

Acts 6:1-7
Sunday 21st Mary 2017, 10:30am
St Mary's, Wollaton Park

I want you to imagine something spectacular happens this week. Imagine that God answers our prayer from our vision statement for "a hundred people, from all ages, to become disciples of Jesus" in just one week.

Imagine the joy. The joy amongst us. The joy in heaven.

Joy because people who were dead are now alive; who were lost are now found; who were enemies of God now reconciled to him, those heading to eternal punishment now given eternal life.¹

Joy. God rescuing people not because they deserve it or have earned it but because Jesus laid down his life and picked it up again, for them. Sheer joy.

What would it be like next Sunday morning? Picture it.
This time next week. A hundred new Christians.
What does it look like?
What does it feel like?

There would be real joy but I suspect it wouldn't take long before a few struggles appeared.

- How will the welcome team fit everyone into the pews?
- The refreshments team will need to beg and borrow mugs from every house on Wollaton Hall Drive for coffee time.
- And they all want to join a small group – that's twenty new house group leaders.
- And that's before we talk children's work team, home visiting team the extra meetings and admin!

Even amongst genuine joy it probably wouldn't be long until certain things and certain people were overlooked or neglected.

Why am I getting you all to imagine this? Because this is a little picture of what was going on in the church in Acts chapter 6.

What is the first thing we are told in verse 1?

"Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number..."

In Acts chapter 1 there were 120 Christians. At the end of chapter 2, 3,000 more Christians. The beginning of chapter 4 another 5,000 men became Christians. And these are just the people we're told about.

¹ Luke 15:32; Romans 5:10; Matthew 25:46

We were feeling joyfully overwhelmed at the thought of a hundred new Christians here it is thousands in just a few weeks.

There was genuine joy but there were also some struggles.

In Acts chapter 6 we find the early church facing one these struggles but we also find a church coming up with a wise solution. It's a passage God has much to teach and encourage us.

I want us to look at the passage by simply looking at the struggle, the solution, and the so-what. To see that the struggle and the solution in this church two thousand years ago helps us be clear about our priority as a church family.

I pray that we will see that declaring God's word is the heart but not the whole of church life and we are all called to play a part.

But for us to learn this and live it out we first need to see the struggle the church faced in Acts 6.

The struggle

Verse 1...

"Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution."

One of cultural group in the church, the Hellenists, felt their widows were being overlooked in a church whose leaders were Hebrews.

Here was a church community that sought to reflect God's character by caring for the vulnerable. The church through its daily distribution gave food, and probably clothes and food to those who were unsupported, felt unloved and had no voice.

The church in Acts up to this point, had done this beautifully. Last week we heard that *"There was not a needy person among them"* (4:34). Now there were some who were needy and they looked like hungry Greek speaking widows.

What might have been seen as favouritism or worse was probably a result of the thousands of people becoming in just a few weeks.

The solution suggests the church had grown so quickly that the way things were organised could no longer cope. A bit like us if a hundred new Christians turned up next Sunday morning. But the result was people who mattered were hungry.

Struggles come in lives of every church. For different reasons the way some things are organised no longer works and people get overlooked.

Over the last few months we've come to see some of those groups in this church family that haven't been served so well and we've been thinking how we can better serve them.

- those less able to get out to regular church activities,
- mums with young children,
- students (especially international students)
- those in their 20s & 30s

The Apostles listened to the complaint and they knew they needed to act. But if they were going to be the solution to the struggle it would distract them from their main role –preaching.

Sometimes we face decisions between two good things.

What to eat? Sausages or Lasagne – both good

Where do I go on holiday? The Lake District or The Peak District – both good districts.

Sometimes it is a choice between something that is good and something that is better. It's not that the first thing is a wrong thing to do, but the other option is better.

That's what we see in the response of the Apostles in verse 2.

"And the twelve summoned the full number of disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables."

The Apostles saw that this struggle could be a huge distraction for them from their preaching. To serve tables was good and needed to happen. But it was better for them to focus on teaching the Bible so that the gospel would continue to spread. So what was their solution?

The solution

What do the Apostles do?

They don't say "it's not our problem you sort it out". They don't tell people to stop moaning. Their solution is to take responsibility and to delegate. Verse 3,

"Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty."

Then later in verse 5 we are given the names of the seven men who were then "set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them."

The Apostles recognised that they couldn't do everything. Not everyone should do everything because that's not how God has designed church families to be like.

