



St Mark's Review

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No. 223, February 2013 (1)

Promise and Fulfilment

Preaching the Prophets and Luke's story of Jesus

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Editorial	v
Preaching from the Minor Prophets <i>Jeanette Mathews</i>	1
Performing Habakkuk <i>Jeanette Mathews</i>	13
Preaching Luke's Jesus <i>Geoff Broughton</i>	17
Lukan Lenten study guide Towards a healing ministry <i>Tom Frame</i>	25
Sample Study Guide Lukan Lenten study guide: towards a healing ministry – week one	31
Preaching conversion in Acts <i>Russell Warnken</i>	42
The Spirit of promise Preaching from Acts <i>David Neville</i>	51
Preaching on Luke–Acts <i>Simon Smart</i>	67
Preaching Luke 15 in different contexts <i>Geoff Broughton</i>	73
'We are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, so be reconciled' (2 Corinthians 5:20) <i>Rebecca Newland</i>	80
Open arms (Luke 15:11–32) <i>Sallyanne Hart</i>	85

Talk for the funeral of Tyler Piper from Luke 15	92
<i>Andrew Taylor</i>	
Does theology have a place in pastoral ministry?	95
<i>Rebecca Newland</i>	
Book Reviews	101
A journey into another faith	101
Debating homosexuality and the church	104
Salvation: is it child's play?	105
Good, but not catholic enough	109
Controversy and conciliation	111
Luke, the trinitarian theologian	114
An invitation to think	116
Letter to the Editor	119

Editorial

‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’

According to Matthew’s Gospel, this is the essence of John the Baptist’s opening proclamation (Matthew 3:2). Mark’s and Luke’s Gospels bear this out: ‘And so John came, ... preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ (Mark 1:4). Matthew and Luke record another essential element of the Baptist’s message: ‘Produce fruit in keeping with repentance’ (Luke 3:8).

‘Repent, and then produce fruit in keeping with that repentance!’ Whether they had come out from metropolitan Jerusalem or were from rural Judea, those who went to see and hear John the Baptist should have understood fully his firm injunction to produce fruit. They knew about growing fruit on the vine, good crops and poor returns, vine-dressing, harvesting and the ever-present risks posed by the climate and by predatory animals and voracious birds.

John’s first listeners also knew about the depiction of Israel as God’s vineyard (Isaiah 5:1–7, Psalm 80). They knew about the failure of their own forebears to produce the fruit required by their God in response to his demonstrations of divine mercy and heavenly generosity.

Jesus, in his metaphors as well as in his parables, drew heavily on the imagery of the vine, of vineyards and of people working at different times of the year in the vineyards. He even made a direct link with John’s preaching in the so-called ‘Parable of the Two Sons,’ those who were directed by their father to go and work in the vineyard (Matthew 21:28–32). ‘For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness,’ he said, referring to John’s injunctions to repent, and then to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The force and effect of Jesus’ words are unmistakable: ‘Do as the Father has directed. It is not sufficient to give lip-service to the Father’s commands; the will of the Father must be obeyed.’

‘Repent, and then produce fruit in keeping with repentance!’ These two injunctions remain central to the messages every preacher should be conveying into the new church year. But for those of us charged with proclaiming these messages in the affluent and increasingly urbanised West, the use of

imagery that depicts the production of fruit is probably more picturesque and poetic now than relevant and polemical. A continuing challenge for the followers of Jesus is to re-present the truths of God's Word while using language our audiences are able to hear and figures of speech which to them become real.

The focus of this issue of *St Mark's Review* is predominantly on preaching the word of God in the current church year, namely, Year C in the *Revised Common Lectionary*. The emphasis in this issue is on Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, with two contributions from Jeanette Mathews addressing the mode and meaning of Old Testament prophecy.

In the recent past *St Mark's Review* has presented papers designed to guide and to contribute to preaching during Years A and B ('Fulfilling the Law: Preaching Matthew and Moses' for Year A in *St Mark's Review* No. 216 and "'The Way of the Lord": Preaching the Psalms, Mark and the Catholic Epistles' for Year B in *St Mark's Review* No. 219).

The current issue, like those which have preceded it, draws its contents mainly from the annual preaching seminar conducted by St Mark's National Theological Centre. In this issue of *St Mark's Review* we are fortunate to have an additional paper from A/Professor David Neville which complements his earlier study, "'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me": Preaching from Luke in Year C', which appeared in *St Mark's Review* No. 213.

May you be spiritually inspired and your preaching reinvigorated as you read this issue, and may there be much fruit borne as a consequence of your applying what you learn.

