

PARK ROAD BAPTIST CHURCH, PETERBOROUGH

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

**Inclusive Leadership**

(Acts 6:1-7)

Good morning, my brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Bible Reading & Background**

Today's reading is from the book of Acts.

In my Urdu Bible the book is entitled as Apostles' Acts and I have always known it by this name. There is something very revealing in the name of this book. Obviously, it is about the apostles but more specifically how they acted/reacted after Jesus ascended, leaving them with the Great Commission, a responsibility which they took very seriously. So seriously that they were ready to die for it and we know many of them met death as martyrs.

Luke starts the book of Acts with the central theme of his former book (the Gospel of Luke) saying *'I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven...'* Luke then continues to write and the last recording in this book (Apostles' Acts) is about Apostle Paul where he is under house arrest and the last words Luke recorded are, *'He proclaimed the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ-with all boldness and without hindrance.'* (Act 28: 31). It is clear that Jesus has been the centre of their writing and teaching.

The book of Acts ended at Acts 28:31 but the Acts in service of Christ continued for the past 2000 years till today. Many of you might be familiar with the book called 'Heavenly Man' (by Brother Yun and Paul Hattaway), It just seems an extension and continuation of the book of Acts. Similarly, 'Miracles from the Dust' (by John Mellor) and many more like this indicate the acts of disciples, of later times, in serving Christ. But for now let's turn to Apostles' Acts 6: 1-7 from the Holy Scripture.

This passage in the NIV Bible is entitled 'The Choosing of the Seven'. It tells that the early church in Jerusalem was facing an issue, perhaps a common issue, and one which still exists in our society. Luke writes that there was a need to choose new leaders because the church was growing rapidly and, we know that although growth brings joy, it also breeds more issues and problems to be solved.

The early church must have been diverse in many other aspects too but here the issue was about the neglect of socio-economic related needs of an ethnic group. There were Hellenistic Jews and Hebraic Jews and the church was looking after the widows in the church community; perhaps a bit like our contemporary 'food bank' open to the needy and desperate.

The emerging situation was that Hellenistic widows somehow were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food and the complaint was brought to the Apostles. It seems that the Apostles were still there together in Jerusalem. It is written in Acts 6:2 *'So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together...'* This group of 12 magnificent Apostles have witnessed, preached and faithfully passed on what Jesus taught and showed them. John says, ***'We have seen his glory...'*** (John 1:14) and Peter said it best, ***'We were eyewitnesses of His Majesty...'*** (2 Peter 1:16).

Well, they gathered together to resolve the issue presented to them. I imagine Peter

leading the meeting of this diverse group which was a cross section of the church community of his time. Whoever was taking the notes of this meeting, Luke has recorded that the decision was made. They delegated the responsibility of food provision/distribution to the seven chosen leaders and very rightly decided to carry on the great commission; a decree issued to them by their master, Christ, Himself.

I don't think that the Twelve were trying to put themselves above the rest of the followers of Christ by taking *'the Ministry of the word of God'* to themselves and asking others to attend the tables. They were delegating and trying to make sure that the best people were allocated the right job: making available different kinds of food: bread of Heaven and bread of flour.

At the start, the twelve were the best to preach and teach what they learnt from their Master. They were the only ones who heard the great commission issued to them first hand on the Mount of Olives. Before that, they were the ones who spent time with Jesus, had watched Him and come to know who He was, why He was there and why He was doing what He was doing. This is what makes them Apostles: meeting Jesus in person whilst he lived on Earth and after His ascension, welcoming and receiving Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. They are those lucky ones who encountered two persons of our Triune God (Jesus & Holy Spirit). The course of their lives changed. They were fishermen and now they were to be fishers of men, as Jesus had told them when he first called them. No wonder they were on fire for Jesus. There was a burden of responsibility on them to pass on the good news to the fallen world.

They had one purpose in their lives: to proclaim the Majesty of the Risen Christ by preaching to the many who had been waiting for ages for the arrival of Messiah and shake those who were the guardians of God's word (Pharisees and the teachers of the Law) and make them realise that the prophecies have been fulfilled in Christ. No wonder they preferred the Apostolic ministry of telling the world about the bread of heaven and leaving the willing fellow-disciples to feed the church community.

In my opinion, society has not changed in that sense at all; we still have people around us who go hungry and thirsty along with their souls, and people who reject the bread of heaven and feed their souls on some funky junk food.

So far, we have talked about an issue in the early church and its solution (delegating and choosing new leaders). Let's look at the type of leadership which was proposed and emerged.

### **Inclusive Leadership**

The term 'inclusion/ inclusive' appears to be a relatively contemporary one but the world has always been and will always be diverse, and this heterogeneity will last forever even beyond the time when we cease to live on earth and enter in God's glory. According to Revelation 7: 9 *'After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.'*

Inclusion is a hallmark of God's family (John 3:16) *'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal*

*life.'*

There must have been many times when the Twelve had to choose and make difficult decisions but let's focus on this specific event the one which we have just talked about '*The Choosing of the Seven*' .

We know that decision making was related to a socio-economic need in an ethnically diverse church

In Jerusalem. We note that in their proposal, the Apostles had an inclusive approach: they included

The possibility of anyone amongst the disciples, capable of being a leader, but at the same time

They also brought forward an exclusive requirement for the leadership role. It is written '*...choose seven men from among you (inclusion) who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom*'

(Acts 6: 3).

