

We're coming near to the end of Season 1 of Acts – next week will be the end of Season 1 and it's a very dramatic ending as someone is killed by the Jewish opposition.

2 sections in this chapter:

1. The delegating of responsibility; the need to set up an administrative system for the widows; the appointment of 7 men for the job; the importance of teaching the word and prayer.
2. Intro to Stephen; opposition to him -the Spirit gives him wisdom to speak; charges brought against Stephen – speaking against the Temple and against Moses

So as we begin our story today Luke tells us of an internal problem that arises in the church between some of the believers. Who are these 2 different groups? The Hebraic Jews were the locals – they have lived in this area all their lives, their families were nearby etc; the Hellenistic Jews were Jews that had come from other parts of the Roman world. They were probably Jews that had come to live their last days in or near Jerusalem – then they could die and be buried near Jerusalem. Now some of them had come to be followers of Jesus, to be new life people. As widows, when their husbands died, they were particularly vulnerable because they didn't have the same family networks around them. This one incident here is probably just one of possibly other cases where racial and cultural differences caused some division.

So there is some mumbling and grumbling going on – the early church was not a perfect church. Of course, this wouldn't happen in our church would it? What I like about this situation is that the problem is dealt with. It's not swept under the carpet; there's no racial superiority demonstrated. There's no blaming. There is a problem, let's deal with it. The whole community is involved; the load is shared; and some new believers get the opportunity to develop their gifts. I like the way in which the 7 who are chosen are given the responsibility to carry out their task. It doesn't seem as if they have the apostles looking over their shoulders – they are trusted to do the job.

We can see in this passage that a very significant factor in the choosing of these 7 men is they were to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. It wasn't necessarily the oldest person, the most senior person, or the most experienced person - the qualifications were that the Holy Spirit could be seen clearly to be at work in them. They displayed fruits of the Spirit. And they had wisdom – which would be critical in this situation. And then in v.5 as the group of 7 is announced by Luke he makes special mention of the fact that Stephen is “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit”. So one of the ways that the Holy Spirit is working in Stephen's life is his faith or trust in God. Later on in v.8 Stephen is again described as a man full of God's grace and power – God's grace is evident in his life as God gives him the power to perform signs and wonders but also to speak with clarity and boldness. And then again in v.10 Luke uses another phrase – “they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.” The Spirit, God, is so working in Stephen that people around him could see evidence of God working in and through him. I believe that all these things are so important as we look for suitable people amongst us to lead and to serve others in our church.

So, is waiting on tables a lesser thing? No, it was important, but if it's all we do, this is not good. Both preaching and teaching and waiting on tables are needed. But we are all called to be witnesses. And we'll see straight away in the second section of our story today that Stephen certainly does more than just wait on tables.

So let's look at v.7 - The word of God – the passage begins and ends with a record of the remarkable growth in the number of believers in Jerusalem, and the point is clearly made that this happened because the ministry of the word continued unhindered. Luke makes it clear that it was important for the growth of the church.

The whole way of talking about God's word is a gentle reminder that however much work anyone puts into the task of explaining the Bible, into teaching the message of Jesus which stands on the shoulder of the biblical witness, into explaining and applying the whole thing, it is still God's work, not the preacher's or teacher's. “the word of God” is really an autonomous

agent, it works on its own. It kind of keeps the apostles in their place. They are not “growing the church”; God is growing the church, and using their ministry of teaching and preaching as the main way of doing this. It’s a good reminder for me as I speak here on a Sunday morning but for all of us as we share the word of God with others. The other side, though, is that the coming of people to follow Jesus is not dependent on me or my clever words. It’s God’s work. The Holy Spirit makes the word of God come alive, make sense, in people’s lives. I still want to preach as clearly and attractively and truly as possible. But it’s God who does the changing. Phew!! But it’s helping me to see even more how important God’s word is – the teaching and preaching and telling out of the truths about Jesus and his death and resurrection, as the fulfilment of all God’s promises down the years – this is significant.