The Spirit of promise

Preaching from Acts

David Neville

As the only canonical book to present a picture of the earliest development of the Christian movement, the Acts of the Apostles understandably features in preaching and group Bible study.¹ That Acts is the prime source of the principal festivals of Ascension Day and Pentecost also makes this book important for the Church's calendar, even if Acts does not occupy a prominent position in the liturgical life of the Church.² Down through the centuries, moreover, Luke's characterisation of 'the Way' (see Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22; also 16:17; 18:25–26) has served as a model for reformers intent on restoring the Church to a perceived pristine state.

When studying Acts, the way in which one answers a number of important questions significantly influences one's appreciation of this early Christian writing. These include: Did Luke write Acts or, in less question-begging terms, did the person who wrote the Gospel according to Luke also compose Acts? Do the four so-called 'We'-passages (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18;

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27:1–28:16) indicate that the author of Acts might have been a companion (no less than admirer) of Paul, even if only occasionally? Is Acts the second part of a two-part work planned as such or better understood as a sequel? Since the author wrote an account of early Christian origins, what were his sources? Does his account of early Christian origins reflect genuinely historical concerns or was he more concerned to entertain and to edify? Did he have a principal purpose or did the writing of Acts meet multiple motives? How should one interpret the many speeches in Acts? And, perhaps most perplexing of all, which of two textual traditions is closer to the autograph of Acts, if indeed there was a single original version?

These and other questions have vexed the minds of interpreters. People who write on Acts need not have fixed views on all of these questions but generally have provisional views on most of them. Of the many matters that might be discussed in relation to Acts, only four are explored here: the meaning and significance of the Ascension in Luke–Acts; Pentecost and the role of the Spirit in Acts; Luke's description of early Christian communalism; and Luke's recapitulation of Jesus' ministry as a divine overture of peace.

The Ascension in Luke–Acts

If the resurrection of Jesus strains credibility in our time, what is one to say about his ascension? Surely the ascension is but a vestige of an outmoded worldview. Or perhaps, as some suppose, the ascension is more or less synonymous with the resurrection, expressing the conviction that divine power trumps death by raising the crucified Jesus to God's right hand. Since Luke is the only New Testament writer to offer a narrative account of the ascension, is it not reasonable to suppose that his description of the ascension as a discrete moment in salvation-history is simply his particular way of expressing the continuing lordship of Jesus beyond his suffering, death and resurrection?

Although Luke is the only biblical author to narrate the ascension of Jesus, he is not alone in affirming the ascended and enthroned Jesus. No less than in Luke–Acts, albeit with different emphases, the conviction of Christ ascended and enthroned is attested in the Pauline corpus, Hebrews, 1 Peter and Revelation. For Luke, the exaltation of Jesus entails his resurrection by God, his ascension to God and his enthronement beside God. The ascension presupposes resurrection but is not simply an alternative expression for the same reality.

To gain insight into Luke's understanding of the ascension, it is natural to focus on his references to the ascension at the end of his Gospel and then again at the beginning of Acts. There is, however, 'a more excellent way'. Although Luke lacks the descent–ascent motif characteristic of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus' journey to God features prominently in Luke's Gospel. Crucial to Luke's presentation of Jesus' journey to God is his central section in which he depicts Jesus instructing his disciples en route to Jerusalem. This distinctive section begins at Luke 9:51, where Luke writes: 'And it happened that as the days of his "taking up" drew near, he fixed his face to go to Jerusalem.' Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is integral to his 'taking up'. Although the meaning of 'taking up' in Luke 9:51 is contested, it probably includes Jesus' ascension even if it has a wider reference. In other words, Jesus' determination to journey toward Jerusalem is part and parcel of an overarching and more determinative journey toward God. This larger determination, which according to Luke is in keeping with God's will and plan, gives divine sanction to the character of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the content of his instruction en route to Jerusalem. Inasmuch as Jesus' journey toward God culminates in his 'taking up' to God, his journey to Jerusalem in all its various dimensions is divinely authorised. The way of Jesus, expressed in both his walk and his talk, is to be honoured by being followed.

Even before Jesus fixes his face for Jerusalem, Luke signals the significance of the ascension for his understanding of Jesus' life and mission. In Luke's narrative sequence, the story of Jesus' transfiguration on a mountain occurs shortly before he sets out for Jerusalem (9:28–36). Although recognisable as the same incident recounted by Matthew and Mark, Luke's account of Jesus' transfiguration is distinctive in various ways.³ For example, only in Luke's account of this event is the topic of conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah disclosed. According to Luke, Jesus' glory-charged interlocutors were discussing 'his exodus, which he was about to fulfil in Jerusalem' (9:31). As with Jesus' 'taking up' in Luke 9:51, there is considerable debate about the meaning of his 'exodus' in 9:31. Luke's narrative and theological concerns make it probable that these two expressions are mutually illuminating, perhaps even synonymous. No less than Jesus' journey to God, his 'exodus' may involve more than his ascension but must certainly include it. While Luke 9:31 intimates that Jesus' 'exodus' entails suffering, rejection by religious leaders, death and resurrection (see 9:22), the way in which the transfiguration episode prepares for Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and

thence to God suggests that ascension is the final phase of his 'exodus'. In short, the discussion at Jesus' transfiguration about his 'exodus' prefigures his ascension. Having announced the path he must pursue (9:22), Jesus is assured by Moses and Elijah that that path leads to God. That assurance is then reinforced by the voice from the cloud: 'This is my Son, the chosen one; *listen to him*' (9:35, emphasis added).

