

1.The Beginning of the Christian community

Introduction –

Some thoughts [which I am sure you already know]

1. The community that we belong to is that of Jesus Christ. He is its head and so He has encouraged and protected it for over 2000 years. He has kept it alive and still governs it. Christianity is not just an idea or a philosophy or moral guideline for life; it is a story of Jesus, a man rooted in history. The first Christians had this story to tell which was so important that they were willing to risk persecution and death in the telling of it. It was the story of Jesus whom they had lived with, watched die and then met again when he resurrected and seen lifted up into the sky., when He ascended. It is the story of God and His love for mankind, His rescue of them and the dawning of a new age. It is the good news, the Gospel, which had long been anticipated in OT writings. To study the church's history is to see how Jesus, as the risen and ascended Christ is continuing work among His people by the Spirit.

2. We need to distinguish between the Kingdom of God and the Church. KOG is the rule of God proclaimed by Jesus as having come in His person. We come under his rule and belong to his Kingdom when we recognise Jesus as King. It applies to a sphere of rule which has particular moral and spiritual qualities which are found in God. It is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit Rom14.17. You seek it and its righteousness. Matt 6.3

The Church is the group of people who follow the King here on earth. They are the ones who proclaim that God's rule is come and by their obedience they show it. They are encouraged to live lives that are in keeping with people who belong to the Kingdom - to love God and one another. The church is spoken of as invisible insofar that it includes those who have gone before us and will come after us and as visible when it is expressed locally. It is catholic - universal -insofar that it is found all over the world and throughout history. Those who belong to the church are those called by God, who have received the Holy Spirit ; they are baptised believers in jesus.

3. A study of any period of history involves selection.

This is especially true for us in this study of Church history for several reasons

a) the early Christian writers themselves selected the material that they passed on so they have already chosen for us. So not every question or line of inquiry is profitable because there simply is not information available.

b) We have chosen those we think are significant but that is only from our very limited perspective. There are many others whose writings we have access to that we won't be looking at and thousands of other " ordinary Christians" of whom we have no record who contributed to the life of the church.

c) We just haven't time to look at all the details that are even available.

d) We come with our own bias as to what we want to find which influences the

selection we make e.g we are concentrating on the spread of the church in Europe, not India or Asia;

also traditionally study of church history has been about the major groups of the church. It does not touch many of the small groups – some of whom were regarded as heretical by the wider traditional church but who were following a particular emphasis of their own, often in reaction to the big scene.

[*Kennedy in Torch of the Testimony* studies some of these small groups on the thesis that God raised them up at particular times in history to keep the flame of Jesus' truth alive. So to Kennedy, rather than being heretical, they were truth-preservers, often persecuted by the recognised "church".]

4. Our emphasis in this study is on the people of God in history and so we need to keep in mind that people in different periods of history faced different questions to the ones we may face today. But they were real people, who persevered to live the truth of Jesus Christ in community with others. So they may have a particular emphasis on life or doctrine, which is not ours at this time. Having said that, there are many things that the people of the early church faced that still impact upon us today so it is instructive to see what some of these issues were and how they faced those issues for it helps us live today. That is one of the reasons for looking at them.

5. In the history of the church there is a mixture of truth and error but God has raised up people to preserve his story truly.

6. We are accepting that New Testament documents are reliable. Many scholars have spent lots of time contesting this premise.

7. We will try to read the original writings of people who have been significant in the development of Christian thought where they are available as our starting point, then to study writings of what later historians.

8. In our study of the church history, we will consider the following

(a) The life of the person

(b) What he believed.

(c) His contribution to the church – to its life, doctrine (beliefs), or government.

(d) What was the happening in the world in which he lived.

(e) What pressures were faced from outside and what pressures were faced from within the body of believers.

9. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* in his preface to Acts writes "These Christians Luke writes about were not spectators of Jesus any more than Jesus was a spectator of God. They were not spectators at all. These Christians were in on the action. God was acting in them, living in them. Guess what that means for us? Christianity is not something to read about; it is something to participate in. Luke wants us to know Christ is where the action is!" Just a little reminder of our focus!

Reading 1 - The Early Church of Jesus Christ - Concentrating on Jesus, the founder and Peter, His apostle

This week concentrates on the New Testament writings., especially the Gospels and The Acts of the Apostles , chapters 1- 12 and the letters of Peter, with the aim of understanding what the church was like in its first years / generation.

You will be very familiar with these readings but to start here will hopefully give a foundation, a base level, for a study of the church and Jesus' intention.

Read through these and make your own summary and bring it to share when we meet.

Jesus – the founding Head of the Church

The church is the work of Jesus Christ. He founded it and through His Holy Spirit continues to direct it.

- Jesus' early life. Luke ch's 1&2; Matthew ch's 1&2;

He was born a Jew, one of God's holy chosen people with whom God had made covenant. God had revealed Himself to them, giving them patterns of worship to approach Him and moral laws to live together. They were monotheists, believing in one God, unlike their surrounding pagan nations. They also looked forward to a time when God would send His own person, the Messiah, to the earth to save His people.

Paul writes of Israel "theirs is the adoption as sons, theirs the divine glory, the covenants , the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the Patriarchs and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ , who is God over all" Romans 9.4-6. "they had been entrusted with the very words of God" Romans 3.2

Into this setting, Jesus came at the "fullness of time".

[notes by G.B. Baird Apostolic Age help to give an understanding of the Jewish background in the 1st century]

John 1.1-18 puts Jesus coming into the much larger cosmic setting of the world.

- The gospels tell of the beginning of his public ministry, around the age of 30 years, with his baptism by John in the Jordan. They relate the events of his life – his baptism, his temptation from the devil to shortcut the establishment of the kingdom other than by the cross, his teaching and miracles, his death on a cross, resurrection and ascension. These books were written to show who Jesus was and particularly to "so that the reader would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing may have life in His name", as John wrote in John 20.31

He came to the lost sheep of the house of Israel., who he saw as shepherdless and lost in need of great care. He came for the outcasts of society – the poor, sick, lame "sin-

ners; tax collectors- those who were sick who needed a doctor.

He came to fulfil the word of Isaiah as the one anointed by the Spirit to preach the good news, set prisoners free, give sight to the blind, release the oppressed and proclaim God's year of favour. Luke 4.18f

He made it clear that God looks on the heart and the heart of man is the source of what he does and says and so man needs a heart renovation. Matthew 5-7; 12. 34-35

- For our purposes in looking at the 'church' we will concentrate on his relationship to his followers – those whom he chose and called to follow him for it is on them that Jesus built his church.

In the gospels, Jesus set out to choose and establish a group of men and women to take his message of redemption for all, to the world after his death. He taught by example, and by word making it clear that He was the long awaited Messiah of the Old Testament [i.e. their scriptures]. These are His Church.

Some of the texts in the gospels that are related to the call and training of the disciples by Jesus.

- Jesus **chooses** followers after he prayed and asked the Father. - he called 12 disciples to be fishers of men Mt4.19. A very mixed bunch, with no obvious standing in the Jewish community. In fact, most were Galileans who were looked down on by the leading Jews of Jerusalem. There was even one who was to betray him. John 6.70

He called them to be "with him" and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority over unclean spirits. Mk 3.13 He commissioned them to proclaim the Kingdom of God at hand - to preach to the lost house of Israel [not Gentiles] to heal and to cast out demons. Mt 10; Mk 6; Lk 9. He also he sent out 70 who returned amazed at the authority they experienced in His name. Lk10.1-24 esp v's 17-24 - he encouraged them to rejoice in their names being written in heaven.

He declared whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is his brother and sister and mother Mt 12.50

He is the bridegroom -while he is with them they rejoice, not fast Mk 2.19

He explained his teaching to them e.g. parable of sower. Mt13 "for to them was granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" Mt13.11; Lk8.10. this was revealed by the father in Heaven. All the time Jesus looks to see what the Father is revealing and then acts on that.