God has given every single Christian gifts to use to serve God's people and beyond. We can all serve in different ways.

Some of those gifts focus more on the practical care side of things and some of those gifts focus on teaching the Bible. We need both.

Those chosen to serve at tables weren't just those free to fill a slot on a rota but those recognised by the wider church family to be those right to take on the responsibility.

The Apostle's took responsibility for the solution but delegated the day-to-day serving tables not because they thought it was beneath them but because prayerfully teaching the Bible was their priority.

Verse 5...

"But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

And here we get to the core of what I want us to see this morning. Declaring God's word has to be at the heart of church life but it is not the whole of church life.

We've seen the importance of practical care in the life of the church. But the priority for church life has to be God's word being proclaimed.

The greatest need of any person, whoever they are, wherever they are from, whatever is going on in their life, is to hear of Jesus and the forgiveness he offers through his death and resurrection.

If you're here the morning and not a Christian what would you say your greatest need is?

God doesn't want to ignore your practical concerns but the Bible is clear that your greatest need is to be restored in your relationship with the God who made you. Something that can only happen through believing in Jesus. A perfect life given up on the cross for your far from perfect life.

The Bible's message about Jesus is one that saves lives. To use the language of earlier it brings dead people to life, lost people become found, enemies of God are reconciled to him and people are taken from heading to eternal punishment and given eternal life.

People don't only become Christians by coming to hear Bible teaching in churches. They often become followers of Jesus when individual Christians like us go out into the places we live, work, and play, and share Jesus by sharing our lives with others.

Bible teaching rooted in prayer must be at the heart of church life so that we all are equipped and encouraged to be disciples who make disciples.

Declaring God's word is the heart but not the whole of church life. Those with the gifts of teaching the Bible need to prioritise prayerfully teaching the Bible and those with gifts of practical care need to use their gifts to prioritise prayerful teaching of the Bible.

The struggle? A genuine need that could distract those who taught the Bible. The solution? To delegate and prioritise. The so-what?

The so what

We don't have Apostles and we don't have an organised programme for feeding and clothing widows. But the principle of this passage is the same. Declaring God's word is the heart but not the whole of church life.

Bible teaching must have a priority in our life together as a church family. It might be sermons on a Sunday, teaching the Bible to children, leading our singing, Bible studies in house group or midweek, or reading the Bible with someone.

Church leaders and those involved with teaching the Bible in these different ways need to prioritise this ministry. Leaders are still to serve practically because they are to be Christ like servant leaders.

If you're someone who teaches the Bible regularly it might be coming off a particular rota so you can give more time and energy to prayerfully teaching the Bible. Prioritise and delegate.

If you are aware of someone in the church family has gifts in teaching the Bible that we're not currently using encourage them and come and chat to me. We are in need of more people to teach the Bible in our children's groups and in our house groups.

Every Christian here is to speak of Jesus and offer practical care in our daily lives. Neither is optional. Within the life of the church family the focus for some will be teaching the Bible and the focus for others will be practical care.

Sometimes I think it is easy to overlook how important some of the practical ways of serving are.

Hands up if...

- you are on the refreshments team
- the welcome team
- you're a duty manager
- you do sound or the computer
- you clean the church
- you do the flowers
- you help set up explorers or are in the kitchen at explorers
- you host a house group in your house

Lots of hands. Thank you. You're not simply clicking buttons on the computer, washing up mugs or Hoovering the carpet. What you are doing is offering hospitality.

But there are other practical ways of serving. Being on the Home Visiting Team, the PCC, or someone who works full time to be particularly generous financially to the church family.

By serving in these ways you are enabling Bible teaching, word ministry to happen. It might be as simple as opening the church building so we can meet or opening your house so people can open the Bible together.

It might be caring for the vulnerable in our church family or spending time with those who are finding life stressful or difficult taking some of the load from those who need to make sure they have time to prayerfully teach the Bible each week.

It might be carving out big chunks of time to pray for the Bible teaching that goes on each week here.

It might be giving sacrificially to the church so that people like me can make teaching the Bible a priority by not having to work another job.

Where are you serving? We've all got a part to play. If you would like to know ways in which you can get involved with the practical side of church life I'd love to talk to you at the end of the service.

The struggle and solution in Acts 6 shows us that declaring God's word is the heart but not the whole of church life. We need Bible teachers and practical carers whose priority is for God's word.

When the church in Acts lived this out, verse 7

"The word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."

If we live this out and if God so chooses to act we might find 100 new Christians here next week or over the next five years.