The relation between 'exodus' and 'taking up' in Luke 9:31 and 9:51 is in some sense replicated by the relation between Luke 24:51 and Acts 1:9. In the final scene of Luke's Gospel, the risen Jesus says to his disciples that he is about to send upon them what his Father promised to send, only that they must remain in Jerusalem until they are enrobed with heavenly power (24:49). His departure is narrated immediately thereafter (24:50–51), as he blesses his disciples. Most English translations of Luke 24:51 include the final phrase, 'and was taken into heaven.' This phrase is textually uncertain, however, with arguments for and against its authenticity evenly balanced.⁴ In the absence of certainty regarding the authenticity of this phrase, what can be stated with confidence is that Luke 24:51 prefigures the ascension because ever since the conversation on the mount of transfiguration Luke's readers have known that Jesus' 'exodus' is both authorised by God and ultimately leads to God. That Luke 24:51 prefigures the ascension in Acts 1:9–11, irrespective of the authenticity of 24:51b, is reinforced both by the preface to Acts (1:1–2) and by other linkages between the end of the Gospel and the beginning of Acts: the provenance of Jerusalem (Luke 24:52; Acts 1:4, 12); the theme of witness to the nations (Luke 24:47–48; Acts 1:8); and references to the promised gift (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–5, 8).

The explicit description of Jesus' ascension in Acts 1:9 is understated, referring first to his being taken up (by God) and then to his removal from the disciples' vision by a cloud. Luke does not linger on the details of the ascension *per se* but rather focuses on the way in which Jesus' disciples are assisted to come to an understanding of the event. To that end, his account of the ascension is in certain respects reminiscent of his account of Jesus' transfiguration. As in the case of the transfiguration, Jesus' ascension is a liminal event. Both occur on elevated terrain (Luke 9:28, 37; Acts 1:12). At the transfiguration, heaven had descended to earth in the personages of Moses and Elijah and also in the heavenly voice; at the ascension, on the other hand, Jesus ascends toward heaven. Prominent at both transfiguration and ascension is the role played by a cloud. At the transfiguration,

the cloud conceals the source of the heavenly voice; at the ascension, the cloud conceals the ascending Jesus as it removes him from the sight of the disciples. Two heavenly figures play a decisive role at both transfiguration and ascension, although the two men of Acts 1:10–11 more closely resemble the two men at the open tomb in Luke 24:4–7, both in their apparel and in their narrative role. By recounting Jesus' ascension in a way reminiscent of his transfiguration, Luke makes clear that the ascension is the end-stage of Jesus' 'exodus', his journey to God.

The clarifying narrative role of the two men enrobed in white is revealed both by their question and by their association of the manner of ascension with the manner of Jesus' return. Taken together, both their question to the upward-gazing Galileans and their reassurance of Jesus' return make the point that passive peering upwards is not the appropriate response to Jesus' ascension. Between ascension and promised return, there is work to do, even if in the short term that work comprises praying and waiting.

In the book of Acts as a whole, Jesus' promised return is not a major theme. At the beginning of Acts, however, it is closely associated with Jesus' ascension. There are those who consider that Luke narrated the ascension as Jesus' return in reverse. Whatever the merits of that view, Luke undoubtedly relates ascension and return as the two definitive horizons of his narrative world in Acts. As transfiguration prefigures ascension, so ascension prefigures return. Furthermore, these two horizons mirror each other. One is the reverse of the other, and the manner of Jesus' ascension is said to be the manner of his return. Although Luke's point seems focused on Jesus' movement from heaven to earth enveloped by a cloud as at his ascension from earth to heaven (see Luke 21:27), I consider that the moral manner of Jesus' ascension might also provide the pattern for Jesus' character and demeanour at his return. If nonviolent regency is displayed at Jesus' ascension, as it surely is, this may also be expected of the returning Jesus.