- A turning point comes after **Peter's confession** of Jesus as Christ, Son of the living God. Jesus' observation is that the Father had shown Peter the truth about Him so He builds on that. He declares that he will build his church on such a rock and gives Peter the "keys of the kingdom".

Scholars have debated what Jesus meant by 'rock' - whether He meant the words that Peter spoke or whether the rock is Peter himself. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that it is the person of Peter and so base their doctrine of Apostolic Succession on Peter as the founding rock of the church, who passed this authority to those coming after him by

the laying on of hands which has continued throughout their history from one leader / pope to the next. Mt 16.13ff.

What is clear is that Jesus intended to build a group of people, a church, who would follow him after he physically departed this world, who know that he is the sent one from God and His Son and that it would be built on people, these ones he had chosen; Peter in particular. He assures them that the church will never die because nothing, not even the gates of Hell will be able to overthrow it.

He gives to Peter "the keys of the kingdom" and authority to bind and loose. Leon Morris thinks this means "Jesus meant the new community would exercise divinely given authority both in regulating its internal affairs [binding and loosing in regard to conduct] and in deciding who would be admitted to and who excluded from its membership". Morris develops the argument to say that Peter was the person - but not the only one - who brought the gospel to the Jews and then later to the Gentile Cornelius. He opened the kingdom of God to them as one in authority. He also caused two people to die - to be excluded when they lied to the Holy Spirit. [p427 The Gospel according to Matthew.]

The only reference to Jesus using the word "ekklesia" / translated "church" meaning an 'assembly' referring to a group of persons that are organised together for a common purpose is in Matthew 16.18 & 18.17. Paul used the word more frequently when referring to one of the local groups to whom he wrote. The idea of God's assembly or congregation of people was used in relation to Israel in Deut 5.22 7 23.3

In Matthew 18.17, Jesus speaks of what to do in the life in the church when a person sins against you - firstly approach him singly, then with 2 or 3 witnesses and then finally bring the issue before the whole church. if he does not listen then he would be treated as an outsider by the rest of the believers. The church is given authority to "bind and loose" - to retain or forgive sins within the community.

in John 20.21 Jesus breathes on his disciples to receive the Holy Spirit and this is linked with forgiveness or retaining of sins. Only God can grant forgiveness of sins and entrance to the Kingdom but the disciples are given the authority to declare the terms under which God forgives or retains sins.

- Jesus **teaches** his disciples about the nature of the kingdom - as service and living in humility like a child - and the cost of following him - total giving up of oneself. Mt 16. 21ff; 19.21-29. They were his own He cleansed them, gave them an example how to act, and prayed for them John 13.1, 15, 34-35 They were with him when he taught about the inner life of the kingdom person in the Sermon on the Mount and also heard the many parables of the Kingdom.

He prepared them by encouraging that he would always be with them; for them to live together in love; and he warned them of suffering to come when they followed him. He promised the Holy Spirit as a teacher and helper, particularly when they had to give an account of their faith. He prays to the Father to protect these ones who follow him for Jesus understands that they have been given to him by the Father. John ch's 14-17.

- He eats his **last meal** with his chosen 12 and leaves them with a sign of his covenant with them in bread and wine and encourages them to remember

him by it Mt26.26 f; Mk 14.17-25; Lk 22.14-23

- Jesus infers that there are **others** who are not Jewish who will belong to his community e.g in parable of landowner and vine-growers who kill the son.Mt21.33f esp v43; Mk 12.1-13 and king giving a marriage feast .Mt 22.1-14; in John 10.16

He predicts the fall of the Temple [the old Jewish worship centre] and the return of the Son of man Mt24; Mk 13

- He dies an ignominious **death** and is deserted by his disciples, except John, his mother and other women – the sheep are scattered when the shepherd dies.

- At his **resurrection** he appears to many – women, his disciples, Peter, Thomas, John, Nathaniel; Paul writes he appeared to over 500 people [1 Cor 15.5-10] he teaches them about himself, his place in history and his death. He promises his Spirit.

