

**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> November 2021**  
**Acts 1:1-14**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Let us come to God in prayer and let us pray,

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

The church in every time and in every place has found itself in changing circumstances and faced with that, the church has had to walk a tightrope between holding on to what is core and changing the rest, so that it fulfills its calling to make disciples of all the nations. I don't know about you, but it feels like we are finally, finally starting to get that. That we need to change as a church. Now, I have my reservations about some of the changes happening at a national level but, here at Brightons, it feels like you are aware of the need to keep that tension between holding on to what is core and nevertheless changing other things.

Your Parish Profile said that you wanted to 'remain vibrant, relevant and accessible to all, and always true to God's word' and yet, you are also honest about the necessity of change because you wrote that you needed to 'increase and enhance our prayer life and expand our outreach securing the future of the church particularly through creative work with children, young people and families'. When I spent a very powerful and informative two and a half hours with your Nominating Committee being interviewed by them, and returning the favour! They put me through my paces making sure the core would be core, and it was great to experience that, and as you just heard I was also upfront with them about a couple of challenging questions that I had, and it was great that they were honest about the needs of the congregation and receptive to those questions. So, even though you are a healthy, vibrant congregation, it's really encouraging to see that you're facing up to reality, that you are not content to rest upon your laurels.

At present I am a locum for a vacant link charge up north and I am a member of the Ministries Council of the Church of Scotland so I am aware that being in a season of change and facing even more change can be unsettling for us, even scary. It can raise all sorts of questions and uncertainties. So, what might God's word say to us in such times?

Well, in the book of Acts we find the early church in changing circumstances. Too they are on the cusp of truly significant change, change like they have never experienced, change like they can never anticipate or expect, and so Acts especially, those early chapters, gives us insight into some core things to remember and hold on to, especially in the midst of change. Acts opens with these words 'In my former book Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven.' From the earliest times, the writing of the book of Acts has been attributed to Luke, that gentile doctor, who came to faith in Jesus and became a valuable helper and friend to the apostle Paul. So Acts is the second installment from Luke. In his former book, that is the gospel which bears his name, Luke wrote about all that Jesus began to do detailing the life of Jesus and his ministry on earth, but notice what that sentence says 'all that Jesus began to do, not all that Jesus did but all that Jesus began to do, so

Luke's gospel details Jesus ministry on earth and Acts details the continuing ministry of Jesus then and even now, and Luke can write such a claim because of his confidence that Jesus is alive. He writes 'After his suffering (that is Jesus) he presented himself to them the apostles and disciples and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.' Luke is convinced of this. Convinced of its reality, that Jesus is alive and so the ministry of Jesus continues and continues even to this day. Can I ask you this - do you believe that do you have the confidence of Luke?

As outlined to our children and young people, there is great evidence to give us confidence in this and I feel and I know it is crucial for us to have this confidence because, in the changing circumstances as a church, and in the changing circumstances of life and all the struggles of life, to be confident that Jesus truly is alive changes everything. This core truth gives courage and comfort in difficult times, it sustains passion across the decades and it gives hope of a better future for our world, for our church, and for each of us individually. So, can I ask you - do you believe that Jesus is alive are you confident in this?

If you're not, please be honest and please do something about that feeling. Please speak with your locum, speak with your elders, read The Case for Christ, for example, but I beg you, do something. For Jesus is alive and His ministry does continue now. that ministry can,, if we let it challenge us and change us. Luke goes on to write that 'he (Jesus) appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God' and that prompted the disciples to reply with a question – 'Lord, are you, at this time, going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' They expected still,, a political and territorial kingdom, a national kingdom of Israel, and they hoped it would be established.

Now, in response the continuing ministry of Jesus brings a challenge to their thinking he says to them 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the father has set by his own authority but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.'

There's so much in those two verses but let us for now notice this - the continued ministry of Jesus challenged them. It challenged their ideas about Jesus and the kingdom. For the kingdom of God is primarily spiritual in character, that as people submit to the reign of God in their lives, He transforms their hearts and He renews their mind. This kingdom is also going to be international says Jesus and it will grow gradually, so even after three years of intense discipleship and a further 40 days with the risen Jesus, the continuing ministry of Jesus is still challenging their thinking and way of life.

So, what about us? How is the continuing ministry of Jesus challenging our way of life and our thinking individually and corporately here in Brightons?

At the beginning of this message I spoke about the changing and challenging circumstances that we find ourselves in both nationally and locally, and so often we look on it negatively. The number of ministers is dropping, buildings are closing, parishes are

expanding and the list goes on and on. But, what if we are in a divine moment? Have you wondered that? What if we are in a divine moment? A divine moment of opportunity when the continuing ministry of Jesus might challenge our thinking and our way of life so that the kingdom of God extends to the ends of the earth but begins growing right here too? Have you wondered that yet?

