

Sunday 17th March 2024 - Sunday Service

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Preacher: Johan DeJong

[0 : 00] Good morning. Good to see you. My feet are still wet, so if I'm slightly distracted, forgive me.! That's why. Just before we read the passages, I hope I'll just put it into context a little! bit, isn't it? So by way of doing that, I just want to tell you a story. I was driving up to a cup final game this week with a friend, and it was a very quiet drive. And the reason it was a very quiet drive is because there were no children in the car at all. Because you know what kids do on long car journeys, don't you? Unless you sort of anaesthetise them with television, they tend to fight. Did you ever do that when you were a kid? You have brothers and sisters, cousins, sit in the car, hour three ticks by, let's have a good old fight. It's okay, isn't it? It's part of growing up. And usually it's worth it when you get to the destination, and you have a good time. But just occasionally, at least if your family was anything like mine, just occasionally there's a fight about something when you get there as well. You know, it's not fair that he got to pet the rhinoceros just because he jumped into the enclosure and I can't. Or maybe something more trivial than that. I mean, maybe that was just my family. And sometimes, just sometimes, you come home and you look back on the trip and you can't remember anything but the massive fight and the public embarrassment and the very quiet drive home after the very public telling off you got from your parents. Right? The not fair fight has kind of spoiled the whole point of being family together. And what we're about to read in the Bible is a little bit like that.

So tune in on that wavelength if you can. Here's a little bit of background. Three times the kingdom of good news, the family that Jesus is building, has come under attack. Twice from the outside, once from the inside. And there's another attack about to come from the inside. So let's hear Luke's eyewitness account of what happened as we have our reading.

So Acts chapter 6 and the first seven verses. In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 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. This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Also Philip, Bacurus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

[3 : 44] Thank you Andy. So there's the problem. A bunch of people yelling it's not fair, isn't it? And if it's not handled properly, it's going to spoil the whole family trip. Because that's what the church, Kingdom of Good News is, isn't it? It's an adopted family of people that God has rescued and changed on a journey with the Lord Jesus towards the best destination there is.

So why am I making such a big deal of this? Isn't it just, you know, growing pains like any organization experiences? Or is there something more sinister going on?

Let's look at verse 1. In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Now if you've been here the last couple of weeks, you'll remember that part of what the early church did was to make sacrifices so that people could be cared for, so that they could get what they needed. And that included giving food or giving money to widows for rent or just to stay alive.

Excuse me. Why? Because, well, those women didn't have a way to support themselves back then. If your husband had died, you were no longer married, and you didn't have a family, there was no welfare state.

[5 : 06] There was no social provision. You needed someone else to look after you. And in the church, they're an older sister, so of course, of course you make sure that they get enough. Don't you?

Except one group wasn't getting enough. That's what we've just read. The problem is we're supposed to be one. One family. Brothers and sisters.

But they aren't treating each other like brothers and sisters. They're not even treating each other fairly. So there's the it's not fair fight. And what's the result? A division. The family is divided. Now some people have said, oh, this is a problem with racism in the church. That's what you see here. But it's not about racism, because all of these people are Jews. You see that in verse one, don't you? So this is a culture and language problem, which is actually much more common, isn't it? They come from different places, so they have different ways of doing things, and they talk about those things differently. And that's very common among all kinds of groups of people, isn't it? We have different ways of doing things.

[6 : 10] We talk about them differently. And occasionally, we don't understand each other. And we don't agree. And we don't get along. So what's the danger? Well, the danger is just to think, well, exactly that.

It's just growing pains. It'll pass. People will get to know each other better. No, we just need to move on. But then you remain divided.

How do people generally try to get unity? Have you ever thought about that? I think generally what we do is we try and get people in the same room, and we build common ground until we reach some sort of agreement, and then we try to integrate with each other, don't we?

We move from being apart, and we sort of try to gradually get closer together. But that's not God's way of achieving unity, or peace, or togetherness.

