

**The Community of St Cuthbert:
Spiritual Growth Group Study Guide
April – May 2023**



Easter Season Sessions

These studies were prepared for us by Edmund Milwain, our Students and Internationals worker at St Nics.

They allow you – if you wish – to follow the lectionary Easter readings through the Easter season, which we will be using in our Sunday morning sermon series. However you can do the studies at any speed. If you decide to follow the Sunday sermons at St Nics, then the dates work out like this:

Week of:

17 – 21 Apr	Acts 2:14, 22-32	= study
24 – 28 Apr	Acts 2:14, 36-41	= prayer and worship
1 – 5 May	Acts 2:42 – end	= study
8 – 12 May	Acts 7:54 – end	= prayer and worship
15 – 19 May	Acts 17:22-31	= study
22 – 26 May	Acts 1:6-14	= acts of service

Week One – Acts 2:14, 22-32

Bible Study

Scripture and the Resurrection

We are about to commence a series of studies on the Book of Acts. When we begin reading a Bible book, it can be a good idea to think about who is writing the book and why this book might have been written. Acts is the sequel to the gospel of Luke, so let's have a look at some reasons why Luke is writing.

Read Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-5.

- Who is Luke writing to?
- What reasons does Luke give for writing?
- Who is Luke writing about?
- What do we learn about Theophilus? Does this affect how and what Luke might write?

As you have just read, Jesus tells the disciples they will be baptised with the Holy Spirit. By Acts 2:14a this has happened and Peter is speaking to a crowd of people from many nations through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Read Acts 2:14a, then Acts 2:22-32.

- Who is Peter addressing?
- What are the main points of Peter's speech in vv.22-24?

In Acts 2:25-28, Peter quotes verses from Psalm 16 and then, in vv. 29-32, explains what they mean to those who are listening to him. Peter uses scripture to understand what is happening in his own time, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

- Do we use scripture like this in today's church? You might like to think of some examples.
- How have you found scripture to be relevant in your own life? In what ways?

We have just celebrated Easter—a time of year, when we remember the truth of Jesus’ resurrection and his continued presence with us by His Holy Spirit. Peter is strongly defending this truth in the passage.

- What does the truth of the resurrection mean for you?
- What does it mean for the modern world?

Week Two – Acts 2:14, 36-41

Prayer and Worship

Repentance

Listen to this worship song – *O Come to the Altar* (you might like to sing together): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpfuKKH_SCE

- What words or phrases stand out to you? Keep them in mind as we move through the study.

Read Acts 2:14a, 36-41.

This week we continue Peter’s speech to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. Verse 36 states that Jesus has been made ‘Lord and Messiah’. Sometimes we use words or phrases so much that we forget what they actually mean. ‘Lord’ means that Jesus has been given ultimate authority, while ‘Messiah’ is a Jewish term for the one who will save God’s people (Christians interpret Jesus as the Messiah).

- Many of our worship songs involve singing about Jesus as Lord and Saviour (Messiah)—what does it mean for us to say and sing that Jesus is Lord and Messiah?
- Why might this provoke such a strong reaction in the crowd in v. 37?

In verse 37, those in the crowd are ‘cut to the heart’, by Peter’s words, perhaps especially the way they are complicit in crucifying Jesus, but they are unsure

what to do about it. They ask the disciples what they ought to do. Peter tells them to repent and be baptised. This gives them forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Notice that even after crucifying Christ, when the crowd repents they are given the gifts of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit.

- This passage highlights that repentance is good news. How do you think of repentance?
- At all our Sunday services, we say the confession together because we all fall short of how we ought to act. Do you find there are things that cut you to the heart?
- Repentance does not mean guilt and shame—the fruit of repentance is joy and freedom, in God’s forgiveness. Have you experienced this joy and freedom on account of repentance before?

Take a few minutes in silence to pray, asking the Holy Spirit to reveal places in your life where you need repentance. Then pray for each other as a group, rejoicing in Jesus as Lord and Messiah, who desires freedom for His people.

Finish with this worship song (*Boldly I Approach*) and pay attention to the joy and freedom that are found in coming to Christ:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QDnVD7gu5Y>

Week Three – Acts 2:42-47

Bible Study

A modern church with ancient roots

Read Acts 2:42-47.

Acts is a book that, among other things, describes the life of the Church for the first generation of believers in Jesus Christ. This passage describes some of the practices of the early Church.

The Apostles' teaching; fellowship; breaking of the bread; and prayer are all mentioned in v. 42. Tom Wright says that these are "often regarded as laying down 'the four marks of the church.'" (*Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (SPCK: 2008))

- Do you recognise these four marks in our own church?
- Why do you think each of these marks is important?
- How have each of these marks developed your own faith?

Re-read v. 43-47.

- What are your impressions of this community of believers?

Often, when reading the book of Acts, it is tempting to think that if only our church today were like the early Church then things would be so much better. The early Church was no stranger to failure, difficulty and scandal however (as is made clear in many of Paul's letters, and also in the book of Revelation chs. 2–3). This picture in Acts 2 is not meant to be an unattainable ideal – it is a picture of ways of being church that we can all learn from and put into practice, even in the midst of our failures.

In v. 43 the community of believers is encouraged by 'signs and wonders' of God's work through the apostles.

- Where do we see God at work in our church? Through whom?

- Might we be challenged to encourage the people identified as the ones through whom God is at work?