The ascension, as the final stage of Jesus' 'exodus' and exaltation, is Luke's way of affirming the present reign of Jesus by means of the continuation of the cause of Jesus in and by the Church. The preface to Acts refers to an earlier volume, Luke's Gospel, containing an account of all that Jesus *began* to do and also to teach until the day of his taking up (1:1–2). The implication is that the ascension of Jesus facilitates his continuing action in and instruction through the Church, whether directly – as when confronting or encouraging Saul, renamed Paul (9:5; 18:9; 23:11) – or indirectly through

the Spirit or angels or human witnesses.⁵ In Luke's perspective, if the resurrection vindicates Jesus and his way, the ascension bespeaks his continued authority for the Church and agency through the Church.

Pentecost: event, exposition and effects

The ascension of Jesus leaves his Galilean disciples bereft for the second time in the space of a few short weeks. If the crucifixion of Jesus was integrated into a conception of the divine plan and purpose as a result of the resurrection – understood as God's reversal of human judgement against Jesus and hence his divine vindication – this was in part possible, according to Luke, because resurrection restored Jesus to his disciples. With the ascension, however, the same God who restored Jesus to his disciples by raising him from death now definitively removes Jesus from the disciples by raising him beyond earthly perception. If resurrection reverses the crucifixion and thereby reveals its role in God's purposes, what compensates for the desolation caused by the ascension? Luke does not signal that the ascension left the disciples bereft, but this may be the result of his salvation-historical schema in which the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' disciples is contingent upon the ascension of Jesus to God's right hand. As Peter proclaims at Pentecost, the risen and ascended Jesus receives from the Father the Holy Spirit so as to pour out the promised Spirit on the disciples and subsequently on other believers (see Acts 2:32–36). For Luke no less than for John (16:7), then, the presence of the Spirit presupposes – but also compensates for – the absence of Jesus.

In Luke's presentation, Pentecost is crucial for two main reasons. It fulfils both the promise of Jesus and scriptural prophecy, and it marks the beginning of the Church's continuation of Jesus' mission under the direction of the Spirit. Fulfilment of promise and the agency of divine Spirit are prominent concerns for Luke, and this is nowhere more evident than in his account of the first Christian Pentecost.⁶

Most immediately, according to Acts 2, what occurs at Pentecost fulfils the promise of Jesus (at both the end of Luke's Gospel and the beginning of Acts) that his disciples would be empowered from above so as to serve as witnesses to his mission. When the risen Jesus appears to the assembled disciples, he enables them to understand the scriptural record as pointing to himself, with the result that radical change and forgiveness must be proclaimed in his name among the peoples of all nations, starting from

Jerusalem. Jesus confirms that his disciples are witnesses of these things but immediately instructs them to wait for what he will send upon them before they begin their task of witness (Luke 24:44–49). Their commission is both universal and urgent but first they must wait for empowerment from above. On their own, they are in no position to extend the ministry of Jesus.

At the beginning of Acts, during the forty-day period between resurrection and ascension, Jesus reissues his command to wait before witnessing. Reminding his disciples of promised empowerment from above, Jesus reiterates the promise of John, who baptised by water but pointed ahead to someone more powerful (by being more empowering) who would baptise by the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:15–16; Acts 1:4–5, 8). For Luke, Pentecost has been pending since the mission of John. In Luke’s perspective, therefore, Pentecost is the inescapable event to which his entire story has thus far been straining.

Pentecost is the fulfilment not only of recent promises but also of ancient prophecy. The remarkable events of that first Christian Pentecost aroused astonishment, excitement, perplexity and also derision among those drawn toward the din of holy babble. Some go so far as to suggest that this is but the effect of intoxication. In response, Peter, in his first public address, offers an altogether different interpretation. By appealing to the prophet Joel and by adapting the opening words of the text cited from Joel, Peter affirms that the occurrences of this particular Pentecost comprise the end-time fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy. *This is that*, Peter says, pointing to what Joel had prophesied about God’s intention to pour out divine Spirit on *all people*, irrespective of ethnicity, gender or age. What has been long-awaited is now here; prophecy is in process of being filled full to overflowing.

In cascading fashion, then, the first Christian Pentecost fulfils ancient scriptural prophecy (Joel 3 in the Hebrew Bible), the more recent prophetic foresight of the messianic precursor, John (Luke 1:76; 3:15–16), and Jesus’ own messianic promise of Spirit-empowerment (Luke 24:44–49; Acts 1:4–8). This is the first and decisive significance of Pentecost. Promises of the past have come to pass. What of the future, however? Pentecost is also significant because it both previews and provides the program for the Spirit’s agency in Acts.

Peter’s appeal to the prophecy of Joel not only serves to interpret the meaning of what transpires at Pentecost but also provides a preview of how the Spirit acts in Acts. First and foremost, the Spirit of the time of fulfilment

is ethnicity-blind, gender-blind and age-blind. The Spirit of fulfilment is poured out indiscriminately. For Luke, this implies that the invitation to turn to God for healing is opened out to one and all, no longer restricted to God's people of old. The time of the Spirit is a time to extend the message of God's saving favour to all and sundry.

