

21 Even on the Cleaning Ladies

People had been a long time inside this house – it might have been only a few days, but still it was longer than they had expected. Surely something ought to be happening! They were used to waiting, and after everything that had happened, what could they do but wait until they got a sign of some sort? But just waiting? and for how long? Well, they had been told to wait, and it probably wasn't safe for them to go outside, anyway. If they were to start wandering around the city full of their story, if they were to go to the temple where the priests were in charge, their joy might all end in a sudden death.

Outside in the bustling city, people knew what they were about: business and work, preparing for the big feast of the Fifty Days (fifty days after Passover). It was a busy time for the temple, and for shops and hotels and guest houses. The city was thronging with pilgrims and tourists for it was a popular time to be in Jerusalem. It was warmer than Passover and even in the high, cool air of Jerusalem people who couldn't afford an indoor lodging could camp out with the animals. It was a good time for making money – as long as you knew how to haggle in ten languages – on top of Greek and God's own Aramaic. The people of Jerusalem were busy about their proper business, scurrying around in their proper little courses just as they had always done, without interruption, for time immemorial.

And the priests, the sanctified ones who stand before the altar of God to offer sacrifice, they had their work cut out. Since they alone could manage the people's converse with God, they were very busy when all the people, not only of Jerusalem, but pious Israelites from all over the world, came to acknowledge their God. It was not easy keeping up both with the huge public and official sacrifices and with the many private offerings and consecrations that people wanted to make at this auspicious time. They sweated in the sun and the dust of the temple, preparing for the ceremonies that would take place in the later afternoon.

Inside, in the great room where Jesus' followers were gathered (What a good thing there was someone who had a big house in Jerusalem!) more than a hundred of them were together. They wanted to celebrate Pentecost too – but what could they do? Dare they go out like everyone else? Had the people and the priests forgotten about them so that it would be safe, or were they still watching and hostile? What kind of reception would followers of Jesus get, now, in Jerusalem?

Miriam, his mother, was with them. They were praying. And she was thinking – still trying to catch up on everything that had happened in a very few years. Only four years ago he was still her boy – in spite of the wonderful things she had been told about him. It had seemed to make no difference in all those years he had been growing up. She had been wondering if he should marry soon – the eldest son, and his sisters all settled now. Miriam could look out on her family of children and see them, strong healthy young women and men, a family to be content with – even if they did quarrel a lot. But Jesus had not married, and the family had been discussing it, when suddenly John had started up in Judea and all the talk was of prophets and Messiahs, and no one knew what she knew, and she did not know if Jesus thought what she thought, and suddenly he was gone to follow John, and before the family could get their heads around any of it, he was back in Galilee and telling them about the coming kingdom of God.

Long before then she had learnt that the ways of God were unpredictable even when you had been told what God was going to do; that the eager, bursting hopes you knew God would fulfil

mite yet lie on the other side of uncertainty, disappointment and pain. And then it had all broken about her: the wonder, the vision and the power of God in him: the awe of the words that came from him and yet the comfort and inspiration of his reaching out to the children of God. It'd be all very well if it were Moses or one of the prophets speaking, but how do you cope when your own son comes across like that? The consternation among the neighbors and his ejection from the synagogue; the arguments in the family, and the pain as she realised that her son, her first-born, had other family. But how could anyone refuse the will of God? What else could ever be good? When God's time comes, even the strong and wise plans of a mother, and the honor and concern of a family have to give way.

Out in the streets of Jerusalem, the festival preparations were reminding some people of the last big festival, the Passover just gone, when a Galilean prophet had turned up in the temple talking all kinds of things; but he had taught treason and the priests had handed him over to be crucified. He seemed to have a lot of followers then, but they were all gone now. Probably there would be no excitements this festival – disappointing for anyone who had come for excitement, but all the better for business and getting on with life.

In the cool interior everyone had gone quiet. You could hear the soft trickle of water from a jug as someone poured to slake their thirst. It was still early in the morning – not nine o'clock yet – but you sensed that outside the sun was climbing to its strength, where the heat would begin to bake the streets and the light off the white stones would blind your eyes. Perhaps a breeze would spring up.