Another thought on the word of God – we need to be careful that we’re not just reading and listening to God’s word to get information. We generally read things to get information – you know I read a news article to find out about Covid. We want to read the Bible with the view to having an encounter with God. We don’t want to read the text to know ABOUT God, BUT to KNOW God.

Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” This is not something we can control. I think I can read the bible in such a way that I know a lot about it, the historical background, the context, the meaning of words etc, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But I need to let God use it to cut deep into my soul, to reveal those attitudes and thoughts that need to be brought to light. When I read the Bible just for information I’m in control, but when I let God’s word have its way, and let God encounter me through his Word I am not in control. But if I want to KNOW God I need to have that attitude. Look at how the writer to the Hebrews finishes off- v.13, of Hebrews 4 - “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” Woah! I cannot hide anything from God! Yes, if we allow the Word of God to do its work in our lives our comfortable worlds might be rocked, but wouldn’t I rather have the almighty God who loves me to cut deep into my

heart and expose those things needing exposing than to hide and retreat behind a mask of seeming respectability. Following Jesus is not safe but Jesus is safe – he wants us to be people that display the fullness of the Spirit in our lives; to display his wisdom, his grace, his power.

And then prayer – it's mentioned in the same breath here. It's so significant. Boy, do I find this hard! The teaching and preaching are mentioned as important but what's the other thing mentioned in v.4 – the apostles need to give their attention to prayer. Of course all Christians are called to pray, to make time for it, to soak everything that they do in it. But the apostles say that this is a reason why they can't get involved in the organisation of daily distribution to those in need. How much do I give myself to prayer? It's a challenge to me. I can preach powerful and challenging sermons, but God has called me to pray. I struggle with that. You know prayer isn't about asking God for things, yes we can do that and we're encouraged to do that. But prayer is more a reflection of us recognising our need to depend on God. I need you Jesus, I can't live this life on my own, strengthen me as I talk to my workmates; as I seek to love my neighbour; as I seek to love this other person in the church who I struggle to get on with; as I seek to serve my wife and not just get preoccupied with my life; prayer is also saying thanks to God, remembering him when things are going well; saying that he is the source of all blessing. Yes, prayer is crying out to God. Help me God. If I am not doing that what does it say about my friendship with God. Pray for me that I would be a praying pastor; pray for our leadership team, that we wouldn't just try and thrash out the next response to Covid but that we would be prayers; that obviously is a need for those in leadership as our story suggests today; pray for each other that we would be praying partners in the gospel.

One of the things that the Leadership team has been talking about is how does God want to grow our church? Can we employ someone else part-time? What would be their role? We've talked with Bernadette at the Preschool about this; we're talking with Committee of Management about this this afternoon and then someone from the Leadership Team will talk about this with the whole church in the next week or two. Let us pray as a church – how can we be growing as a church? Each of us can be praying what would you have me do, Lord?  
Prayer for another worker –

v.8-15 – This is the beginning of the last episode in this series. Luke has told us a little about Stephen already. Now we see another side to him – he is an outstanding speaker for Jesus. He really is just like the apostles. And so we see him in a similar role to Peter and the Apostles. No one can stand up to him when he is speaking. What are you thinking as you hear this? Yes, it's just like Jesus. Remember the crowds would say, "No one spoke like this man". Now Stephen, filled with the holy Spirit, is speaking in a similar vein. And so now, just like Jesus, accusations are brought against Stephen. There is a similar twisting of the truth. And so we get prepared for the trial of Stephen. There are two accusations brought against him. He speaks against the Temple and he speaks against the laws given to Moses. The Temple was the place where heaven and earth were supposed to meet – God was seen to be dwelling in the Temple.

People came to the Temple to perform the sacrifices for their sins, to get rid of the barrier that separated them from relationship with God; to be able to meet with God. We know, though, that Jesus had come down to earth. Jesus, was God dwelling here on earth. His death and resurrection had now restored the relationship with God. There was no need for the Temple – God was now dwelling fulltime in his people. The Holy Spirit now lives in those who are his followers. If we follow Jesus, we are his Temple.

Read chap 7 in the coming week – longest sermon in Acts – and discover what Stephen says about the Temple and about Moses and the law?