As in the prophecy of Joel, reception of the Spirit finds expression in prophecy. For Luke, an indispensable aspect of the Spirit's presence is prophecy. The fulfilment of prophecy facilitates further prophecy. Christian prophets play an important role in Acts. In addition to some of the more prominent personages in Acts, Luke draws attention to the prophetic roles of Agabus (11:27–30; 21:10–14) and the four daughters of Philip (21:8–9).

A third dimension of the Spirit's agency in Acts is the marvellous. In Luke's view, empowerment by the Spirit naturally results in 'works of power' (see 2:22). The prophecy of Joel does not quite say that wonders and signs are the work of the Spirit, but there is an association between God's dispensing of the Spirit and God's dynamic displays in the heavens and on earth. In the case of the wonders and signs done by Jesus, there is no doubt that Luke understood these to have been Spirit-empowered. So, too, Luke presents the same dynamic agency at work among his principal protagonists in Acts.

When Jesus promised his disciples that he would shower them with the Spirit to empower them for witness to his life-saving mission, he also advised them to wait. Along with the promise came the command to be patient. After the resurrection, Jesus' disciples had news to tell, but Luke's storytelling makes clear that one thing above all is needful to witness faithfully to Jesus: the empowering presence and discerning guidance of the Spirit. This is why, in Acts 2:32–33, Peter describes the outpouring of the Spirit as the culmination of four interrelated events in salvation-history: first, Jesus' marvellous ministry (2:22); second, Jesus' crucifixion as the direct result of his mission to Israel (2:23); third, God's vindication of Jesus' ministry by raising him from death, in fulfilment of Scripture (2:24–32); and fourth, Jesus' exaltation to the place of authority beside God (2:33–36). Exaltation to God's right hand leads to something like a handover of the Spirit from Father to Son, who then has the authority to dispense the Spirit. The Spirit who had empowered Jesus' own ministry is now poured out by Jesus to empower witness to Jesus. By depicting the dispensing of the Spirit as the culmination of Jesus' mission, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, Luke seeks to ensure that the role of the Spirit's agency in Acts is understood as

one of continuing Jesus' mission. What Jesus began to do and to teach, as narrated in Luke's Gospel (see Acts 1:1), he continues to do in and through his disciples – *to the extent that they follow the prompting of the Spirit*. The Spirit not only empowers Jesus' disciples to witness to Jesus but also empowers witness that conforms to the character of Jesus' own ministry. Pentecost signals that the time of patient waiting is over and that the time for active witness is now, but it also signals that such witness is to extend Jesus' ministry – both in content and in character. Little wonder that insightful commentators on Acts are inclined to describe Luke's second volume as the Acts of the Holy Spirit.⁷

As meaningful as Peter (and others) found the Pentecostal experience, Luke indicates that it took time for the full ramifications of Pentecost to sink in. Although Peter points to the inclusive and universalistic prophecy of Joel to interpret the events of Pentecost, this does not lead immediately to the recognition that apostolic witness should have no boundaries.

Luke's artistry is on full display as he narrates how the meaning of Pentecost gradually sinks in, at least for Peter. The figure of Peter dominates the first two-fifths of Acts, even though Luke makes room to feature the prophetic preaching of Stephen (6:8–7:60), the effective evangelism of Philip (8:4–40) and the confounding conversion of Saul (9:1–30). Peter it is who moves that, from among the male companions of Jesus, a twelfth witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is needed to replace Judas. Peter it is who speaks for the Apostles – at Pentecost, in the temple precincts and also before the Sanhedrin on more than one occasion. And Peter it is who has his eyes opened to the full implications of Pentecost, albeit only after having to witness its aftershock, so to speak, in Caesarea (rather than in Jerusalem) among those outside the people of God (rather than among Jews). The Pentecost penny drops for Peter and fellow Jewish Christians only after those assembled at the home of the Roman centurion, Cornelius, had evidently been showered with the Spirit, without waiting for Peter to finish preaching.

The eye-opening conversion of Cornelius, with its far-reaching ramifications for the Church, is of major importance for Luke. In certain respects, it is less an aftershock of Pentecost than the seismic shift forewarned by the tremor of Pentecost. For Luke, in any case, the full meaning of Pentecost is not comprehended until 'Cornelius and Co.' are brought into the Church's embrace. Once grasped, however, the full meaning of Pentecost was not

easily absorbed, as the disputes recorded in Acts 11:1–18 and 15:1–33 make clear. In each case, Peter carries the day by appealing to the incontestable reality that the Spirit was gifted to the Gentiles no less than to Jews (11:15–17; 15:8). In such circumstances, who was he, or anyone else, to contest the Spirit's guidance?