Returning to those early disciples, I'm sure some of them felt shock and horror as Jesus said those words. Maybe some of them thought 'Jesus, are you nuts, there's only 120 of us. How is this ever going to happen. You cannot be serious!' but Jesus knew that by His continuing ministry in them and through them by the Holy Spirit, that this world would be turned upside down, that the words of Isaiah would come true that some would say 'I belong to the Lord and become part of the family and people of God'.

Jesus has just challenged their thinking about the future so, how is the continuing ministry of Jesus challenging us? How is He challenging you?

With the Nominating Committee, as I said, I spent a good wee while with them which was great and I outlined a number of key principles in the midst of that conversation about myself and about any future ministry, and one is that I feel the church at large, and maybe some of us here, need to wake up to the fact that we are called to be witnesses. We each are disciples of Jesus. We each are to go and make disciples of others. We are to share our faith. We are to go and call people to follow Jesus, to repent and live for Him. And I was grateful in the midst of that conversation with the Nominating Committee, that one of their number was honest and said 'I'm just not sure how to do that. I'm not sure how to do that. How do I reach out to my peers? How do I reach out to my peers who are successful and affluent and capable?

That member communicated a feeling, I think, that we all have. We can all be daunted by that call to be a witness. We don't know what to do because we haven't been disciplined in that way ourselves so often, but that same person in literally the same breath, spoke about their conviction to lean into that call, that they wanted to play their part and it was so inspiring to hear!

As I say, I suspect she's not alone. I suspect that many of us here have the same apprehension, but we are each called as witnesses as disciples who are to go and make disciples. And so my question is - are you up for that? Are you up for that? I'm being very upfront with you. If you call me here, I'll lean into that myself, but I'll call you to lean into that too. I'll work with your elders, I'll work with you individually, but we'll lean into that, if you call me here, and it might change your life radically, and it'll be costly. Are you up for that? Are you up for it?

The continuing ministry of Jesus brings challenge and that is but one, I'm sure there'll be more, whether here at Brightons or for our church nationally, and you might say back to me 'Well Scott, it was easy for the disciples. Come on! Jesus was right there in their midst' but notice what happens after He leaves. They returned to Jerusalem, went upstairs to the room and joined together constantly in prayer. Prior to His leaving, the

disciples had spent time with Jesus. They had listened to His teaching. They had soaked in the love of God, and so now it is instinctive for them to turn to Him in prayer, and that is how they will wait upon Him. That is how they will wait upon His provision and leading. Again and again, if you read through the book of Acts, the disciples come together in prayer and God leads and provides for them.

Maybe they also came together because of that commission Jesus gave them in verse 8. It's hard to see in our English translations but when he says 'you will be my witnesses' he's calling them to a costly future because the Greek word for witness is the exact same root word for our English word martyr.

So, Jesus has just called them to sacrificial way of life, to loyalty whatever the cost ,but these early followers of Jesus were so confident in the continuing ministry of Jesus, were so challenged and captivated by that ministry, were so aware of their need to depend on Him, that they came together in prayer.

Friends, can the same be said of us? Do we unite in prayer here? It can be so tempting to rush ahead. We prefer to get on with the job. We don't like waiting and we really don't like depending on another. Are you like that? I know I can be, but the truth is, we can't do this on our own. The gaps in these pews are not going to fill by our own efforts.

If we are going to grow in confidence in the continuing ministry of Jesus, if we are to hear the challenge of the continuing ministry of Jesus, if we are to receive all that we need to participate in the continuing ministry of Jesus, then we must wait, we must wait upon Him and you can of course do that at home, individually, but the testimony of Christians across the ages is that the church needs to come together in prayer if we are to know His leading, if we are to know His providing, if we are to have the courage to take the costly choices and be His witnesses, then we must pray and we must pray together.

I've heard that your Nominating Committee is prayerful perhaps, overly prayerful if that can ever be possible, they pray a lot and I know that you have a midweek time together and hopefully you're praying in your home groups and in other ways too, but if you are not personally gathering in prayer, some way, somehow, can I ask that you find a way. If the time is difficult, if the day is difficult, if you're just unsure how to pray with others or even just how to pray, again, I encourage you speak with someone, be honest about that, talk to your locum, talk to your elders, talk to your session, feed it back to them and maybe together we can work out a way to help you gather together in prayer, but at some point you must make the choice, at some point you must see that prayer is enough of a priority that you fit it into your diary, but it's only by prayer that you will find the confidence that Jesus is alive and it's only by prayer that you will have the courage you need to be His witnesses and to respond to His challenge. The testimony of the early church, in the church across the ages, is that the people of God must unite in prayer if we are to participate in the continuing ministry of Jesus.

In these changing times, are you confident that Jesus is alive? Will you respond to His challenge at this present time and will we come together in prayer? The ministry of Jesus is continuing and to Him be the glory both now and forevermore. Amen