The sound of a woman scolding and a man shouting angrily carried in across the courtyard. They were speaking some foreign language, probably some pilgrims frustrated by one of the tricks Jerusalem was always springing on foreigners – even if they were Israelites. It died down, till once again you only heard the muffled rattling of traffic in the street, seeming much further off than it was, thru the stone walls of the courtyard and the house.

Waiting like this, and not knowing, and feeling fritened because of everything that had happened, they ought to have been unhappy. But you couldn't feel unhappy – not that. Not after everything that had happened. They hardly knew what it ment, or what they could do with it, or what it ment in the plans of God, which had turned out so unpredictable, but the Lord was alive! Was he coming back to them – here? Was that the plan?

Miriam was thinking. She was beginning to realise what it was to grow old – the incredible joy of it, in spite of the painful changes. That joy, for her, should have been destroyed by what happened at Passover, and it seemed it was, but it had grown again, irresistibly, as she had realised that her son was alive – and how alive! More alive than his living brothers and sisters. Many of his followers had seen him, in several places. She had not, but she knew that that didn't matter. Until a few years ago she would have said that he was closer to her than to anyone, and then all that had changed; but now she knew that, tho he had been crucified, he was closer to her than ever, and closer to many others, with the closeness of God himself.

People said that bereaved mothers were sentimental about such things, and probably they were, but Miriam knew – it was in her body, heart and soul – a deep, unshakable presence of God, and of her son, that was so real it made seeing irrelevant. It was a blessing greater than any her eyes could ever bring her, and stronger than her pain – stronger even than the terrible pain of that day when he had died so horribly. Even now she had to fite against that memory, for how can a mother bear it when she sees her own child tortured to death? A sword had cut thru her heart,

sorrow cruel enuf to kill, and yet it had not killed her, and had not even killed her joy and her hopes for Israel. For stronger than death was the blessing of God that filled her and was now all around her, flowing among her son's followers who were there with her. Soon they too would see that they no longer needed to see, and then what could hinder the unstinted blessings of God?

The friends and followers of Jesus were not sure why they were here, but whatever else they could or couldn't do, they knew they could pray. They knew that, if they couldn't go out and join in the temple sacrifices, then praying to God as Jesus had shown them was, if anything, better. They prayed, and in their prayer they honored the name of God, asking for the rule of God to begin, here in Jerusalem, but in all the world too. They asked that the will of God be done - for who, once they have heard and known Jesus, desires anything so much as the fulfilment of God's intentions here on earth every bit as much as in heaven? They prayed, and as they prayed the silence grew deeper, for they were in the presence of God.

What was that? Who said "Clap your hands!?" And where was the wind coming from, roaring thru the house with the power of a storm in full spate? At least, you could hear a wind, but it didn't blow you about at all. It was as if you were being carried upon it, moving with it so that you felt nothing. But you were still in the house, in the dim shade of an inner room in Jerusalem. Only it wasn't dim now. In the air about them there was fire – fire that blazed and divided and flickered like flames over their heads, a single flame burning over the head of each one.

And all around them, within them, without them, the movement and power of God, God's Spirit was: a joy, a hope, a realisation, a powerful, onward-driving recollection, a freedom, an end of fear, and a certainty of praise to be shared and shouted, from the rooftops if necessary: God, and God Now; the time of waiting was ended and over, the time of doing the will of God in the kingdom of God has come at last, Now!

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As they poured out of the house, shouting and praising God, the crowd outside wondered what was going on. For there was a crowd outside. The loud, rushing noise of a wind had not been in their private imagination but had been heard in public, and people came running to see what it was. The couple who had been arguing with a trader in some Phrygian dialect, frustrated that he didn't seem to understand what they considered plain Greek, caught the sound of someone talking about God in Greek – or so they thought, until they realised the man was actually shouting in their own Phrygian dialect. They mite have been standing outside the Phrygian synagogue in Antioch!

Lots of others were gathering around, crowding the street. They seemed to be all sorts, pilgrims from all over the place, like you got in the busier parts of Jerusalem at festival, but they were all listening, as if they all spoke Phrygian Greek for preference! Or maybe not all – maybe some of them didn't understand, because someone shouted out: "They're all drunk!" and quite a few of the crowd laughed. One of the people who were pouring out of the house (some of them were even dancing!) had jumped up onto a ledge of the wall, and quick as you like he answered the guy (Good heavens! Was he Phrygian too?) "Come on, mate, it isn't nine o'clock yet! Even I can't get drunk that quick!"

