

## **Meeting some of the first Christians**

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Dear Friends

Welcome to this Local Arrangement service resource. In this service we are going to meet and get to know some of the first Christians - people whose names are mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles.

Please feel free to 'customize' your service to your own congregation... e.g. ... The hymns are only suggestions - if your congregation knows others that fit in with the theme, especially any newer ones, feel free to use those. You will also need to prepare for the prayers of intercession, to reflect current concerns. This is *your congregation's* service of worship to God, so make it as individual as you think appropriate!

I have suggested that you use 2 leaders and 4 readers, but you can adjust this too.

*Chris Odell (Sheasby)*

## Meeting some of the first Christians

### Call to Worship: Leader One

God has called us by the Holy Spirit  
To worship together in this place.  
Let us bring all that we have and all that we are.  
Let us be renewed by the Spirit,  
And find meaning and joy for our lives.

Hymn: Holy Spirit, we welcome you *StF 385; MP241OR*  
Holy Spirit, hear us *H&P 304;*

### Prayer of Adoration: Leader Two

L: For the gift of the Holy Spirit: **R: We praise and thank you.**

Let us pray:

Loving God, your Spirit is with us, breathing new life into our hearts and minds:

L: For the gift of the Holy Spirit: **R: We praise and thank you.**

Loving God, your Spirit is with us, showing us the way to live:

L: For the gift of the Holy Spirit: **R: We praise and thank you.**

Loving God, your Spirit is with us, giving us the love, courage and power to be your witnesses:

L: For the gift of the Holy Spirit: **R: We praise and thank you.**

Loving God, your Spirit is with us, helping us in our struggles and strengthening us to face the day:

L: For the gift of the Holy Spirit: **R: We praise and thank you.**

Holy Spirit, help us never to forget that you live in us and work through us, as you bring life to the world. **Amen.**

### Introduction to the service: Leader One

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles, which follows on from the gospels in our New Testament, is a great read! It is full of the adventures of those first Christians on whom our church is built. It is both exciting and inspiring. Some of the main characters are very familiar to us – Peter and John, Stephen, Paul and Luke. But the Christian stories of many more people, men and women, are told in this book, too. And it is three of those characters whose stories we are going to meet in worship today - Barnabas, Lydia and Dorcas. You may find they remind you of Christians you know or have met before. They might even remind you of yourself. Their stories speak to us today of the power of God's Spirit in the lives of believers. But first we hear a reading describing what the first Christian community, the first church, in Jerusalem, was like.

Reading: Reader 1 – Acts 2: 43 – 47

### Prayer of Confession: Leader 2 Let us pray:

Loving God, the first Christians were full of enthusiasm, in their worship and in their shared life together. Their lives were lit up with joy and generosity. We are sorry that so often our worship, giving and life together do not live up to their Spirit-led example. Forgive us and open us up to your guidance and joy, in the Saviour's Name, **Amen.**

### Offering and prayer: Leader 2 Let us pray:

Inspire us, God of Love and Life, with the generosity of the early Church.  
Take this money, take us, our time and energy and thinking, and use them  
To spread the good news of your saving love to all humankind. In Jesus' Name, **Amen.**

Hymn: (*sung twice*) Spirit of the living God *StF 395; H&P 295; MP613*

Reading: Reader 2 – Acts 13: 1 – 5 We hear more about Barnabas in this reading....

### **The Story of Barnabas: Reader 3**

"And so it was that Joseph, a Levite born in Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "One who Encourages"), sold a field he owned, brought the money, and handed it over to the apostles. " That is the first mention we have of Barnabas. His new name fits what we know of his actions. When Saul, later called Paul, came to Jerusalem after his conversion, most of the Christians there wanted nothing to do with him. They had known him as a persecutor and an enemy of the Church. But Barnabas was willing to give him a second chance. He looked him up, spoke with him, and brought him to see the other Christians, vouching for him.

