

Acts of the Apostles

One of the aims of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is to describe how the Good News travels from the Jews to the Gentiles as Jesus' witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8)

A favourite quote

"And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38)

The Acts of the Apostles

Luke's first volume, his Gospel, brought the reader to the climactic point of the Resurrection and the first story of the proclamation of the Good News of the Risen Christ to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The second volume shows the Good News spreading to the ends of the earth, that is, in Jewish parlance of the time, to Rome (Acts 1:8; 18:14). All the criteria of style, vocabulary, literary structure and theology leave no doubt that this work is a second volume authored by the same mind and pen as the Gospel of Luke.

One of the features of Acts is the strength of community among the early Christians: they "remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42) and "they all lived together and owned everything in common... and they shared their food gladly" (Acts 2:44-46).

A huge theme that runs through Acts is the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Luke writes about Peter's address in the house of Cornelius, when he tells them that he had come to realise that "God does not have favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). Later on, while Peter was still speaking, "the Holy Spirit came down on all the listeners. Jewish believers . . . and pagans too" (Acts 10:44-45) and Peter gave orders for the pagans to be baptised (Acts 10:48).

Acts is known for the long speeches given by various people along the way. A good example is Peter's speech explaining the significance of the events of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36), and Stephen's speech marking the turning point of the Christian mission away from Jerusalem (Acts 7:1-53). Paul also gives two great speeches: one in the synagogue at Antioch, an example of Christian preaching to the Jews (Acts 13:17-41) and the other before the Areopagus of Athens, an example of Christian preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 17:22-31).

Luke does not paint over difficulties in the church to portray a rosy picture of a perfect church. The early church was not without its problems. Church members lied to one another, there were ethnic/racial tensions between Jews and Gentiles, the most notable missionary team (Paul and Barnabas) disbanded over a disagreement

Suggested Reading

Chapter 1 (including verse 8) on the promise of the Holy Spirit and the chapters about the Council of Jerusalem (Ch 13 onwards).

Who wrote this book?

The opening few verses of Acts (1:1-2) indicate that this book is the second book to an earlier one. It is probably that the same author wrote Acts as the one who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Traditionally, it was believed that Luke was a physician and companion of Paul (mentioned in Philemon 1:24, Colossians 4:14 and 2 Timothy 4:11). There is much discussion about whether Luke was a Gentile or not. He certainly knew and was able to quote from the Jewish scriptures. We can tell from his writings that he was a keen historian and laid out both the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles in a style reminiscent of historical accounts of his day.

Liturgical notes

Acts provides the first reading on Sundays of Eastertide, drawn from the early chapters, and presenting a portrait of the ideal Christian community of Jerusalem, united in prayer, the teaching of the apostles and the breaking of bread. It is read at Mass semi-continuously during Eastertide on Weekdays (Year II) again to provide a portrait of the ideal post-Resurrectional community.

How is it structured?

I	the Church in Jerusalem	1:12-52
II	the earliest missions	6-12
III	the mission of Barnabas and Paul and the Council of Jerusalem	13:1-15:35
IV	Paul's missions	15:36-19:20
V	the end of Paul's missionary journeys, a prisoner for Christ	19:21-28:32

God speaks to us

The Church, even in Acts, is not perfect. Yet, through Luke, perhaps God is telling us that the Church's purpose does not change: to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth.