

ALL SAINTS WESTON

SUNDAY 11 AUGUST 2024
(First given June 2017 at ASW)

(Exodus 18: 5 -27)
Acts 6: 1-7

WISE LEADERSHIP – Tom Peryer

We have now reached Chapter 6 in our journey through Acts. So far, it's been a roller coaster ride. There has been the explosion on the Day of Pentecost when thousands were baptised as followers of Jesus; the dramatic healing of the disabled man through Peter with the consequence that many more people believed and many more miraculous healings and signs. And we have seen the pooling of resources and money by those first Christians ... the double arrest of Peter and John and their miraculous escape from prison. Last week we had the sobering story of the sudden death of Ananias and his wife Sapphira following their deceit about the sale of a piece of land they owned. Next week we shall focus on the brutal death of Stephen – the first Christian martyr. That is one heck of a ride.

But these seven verses from Chapter 6, tell of an altogether different and quieter episode in the roller coaster story so far. But what it teaches us about churches and their problems and about the wise leadership of churches and indeed of any organisation, is very significant and eminently practical.

The opening sentence of chapter 6 tells us two things about this early church. Firstly it was growing. Secondly there was the prospect of division and conflict – and division along ethnic and racial dividing lines. Sound familiar this week?

What is not familiar to us in the West and even here in All Saints is the growth problem that the early church had. We have a decline problem. We here in this predominantly elderly congregation are the last generation to have been born in the UK into what you could say was a predominantly Christian culture. That was not true for our adult children and is much less true for our grandchildren. Of course we long for the tide of the sea of the Christian faith to be turned – no longer receding far into the distance but coming forward and splashing up against the sea defences. We long to see more people turning to Christ. We long to see our churches and more specifically our church growing.

We, not least me, hope and pray that the 300 seats we have recently acquired for the new building will be regularly occupied by people not just in concerts or conferences or special services but Sunday after Sunday. We hope and pray that once again people will be required to move upstairs because the seats downstairs are occupied and you know up there they can be nearly as comfortable as downstairs because of the new pew cushions that now occupy every space on the gallery pews.

But if this growth in numbers were to happen, make no mistake there will be many challenges and problems arising out of that growth. Sometimes we over-romanticise and over-idealise the early church and think if only we got back to what

it was like then all our problems would be solved. Not true. Mind you I would rather solve the problems of growth than the problems of decline.

But, imagine if people with virtually no Christian background, experience, knowledge or language were to start coming to All Saints. Where would we find the mentors? What guidance would we give over lifestyle? What expectations would we have of those new converts or new additions to our church and they of us? So when Tom Yacomeni half-jokingly suggested early on in this series that it would be wonderful to have 3,000 new disciples joining us, as was the case on the Day of Pentecost, I was not so sure I agreed with him! Maybe 30 would be enough to be going on with!

It is not hard to imagine the challenges that those 12 apostles faced, with hundreds and thousands of people coming forward to be 'people of the way' as Christians were first known... And one of those first practical problems was how to run the food bank set up to help the poorer members of the Church? Well that's a pretty contemporary problem isn't it? Incidentally the Trussell Trust now has over 1300 foodbanks – and they are not the only organisation providing them – many of course being run by churches.

The Jerusalem foodbank had been set up to support those who had no means of supporting themselves economically – the widows, the elderly, children and presumably the disabled. It is exactly what the church should do. The Apostle James in his letter says

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.

The Jerusalem Foodbank and Relief Fund is a sign of how the grace of God has made a powerful impact not just on people's hearts but on their bank balances (not that there were any banks in those days).

So money is donated and presented to the apostles. Then it has to be carefully recorded and guarded and provisions bought and then distributed to those who need it. And would you know it? that's when the arguments start, when the rumours and gossip spread about who gets what. So verse 1 says 'the Hellenistic Jews - ie those Jews who spoke Greek and were from a predominantly Greek culture – the Hellenistic Jews complained **against** - against - the Hebraic Jews because **their** widows - notice use of 'their' – their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Everyone with an income was paying their weekly standing orders into the Jerusalem church account but some of them felt 'their own kind' weren't getting a fair share.

There was a feeling that the widows who were born and bred in and around Jerusalem were getting more than those Jewish widows who were born outside of Jerusalem, Judea and Galilee but who had moved for whatever reason to Jerusalem. No doubt there were many local Jewish people who were a bit resentful of these Greek speaking Jews "coming here and taking our food – and accommodation and jobs". You can imagine the conversations that took place.

- *“Did you see what she got this morning and then did you see what I got?”*
- *“I heard that Priscilla was turned away because there was supposed to be no more food left in the warehouse but actually there was and it was being kept for those women who have got the ear of Peter and John and James and Matthew’.*
- *‘Oh yes’ says another – ‘there’s definitely an in-crowd and I think we are in the out-crowd.’*

And so the rumours fly around – the gossip spreads, the grumbling gets worse.

As it happens, just this week I heard about a local food initiative called the Community Fridge. This is not quite the same as a Foodbank. It is more about stopping food going into landfill. Every day volunteers go to the local supermarkets and collect perishable foodstuffs which have come to their ‘best before date’. This is good for the supermarkets because they do not have to pay for disposing of unwanted food, good for the environment because there is less food going into landfill and good for families because it is free food. The food collected from the supermarkets is then taken to a central point and anyone, regardless of circumstances, can come in and help themselves. This particular week there has been some chatting by some volunteer helpers on their whatsapp group who feel that people from one particular group of people are taking *‘more than their fair share’* or *‘more than they need’*. And the question is *‘what can or should be done about this? Should rules be introduced limiting people to one bag etc?’*

Back to Jerusalem AD 35 or thereabouts . Over the course of at least a few days but maybe weeks and months, the grievances and the murmuring on the part of the Greek Jews grew louder. The women made their feelings clear to the men. And then some of the men took it on themselves either as a group or individually to collar the apostles after church or when they saw them in the street or they called in on them at home and told them the problem. I hope they voiced their concerns or complaints in a positive way. Thankfully for the apostles, there was no email, facebook or X account to bang off an angry and offensive complaining message – as happens so often these days. And very occasionally it happens here in this church! But I think only very occasionally!

Now let’s turn to verse 2 where we see the wise and skilful leadership coming into play on the part of the 12 apostles – men who had of course had as their role model and mentor Jesus himself. In verse 1 the complaint has been voiced and verse 2 begins

“So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said”

That very short and simple phrase covers a lot of good practice which is worth uncovering because it demonstrates the demonstration of wise leadership. So what was it that they did? What did they do before they called an open meeting?

Firstly the apostolic leadership must have listened to the complaints and taken them seriously – they did not dismiss them out of hand. They recognised that this issue is a threat to the unity and mutual support that the church has been living out. You know a good leader takes complaints and grumbings

seriously. It is always good to nip these things in the bud before they get out of control. Too many people in the workplace or in society feel that nobody listens to them – their grievances may not be well-founded as in, for example, *'all those immigrants go to the front of the housing queue'*; it may only be perception but perceptions have to be dealt with. And grievances not taken seriously can be damaging – maybe we are seeing that in the political upheavals that have taken place recently and maybe.

Secondly the apostles listened to each other and agreed what to do together – it was a collective decision – it was the 12 who gathered the disciples not just Peter or John.

Thirdly they must have prayed about what to do for the best – prayer was central to their ministry and their practice.

Fourthly they showed that they had listened by calling a meeting all the disciples (not quite sure how they did that). In other words they brought the issue out into the open. Transparency and accountability we call it today. They put it on the table – they showed that they had listened and more than that they came up with a plan.

All of those four points must have happened before they called the people together.

I wished I could have listened in on their discussions because, when you think about it, Peter as leader and chair of the group must have put the item on the weekly or daily apostles meeting. I can hear imagine him saying:

"Right now we come to Item No 4: Distribution of food parcels – complaint from Greek delegation. Try and stay awake James & John. Now Phillip and Andrew you know something about distributing bread and fish don't you? ha-ha-ha, you go first."

No doubt there was a variety of views. Perhaps you remember that in the previous chapter of Acts in chapter 5 (the one before this incident) there is an account of 'the apostles' – maybe all 12 of them' being arrested, re-arrested and then flogged. They have taken a whipping and a beating. They are still nursing those scarred backs . So you can imagine some saying *"Good grief. They're going on about not enough bread, when we've not long been flogged and are at risk of our lives. Give me strength!"*

Perhaps James and John (who Jesus called the sons of thunder because they had a short temper) said *'we should tell them to be grateful for whatever they get and to think of other poor people who don't get anything. And if they don't like it they can always go somewhere else'*.

Perhaps Thomas said *'I doubt very much if what they say is true. What evidence do we have that there is unfair distribution? I'll need to get my hands on the accounts and distribution lists before I pass judgment'*

Well they may or may not have said those things but actually in the end they must have been sympathetic and accepted that something needed to be done. The upset Greek Jews didn't need a sermon or advice about being patient and grateful. What was required was a wise plan, a sensible course of action from the leadership.

And that's just what they did as we see in the rest of verse 2 and verse 3.

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. 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 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

These words represent a 5 point plan of action. Very quickly this is what it was.

Firstly the apostles decided what their own priorities were – and they decided that their priorities were the ministry of the word of God and prayer; we need to make sure that Tom Yacomeni and Emma are not overburdened with tasks that are not their first priority.

Secondly, having recognised what their priorities were, they decided that a separate team of people to handle the matter was needed– the apostles recognised that they couldn't do everything themselves and that different tasks required different skill sets. Thankfully in this church we have many teams of people who perform many different roles. As a general rule of thumb I think everyone of us should be involved in a team of some kind.

Thirdly the apostles then involved others in the solution of the problem. They involved all the men-disciples by giving them

the vote in choosing who the team should be to manage the problem – the apostles did not appoint the team although they did set some criteria for who those people should be. Nowadays we call it a candidate specification ie the candidate for this or that post must have these skills and experiences and it would be preferable if they had some or all of the following qualities and skills. In the case of the Apostles they just set three criteria:

- They should be known to you and from amongst you.
- They should be full of the Spirit
- They should be full of wisdom

Notice by the way the difference in appointing these people compared with the method of choosing the apostle to replace Judas Iscariot. In that case they whittled the number of potential apostles down to two and then cast lots. On this occasion they gave the matter over to a selection panel of some sorts.

Fourthly they delegated authority to the people chosen by the church – verse 3. in part the plan was to pass the problem back to this large growing church but to pass it back with delegated authority to get on with it.

Fifthly they accepted the decision of the people who publicly commissioned them for the work by praying for them and laid their hands on them as a sign of that commissioning.

Too often in churches and this is especially true of new churches founded by one person or a married couple, the leadership becomes very autocratic, makes all the decisions and it becomes a case of 'my way or the highway'. That is not a biblical pattern or a sensible pattern for a healthy and mature church. Many of the abuses we see in churches and elsewhere are because people were too autocratic, did not share responsibility and no one felt able to challenge or disagree with them.

But here in these early days of Acts a good principle has been set by a wise leadership. This is leadership that involves others. It delegates the task and it delegates the choosing of people. We hear a lot these days about 'ownership' of problems and challenges and about 'empowering' others. Well here are these untutored men who haven't been to Business School doing just that. But they do their delegation within a clear framework. They tell them to pick seven people, they give a candidate specification or necessary qualities and skills and probably somewhere there is a job description – and then they leave them to get on with it.

This emerging church now has a new team of seven working alongside the first team of twelve. But these seven are not just good administrators, good with money, good with drawing up rotas, good with producing action plans and job descriptions they are also godly, prayerful men who are full of the spirit of God.

You will probably have seen this week that an excellent appointment has been made of a young man to carry out all the practical jobs associated with maintaining and keeping

open for lots of activities our new church. That is excellent news and we are very hopeful that two more appointments will soon be announced – one to lead our music worship and work amongst 20's and 30's and another to take over from Naomi in managing our Church Centre and the Hub.

It has been a process involving spiritual discernment, humility, collective responsibility, involvement, diplomacy, graciousness and a good many other features. Is there a connection between this incident and the very next verse, verse seven?

So the word of God spread and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly.

Surely there must be a connection.

If we hope, as I hope we all do, that the word of God will spread and the number of new disciples in Weston and Bath will increase rapidly over the next few years we will need leaders who can lead like the apostles and people who will be willing to serve like these seven. We will need people who are spirit filled, wise in many ways and passionate about spreading the good news of the gospel. We will need a task force of hundreds not a handful. Which of you is up for it?

Let me end with words from Peter's letter. Maybe he first said those words on that day when they appointed the seven.

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with

the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.'

May God be praised through Jesus Christ in all the things we do in this church and may we do it in the strength and fulness of Spirit that he provides.