Verses 44-45 talk about how the believers shared their possessions and were generous to make sure those who were in need were cared for.

- What do we find challenging about vv. 44-45?
- What do we think motivates their generosity?
- How can this motivate our generosity?

Verses 46-47 describes the day to day life of the believers

- Is Christianity and community a day to day affair for us?
- What emotions characterise the community in vv. 46-47?
- The actions of vv.42-46 lead to 'praising God' in v. 47. How do our actions lead us to praise God?

Week Four – Acts 7:54-60

Prayer and Worship

Persecution

Read Acts 7:54-60.

For some context, Stephen has just finished a lengthy speech to the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling court in Jerusalem), where he has been accused by false witnesses, claiming that Stephen was 'speaking against this holy place and against the law'. In Stephen's speech he recounts some of the history of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, as well as Moses, David, and Solomon. He points out the ways in which these biblical figures (as well as other prophets) were historically persecuted by other Jews themselves, because they were obedient to God.

- Why might Stephen be telling these stories?
- How do these stories link with what happens in Acts 7:54-60?

In verses 55-56, Stephen sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God, in an echo of Daniel 7, which describes the judgement court of God. The difference in the Acts reading is that Jesus is standing to declare judgment, whereas in Daniel he is approaching God. Stephen sees that Jesus has been enthroned as judge of heaven and earth, even as an earthly court judges Stephen.

- Think of some places of injustice in our world. As a group, pray for Jesus to act as judge in these places.
- Pray that God's righteousness and justice would be known in these places, even in the face of evil.

Persecution is an almost continual theme in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, continuing right up to the present day.

- Take some time to pray for the persecuted church in our day
If you need ideas for ways to do this, *Open Doors* is a charity that engages with the persecuted church and has lots of resources for prayer. Maybe you could pick one country on their *World Watch List* and pray for that country during your week. See <https://www.opendoorsuk.org>

Sometimes, some of the worst persecution of Christians happens at the hands of other Christians, just as the prophets were persecuted by the ancient Jews. Stephen's reaction to persecution is forgiveness.

- Are there parts of the church which we sometimes see as enemies?
- Pray for these parts of the church—that the light of Christ would shine through their witness

Even in the midst of persecution, Stephen's focus is on God.

- Take some time to rejoice in the goodness of all that God has done, even in the midst of whatever difficulties we are facing.

Week Five – Acts 17:22-31

Bible Study

Culture and Evangelism

Read Acts 17:22-31.

Just before this passage, Paul has been distressed by the number of idols in the city of Athens and so he reasons with different groups of people. Some philosophers are curious about the ‘strange ideas’ of ‘the good news about Jesus and the resurrection’ of which Paul speaks.

- In what ways have you found that people are interested or curious about Jesus and/or the resurrection?

The philosophers then take Paul to one of their own meetings and ask him to explain what he means. The passage you have just read is Paul’s response to this request. There is a fine balance here: Paul is open about his faith, but not forceful. He invites curiosity, but awaits invitation before explaining.

- How often are we asked about our faith?
- Do we sometimes try and force our faith on others when they have not asked?

In Paul’s speech, he engages with the issue of idols.

- What evidence is there that Paul is very aware of Athenian culture?
- In what ways do you see him encouraging aspects of Athenian culture?
- What things does Paul make clear about God compared to the idols in Athens?

In all cultures there is a tension between aspects of that culture and the gospel. Paul is very careful not to condemn the entire Athenian culture and indeed in v. 27, he affirms that God is close to all of us.

- What does it mean for us to respect other peoples' culture when we engage with evangelism?
- In what ways do we see God as close to or far off from other people?
- What aspects of our own culture (even our own church culture) may need repentance?

At the end of Paul's speech there are a variety of reactions. Paul is at peace that not everyone is persuaded.

- What causes the controversy and different reactions?
- What do you think are some of the core realities of the gospel, which are important in all cultures (even if they might be controversial)? What does Paul think in his speech?

Week Six – Acts 1:6-14

Service

Mission

Read Acts 1:6-14.

The previous five studies have focussed on the results of what happened as a result of this passage. We have been studying the ways that the disciples and early apostles responded to Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension. In vv. 6-8 Jesus gives a new command in response to a question from the apostles.

- What might the apostles be expecting as a response to their question in v.6?
- Who is involved in the growth of the kingdom, based on Jesus' response in v. 8?

In v. 9 Jesus leaves the disciples, but he has promised that he will be with them by his Holy Spirit, which is coming.

- How easy do we find it to trust in Jesus' presence and continued mission, despite him not being physically with us?

Read vv. 10-14.

The disciples are chastised for blankly staring into the sky.

- Why do you think the apostles continued to stare into the sky after Jesus had ascended?
- How does the response of the two men in white encourage the apostles?
- How might that same response challenge us today?

In v.14 the disciples are waiting in prayer for the Holy Spirit. It is tempting to run straight into the mission of the book of Acts—to go straight to the amazing miracles that happen. But it starts in prayer; the apostles are led by the Holy Spirit into their mission through prayer.

- Take some time to pray as a group, trying to listen to what God might be saying about how we are called to serve. We might like to think about:
 - How might we be 'standing here looking into the sky?'
 - What are we being called to pray and wait for?
 - How is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives and the lives of those around us?
 - How might God be calling us to serve, both as an individual and as a group?