Jesus Messiah

When it fell to Peter to explain to a crowded street in Jerusalem the coming of God's power upon earth, he reminded them of what the prophet Joel had said:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on everyone.
All your sons and daughters will proclaim the will of God,
your young people will see visions and your old will dream dreams.
Even on the ordinary working people I will pour out my Spirit in those days
and they will declare the word of God. (Acts 2: 17 – 18, Joel 2: 28 - 29)

Peter, whose work was on the fishing boats, spoke of the fulfilment of God's plan in the Spirit of God. God's power and authority, no longer reserved for priests and scholars, or for warrior leaders and the rarely appearing prophet, would be poured out all the time on the most ordinary people: even on the bin men who take away your household rubbish, and the cleaning ladies who come into school each day to sort out the floors.

This, the wonders they witness today, is the fulfilment of those signs that mark the "Day of the Lord", the ending of all things in catastrophe and triumph:

I will spread my signal in the heavens above and signs on the earth below.
The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood
before there dawns the great Day of the Lord,
and all who call out to him will be saved. (Acts 2: 19 – 21, Joel 2: 30 - 31)

Every end foretold is coming together in a new beginning, when people will turn to the Lord.

What could Peter say to them? How could he, how could anyone, talk about God? But God it was. Here was the Spirit of God, that wild breath of God that had filled the warrior leaders in days long ago when Israel needed warriors and God was a leader of warriors; the very closeness of God that had transformed the prophet Elijah and overturned the kingdom; the fire in those powerful voices – Amos and Isaiah and Hosea – who had cried out for justice at the gates of Israel, for righteousness in the people of God; the dove that had hung above the Jordan waters when Jesus of Nazareth came up from his baptism; and that original, primeval breath of God that hovered in the beginning over the waters of chaos, yet everywhere creating new chaos and mayhem like a wild goose in the washing.

And this was God: this at last was all the Law of God, no longer a difficult command but an intoxicating taste of life itself, sweet as honey and filling you with the desire to obey. Here was the power of God, breaking all bounds for the children of Abraham and tearing open their future, a dawn of light inaccessible, yet now shining in the dusty streets of Jerusalem and making all of them fools, drunk indeed with the new wine that flowed in the very streets of God's city.

He couldn't tell them all this at once, he could only remind them of the images of Joel, and point to the acts of God in Jesus, whose power and vindication had come.

"Men of Israel!" said Peter. (They're all the same: Phrygians, Greeks, Jews, they always address the men, even if half of us are women!) "Listen to what I've got to say!"

The followers of Jesus had much to say to Jerusalem in those early days. Who hadn't heard of Jesus of Nazareth? and everyone knew about the miracles and signs he had done among them. But this city and its politics had given him over to the gentiles to be crucified. In effect, they

had killed him. Now his followers could affirm that all this had been done within the knowledge and the plan of God, who had raised him from the dead.

David had said in one of the psalms:

You will not abandon my soul to the underworld
or let your consecrated servant sink into decay.
You have shown me the way of life
and I shall be filled with joy in your presence. (Acts 2: 27 - 28, Psalm 16: 10 - 11)

David, they said, had been speaking not of himself, but of the Messiah. For God has raised Jesus to life as they, his followers, could testify. And that God had raised him further to the heights of glory at God's right hand, the people themselves can now testify. For what the crowd in Jerusalem have seen and heard this morning is God's own Spirit, given unstinting in the name and the power of Jesus. As David had said in another psalm:

The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand and I will set your enemies as a footstool
under your feet. (Acts 2: 35, Psalm 110: 1)

The whole house of Israel can be sure of this: that "this same Jesus whom you crucified, God has constituted Lord and Messiah."

What were they to do? Many of the crowd were impressed – profoundly moved and willing to hear from Peter what they should do to respond to the unexpected revelation of the Messiah. They were to do what they had been told to do from the coming of John the Baptist: to repent, to let their lives be transformed from evil to good. Only a profound change of heart, of attitude and outlook, can cope with the coming of the Messiah, for his coming exposes the world in its selfishness, greed and fear; dates and consigns that world to its well-earned shame, and they, the people of Israel are to be part of it no longer. They are to escape from the perverse and obstinate generation that always constitutes the world in its power, wealth and honor. As they did with John, they are to be baptised as a sign of their repentance, for the promise of God stretches out before them as a new future opening to them and to their children. They will be endowed with the Spirit, the energy and authority of God.

