light our way.*

*Fire that dances, wind that whispers,*

*Holy Spirit, come today.*

*Ease disturber, comfort bearer,*

*move among us while we pray.*

*Truth revealer, faith confirmer,*

*rest within our hearts today.*

*(Singing the Faith 383)*

Come, Holy Spirit!

Revd Richard Andrew

District Chair