

People often say that whenever they reread a passage of scripture they have already read, they see something new. This has certainly been the case for me as we have reread the Book of Acts together.

One thing that has struck me over and over again has been the astonishing contrast between the way the disciples are depicted in the Gospels and the way the Apostles are depicted in the Book which describes their acts.

So often in the Gospels, the disciples fail to understand or fail to accept what Jesus is saying to them so that Jesus becomes frustrated with them. Sometimes the Gospels even seem to contrast the closed minds of the disciples with the ease with which 'ordinary' folk accept the words of Jesus.

But in the Book of Acts these same disciples are transformed. At first they are led by the Holy Spirit in ways which seem to emphasise their passivity. Philip, for example, is led to the Ethiopian treasurer and then plonked down in Samaria without having any say in the matter. But gradually, the disciples develop an ease and a confidence in this new Spirit-led life. They learn to articulate to each other what the Spirit is directing them to do. We see this in the debates that Peter and Paul engaged in. This is the transformation that Spirit has performed in them.

At various times in our reading we have drawn parallels between this Spirit-led transformation of the apostles and the experience of pandemic and lockdown we are all going through. And while no other period of human experience will ever be quite like the creation of the church by the Holy Spirit, there is a kind of parallel here in one sense at least.

Before lockdown, we were used to worshipping in our church in ways that had been handed down to us. The rhythm of worship was more or less the same each year. The rhythm of preparing worship in church dominated my life. The bulk of what I had to do as a priest and what we were expected to do as a congregation was set out in a familiar pattern.

Being a disciple of Jesus before the crucifixion was a bit like that. You got up and followed Jesus as he told parables about the Kingdom and healed the sick. Jesus was there to shape your day. You just followed.

After lockdown everything was thrown up in the air. How do we worship now? How do we follow Jesus now? Nothing was the same. Trying to be the same in these new circumstances was a challenge.

And isn't this a little bit like what it was like being a follower of Jesus after the crucifixion and the resurrection and the ascension? How were they to follow Jesus now?

The Book of Acts tells us how. The Holy Spirit came and showed them. The Holy Spirit entered into them, so they knew what to do. Maybe that is a way for us to think about how we responded as a church to the early days of pandemic and lockdown. Maybe this will help us to understand how we are responding as the world carries on learning how to live with Covid.

One thing I have been reflecting on is that a church which is very focused on worship in a church building is a church that is also very focused on its vicar. Or at least it feels that way when I am behind the altar and the rest of you are in front of it; when I am up in the pulpit and the rest of you are looking up at me; when I stand at the door to say good bye and everybody says goodbye to me.

A church that is exiled from its building doesn't feel anything like as focused on the vicar. I have learned to focus on the little camera in my laptop as I stand in church alone. And wonderful people have taken on the work of the foodbank and the shopping project and the website and the Sunday School. And the PCC and other volunteers have looked after the church building and the grounds and our finances and our safety. A Thought for the Day is produced every day and I hardly write any of them. And our evening worship on Zoom just gets better and better and it's not because of me. And all across our congregation people have been sustaining pastoral care of each other week after week after week.

One of the early observations about lockdown was that it taught us who the keyworkers are. I think lockdown has thrown up a lot of key workers. They were always there of course but in lockdown we really see how vital they are. I think that applies to churches as well.

And then thinking back on Acts, I remember all the new people who were thrown up in the story of the church. The twelve disciples who wanted to know who would sit next to Jesus in the Kingdom have been joined and even eclipsed by new people; by Stephen, by Philip, by Barnabas, by Lydia, by Apollos, by Timothy, by Priscilla ...

And this is just the story of the westward spread of the church. The spread of the church to the East, to the South and to the North; these stories are not told in our Scriptures but they must have happened also and they can only have happened if the Holy Spirit called forth all sorts of unlikely new people.

And so the final reflection I want to offer you on re-reading Acts during the time of the pandemic and the lockdown is this:

Our church has been transformed by the Holy Spirit. All around us people have been transformed by the Holy Spirit. How have you been transformed by the Holy Spirit? What is it about your life that will never be the same again because of this transformation? What will the new normal; the post lockdown normal; the living with Covid normal; the post-Covid normal; what will this be like for you?

What happened to the early church has now happened to us. New key workers have been found. New leaders have emerged. New ways of being a leader have been recognised. Are you one of them? What is the Holy Spirit moving you to do?