The world in which they would now live and their children grow up was going to be different. And some of that difference was at once apparent. Over the weeks that followed, a new community, a fellowship of brothers (and sisters) sprung up, taught by those the Messiah had sent, meeting together and praying together. There were signs and miracles at the hands of the apostles, but perhaps the greatest miracle was the one that the twelve had thought they would never see: the rich emptying their pockets. For those who had land and property sold it, sharing out the proceeds among the community – each one receiving what they needed. The Spirit inspired in them an early version of communism, without any of the violence, and in deep friendship with God.

Yes, as Jesus had foretold, even the rich can be inspired to open their hands and receive the kingdom of God. This was world-changing repentance, and from that day on thousands flocked to join the followers of Jesus. They were no longer afraid to go to the temple, but went there as a body, and earned the respect and admiration of the people.

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Jesus Messiah

The Messiah is come and is with them still. His works are still the works of healing and mercy that they had seen thruout Galilee, only now the power and beauty of those works is in the hands of his followers. There was a cripple whose family brought him every day to beg at the temple gate. He looked hopefully at Peter and John one day, as they came by on their way to pray in the temple. But Peter had no money. What he did have was the power of the risen Lord, and so he said to the cripple:

What I've got I'll give you. In the name of Jesus the Messiah stand up and walk. (Acts 3:6)

The cripple got up. His broken feet and ankles were healed, and he followed them into the temple, literally jumping for joy in the restored soundness of his body. Inevitably, the miracle attracted attention. A crowd was gathering round them as they used to gather around Jesus, and there in the temple itself, as Jesus had once been, they, his disciples, were the centre of attention. Peter explained what was happening.

His first task was to puncture the adulation. The crowd was staring at him and John as if it were some power or holiness of theirs that had achieved this feat. No the power and authority manifest here is rooted not in Peter and John, but in Israel's own history and in Jesus who has fulfilled it. What they have witnessed is the work of their own God, the God of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The power of God has honored his servant Jesus.

But Jerusalem had dishonoured Jesus, rejected him and given him over to the Romans. Worse than that, when the Roman governor offered a reprieve they had clamoured for the reprieve of a murderer, for Barabbas to go free and for the Messiah to be crucified. It is necessary to say again that the words of those first disciples in Jerusalem can not be taken to justify any kind of anti-semitism. Here are Israelites telling other Israelites what has gone badly wrong in their recent history, what God has made of it and what it now means for them; just as we must often tell ourselves what has gone wrong in our own history and how we are challenged to put it right. What Jerusalem and the Jewish population did has been echoed again and again since then by Christian governments and Christian populations. It is not just a Jewish world, it is a gentile world too, where it was only the Romans who had the power to carry out the Jewish will – and not a uniquely Jewish will but a typically gentile one as well.

The authorities of the time needed to get rid of Jesus, and they knew how to carry their people with them. So Barabbas went free and Jesus died. But in every age there are authorities who know how to handle their people, to manage in the nation's interests, even if that sacrifices a few innocents and diverts the normal course of justice. We saw it in America in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra scandal. People who were no better than brigands had channelled arms to terrorists in Honduras, and thousands of people had been tortured and butchered in Nicaragua. But when it came to the crunch and the ongoing interests of business and government in the United States were at stake, the public was persuaded to look for leniency: a gentle rebuke for Oliver North and a pardon for his accomplices; the gun-runners to the Contras soon set free, while death was demanded for a Sandinista government that dared to put the poor before the interests of US business. John Negroponte may walk at large to denounce other people's terrorists in the United Nations, but the leaders of a government that sided so radically with the poor must be hounded out of office.