In Acts, Peter is Pentecost's person. He interprets Pentecost for sceptical Jews. He channels the power of Pentecost in acts of healing for the diseased and disabled, and in the face of persecution he displays the empowerment of Pentecost by fearlessly proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Messiah. With a little help from the Spirit, Peter finally comes to appreciate the full barrier-breaking significance of Pentecost during his eye-opening encounter with Cornelius. And with that, his role in Acts is more or less realised. There is, of course, his arrest at Passover, on an anniversary of Jesus' own arrest (Luke 22:1), and his dramatic escape from incarceration, in which the Spirit is not mentioned (Acts 12:1–17). Although Peter escapes, this close call on his life effectively brings the curtain down on his role in Acts. Apart from his brief but compelling testimony at the meeting convened in Jerusalem (Acts 15), he plays no further part in the narrative of Acts. Peter is Pentecost's person.

Sharing in the Spirit

In Acts 2, Luke's narration of what transpired on the day of Pentecost leads directly into a summary description of the character of the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem. The three thousand people baptised into the Church that day devoted themselves to catechetical instruction comprising four essential features: (1) the teaching of the Apostles; (2) participating in the common life of the community (*koinōnia*); (3) sharing food together; and (4) communal prayer (Acts 2:42).⁸ All but the first of these four features receive further comment in what follows, but most attention is given to the communal character of the growing Church. Solidarity was expressed through sharing, even if that necessitated selling possessions and property to meet others' needs. This group solidarity also entailed meeting together daily in the temple.

The solidarity of the early Christian community in Jerusalem and its effect on others comes to the fore yet again in Acts 4:32–5:16, where once again Luke puts the emphasis on shared possessions. Unity of mind and heart expressed itself in sharing with others in the community of believers. In Acts 4:32–35, Luke associates the sharing of resources according to need

with two factors: first, the Apostles' powerful witness to the resurrection of Jesus; and second, the presence of divine grace. So close is this double association that it is difficult not to read this passage as saying that shared possessions according to need was not only symptomatic of divine grace working through all but also integral to apostolic witness to the resurrection of Jesus! Why else would the affirmation of Acts 4:33 – 'and with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all' – be tightly bracketed by descriptions of the common commitment to ensure that none within the community lacked what was needed? Both the positive example of Joseph, nicknamed Barnabas, and the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira reinforce how vital shared possessions were for these early Christians. The same emphasis reappears in later passages such as Acts 6:1–7, in which the issue of unequal distribution of food is redressed, and 11:27–30, in which Christians in Antioch resolve to offset the effects of famine on fellow Christians in Judea. As Robert Wall observes, 'The church of Acts is a community of goods. Its united witness to the Messiah's resurrection is not only proclaimed but is also embodied in its common life under the aegis of the Holy Spirit.'⁹ In other words, economic sharing was a 'resurrection practice'¹⁰, an aspect of community life that embodied the living out of a vision of reality made possible by both affirming and witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus.

For Luke, possessions and what to do with them are central concerns.¹¹ In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' teaching on wealth leaves no room for cool complacency. Mary's Magnificat (1:46–55) might be liturgically sonorous, but its theme of social reversal is discomfiting to those with wealth and power. Blessings pronounced upon the poor and hungry are counterbalanced by woes upon the rich and well-fed (6:20–26). Jesus' parables of the wealthy fool (12:15–21) and the reversal of fortunes for the rich man and his poor neighbour Lazarus (16:19–31) reveal that wealth is insidiously pernicious, capable of desensitising and indeed deadening one's personhood. We may think we control our wealth, but Jesus' intuition is that possessions themselves both possess and deform. Hence his warning that one is unable to serve both God and Mammon (Wealth with a capital 'W', 16:13). This insight also explains why Jesus advises the Torah-abiding seeker of eternal life to sell what he owns to share with the poor (18:18–30) and why Luke then follows up this story with the more edifying one involving Zacchaeus, whose positive response to Jesus is expressed in terms of economic sharing

(19:1–10). Receptivity to the one who came to seek and to save the lost is expressed by concern for economic fairness.