In Galilee he **commissions** Peter to feed his sheep and the 11 disciples after his death to go into all the world to make disciples and to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to obey everything He had commanded. Jn 21; Mt 28.16-28

In The Revelation of John

Jesus is among the church/churches 1-3,5,7; the prayers of his people affect the world 8.3-5; his followers overcome through His blood 12.10-11 the promise is given that he will come again to meet the church, which is His bride. 21 and will dwell with them forever.

Jesus describes his followers as

as disciples - who follow him as one would a Rabbi, Teacher, to

to be with him at the cost of their lives , giving up all for him

as apostles - sent in His name to be 'fishers of men' - to preach about the com

ing of the Kingdom, with authority to heal and cast out demons - to do

works in his name, to go into the nations to make disciples

as salt and light in the world because they follow him

as belonging to the kingdom of heaven

as builders of his church

as sheep, his flock of whom he is the good shepherd

as friends who do what he commands them Jn 15 who abide in him.

as his own, entrusted to his care by the Father Jn 17

- By the time he ascended into heaven and left the earth, there was a small band who believed Jesus was son of God and who wanted to tell the world of his place in history and God's plan to redeem man. At the centre were 11 men Jesus had chosen to lead this group and tell his message.

In summary:

"Jesus was clearly no ordinary prophet, no mere teacher of moral righteousness and divine governance. Had come to usher in a new Kingdom and a kingdom is not only a rule but a society. It affected not only men's hearts but also their lives: it might come on the clouds of heaven but for its fulfillment it demanded a new earth..... Our Lord expected the world to continue in some form or other after His death and He made provision for a well-defined body to continue His work. .. He organised a faithful remnant which would inaugurate the Kingdom of the New Israel; the ekklesia which was so securely founded on a rock was to succeed the old assembly of the church of the Jewish people. Initiation was by baptism; the young brotherhood was urged not to be diffident in the exercise of its functions; it was to make its arrangements in full confidence of the support of Heaven; the authority of Heaven would be behind its care for the moral well-being of its members and the special favour of heaven would be granted in its prayers. Its leaders had already been chosen and close attention paid to their training." [JWC Wand A history of the Early Church p2]

Simon Peter, an apostle from the beginning.

Unlike all those who follow them in church history, the first Apostles were men appointed by Jesus to be with him from the beginning, who heard what He said, saw him with their eyes, looked at and physically touched him [1 John 1.1-2] Peter, when choosing a 12th apostle to replace Judas, said they needed "to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when he was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection. [Acts 12:1-22] Jesus' ambassadors, who had authority in the church because they had been 'with Jesus'. Their words and writings have been the plumbline for followers of Jesus ever since.

To understand Peter there are 3 major sources – the 4 Gospels, Acts and his letters. Read these for yourself. Some references are given as guidelines but Peter walked with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. He was 'with him'. There were some references in the writings of the early Christian fathers, which refer to his time in Rome and his death.

Peter's life story

In the Gospels

Before he met Jesus he was a fisherman Mk 1.16

Jesus changed his life

His calling

Jesus called Peter to follow him; to be with him, so Peter left everything to follow Jesus Mt 19.27; to be a fisher of men Mk 1.16

Peter found himself in an interesting mix of men. He already knew his brother, Andrew and James and John, sons of Zebedee described by Jesus as sons of thunder which means they were fiery – all fishermen from Galilee. Peter himself, Jesus renamed from Simon to Peter, meaning a rock. There was Matthew, a tax collector, usually despised by Jews because they worked for the Roman overlords and used their position to rip off the locals. Simon, a zealot belonging to a group who wanted to overthrow the Roman conquerors, usually by violence and establish divine rule of the Jews.

Judas Iscariot, the only man from Judea who was to become his betrayer.

