Let us pray

Lord Jesus Christ

By the power of your presence

Open the mind of God to us,

That in your light we may see light

And in your strength be strong.

Today we get to the pivotal point in Luke’s history of the earlt church in the book of acts.

Decisions have to be made.

Specifically one decision

How do we decide that someone is in the church or not?

It’s a common discussion in our general lives isn’t it?

How do we decide to live?

I remember when I was at school being fed lots of red meat, dairy and bread.

We even got free milk at school break times.

Yet fast forward to today and most of those types of foods are frowned upon.

The way we are urged to prioritise our different food groups has changed.

In the manse each month we draw up a menu to save us thinking day by day what we are to eat.

But looking back through the last couple of weeks we have moved the order that we have eaten the meals about. Why? Well to take account how much time we had to prepare them and how we were feeling.

Prioritising what we do is important.

So maybe we shouldn’t be surprise when the early church faces a similar decision

Just how do we decide that someone is to be part of this new church or not?

Maybe in one sense it seems odd to our ears,

It’s simple, isn’t it?

Does the person believe in Jesus as the Messiah or the Christ, we might think.

But the answer turns out to be a little more complicated than just that.

For Luke it involves the Holy spirit being poured out and for those early believers it depends on how you see your links with the God of Israel.

The God who had rescued his people from exile by helping them cross the red sea

And the god who had gone into exile with them when the Babylonians had over run Jerusalem.

And there other difficulties to contend with like

How is Jesus so different from all the other mystical magical religions around.

Luke hints at how the early church deals with the difference between magical religions and belief in Jesus a couple of times in Acts.

We looked a bit at that in a recent Wednesday break and discovered it always involved the work of the holy Spirit.

But it comes to a point where the church has to decide whether or not Gentiles can be part of the church.

God shows Peter in a vision that it is Ok when he drawss Peter to meet Cornelius and Peter discovers a believer.

Great! The early church is now happy for Gentiles to join, but remember the early church still sees itself as working within Judaism.

The question arises as to what extent it is important for non-Jewish people who believe in Jesus as the Messiah to adopt Jewish ways of living specifically circumcision and the food laws.

Why is that important?

Well remember that continuity with the story of the Old testament right back to Genesis is important not just for the early church, but for us the church of today.

That is what is up for discussion here.

Is it Ok to reshape how we see our faith to allow Gentiles to be part of it and if so how?

There seems to be two sides to the debate.

Firstly Peter at best sits on the fence. He knows the holy Spirit can be poured out on Gentiles, but there’s part of him thinks that to keep the continuity with their heritage, they need to stick with the traditions and law.

On the other side are Paul and Barnabas fresh from missionary journeys to Gentiles.

Eventually, Paul and Barnabas were appointed to be part of the group who were to go to church headquarters in Jerusalem and discuss the issue with those who are in charge.

We know that the head of the church at that time was probably Jesus brother James who we know from sources outside the Bible was a Jew.

Peter, Paul and Barnabas and presumably others go to the meeting. We now call it the council of Jerusalem and it took place in 49CE.

Both sides get to put their point. I always think of these first Christian missionaries as fairly assertive people who knew their minds and were always ready to debate what they knew to be right.

After the speeches, James stands up and says Brothers listen to me. I have reached a decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to god. We should simply write to them to abstain only from some things.

Remember for generations in every city, people have proclaimed aloud in the synagogues every Sabbath what Moses told us about God.

Then the whole church decided to send a group led by Barnabas and Paul to Antioch with a letter telling gentiles that it seems good to the holy spirit and to us here in Jerusalem to impose no further burdens than these essentials on you.

Off they went and delivered the letters

And all of a sudden a new shape appeared in God’s relationships with his people.

We now call it the Christian church.

And for many of us over the last few months, the shape has changed again.

We have moved mainly online and

A move that has challenged many of us, but has led to us discovering new ways of being church which will continue for the foreseeable future.

We are not sure how the flexibility to meet will change over the next few weeks,

But we can take heart that throughout the history of the church right back to the beginning, we have been asked to rethink and reshape as the Holy Spirit guides us

As we continue to worship God, Father Son and holy Spirit

The trinity

Who works as a team to let us feel the presence of God in our lives in all the ups and downs

And re-prioritising that is our day to day lives.

Let us pray.

Gracious God

This si atime where we are happy to be back worshipping you in our church building

But it is a time of change reshaping too.

Not just in church, but in the whole of life.

Let us know your presence in all we do.

Help us to be a good neighbour to others and praise you each day.

And so help others to find your love

Ever more.

And

Now to God the Father,

God the Son

And God the Holy Spirit

Be glory and honour

As it was in the beginning

Is now and ever shall be.

world without end.

Amen