Seen in light of Jesus' teaching on possessions in Luke's Gospel, the economic sharing practised by the early Christian community is but one of the ways in which disciples of Jesus extended his mission under the influence of the Spirit. From the beginning, however, sharing possessions proved problematic, as the disconcerting record of Ananias and Sapphira reveals (Acts 5:1–11). And ever since, as Reta Halteman Finger documents, the Church has been flummoxed by Luke's insistence that a crucial dimension of the early Church's faithful witness to Jesus' resurrection was to put into practice his teaching on self-dispossession by sharing.¹² For either apologetic or pastoral reasons, Luke is considered by many to have idealised his descriptions of early Christian *koinōnia*. On the other hand, in the first flush of a renewal movement with a shared vision for – or, perhaps better, in view of – a restructured reality, it would not be strange within the socio-economic structures of antiquity (patronage and kinship) for such vision to be expressed by means of sharing.¹³ Living in light of Jesus' resurrection to life is expressed in sharing the resources to sustain and enhance life. Even if, for edifying reasons, Luke did craft fictitious portraits of early Christian solidarity, his theological instincts in this respect are finely tuned. If for no other reason than to remind would-be disciples in the wealthy West that faithfulness to Jesus' vision of God's fair reign prioritises giving over getting, sharing over saving, Luke's description of the earliest Church's economic solidarity is a salutary reminder that salvation is social.¹⁴

Jesus – God's emissary of peace (Acts 10:36)

In the wake of Saul's dramatic conversion, narrated in Acts 9:1–30, the spotlight refocuses on Simon Peter, last mentioned (along with John) as following up on Philip's evangelistic mission among Samaritans to facilitate their reception of the Holy Spirit (8:14–17, 25). Peter is reintroduced by two extraordinary episodes in which he is instrumental in restoring a paralysed man named Aeneas and in resuscitating a model woman disciple named Tabitha (9:32–42; compare with 3:1–10). Each of these events is reminiscent of Jesus' healing ministry (Luke 5:17–26; 8:40–56), thereby enhancing Peter's charismatic authority. Acts 9 closes with Peter in Joppa (present-day Jaffa), whence he is summoned to announce God's acceptance of all people to a centurion named Cornelius. The unexpected 'falling of the Spirit' upon

all those gathered together by Cornelius, even before Peter's appeal for repentance and faith, leads Jewish believers in Jerusalem to accept that divine salvation is offered universally (11:1–18). Within Acts, the story of Cornelius is a second 'Pentecost', the occasion when the Holy Spirit breaks through ethnic prejudice to prepare for worldwide mission to non-Jews.¹⁵ Given Luke's universal concerns, this episode is crucial to the narrative development of Acts.

At this decisive narrative juncture in Acts, Peter's proclamation centred on Jesus recapitulates a prominent Lukan theme – that divine salvation entails *shalom*, peace in its thickest theological and social meaning. Among the Gospel writers, Luke is the acknowledged evangelist of peace. Especially in the Gospel, references to peace are theologically and socially loaded. For the most part in Acts, however, references to peace are more anaemic, lacking the same theological and social depth. The reference to peace in Acts 10:36 is the exception, and it is hardly coincidental that it is associated with God's purpose in the ministry of Jesus.

In Acts 10:34–35, Peter begins his address by acknowledging God's impartiality with respect to ethnic background. No longer does Peter see his own Jewish people as privileged in God's sight; 'rather, in every ethnicity one who fears him and does what is right (or just) is acceptable to him' (10:35). Thus, the immediate context of the reference to peace in Acts 10:36 concerns the socio-political no less than the divine-human dimension. Then begins a lengthy sentence summarising the mission of Jesus, distilled in its opening clause as 'the message divinely sent to the children of Israel proclaiming peace through Jesus Christ, who is lord of all...' (10:36).¹⁶

According to Willard Swartley, the significance of Acts 10:36 is threefold: first, it echoes the heralding of peace worldwide in Isaiah 52:7–10; second, peace between rival ethnicities is the purpose of this good-news proclamation; and third, this new inter-ethnic social reality is brought about by the universal lordship of Jesus Christ.¹⁷ What is perhaps hinted at but not explicitly stated by Swartley is that the mission of Jesus *in its entirety* is characterised by Peter as a divine announcement of *shalom*, God's own saving peace that makes possible – and even imperative – peaceable rapport between ethnic groups antagonistic towards each other. Not only is the mission of Jesus in its entirety one of announcing divine peace intent on realigning social realities, but Jesus, in his person and in his ministry, is God's own emissary

of peace. In this decisive passage the evangelist of peace recapitulates Jesus' ministry in its entirety as a divine overture of peace to all people.¹⁸

Concluding reflection

This article has touched on but a few themes in Acts, yet each is central to Luke's overarching concern to demonstrate that what Jesus began to do and to teach continues to be done and to be taught by his disciples under the guidance of the Spirit. For Luke, the ascension of Jesus is the culmination of Jesus' journey to God, but it is also what makes possible the dispensing of the promised Spirit to empower true witness to Jesus and witness that is true to Jesus. In this way, the ministry of Jesus in the world is continued by witnesses faithful to his distinctive display of divine authority and agency. The Spirit's coming at Pentecost fulfils prophetic and messianic promises, albeit in such a way that traditional expectations are not only met but also reconfigured in light of Jesus' mission and message. Pentecost provides a preview of the continuing work of the Spirit in Acts, the content and character of which reflect the earthly ministry of the now-ascended One. Even so, despite the Apostles' familiarity with Jesus, it takes time and further prompting by the Spirit for them to comprehend the full significance of Pentecost. In light of Luke's description of early Christian solidarity by means of shared possessions and of the ministry of Jesus in its totality as a divine proclamation of peace, perhaps the process of comprehending the full significance of Pentecost continues still ...

