

Rt Rev Sally Foster-Fulton Sermon for the service at St Giles' Cathedral, 21 May 2023

Did you know this book was dedicated to you? Don't you recognise yourself, Theophilus? For in the very first verse of Acts, the author tells us it is written for Theophilus, the 'God-lover.' So, it was meant for the twelve who followed and the 5000 who were fed and us, the ones here all these millennia later. The author of Acts says this is the story of the beginning of the body's work – the work that began when Jesus no longer walked the earth on his own two feet, but in the hearts and minds and spirits of Theophilus. And I must say, God-lovers, I love this story!

It is rich in symbolism and imagery, injects insight into every syllable – I remember when I was a probationer (yes, I can remember that far back 😊) that Graham Finch, who was chaplain at one of our conferences, likened sacred stories to a treasure chest in a cave. You dive deep, come out and bring an insight into the light and say 'look at this!' And over and over again, the story speaks to you, shares its wisdom, offers new treasure – such is a sacred story. Such is *this* sacred story.

What does this ancient treasure of a story want to share with us today, Theophilus? In the 8th verse, Jesus tells his disciples where they will witness/where their love will unpack itself. 'And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and in Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Very specific places and an intentional and deliberate sequence – first Jerusalem, then all of Judea, then Samaria, and, finally, to the ends of the earth.

I wonder how they felt about where they were to begin? Consider the context and the characters: Peter, who denied him, Thomas, who doubted him, all of them who had hunkered down in that upper room. Judas wasn't there, but we all remember that story. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem. So the change is to start in us – in some of the things we need to do differently – it is poignant and powerful that Jerusalem is where they just failed, the very place where Jesus was executed; the very place where they were scattered and confused and afraid. The story says they must begin there. Can't we hear them, can't we hear ourselves. Not Jerusalem! Anywhere but Jerusalem! People aren't going to listen to us here – we failed here. But that is precisely where Jesus tells them and us to begin – exactly there. We live out our mission when we are brave enough to live and respond differently, even in the places we've failed - to stay and be different in our most difficult, most uncomfortable, most

fraught, and fragile places. To be a church that admits our failings, forgives the failings of others and lives as the changed-beings Jesus Christ has set us free to be. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem – in that broken relationship, in that rift that never healed, in that time or place where you might have been at fault, where you let the side down – where you let yourself down. You will be my witnesses there. Not an easy task – especially because we know we have to start there if we're ever going to go anywhere else. We have to be changed beings where we are.

You will be my witnesses in Judea. Judea is known and familiar territory. Judea was home turf/hometown/the wonderful everyday ... Like the wisemen at the beginning who went home a different way, this story points to new life in the local. Where everybody knows us – or thinks they do – in the ordinariness of every day. Go home – you'll find me there. You'll represent me there - in how we treat the ones we love the most, the ones who get on our very last nerve, the ones we share our homes with, live alongside, share the street, the neighbourhood, our amenities with. All day, every day, day to day – in the little decisions that turn your life one way or another – not the easiest place to be a witness, when you stop and think about it. But maybe the most rewarding?

And then, you will be my witnesses in Samaria. Such a clever story. Such a shocking story! The Samaritans? Come on! They're the ones History called betrayers, betrayed the Jewish nation by mixing with their captors during exile. The ones who'd stayed and married and worked with gentiles. Two communities who did not speak or touch or engage. Samaria! What an astonishing place to specify ... But remember who's giving the command – the one who told the story of the Good Samaritan, the one who had his longest recorded conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well (Samaritan and Woman – seriously!) Then it becomes apparent that, for Jesus, Samaria is a very important place. But again, can't we hear the response. You've got to be kidding. They hate us in Samaria and if truth be told we aren't awfully fond of them either. How can we present you alive with many convincing proofs when we are so at odds?

The unpacking of who we can be when we get over ourselves to get to Jesus – when we love despite our differences. Internally, as a church, there is division, yes, and even in that division we are called to love. If we cannot get along with each other, can we really expect anybody else to? If we cannot get along with each other, can we really expect anyone else to listen to our calls for peace?

You will be my witnesses in Samaria – in how you treat those you disagree with, those you don't understand, don't like, those you fear – in places where concrete answers and 'being right' gets challenged by love. You will be my witnesses in Samaria.

Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria – start there. And only when you have been witnesses there, can you be witnesses to the ends of the earth. You will be mine to the ends of the earth - the ends of the earth. But start where you are.

In the story, as the disciples were gazing into Heaven, watching him go, two messengers said "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

He will come in the same way as you saw him go – loving, forgiving, healing, walking and working with the poor, marginalised and unjustly treated. He will come in the same way as you saw him go – teaching us to love each other with no guard rails, to seek unity and peace, not only to seek it, but to build it. He will come in the same way we saw him go – breaking down barriers that divide us, upending tables of injustice, calling us into the stormy waters and upholding us there. We don't need to stand looking into heaven because he is right here; lift your gaze to each other and there he is.

Theophilus, the story does it one last time, offers us a jewel, tiny but perfect – easy to miss. They travelled a Sabbath day's journey – Religious law said you were permitted to travel 2,000 cubits on the Sabbath about 1.2 km. ($\frac{3}{4}$ mile). Not far. Sometimes love, hope, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation isn't as far away as you/we think. Sometimes, we just need to make a move.

Did you know this account was dedicated to you? Do you recognise yourself? So then, my dear Theophilus... .. make your move.... make your dramatic move... maker your brave move....and in the moving.... go well.... and go in passion.... and go in power. Amen.