Neither the people of Jerusalem nor their leaders knew what they were doing. (They knew they were carrying thru a vital real-politikal manoeuvre, or they knew they were clamouring for the

blood of the enemy. But they did not know what they were doing. They never do.) And Peter sees this with understanding. They are still the people to whom God reaches out in mercy, and God's way of putting things right is not punishment to destruction but a forgiveness that invites and encourages repentance:

Repent. Let your lives be turned around and your sins taken away from you. (Acts 3:19)

Unexpected tho it mite be, the people of Jerusalem may read the history of these days in their own scriptures, for this is the fulfilment long since foretold to them of their history. Moses, their law-giver and founder of the nation, had spoken of a future leader like himself for them to listen to and to obey as a prophet. Now Jesus is that one and in accepting him they will be accepting their own past and the long history of promise that goes back to their ancestor Abraham. With Jesus, they will enter into their own rightful inheritance and the future God has always intended for them.

This was dangerous talk, for the authorities had not changed. A little healing, a little talk of God would do no harm, but when you pulled a crowd and started talking of the Messiah you were in trouble. The Sanhedrin had delt with Jesus, but now there were others invoking his name and causing trouble in the temple as he had done. And these people were talking of resurrection! The Jerusalem priests, as we saw, had never been keen on the doctrine of resurrection, which the Pharisees held. They saw no reason or evidence for the popular belief that the dead would rise, but they tolerated it. They had to co-operate with the Pharisees. Only here were extremists claiming that Jesus of Nazareth had alredy risen, and, worse than that, that he was even now the Messiah.

Peter and John were hauled before the Sanhedrin, two men from Galilean fishing families to stand before the aristocracy of Israel, before the representatives of priestly families whose pedigree went back centuries and their office to the time of Moses and Aaron. The Sanhedrin demanded an explanation, which Peter was only too willing to give them. He who had once been scared of the High Priest's kitchen maid, now faced the High Priest and a whole panel of priestly aristocrats¹ and tho he was under arrest he boldly proclaimed: "This man has been healed by the Name of Jesus the Messiah, the one you crucified, whom God has raised from the dead. Jesus is the cornerstone, tho you, the builders, rejected him, and his alone is the name by which we are to be saved."

The message of the Messiah is not only for private citizens and pious churches; it is for national governments and ruling elites as well, challenging them to repent, to recognise the error of their assumptions and the rule of God that overturns all their calculations. Jesus is pre-eminently the stone rejected by the builders, the cornerstone of a new order in the nation and in the world, and if the nation in all its power rejects the rule of Jesus the Messiah, his followers are emboldened to speak out and to tell even Presidents and Parliaments the truth.

It's not what Presidents and Parliaments want to hear, but sometimes they have to bide their time. Tho they have the power to kill, there is sometimes space for the gospel to be boldly spoken. The Sanhedrin, this time, were persuaded to go cautiously. They had delt with Jesus at considerable risk. Careful planning had gone into his capture and execution, and it wouldn't be easy to pull off another coup like that strait away. Once again, they had to deal with popularity, and they would need time to reassert their influence. Like successful aristocracies everywhere, they knew just how much they had to nurture the population at large and keep them on side. Meanwhile, too, they would have to forge new plans and new alliances. Maybe Herod ...

Jesus Messiah

Peter and John were sent away with a warning, the clear warning of authority that they were not to speak of Jesus; but Peter challenged them to judge whose authority they had to obey: the Sanhedrin's, or God's authority now manifest in Jesus.

Whatever else it is, to be renewed in the Spirit of God and so to encounter the living reality of Jesus is not just to believe a doctrine or even to have hope in a vision. It is a powerfully transforming experience of present reality. It changes hearts, searching out and lighting up the deepest corners; it changes lives, healing the most evil deeds and the saddest regrets; it changes societies and nations, challenging and overturning their systems of power and exploitation; it changes the world. Jesus is the Messiah, and the authority and energy of God is active in the world in his followers.

The adventure of the kingdom has begun in earnest. It is dangerous and joyful at once, filled with challenge and enthusiasm, for in that adventure the world is being changed. People are being changed. What once seemed impossible, that the rich might even empty their bank accounts for the sake of the kingdom of God, is now becoming commonplace. There is a new sense of solidarity in the community of Jesus' followers, and those who have property and money actually want to share it. The Spirit of God is launched upon the world and the adventure of life with entirely new rules – rules we can only learn as we go – has begun at last:

There was a tremendous solidarity among them and no one wanted to keep their possessions as their own. They shared everything. The apostles (the twelve) witnessed powerfully to the resurrection of Jesus. No one in the community was in poverty, for those who owned land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds to the apostles. From these resources each one was helped according to their need. (Acts 4: 32 – 35)

It wasn't that a puritanical new law was introduced for Jesus' followers. It was what they wanted to do. Nor was it a temporary enthusiasm for people who expected the immediate return of Jesus. Luke, who writes long afterwards, perhaps two generations later, records it with approval as evidence of the change that the Spirit of God brings about, even in the hearts of the rich. Here at last is the kingdom of God coming about in the followers of Jesus; here at last is our daily bread, which God inspires us to give to one another.

