

Sunday 27th June 2021 – Acts 6:1-10 ‘Order and opposition’

One of the big debates about these famous opening chapters of the Book of Acts is how far the early church is an example to be copied by future generations of the church. It's true that most of us stand in awe of its dynamic activity, its deep community life and generosity, its impact in the population, its clarity of vision and leadership. But, so the argument goes, perhaps it's just an ideal to aim for, but not one we can realistically expect to copy in the 'real world'.

We have similar debates about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – never mind that much of our practical lifestyle teaching in the church is taken directly from it, it's often presented as an ideal but unattainable vision which we hold up as a template but don't actually try and live in any meaningful sense.

Today's passage, however, rather gives the lie to this idea that the early church was somehow unique, or at the very least abnormal. **The church we read about today sounds just like most normal churches that I've ever been to:** there are complaints about pastoral care, challenges with staffing, and negative media reports from local enemies with a chip on their shoulder. Sound familiar?

What we see here is that within a year or two of its beginning, the church starts to have exactly the same sort of challenges that all of us face, that affect all human communities of people. For me, this passage acts as a bridge into the rest of the Book of Acts. Because what I read here is just the sort of stuff that church communities that I've been part of have to deal with, I can relate to the rest of it as well. This is not some sort of ideal community that bears no relation to my world – it's a real flesh-and-blood church full of real flesh-and-blood people with real flesh-and-blood problems. Their world is mine, at least to some degree: so maybe the other inspiring stuff about generosity and miracles and growth is possible too.

At its heart, what this passage reminds us of very clearly is that **for any church to thrive long-term it has to be able to face and overcome threats and challenges both within and without**. We've looked at the opposition from outside that the church faces – and still faces today – in the video we showed earlier, and we'll come back to that more than once over the next couple of weeks. Sadly that hasn't changed, and remains the reality for millions of Christians around the world. I hope this current series re-energises our desire to pray for them and offer practical help where we can.

But today, let's also look at the challenges from within: any large community will have some internal discontent at some point. Here the challenge is particularly acute because it has racial overtones – one ethnic group is being prioritised over another in its welfare programme – but this is not just a justice issue in itself, it undermines the radical nature of the church's message, that Christ has come for all people.

It also presents an organisational headache, because the current leadership network is too small to fix the welfare programme without taking the apostles away from what they do best. When they talk about not wanting to wait at tables, they are not being snobbish – remember they're fishermen, described by the true elite in Acts 4 as 'unschooled, ordinary people' – they're simply making the point that their gifting is to preach and pray. The risk here is that if they adopt a quick fix and do it all themselves, they'll fall prey to what a lot of churches fall prey to: they end up giving all their time to servicing their internal life, at the expense of their mission and their continued presence in the wider community.

So they come up with a much better plan – find a second group of leaders, who are gifted at practical organisation, so that those in need can be well looked after *and* the apostles can continue to focus on their main gifts. So that's what they do – and it works! Look at the outcome in verse 7: 'the word of God spread, the number of disciples increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.'

But let's also notice one other thing: there are not two classes of Christians here – the 'spiritual' ones and the 'practical' ones. **Look at the qualifications for leading the practical ministry: 'known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom'** (v3) In other words, the *same* qualification as the spiritual leaders. When St Paul talks in later New Testament letters about the equal worth of all people and all gifts in the body of Christ, he really means it! These practical tasks are just as spiritual as the 'spiritual' ones.

And can I say from my own personal perspective, that this observation is just as true today. The wonderful people who take on the practical tasks of the church's life are like gold dust. We have a number of people like that – and you know who you are! – and I can't stress enough that you are just as vital to our community life as those who lead services, if not more so. I can't do what I do, if these wonderful people didn't do what they did.

And the truth is that **we still need you as much as ever**. Our own church communities are growing, which is wonderful news and for which I am very grateful – and I'm still looking for good people who have a heart for God to get stuck in to the nitty-gritty. It's not glamorous, or even paid – but it is for God's glory, and allows us all to be part of a Spirit-filled community which changes lives. Are you in?