Later, as we have just heard, Paul and Barnabas went on a missionary journey together, taking Mark with them. Part way, Mark turned back and went home. When Paul and Barnabas were about to set out on another such journey, Barnabas proposed to take Mark along, and Paul was against it, saying that Mark had shown himself undependable. Barnabas wanted to give Mark a second chance, and so he and Mark went off on one journey, while Paul went on another. Apparently Mark responded well to the trust given him by the "son of encouragement," since we find that Paul later speaks of him as a valuable assistant.

**Barnabas and us: Leader One** Barnabas was an encourager. Perhaps you can remember someone special in your life who gave you the courage to do something you did not feel you could do? Who supported you at a difficult time? Who helped you in your Christian life? A few words of encouragement can change a person's life for the better, and may even 'save' them.

**Prayer: (Leader Two)** Let us pray:

God our loving parent, we thank you for the people who, at different times in our lives have offered us encouragement to be what we had it in us to be. Whether they were our parents, teachers, friends, partners or members of the church family, we remember them with gratitude and ask that you will give us the grace, through your Spirit, to follow in their example and be 'people of encouragement' for others. In the name of Jesus, who brings us fullness of life, **Amen.**

**Hymn:** - There's a spirit in the air... *StF 398; H&P 326 OR* Spirit of holiness...*MP 611*

**Reading: Reader 1** – Acts 16: 1 – 4

### **The Story of Lydia: Reader 4**

Paul, on a missionary journey, comes to Philippi, a Roman colony named after the father of Alexander the Great, another young man who aimed to conquer the world. As was his practice, he first of all looked for the Jewish community there. In towns where there was no synagogue, the Jewish people would often meet to pray by the river. And this is where he found them...or at least, the women. He talked to them about Jesus, told them the good news of salvation, and at least one of the women, a lady called Lydia, not only listened to, but opened her heart to the message and responded to God's love for her. She became a central figure in the new church in Philippi.

Lydia would not have been an obvious choice for Paul to make. She was the sort of person some people might have objected to. For a start, she wasn't a local girl. She came from Thyatira, a city in what is now Western Turkey. And, she was a woman! She was a wealthy business woman, engaged in supplying fabric for the very rich. And while that meant she had a large house where she could offer hospitality to visiting apostles, we know that being wealthy can sometimes create a barrier between the wealthy person and ordinary folk. She would not have seemed an obvious choice as a church leader. But it was not Paul who chose her. It was God.

**Lydia and us: Leader One** Lydia was a successful woman. But she knew that there was more to life than making money. Her success had not been at the expense of her knowing her need for God. She was open to listening to Paul, for she was humble enough to know that she had more to learn of God. She was willing to hear the Good News of Jesus. She was willing to open her heart to his love. Her story encourages us to offer such openness to God.

**Prayer: Leader Two** Let us pray: Calling God, Help us not to be so preoccupied with our daily lives that our ears are closed to your word for us. Help us not to be so caught up with our own feelings and needs that we do not open our hearts to others. Make us, like Lydia, open to the new things you want to do in our lives. **Amen.**

**Hymn:** - God's Spirit is in my heart *StF 404; H&P 315*

**Reading: Reader )** – Acts 9: 36 – 43

### **The Story of Tabitha or Dorcas: Reader 5**

I know it sounds like a cliché, but Tabitha had a genuine heart of gold. You only had to mention in passing that a neighbour had suffered a misfortune, and there she was, round their house with a hot meal and her laundry basket. She wouldn't stop at the washing, but would repair a tunic or darn a cloak if it needed attention. She was a really skilled needlewoman. Many a widow has reason to bless Tabitha for a new outfit for herself or her children. Yet she did it so unobtrusively. She wasn't a professional do-gooder – she was sensitive and perceptive, suggesting rather than instructing, allowing the poor to retain their dignity and pride. Whenever there was a crisis, Tabitha was the one the women turned to for comfort and practical help. She had been one of the first to join 'the saints', as we locals nicknamed the followers of the Way. At first we scoffed at their religious beliefs: yet there was something about the best of them - and certainly Tabitha was one of the best - that made you stop and think. Time and again you found these 'saints' comforting, consoling and helping folk who were neither kith nor kin in very practical ways.