The sequel to the gospels which Luke wrote is known as the "Acts of the Apostles", but that title was given by later readers, not by the author. In fact, it's not a very apt title, because some of the major "actors" (Stephen, Philip, Barnabas and James) are not apostles; only two "apostles" (Peter and Paul) play a major role and Peter drops unceremoniously out of the picture less than half way thru. As for Paul, he is left, in the end, under arrest in Rome, without our being told how his trial goes. No, the "Acts" is not about the apostles. It is about God, about God's definitive commitment into history. It tells of the vindication and the glorification of Jesus Christ as the truly and finally decisive act of God in history. The book is, in fact, the "Acts of God", God's giving of God's Spirit as life and adventure for everyone, and the work of God who transforms the world in the power of Jesus the Messiah.

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The transformation of wealth which the first Christian community experienced in itself was indeed the Spirit of God at work, but it wasn't without problems. People had all the usual needs and the usual excuses for arguing over them, and being enthusiastic followers of Jesus didn't

magic away human nature or rub out their tendency to make an issue of things. Among them, as in every community there were people too poor to feed themselves, and if they couldn't look to their own companions for help, where else could they go? Widows in particular were vulnerable. Unless their families were wealthy, they were, without husbands, without everything. They had to look to their new community, their fellow-followers of Jesus, for help.

The Jesus-followers had taken with enthusiasm to sharing their wealth, but there was still the mechanics of administration. Generosity is one thing – and a great thing – but you still have to organise it all. Your generous relief has still to be channelled to the people who need it, and in proportion to their need. A system was set up for distributing the wealth of the community to those who were in need. The widows would be provided for at the community's expense. But, as always in distribution, problems arose.

“The Hebrew widows are getting more help than the Greeks!”

Clearly there were divisions in the early Christian community. Even if they were all Israelites and all followers of Jesus, there were differences between the local Aramaic-speaking members of the community, and others who had spent most of their days abroad in the diaspora, and were now Greek-speaking, though they had come back to settle in the land of their ancestors.

The “apostles”, that is the leaders Jesus had originally chosen and sent to be his witnesses, were appealed to. They now had great authority in the new community and their decisions would be respected. But how could they give their time to sorting out the administration and distribution of alms? People were to be fed, but could the apostles give their time to waiting at the tables? They had a commission from Jesus himself, to preach and to pray, and where would their preaching and their praying be if they got entangled now in the difficulties of community administration?

A wise decision was taken to appoint a number of “diakonoi” (“deacons” as the word became in English, but it means household servants) who would take over the supervision of community resources and arrange a fair and just distribution to everyone's satisfaction. They would be good administrators and organisers, endowed with the Spirit of God for their task (for all tasks in the new community come from the Spirit of God) and the apostles would be left free to pray and to preach.

It was a wise decision, as far as human beings, even the followers of Jesus, are able to be wise, and it was a beginning of the sorting of roles and tasks in the Christian community that has gone on ever since. (Or should have gone on ever since – unfortunately we have frequently fossilised our arrangements as if the changes once made are made forever, and no further change is ever to be called for.)

But the wise distribution of roles, carried out with the full authority of the Christian community, the incipient Church, with the recommendation of their given leaders, was not forever, and was not even what they originally planned. We make our wise arrangements – as we should – but God reserves the right to rearrange them all, with very little ceremony about it. The Spirit, the wild goose, had other plans than the carefully thought-out provisions of the apostles and their community.