We know that all wise men/women are not full of Holy Spirit but I would like to think that those who are filled with the Holy Spirit are expected to be full of wisdom. Whoever you are, whatever skin pigmentation you carry, and wherever you come from, you have a place in the church. However, to lead the church and to support the church leaders, one needs to lead and stand for Biblical principles in the face of emerging ideologies of the time. It is not an easy task, it requires wisdom to flow against the current and the leader specifically needs to be rooted in the word of God. In Proverbs 2: 5, it is written '*for the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.*'

Regarding the Holy Spirit it is written '*Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit...?*' (1 Corinthians 6:9) and at the same time we know that it is hard to say what is the yard stick for these two requirements: full of the Spirit and wisdom. However, the Bible clearly says that '*you will know them by their fruits.*' In Galatians 5: 13-26, there is a list of the fruits of the spirit. This section is entitled as 'Life by the Spirit'. It talks about what is Life by the Spirit and Life by the Flesh. We are both flesh and spirit and sadly they are contrary to each other.

Being Christ's follower is not easy and it never has been. It demands your all; willing to be a living sacrifice: '*holy and pleasing to God- this is your true and proper worship*' (Romans 12: 1). Imagine how hard it is to leave a living being on the altar. We, the followers of Christ, are all a living sacrifice. There are times when we fail and perhaps move away from the altar. This is where the Spirit and wisdom uphold us, through our fellow disciples and the leaders, to be steadfast in the service of God. To serve God is to be 'salt of the earth' adding flavour and preserving what is good in God's sight: to preserve the Biblical principles in all we do and support.

We all should aspire to be wise and actively allow the Spirit to work through us but it is essential for the leaders so that they may not permit the flock to deviate from the narrow path which we are bound to tread. Jesus Said, '*small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*' (Mathew 7:14)

So, we have talked about the principle of inclusion and the exclusive criteria for the leader. Now let's consider the people who were chosen to be deacons, to supervise the food bank of the church in Jerusalem. All seven men who were chosen for the financial management of food distribution have Greek names. Perhaps this could be interpreted as cultural

sensitivity in dealing with the issue of Hellenist widows.

To sum up this section, I would say that this special incident sets an example of and criteria for leadership: the principle of inclusion and the exclusive criteria suggests that a suitable leader may emerge from the group of people willing to serve.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century & Church Leaders**

Our world is different from the world in which the early church flourished. Obviously, all generations are products of their own time and culture. I imagine if any of the original disciples were to time travel and land in the middle of Peterborough, he would be shocked by the wizardry of modern technologies and innovation. I guess he would also find the church liberal in many ways, in comparison to the church they led and nurtured.

Having said that, the church of 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be a replica of the church of 2000 years ago. Society moves, cultures evolve and paradigms shift over time but some universal truths are still upheld today and for all the generations yet to come. The church of 2000 years ago, the church today and the church yet to come have to continue to believe, preach and uphold that:

**Firstly, There is no salvation apart from Christ.** With passing time, new ideas appear of how to approach God but the church must uphold that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

**Secondly, The Great Commission needs to continue.** The way of fulfilling it might be different. For example, the Apostle Paul took many missionary journeys. Many people believe that Thomas went to India. Later in history, John Bunyan wrote 'Pilgrim's Progress' a world class allegory to preaching the Gospel message. There is an old gentleman who stands in a Peterborough Square with a placard declaring his faith. Believers do what they can do.

Surely, for this time, digital media appears to be the most effective tool for the continuation of the Apostolic ministry of fulfilling Great Commission. My husband and I have been watching a series called 'The Chosen'. It is a dramatisation of the Gospel story. They have done 8 episodes of the first season and they intend to do 8 seasons. I must say that it is brilliant and I have watched it many times now. In my opinion, the American director Dallas Jenkins is fulfilling the Great Commission with the talents and tools of his time. I have read the testimonies of people who are atheists, and were involved in witchcraft, saying how they binged on this series and how touched they were.

We need to be open to the opportunities and re-invent ourselves to carry the message forward. Who knows, in the future, church may be having services in spaceships. Venue doesn't matter as long as the word of God is honoured. Once Pope Francis was asked what he would do if aliens come to Vatican. His response was that he would baptise them if they asked for it...who are we to close the door? The point is that we must grab the opportunity and tools of our time.

**Thirdly, Standing up for Biblical principles** in the wake of emergent ideologies of our time and age, which are not compatible with Biblical teaching, is essential. Many of us might recognise that standing for Biblical principles will become increasingly difficult in a society that is becoming not only secular but is developing highly fractured and polarised communities.

In this changing society, becoming sensitive to what is not right in the sight of God stems from being rooted in the word of God: our stable and authentic source of wisdom. Whoever spends time immersing themselves in the living word of God is bound to be shaped and shaved by this two-edged sword. It is not only the responsibility of the leader to uphold and carry the torch. We, as the body of Christ, need to support the leaders.

To conclude, the church is the light and salt of the world and we the members, specifically the leaders, need to be open and ready to lead and evolve in interacting with the changing world, looking for opportunities, using the tools of our time to convey the message of Gospel and above all standing for the Biblical principles, not conforming to the pattern of this world. Jesus said, *'if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world it would love you as its own...* (John 15:18).

Let's pray for the church leadership and ourselves to hold our ground for Biblical principles.

Dear God, guard our hearts and minds and keep us united in your Service. Help us to be wise not in our own sight but in yours. Help us to be obedient to you and let the Holy Spirit work through us. Help us to be sensitive to the small voice to lead our earthly lives purposefully according to your will. In Precious name of Jesus. Amen.

God Bless you all.