He witnessed many miracles of healing e.g of his own mother-in-law Mt 8.14-15, raising of Jairus' daughter Mk 5.22-43 esp v37

And miracles of "nature" - Feeding of 5000 & 4000 – Mt 15.29ff; Mk 6.34ff ; Mk 8.1ff;

Jesus walking on water ; stilling a storm; turning water to wine

He even walked to Jesus on water – which tested his faith in Jesus Mt 14. 28ff

He heard Jesus' teaching in parables, and the sermon on Mount Mt 5-7

He is one of the 12 chosen apostles who Jesus called to be "with him" and to so that they might be sent out to preach. Soon after this, Jesus sent them on a mission out to proclaim the Kingdom and gave them authority over unclean spirits & to heal Mt 10; Lk 9; Mk 3.13f

He asked about the extent of forgiveness after Jesus stresses its importance in the life of the community Mt 18.21-35

His confession

It was Peter who confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Mt 16.13ff; Mk 8. 28; John 6.66f. At that time Jesus declared that it was the Father in heaven who had revealed the truth to Peter and that he would build his church on that rock.

Refer to earlier notes on Jesus about Matt 16

Ironically, this confession was followed by Jesus' rebuke of Peter when he refused to accept Jesus prophecy about his impending death & gave his disciples a call to give up their lives. Mt 16.21f

The transfiguration

He, with James and John, witnessed Jesus' Transfiguration - Mk 9.1f ; Mt 17.1-8; 2 Peter 2.16-18 when the Father gave honor and glory to Jesus.

He found the coin in the fishes mouth which arose because of the question about paying taxes to Caesar – acknowledging authority Mt 17.24

He ate with Jesus at his last meal and, after an initial protest, had his feet washed as

an example Jn13

Peter swore allegiance to Jesus only to have Jesus predict his triple denial Mt 26.33; Luke 22.31-34

He was with Jesus in Gethsemane, Mt 26. 36f but he slept while Jesus prayed
Peter denied he was a follower of Jesus Mk 14.66-72; LK 22.54-62 at Jesus' Trial

He met the risen Jesus – Mk 16.7 in garden, LK 24.12, 33-34 at Sea of Galilee
Jesus commissioned him to feed his sheep., three times , a sign of his forgiveness
John 20.2-10; ch 21

In the Acts - Post Ascension -The beginning of the Church of Jesus Christ

Peter is the most mentioned apostle in the early chapters of Acts 1-5; 8.14-25; 9.31-11.18;12

He led the disciples and lived according to what the Holy Spirit showed. Peter didn't set the agenda, the Spirit did – he followed the Holy Spirit's lead

Early days –

He witnessed Jesus' ascension Acts 1. He led in the choosing of 12th disciple 1.esp 12-26 They gave the names, the HS directed.

Establishing new believers –

He was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues, along with the other apostles & disciples,

In Acts 2, Peter's spoke to the crowd at Pentecost

He preached to people and to authorities Acts 3&4, and ordered the new converts that the Holy Spirit made. He healed the sick.

He saw the Holy Spirit kill 2 people as a discipline when they lied which created fear and awe. [- not surprisingly!]

He was imprisoned by Jewish authorities and rescued by an angel. [pretty amazing stuff!] but he couldn't & wouldn't stop preaching with a great boldness.

As the church increased in number, he ordered it with the appointment of other workers, especially to help the converts who were of Greek background, Hellenistic jews. He saw the increasing persecution of the church, including the stoning of Stephen and its spread outside Jerusalem.

He knew Paul, as a persecutor of the believers and then later as follower of Jesus.

A new chapter in the church to the world - He acted on the Holy Spirit's prompt to bring about a new thing into the Jewish based believers – taking the gospel to a Gentile. The Holy Spirit directed him to the house of Cornelius, a Roman non-Jew, but God-fearer,

therefore linked to the Jewish synagogue. God gave him a vision that prepared him to go to the 'unclean' Gentile, to share the gospel. He witnessed the Holy Spirit fall on them and they spoke in tongues, so he baptised them. He stayed with them and ate with him, which was a very un-kosher thing to do.

