

Chosen to Serve

Acts 6:1-7

9th March 2014

Introduction

15 years of years ago at Christ Church we acted out a play entitled 'Too Jerusalem' for family, friends and the community. It provided a vivid and moving account of the journey of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem and his crucifixion and subsequent resurrection. I was delighted to land the part of a disciple – 'doubting Thomas'. Peter Chiverton was another disciple playing his name's sake 'the disciple Peter'. Some of us will remember Colin Woolmer who brilliantly played the part of Jesus. As for my wife Ruth – she also landed a great role as one of the disciples, playing the part of Judas! During the play we re-enacted the scene of Jesus washing the disciples feet from John chapter 13. At the time I'd been a Christian about four years and I didn't really get what all this 'washing of feet' was about.

Since then I've been fortunate to be on the receiving end of some excellent preaching and teaching from people who have served here at Christ Church, people like Richard Turnbull, Philip Plyming and more recently Ian Bentley – thanks to them and many others across this church plus other Christians I've encountered I now better understand what all that feet washing was actually about.

In Mark 10:45 Jesus says (CLICK): "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." On the night before he was crucified, when the weight of the world was on his shoulders, Jesus took a towel and basin and washed the dirty feet of his disciples. By that one simple gesture he showed forever what sort of man he was and what sort of people we should be. Jesus (Fully God and fully man) came to serve, and in his bloody death on the cross he served all humanity. Was Jesus great? The question hardly needs answering. He was great because he was God's servant. And that greatness is open to all of us because anyone can be a servant.

Today we begin a sermon series entitled "God's call to service" – it'll cover eight sermons and take us through to 4th May tracing through Scripture what it is God has said to the church in the past about service in the body of the church. And through this we can reflect on the gifts God has given us and see how we might use them or are using them in God's service.

A huge amount of Godly service already happens through you – the people of this church. And it's important we acknowledge this and celebrate it. But we are always work in progress and if we are to continue growing as disciples in the image of Christ then it's important we continue to develop in our service of God and others.

Let's then begin with this short passage from Acts by posing a question...Is everything always plain sailing here at Christ Church? The short answer to that is 'no'. Life just isn't like that and whether it's our personal lives or as a community of Christians things go wrong from time to time – and we fall into confrontation and dispute. Sometimes we just don't get on.

Well everything was not plain sailing for the early church, either. Yes – the church was constantly growing and multiplying but it was not without its problems. So as we start to look at this passage let's consider it in three chunks.

1. The problem
2. The Solution
3. Our response

1. The problem

In Acts chapters 4 and 5 – just before our passage today you'll discover attacks on the church - sometimes from outside of the church (such as persecution) and sometimes from within the church (such as hypocrisy). In our passage we witness the early church facing another type of difficulty coming from within the church itself. It's not external persecution or internal hypocrisy, but division. In verses 1 and 2 we discover grumbling and division in the Church. So let unpack this.

In the book of Acts we witness the rapid growth of the early church, so at this point the church in Jerusalem is now numbering well into the thousands. But this also brought what we might call "growing pains". In Romans 3:23 Paul says "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". So as a church grows that means on the positive front "More believers" but it also means more sinners worshipping and associating together? Just like a marriage between two Christians is also still a marriage of two sinners, so the Christian church is full of sinners who have been forgiven and given new life in Christ, but who are still, nevertheless, sinners as well. And we sinners, even Christian ones, have this unsettling habit of, well, . . .sinning, don't we? So, we should not be too surprised when we are offended by someone else in the church, or when someone else in the church is offended by us!

Also the early church (just like the church should be in any place or time) was increasingly made up of people from different backgrounds, nationalities, or languages, but you can see it's a recipe for some issues to come up in the congregation. So some friction is to be expected. Growth brings some growing pains. In verse 1 there was some complaining going on.

Basically The Grecians (or Greek-speaking Jews) complained against the Hebrews (those native to Jerusalem, who primarily spoke Hebrew and followed Hebrew customs). What was it about? Well verse 1 says: "their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food." Will come back to that in a minute but first consider this... the word "complaint" in the Greek is also translated as "grumbling."

In Philippians 2:14-15, Paul writes, "Do everything without grumbling or arguing,¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky"

Paul spells out that grumbling should not be characteristic of the children of God. And not only that, but not being a grumbling, complaining people is actually an essential part of our witness to the lost and dying world around us! So bickering, grumbling and complaining, especially against each other stains our reputation as Christians; it dampens our light. It is a very big deal. Indeed it's been said that "Grumbling has destroyed more churches than heresy."

This passage shows us there was a ministry in the church providing for the needs of those who could not provide for themselves, namely the widows. And the Grecians perceived their widows were being neglected by this ministry in favour of the Hebrew widows.

We complain over far lesser things, don't we? The car parking, the heating, there's no tea-towels in the kitchen. But this situation was a bit more urgent and important – this was about elderly church members not receiving enough food or daily necessities!

So let's move to the solution...

2. The Solution

How was this grumbling and division to be resolved in such a way that God would be glorified and the work of the gospel would not be hindered? The solution was not to ignore the problem and hope it would go away. The solution was not to simply pile more work onto the apostles. They could not let the work of making disciples of Jesus Christ go undone, even for the sake of feeding the poor (as important as that was and is)! There was just too much work for only 12 men to do it all. So they needed help. The solution was service – shared service in the church. A couple things about this shared service needs to be understood.