We don't know how it happened and what went wrong, but the next thing we know is that one of those appointed to the administration, to free up the apostles' time “for prayer and preaching”

Jesus Messiah

had emerged as the community's foremost preacher. Stephen, one of the diakonoi, spoke up without compromise for the Messianic claim. In particular, he showed how Jesus' actions and the events of his life fulfilled the scriptures themselves. Stephen, it turned out, was not only a preacher, but a most persuasive preacher, and he didn't mind into what hostile territory he took the message. He was soon engaging the more conservative Jews in public argument, and he had a knowledge of the scriptures that they could not dismiss.

They argued with him, but could not answer his wisdom or the Spirit with which he spoke.
(Acts 6: 10)

Whether it was his success or his manner, he was too provoking for the now defensive Jewish establishment to take. What's more, he wasn't really "one of us" – his Greek name indicates that he was one of the Greek speaking diaspora, not a home-grown Jew. It was decided that he must be stopped. Like Jesus before him, he was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin where he was charged with blaspheming Moses and God.

Unlike Jesus, Stephen defended himself at great length¹, arguing that the whole history of their ancestors, of Abraham, the patriarchs, Moses and David pointed to Jesus, and that it was only the same ancient stubbornness, shown by Israel in the past, that now refused to accept the Messiah sent from God. The Sanhedrin were infuriated. Far from persuading, he was antagonising them. Finally, he asserted the claim that had been the condemnation of Jesus:

I can see heaven opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.
(Acts 7: 56)

Stephen proclaimed the unity of heaven and earth and in both of them God's glory invested in Jesus the Messiah. Here was a claim they could not accept: the criminal they had condemned standing now at God's right hand, ruling as the Lord of Israel. Covering their ears and shouting him down, they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. Stephen the diakonos had preached to effect, and as they stoned him he prayed the prayer of the dying Jesus:

"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."
(Acts 7: 60)

Tho the plan had been to free up the apostles for prayer and preaching, it was, in the end, the deacon who, "moved by the Spirit"¹ both preached and prayed and did so in all the power and authority of Jesus the Messiah.

It is right that we make our plans and organise ourselves sensibly to carry out the work of Jesus. We would not be serving him if we failed to do so. The gifts and roles to which he calls us need to come together in harmony and order, but not to exclude the Spirit's breaking into them with sovereign surprise and adventure. We do not know where we are going, and we do not know how God is getting us there. What we do know, we have to manage as wisely as we can, but our wisest arrangements must always be provisional.

You can sort it all out and give one person oversight of the whole organisation; you can make another responsible for the administration, directing clerks and filers and secretaries; you can appoint a man with a persuasive voice and commanding presence to be leader, or a person of ideas and explanations to be teacher, a gifted speaker to preach and a skilful dealer with people

¹ Acts Ch. 7

to be bishop or pope; and a good woman with a sharp eye for dirt, and work-willing, to be the cleaning lady. But the Spirit of God, as chaotic as the wind, as fast as fire, and about as respectful of orderly and well thought-out arrangements as a wild goose in the washing, will turn the whole structure upside down and shake out something unthought of to be God's next masterpiece. Just when you settle down to run your system according to plan, you find that the power, the energy, the decision, the drive and the authority of God, the Spirit of God, is with the cleaning lady.

Anyone who tries to get from Acts a definitive description of the church, or the rules by which it is to be organised, should think again. What Luke shows us is a church being surprised, even in its most careful plans, by the surprising and overriding decisions of God. After Stephen's death, there was a wider attack on the followers of Jesus living in Jerusalem – or perhaps it was only an attack on the Greek-speaking ones, the all-too-outspoken outsiders. At any rate, it was another of the “deacons” who, driven from the city, took word of the Messiah first to Samaria and then, thru a providential meeting with an Ethiopian court official, to the remotest of known countries.¹

In the power of God, the good news of the kingdom was going places very quickly and there was no time to plan the mission. For the rule of God has arrived and it breaks upon us with incredible speed, energy and authority. We are not waiting for a greater power to come or a wider authority to be granted. We are not holding back until the Messiah comes to exert powers he has hitherto kept in reserve. God is Now, giving God's Spirit to God's children. Not even in heaven does a greater power exist. Never in all time, not even at the end of history, will there be a greater giving of power and freedom. The Spirit of God, God's own breath, God's life and adventure, is given to God's people, and this is the present work and achievement of Jesus the Messiah.

