

WEEKLY SERMON

communicate@blackburn.anglican.org



Sequels

The reviews are in and, by common consent, “Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny” appears to be a bit of a stinker. The best one critic could find to say about it was that it wasn’t “quite as bad” as the previous movie in the franchise.

But no worries! If you don’t fancy “Indiana Jones 5”, the local multiplex can offer you lots of other films to choose from; perhaps “Guardians of the Galaxy 3” or “Fast and Furious 10” or “Spiderman 9” may be more to your taste. And I don’t suppose it will be that long before “James Bond 26” comes along. Everywhere you look, there are sequels. And if not sequels, prequels. Or even sequels to prequels!

Of course, it makes commercial sense. If you have a winning formula, repeat it. The problem is that most sequels do exactly that: repeat the formula and give us nothing new. Which leads very quickly to a law of diminishing returns.

Just occasionally, the sequel goes off in a completely different direction, perhaps taking the themes of the original but playing an entirely different tune with them.

These thoughts were prompted by our readings for last Sunday and the one to come, both drawn from the opening chapters of that great grand-daddy of all sequels. For “Acts of the Apostles” could just as easily have been called “Luke’s Gospel Part 2”. It even displays many of the characteristics of the good sequel. It begins with five verses that recap the action to date; just as Luke’s Gospel closes with four brief verses that look forward – almost a case of “Next Time on Luke’s Gospel”!

Which brings us to an interesting question: What made Luke put the break exactly where he did? As the Gospel tells of Jesus’ life on earth, surely the sensible thing would have been to complete the story with the Ascension and let the new book tell the story of what happened afterwards.

But the Ascension is just as much a beginning as an ending. It marks the start of our faith being linked, not to a physical manifestation, but to the spiritual world, to someone who is forever independent of both space and time. As such it’s a joyous and miraculous opening to a new story, even though it may have left some of those first disciples confused and unsure: unsure about the direction Jesus had told them to take – and unsure about the new gift Jesus had promised to send to them.

No wonder they needed to devote themselves to a time of prayer and preparation. A time to regroup; to elect – after prayerful reflection – a replacement for Judas Iscariot; a time to prepare themselves for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

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These few days between the Ascension and Pentecost can all too easily be overlooked; be overshadowed by the major festivals that bracket them. And yet, arguably, they are just as important, because nothing could be achieved until the disciples were in the right mental and spiritual place. Even the Holy Spirit waited until they were ready to receive! Just as the Spirit waits for each of us to be ready mentally and spiritually for those life-changing, life-enhancing tongues “as of fire” to rest upon us.

And when they do, everything changes. We can go out into the world filled with new confidence; we can witness anew to the joy of our faith; we can all bring new disciples to our Saviour; we can all be his leaders as well as his followers.

Jesus’s final words as a man were: “You will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth”. I pray that, after this time for prayer and reflection, we may all take up his challenge, be his witnesses and follow him wherever he leads us.

Rev David Hargreaves, Associate Priest for Foulridge, Laneshawbridge and Trawden