First, the work of ministry or service in the church was not limited to the apostles themselves. It was far too big a task for them. In v.2 the apostles gathered the whole church together and told them, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables". They were not demeaning the importance of the ministry that the church should have to the poor within her midst. Far from it! And they were not saying that it was beneath them. But up until this point in Acts, they were the primary ones who handled or at least organized this distribution to the poor. They were simply stating the obvious – there were not enough hours in a day for the Apostles to do it all themselves! For the ministry of prayer and the Word of God to continue effectively, others in the church needed to pick up the slack in other areas. Many hands make light work.

Second, notice the solution involved the calling of church officers. It was not just service in general, but of particular men who were singularly called to serve in this ministry. In v.3-4, the apostles said, "Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." The apostles would appoint qualified men, chosen by the church, to serve. So they were really affirming both the priority of the Word of God as well as the importance of caring for the needy in the church.

We might be surprised by the extensive list of qualifications the apostles place upon this new ministry position. Look at the qualifications! These men had to be "of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (v.3). Their character needed to be impeccable. Their spirituality (being filled by the Holy Spirit) needed to be evident. And their wisdom needed

to be unquestionable. And what was the end result of setting men apart for the work of service to others?

It resulted in a God-honouring resolution to the grumbling and division within the church. And also the growth of the church and the expansion of the gospel. In the words of v.7, “so the Word of God spread.” Think about what this means.... Growth in ministry may involve growth in the size of a congregation, its budget, its facilities and resources. But ultimately none of that matters if, at the end of the day, the Word of God is not the thing that is advancing, increasing and spreading in its reach and impact.

What is truly a blessing about Christ Church is we strive to be a bible based, Word of God centred church. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God's Word (and it alone!) is what opens the blind eyes of those who don't know Jesus, it's what transforms lives, communities, nations, and the world.

V. 7 also says “the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly.” In V.1 we saw a potential disaster in the church being divided and filled with grumbling. By v.7 we see the risen and ascended Lord Jesus using even that situation to build his church. Jesus works all things together for our good, and for the salvation of many! We also read at the end of the passage “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith”. Let's consider the significance of this. Chapter 5 of Acts tells of the high priest and all his associates persecuting the Apostles and wanting to kill them. But now the gospel was reaching them too! There were fewer and fewer priests standing alongside the high priest, because they were now becoming obedient to Jesus Christ, “the Great High Priest” (Hebrews 4:14)!

What started out as a huge problem in the church – division & grumbling – was used by the Lord as an opportunity for the glory of God and the salvation of many! And serving was integral to this and still remains vital to the life and health of any church. And so to our third point...

3. Our response

Working together is a very important part of Christianity. Working together means we are being disciples of Jesus. God has so many different jobs for us to do. We need to be open and willing to serve one another and with one another. One of the most important things we can do is to make disciples. Discipleship is a biblical command and we see it in our passage today through the selection of these men to carry out the work of ministry to the poor. They would not have been called to that position if they had not be followers of Jesus who had grown in the faith and been known by the members of their local congregation. Being a disciple means you are working with others. It doesn't mean you are isolated. When disciples are made, the world is changed. Disciples do not serve two masters at the same time. Disciples serve God through the person of Christ -- based on what he did on the cross. To be a disciple of Christ means you study His words, see what He did, and then do what He said and did. This is the work of the church, to expand the kingdom of God to His glory.

Each of you has gifts God has given you. You may be wondering what they are. Hopefully over the next few weeks those gifts will become more apparent. You see - each of us has a place not only this church, but also in history, an appointment by God. You are a piece of

the divine puzzle. You are part of God's plan and method. He wants you to be used, to be a part of His ministry to the world.

My job involves working with lots of churches across the Diocese of Winchester, some (not all of them) do some fantastic work and brilliantly proclaim the Gospel. It is a huge privilege working with lots of different churches because it helps me appreciate how we are here at Christ Church. With that perspective in mind I believe we are hugely blessed in this church because there is already a culture of serving. If you analyse all that goes on particularly the acts of service that are not seen its heart warming how much people use their time, talents, gifts, skills and abilities to serve God and through this grow as his disciples. And because of this we are collectively better able to proclaim God's word and are hugely blessed in the process. So hold that and celebrate it.

But God never lets us stand still so pray earnestly as we take a close look at discovering and sharing our gifts over the next few weeks. Pray God will continue raising up from among us workers for the harvest. Pray He would bless this church and enable us as brothers and sisters in Christ to maximise and understand better all the amazing gifts and talents existing within all of us so together we grow as disciples and ensure the vital work of proclaiming the gospel continues to happen.

Your serving of God be it directly within Christ Church or in the community is vital to the life and health of not just this church but "the" church – your serving always has been and always will be! Your serving is ultimately vital to the increase of the Word of God here in our community and in the wider world.

So we are all called to serve in the church in one way or another. All of us. Every believer is gifted and called to serve the body of Christ in some way. Moving chairs, organizing hospitality, welcoming, serving tea or coffee, hosting a home group, singing, praying. Serving in the crèche or light-catchers or pathfinders or refill or Youth Club or Kids Club or CBBies or Messy Church or the puppet team. Helping at Luncheon Club, being a School Governor, or a Debt Counsellor or a Street Pastor. Doing what you do at work or bringing up children or looking after the elderly. This list is by no means exhaustive. You can serve in all sorts of ways. All of these things and many more that go on in (and beyond) the church (many of which are behind the scenes and go unnoticed and sometimes un-thanked) make the effective ministry of the Word of God possible – they contribute to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All of them. May God be glorified in your serving in the name of Jesus Christ, who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.