This raised the Jewish/ Gentile issue for the first time amongst the followers of Jesus. The church was no longer just confined to the Jews. Peter's inconsistency about Gentile acceptance was questioned at a later time by Paul in Galatians 2.11f.

His death

Tradition has it that some time between 55- 60 AD, he travelled with Mark to Rome. Peter left but Mark remained. On encouragement from Roman Christians, Mark wrote down Jesus' story as he had heard it from Peter, which was the origin of Mark's Gospel.

Peter later [about 63AD] returned to Rome and at that time wrote his 1st letter to the churches. It warns of a fiery trial to come and encourages believers to stay the course and to live holy lives as befits God's chosen ones. Before he died he wrote his 2nd letter to warn against false teachers. He mentions Paul.

It is believed that he died by crucifixion during Nero's reign, who died in 68AD so sometime before that. Possibly during the persecution of Christians that followed the great fire. [See later note]

→ What did Peter say?

1. Look at his preaching in Acts 2, 3.12f; 4.8f; 5. 29f; 10 .34

What were the chief features of his message? What were the responses?

2. Read Peter's 2 letters to the churches – written in early 60's

What were his concerns?

In his 1st letter he writes to encourage his fellow Christians, God's elect to live in hope and holiness in face of suffering from without the church.

In the 2nd he warns of dangers from within. He writes that God has given us all that we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him

What problems / questions did he face?

Organising the huge number of converts to Jesus the Messiah.

Difficulty with non-converted Jews

Respected by the Jewish people but distrusted and mistreated by Jewish leaders.

False teachers.

Return of the Lord

Life together within the church expressing the holiness of God's people.

Some features of the early church -

1. Historically the church started as a group within Judaism. The early believers did not reject Judaism but thought that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Jewish hope of the Messiah. Initially, the Jewish leaders tolerated them as just another sect who thought that the long-awaited Messiah had come in this Galilean Jesus.

The early Christian believers, being of Jewish background, still kept the Jewish practices of Sabbath observance and dietary rules, going to the Temple to worship and keeping of the high standards of the moral laws. The church at this time was very Jewish based. Later, this became an issue when Gentiles became converted to Jesus and lived in a different way to what the Jews did. We will deal with this when we look at Paul, who was called the apostle to the Gentiles and the calling of the Council of Jerusalem in 49/50 AD.

3. Life of the first believers – Acts 1.13-15; 2.41-47; 4.23-36; 5.1-16

Mass conversions – daily numbers were added to the believers On the Day of Pentecost, 3000 were added; the Lord added to their number every day, the number of men grew to 5000 Acts 2.41,47; 4.4

They entered the church by baptism, symbolising repentance and as well union with Christ

They shared meals together, which included breaking bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Jesus' death.

They held property in common. This may have been because of necessity to house the number of people who had stayed on in Jerusalem after Pentecost when thousands had been converted. Even the Galilean apostles had not returned up north but stayed in Jerusalem, teaching and preaching in the Temple every day.

Signs and wonders and healings were performed by the apostles so that the people were in awe of God.

They spent their time praying and praising God, and boldly speaking of their faith.

They met in houses and went to the Temple portico to hear the Apostles teach.

God disciplined them 5.11

The Holy Spirit came upon new believers, they received Him, in some situations, marked by speaking in tongues.

Their love for each other was apparent. They lived very moral lives.

4. The number of believers grew -

To begin, the authority in the church rested chiefly on the apostles but as the numbers grew, others were appointed to take responsibility. Distinction of function was made between apostles and others – deacons of Greek background were appointed to serve the needs of Greek disciples, particularly widows, while the apostles concentrated on prayer and teaching the word. Acts 6

As fellowships grew in the evangelised cities, the government in the church developed. The apostles could not be there so local leaders were appointed. They were desig-

nated by different titles – the leading ones were apostles, prophets, teachers. Elders, overseers and presbyters cared for local fellowships. Elders were to be shepherds of the flock, setting an example to care for and feed the people entrusted to their care; preaching and teaching, rebuking those who taught error and to serve with humility.