Then we heard that she had suddenly died. How could God allow this to happen? We crowded round her home before the funeral. While we were still mourning, there was a commotion outside. A big burly fellow with a couple of companions pushed their way in to the house. This must be Peter, I thought. Some of us showed him the clothes Tabitha had made, spoke of her kindness and heart for the poor, and then led him upstairs to where she had been laid. We all crowded behind sobbing and wailing. Peter quietly but firmly ordered the room to be cleared. Reluctantly, we left. We dared not disobey his orders. A rough Northerner he might be, but everyone was conscious of his authority.

Downstairs we waited in silence. What was he doing up there? Then we heard him say 'Tabitha, get up!' Get up? Didn't he know she was dead? The funeral had been booked, the wailers hired – we were about to carry her to the cemetery. I suppose I had expected he would commend her to God and then carry her downstairs – he was a big man and Tabitha was no weight at all. Instead we heard laughter – a chuckle followed by a full-throated bellow and a high-pitched giggle. That was Tabitha – I could tell her laugh anywhere! Then they emerged, Peter and Tabitha, laughing and crying and shouting. It was contagious. The party had begun.

It's now several days since it happened. People still come up to her, touching her in amazement, greeting her with astonishment. She seems younger, more alive, and even more joyful than before. She's making me think very seriously about this Jesus of hers. After all, she was dead, but now she's alive!

### **Dorcas and us: Leader One**

We all know people like Dorcas in the church. People who are always ready to offer help. People you know you can rely on in a crisis. People who seem to know just what you need, who are sensitive, sympathetic, sensible – well, just loving. You may be sitting right by one of them now! God spoke through Dorcas, not only because she was healed, but because her way of life brought his love into the heart of her community. Which is what we all are called to do.

### **Prayers: Leader Two**

The stories that we read in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles tell us how the Good News of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit changed the lives of many people, some of them people just like us.

In our prayers of intercession we ask that this same Spirit touch our lives, and through us, the life of our world. When I say 'Come, Holy Spirit:' please respond '**our lives inspire.**'

Let us pray: Spirit of enthusiasm, fill us with the desire for God that transforms hearts and minds.

Come, Holy Spirit: **our lives inspire.**

Spirit of inspiration, set our words on fire as we tell the good news of Jesus Christ.

Come, Holy Spirit: **our lives inspire.**

Spirit of love, bind us together in unity that the world may see and believe.

Come, Holy Spirit: **our lives inspire.**

Spirit of freedom, cast out our life-limiting fears that we may love with boldness.

Come, Holy Spirit: **our lives inspire.**

Spirit of peace, empty us of guilt, anxiety and despair; and fill us with all-sufficient faith.

Come, Holy Spirit: **our lives inspire.**

Spirit of power, blow into the life of our world, overturning values, changing stale, selfish ways.

Come, Holy Spirit: **our lives inspire.**

Spirit of comfort, when we are ill or sad, soothe us, strengthen us, give us hope.

Come, Holy Spirit: **our lives inspire.**

Spirit of joy, turn our tears into laughter, our frowns into smiles.

Lead us singing into the life of God's kingdom.

Come, Holy Spirit: **our lives inspire.** In Jesus' Name, **Amen.**

We say together the Lord's Prayer, said together by Christians from the very earliest days:

**Our Father, who art in heaven**

**Hymn:** Breathe on me, Breath of God *StF 370; H&P 280; MP 67*

**Dismissal: Leader One**

We are the Church of today

We are filled with God's Holy Spirit,

So let us go out as the apostles for this age

Taking our message of love, joy, hope and peace, in the Saviour's Name, **Amen.**