The coming of God's Spirit is the ultimate breakthrough. All the power that was at work in Jesus, far from being extinguished by his death or withdrawing from the world that had rejected him, is every bit as effective in the continuing world of his followers. The life and energy of God that was in him as his own Father's is now free in his followers and in the world he has embraced. All the power of God that will ever be at play in the universe or in heaven, or in the uncreated reality of Godself, is already at work, given, exercised, exploded into our world and our history.

God is here, God is with us, and the world we see and touch is the one where his Messiah takes hold of us, rescues us and leads us. We will not go back to that hill outside Jerusalem, looking up into the sky for an insite into the present reality of Jesus the Messiah. Here is where we will find him, and even when the end of all ends comes about and all God's work, the work of the Messiah, is accomplished, it is here that we shall see it. Jesus will return.

There is no call to seek God in any other world than this. To be sure, God is in heaven, and for all we know in many other realms or spheres of being. But we cannot seek God there, and have no need to. For in the Messiah Jesus, God is here, and all we can ever encounter of God we may encounter here.

I will pour out my Spirit on all humankind.

¹ Acts 8: 26ff

Jesus Messiah

All that God is, all that God could ever choose to be, is here, in our world, which, in the work of Jesus the Messiah and with him and thru him is already become the place of God, the holy ground where we meet, and ever shall meet, God.

The kingdom of this world
is become
the kingdom of our God
and of his Christ,
and he shall reign for ever and ever.
Alleluia!

* * *

To believe in Jesus the Messiah is to believe that God's kingdom is in him, that in him God's power and glory are committed without limit to our world and to all that we are within it. It is to come to the end of fear and hesitation, to the death of unbelief, the tearing up of all our cautious securities and the grounding at last of our utter security. It is the banishing of greed and selfishness, overthrown by faith, that now we may believe in the promises of God. Now at last we are free to commit our lives to the Messiah who stands among us.

Now is the time to receive courage from God, to recognise and to believe, reaching out and stepping out in the Messiah's work, to go where he is going and to do what he is doing. Now is the raising of the poor and oppressed, the defending of the weak, the sharing of wealth, the overturning of the world, the revolution of the twenty-first century, which is ours to make – for the Messiah is already making it.

Now is the age of the song of Miriam, and if we, the rich, are afraid of it, let us give away our wealth knowing that all of the past has been forgiven, that God has judged and forgiven it. Now is the day when the confident, proud plans of the powerful, with their armies and their banks and their global media, begin to crumble, brushed aside by the coming of the Messiah and the joy of the dispossessed. And if we, the powerful, are alarmed to hear it, let us hear the song of Zechariah and the forgiveness of God who will take away even our sad power and our entrenched sins, in the dawn of salvation that shines for us too.

For the way is before our feet, the word of God and of God's prophet shows it to us, and the time is Now. Now is the time of the Messiah, and the kingdom of God. Now is the time to scuttle our aircraft carriers and give them honorable burial at the bottom of the oceans; now is the time to assemble our troops and give them their new orders: the gospel as told by Mark. Now is the time to put all our money into the World Bank and give it a new constitution: the gospel as told by Luke. Now is the time to wake up a church that has been sleeping longer than Rip van Winkle and to give it for charter the gospel of Matthew. Now is the time to summon the world and ask its forgiveness for putting out the light, to take the world by the sleeve and show it what we mean by the Acts of God.

Now is the time for our young people to see visions and for our old people to dream dreams, for the song of Miriam to be sung in Congress (or in the parks outside, if they don't know the tune in there); and for Zechariah's song to be sung in the House of Commons (but they'll have to be led from the streets of Westminster, for they certainly don't know the tune in there). It's time now for our children to show us how they conduct the business of the church, and for our old men in Geneva, Canterbury, and Rome to learn their lines in the Christmas play.

It is time to begin.

For all around us, within us, without us, the movement and power of God, the adventure of God, God's Spirit, is: a joy, a hope, a realisation, a powerful, onward-driving recollection, a freedom, an end of fear, and a certainty of praise to be shared and shouted, from the rooftops if necessary: God, and God Now; the time of waiting is ended and over, the time of doing the will of God in the kingdom of God has come at last, Now!

Now is the dawn of God's energy, the first day of God's adventure. Now is the Spirit of God.

Now is the beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah.