

**Acts 6: 1 to 7****Deacons***(T/B: m- 22 Oct 17)*

It didn't last long unfortunately. The disciples' first attempt at communal living where they sold everything they had so that no one claimed anything as their own, but everyone had enough. But just two chapters later what happens? The Greek Christians are complaining because their widows aren't getting as much aid as the Hebrew Christian widows! Maybe it was greed or racial prejudice on the part of the Hebrews. Maybe it was grabbing on the part of the Greeks or perhaps it was neglect on the part of the apostles or just a faulty method of distribution? Whatever it was, it wouldn't be the last time the church had to deal with tension between ethnic, social or inter-denominational groups, and it wouldn't be the last time the church had deal with the deeper issue of balancing word and work, sacrament and service.

The leaders decided to structure the church to bring balance between the ministry of preaching which was the work of the apostles, and the ministries of compassion. They chose Stephen and Philip, along with five others who were given the title Deacons, to focus on serving and distributing food, which is the work of compassion. The church leaders aim was not to divide the Christian ministry or to suggest one was more important than the other. But to provide a balanced ministry where the church proclaimed the Gospel and demonstrated the Gospel in a caring way.

To be fair, it's easy to see why the first Apostles would focus on the evangelistic role, for this is the first proclamation of the good news of Christ. They had to get the word out and bring people to Jesus, before they could do anything about serving the widows and feeding the hungry. It's easy to understand why the preaching ministry would take precedence. After all, Jesus' last command to the disciples was to go and preach the word to all nations, to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and throughout the earth. And look at the results of this approach! Peter preached and 3000 responded. Luke says the church was adding daily those who were being saved. Under the word of the Apostles lame men were walking, people were being healed.

Throughout Jerusalem was of these signs and wonders. So why wouldn't you focus on the preaching of this powerful, life-changing word? Back their community was full of people with real needs. And if the church was going to model this new life in Christ, it had to live out both sides of the Gospel with the preaching of the Gospel to witness to Christ and to mirror His compassion. Jesus was always concerned for the care of body and soul, and so to emulate Christ's ministry the work of the apostles and deacons, sacrament and servanthood had to work side by side. And over 2000 years later, the church is still trying to model this ministry, and still struggling to get it right!

It seems the church is always getting caught between the two and depending on your theology, drifting to one extreme or the other: Evangelism, preaching the word, saving souls on the right, passion for social issues on the left. Favouring Peter's preaching or Stephen's serving, all the while failing to find the fullness of ministry Christ intended for the church.

The church has always been good at either offering Christ through evangelism, or offering soup through social action, but we've not quite managed to do both together. Britain has a proud history of sending missionaries out to Africa and some of these missionaries were truly heroic in their service. However, Britain's first missionaries were sent out to subjugate the people in the interests of colonialism, and their message was one of Christian obedience to God, and to their earthly masters. David Livingstone's motto was Christianity and Commerce, and those who supported his mission work were those who exploited Africa for its natural resources. It's little wonder that for many in our world, that kind of Christianity became totally irrelevant.

I was a young adult in the late 70s and early 80s and I saw the passion of the peace movement, racial equality movement and the feminist movement; all claiming Biblical precedence to bolster the arguments for their cause. But there was no mention of personal salvation, no invitation for a personal encounter with the living Christ!

There was no acknowledgement of the need of God's grace and redemption. And we still seem to be bouncing back and forth between an evangelistic message with no social power and a social gospel with no heart or soul. Our ministry initiatives, our church life and programs need to discover the balance between Peter and Stephen, worship and work, sacrament and service. We need to seek God for inspiration to provide creative worship alternatives to reach more people with the life-changing message of Christ, through both evangelism and service.

I must say that I think without blowing our trumpet, I think we are pretty good at providing a balanced ministry here in Thornliebank. We support various social causes and many of our people serve others through various activities that help those less fortunate than ourselves. We run evangelistic outreach initiatives like café church, holiday clubs, scripture union and the Guild here and in Eastwoodhill. But I still think we can improve just by acknowledging that we need to provide a complete ministry, we need to offer people the gospel message at the same time as offer practical assistance and that's what we are aiming to do with our Advocacy Initiative. We are offering people assistance with issues to do with health, benefit claims, housing problems and assisting people with independent living, but while we are doing this we are telling people why we are helping them and that's because we sense God telling us to. And by stating we are working for God, that gives us a way to talk about Jesus. Our aim is to offer the balance between worship and work, sacrament and service just like Peter the Apostle and Stephen the Deacon.

If there's something that makes me angry, it's the way that the church grades ministry and those in it. If you attend an ordination or an induction, you will discover that those who are going in with Presbytery, don't just go in together. First come ministers of word and sacrament, in other words. Then come Elders, and then last of all come Deacons and Parish Workers, and then come the Readers and they are almost forgotten. Why we don't just go into those occasions together is beyond me!

And yet, when I read Acts 6 I don't recognise a hierarchy being suggested. The Apostles didn't say let us choose some assistants to carry out a lesser ministry than ours, they recognised the need for a complementary ministry. The early church valued all equally and asserted that all were gifted, and that the early church would only grow if everyone used their gifts in harmony with each other. That is why we talk of body ministry and why the church is referred to as the Body of Christ. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians made this clear when he said: *God has placed the parts in the body just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts but one body.*

If the church is to rediscover its relevance in today's community then we have to offer more than we have been doing, because people need a church that bring's together the balanced ministry of word and work, sacrament and servanthood. The ministry of both Peter and Stephen! The call of the church must be to live out the whole Gospel for today's world.

The Apostle James asked *what does it profit if a person has faith, but does not demonstrate it through actions?* If someone is hungry or homeless and all we can offer them is: *Go in peace for Jesus loves you*, are they likely to give their life to Christ, or think we are sanctimonious busy bodies? *Think about this and ask God to show you how you can serve Him.* Thankfully, Acts 6 introduces us to Stephen and a balanced life of service in the name of Christ.

Two final comments: *This Christian life of servanthood isn't cheap.* If you read on in Acts 6 and 7 you will discover that this ministry cost Stephen his life. The way of balanced ministry which brings together the word and the work of the Gospel can be very costly. I *can* promise that a church which takes seriously the call of Christ to live out the whole Gospel will cost a great deal but it's the way to life!

*Secondly, this way of servanthood and balanced church life is a choice!* It's up to us. We can choose to be this kind of a church and invest in this kind of ministry. We can choose the way of faithful stewardship and giving generously. Or we can walk away, it's up to us to choose.

All I can do is offer the invitation, the opportunity and the call to follow Christ in the way of servanthood. The way of Stephen and the way of life. So, what kind of church do you want to be a part of ? *Amen!*

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