The first Elder in Jerusalem was James, Jesus brother, not one of the original 12 but one to whom Jesus had shown himself after his resurrection.

1 Peter exhorts the leadership of presbyter – bishops / overseers “I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight (not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it--not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders.” (5:1b-5a)

5. They respected civil authorities - they believed that a new kingdom had been inaugurated, which was potentially a revolutionary belief but they were not there to throw down earthly governments. They were respected by the those outside their community.

6. Persecution started.

As they grew in number they became more of a threat to the Jewish status quo. So the Jewish authorities began to question them, then to imprison and then to kill them as they did with Stephen by stoning him for supposed blasphemy. Saul, of the Pharisees’ party and representing the leaders of the Jews, came into the picture as the persecutor of the brethren. Secular authorities joined in. Herod, placed by the Romans as king over the Jews, killed James Zebedee, John’s brother to please the Jews and imprisoned Peter, who miraculously escaped.

The Emperor of Rome, Nero, killed many after the fire in Rome in the 60’s. More about this next time for persecution of the church happened on and off for the next centuries until the reign of Constantine in 4th century.

Following is the earliest account of the first heathen persecution (as well as the first record of the crucifixion by a heathen writer). This was after the great fire in Rome which destroyed about half the city in 64 AD. Tacitus, a 1st Century Roman writer, here clearly implies that the Christians were innocent, and that Nero employed them simply as scapegoats. He pitied the the Christians but did not like them.

“Such public calamities were generally attributed to the wrath of the gods. In the present case everything was done to appease the offended deity. Yet, in spite of all, suspicion still clung to Nero “Wherefore in order to allay the rumor he put forward as guilty and afflicted with the most exquisite punishments those who were hated for their abominations and called `Christians’ by the populace. Christus, from whom the name was derived, was punished by the procurator Pontius Pilatus in the reign of Tiberius. This noxious form of religion checked for a time, broke out again not only in Judea its original home, but also throughout the city (Rome) that receptacle for everything that is sordid and degrading from every quarter of the globe where which there finds a following. Therefore first of all those who confessed (i.e. to being Christians) were arrested, and then as a result of their

information a large number were implicated, not so much on the charge of arson as for hatred of the human race. Besides being put to death they were made objects of amusement; some were covered with the skins of wild beasts and then torn by dogs, some were crucified, some were burned as torches to give light at night Nero had opened his grounds for the display and was putting on a show in the circus where he mingled with people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in his chariot. All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even towards men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment, for men felt that their destruction was not for the public welfare but to gratify the cruelty of one individual (Nero)" (Tacitus, Annals xv.44).

Tradition has it that both Paul and Peter died in Rome, at the time of the persecution under Nero along with many other believers.

7. The word of God spread and with it the community of believers

First in Jerusalem, men heard the message on Pentecost. Some stayed on but many returned to their homes and took the gospel with them to other places.

Then while the apostles remained in Jerusalem, disciples moved to Samaria and the rest of Judea, including Galilee, especially after the stoning of Stephen and the increased persecution when many were being thrown into jail in Jerusalem. As the churches spread they were founded by others e.g Philip planted the church in Samaria, but then the apostles, Peter and John, went there to supervise their life so their apostolic authority was recognised by these early groups. The church spread to Damascus, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Philip even spoke to a man from Ethiopia.

it was to spread to the whole world.

8. What was their message?

God so loved the world that he came into it as a human person – to dwell among us.

That person is Jesus the Christ, the Anointed one. The message is about his birth, life, death and resurrection, particularly his resurrection.

In him, the prophecies of the OT are fulfilled.

He is now exalted to sit at the right hand of God in heaven

This belief has been confirmed by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus will return to bring God's purpose of redemption to a consummation

Now that God is reconciled to the world through Jesus men have an opportunity to repent and receive forgiveness that God offers in and through Jesus and to be baptised as a member of his church.