Endnotes

1. On preaching responsibly from Acts, as well as on responsible preaching generally, see Marguerite Shuster, 'Preaching from Acts, Hebrews, General Epistles and Revelation,' in Ralph P Martin and Peter H Davids (eds), *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1997, pp. 948–55. See also *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, Vol. 66, No. 3, July 2012, whose theme is the book of Acts. On preaching from Luke–Acts as a whole, see Edgar Krentz, 'Turning the World Upside Down – Preaching Luke's Story,' *Currents in Theology and Mission*, Vol. 36, No. 6, December 2009, pp. 434–39.

2. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2005, p. 26. Notably, however, a reading from Acts takes the place of the Old Testament reading on every Sunday in the season of Easter. In view of the evident connection in Luke–Acts between transfiguration and ascension, it is surely anomalous that the Festival of the Transfiguration of our Lord is not recognised as a Principal Holy Day in the Church’s calendar.
3. See Dorothy Lee, *Transfiguration*, Continuum, London and New York, 2004, pp. 65–87.
4. In favour of authenticity, see Bruce M Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, 1994, pp. 162–66. Against authenticity, see Mikeal C Parsons, *The Departure of Jesus in Luke–Acts: The Ascension Narratives in Context*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1987, pp. 29–52.
5. See CK Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. II, T&T Clark, London and New York, 1998, pp. lxxxiii and lxxxv.
6. For another perspective on the significance of Pentecost, see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, ‘Pentecost and Trinity’, *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, Vol. 66, No. 1, January 2012, pp. 5–15.
7. See, for example, Justo L González, ‘Acts of the Apostles: Also Known as Acts of the Holy Spirit’, in Wes Howard-Brook and Sharon H Ringe (eds), *The New Testament — Introducing the Way of Discipleship*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2002, pp. 103–21.
8. Space limitations preclude devoting a section to the theme of prayer in Luke–Acts, but Year C is undoubtedly a good opportunity to explore what Luke teaches about prayer, either in a sermon series or as a focus for group Bible study. For Luke, prayer and praise are marks of the Church in touch with the Spirit.
9. Robert W Wall, ‘The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections’, in Leander E Keck and others (eds), *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. X, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002, p. 23.
10. Wall, ‘Acts of the Apostles’, pp. 10, 23, 71–73, 96, 177.
11. See Philip Francis Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke–Acts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 164–200.
12. Reta Halteman Finger, ‘Cultural Attitudes in Western Christianity Toward the Community of Goods in Acts 2 and 4’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 78, No. 2, 2004, pp. 235–70. For a full-scale investigation of these same

- passages within their socio-cultural setting, see Douglas A Hume, *The Early Christian Community: A Narrative Analysis of Acts 2:41–47 and 4:32–35*, Mohr-Siebeck, Tübingen, 2011.
13. On Luke's socio-economic matrix, see Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke–Acts*, pp. 169–79. See also González, 'Acts of the Apostles', p. 112, on 'subversive sharing', and Joel B Green, 'Acts of the Apostles', in Martin and Davids (eds), *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, p. 22, on 'economic *koinōnia*' as indispensable to discipleship within Luke–Acts.
 14. From another context, and hence helpful for precisely that reason, see René Krüger, 'Luke's God and Mammon, A Latin American Perspective', in Daniel Patte (gen. ed.), *Global Bible Commentary*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2004, pp. 395–400.
 15. For ways in which this second, non-Jewish 'Pentecost' (Acts 10:44–48) echoes the first in Acts 2, see Wall, 'Acts of the Apostles', p. 167.
 16. Textual and syntactic difficulties haunt this sentence but do not cloud its basic meaning: What God announced to Israel through the mission of Jesus was good news characterised by peace.
 17. Willard M Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2006, pp. 161–63.
 18. In view of the significance of Acts 10:34–43 within Luke–Acts as a whole, one appreciates why, in the Revised Common Lectionary, this passage is always set as an alternative for either the Old Testament reading or the Epistle on Easter Day. This is a liturgical affirmation that God's raising of Jesus from death validates his peace-purposed and peace-oriented mission.