God's way of achieving unity is actually to remove the division not between each other, but between us and him. The division that's created by our refusal to listen to him.

[7 : 19] And he does that by sending Jesus. And then he puts all of those people together as a family. And then he says, I'm going to stick with you, and I'm going to help you live together as a family.

And you can't be one family united by God and stay divided, can you? You can't have this kind of thing going on there. Why? Because then you're not being who you really are.

You're pulling against God's superglue. And you know what happens if you superglue yourself to something, and then you try and pull away. Hurts, doesn't it? And the leaders have to do something to stop that hurt, to help people be who they are.

One family with God. So we can't dismiss it as just growing pains. But actually there's another danger here as well, apart from just staying divided and dismissing that. The other danger is that they get distracted.

The church spends all their time in practical care and forget completely about inviting people to join them. Looking for new brothers and sisters. And the leaders stop teaching and helping people how to know Jesus.

[8 : 27] And instead they make sure that everybody gets the same food package. What happens then? Where you end up with full stomachs. But empty souls. So here are the two big dangers.

Being divided and being distracted from God. Both are life-threatening. We let ourselves get divided or we let ourselves get distracted.

Or to put it in Bible terms, we don't care properly for our brothers and sisters. That's one danger. And the other danger is that we lose sight of what makes us brothers and sisters in the first place.

The good news about Jesus. It's a bit like getting a cough. Everybody gets a cough sometimes, right? My son has a pretty bad cough at the moment. But then you get the 100-day cough.

You heard of that going around at the moment? Some people got a cough. You can't shift it. It sticks around for 100 days. And then you get tests. What is this? Why do I keep coughing?

[9 : 29] And then comes the sad-looking doctor with the bad news. It feels like a cough. It's just growing pains. Nothing serious.

Fatal like cancer. The truth is that this isn't just a danger for the church, actually. That everybody here today has a life-threatening condition. Which we tend to just mistake for growing pains. Surfaces, doesn't it? Occasionally we think, Ah, it's just part of being human. I make mistakes. You know, I'll grow past it. But actually the life-threatening condition is that our choices divide us from God.

And he's the source of life. And then we distract ourselves from that feeling of dividedness and separateness from God.

And we fill the gaps with all kinds of good things and sometimes bad things, none of which are anywhere near big enough to take the place of God. Might feel like a cough.

[10 : 33] But it's fatal like cancer. So what's the solution? I think we would explain the problem. Well, maybe the solution is, you know, like in your friendship group, or sadly in some families, we'll just stop talking to them.

You know, it's easier. It just never works. So we'll just stop talking to them. We'll not really have a relationship anymore. Or maybe, maybe we should solve this problem like lots of companies solve the problem.

We'll have a big town hall about inclusivity. And we'll appoint some champions for diversity. And we'll publish a new policy. And that will solve the problem. That's not God's pattern.

I'm looking at verses 2 to 6. Have you noticed how people fight about how to fix problems of fairness? Have you noticed that? And then they call the other side names as well.

So you've got the woke left. Or you've got the extreme right. Or if you want to go a bit more philosophical, you've got the Marxist structuralists behind the Black Lives Matter movement.

[11 : 46] Or you've got the individualist capitalists who don't like the Black Lives Matter movement at all. Or when I was at school, you have the rugby heads and you have the nerds. All disagreeing about how to solve problems of fairness.

All calling each other names. Some people are saying, you can only fix it top down, guys. Sack everyone. Tear everything down. And rebuild it from the ground up.

And then there are other people over here who are saying, oh, no, no. Now, what you need is more rules to make sure that unfair things don't happen anymore. And then you also need some education so that people know better.

People can't agree about how to solve problems. Here's an example from this week. Which I picked up from BBC Sport. It's a problem with player-coach relationships in women's football. And here's the comment.

There are lots of unwritten rules in life that people don't cross. Given where we're at now and given some people still don't understand the unwritten rule, maybe put it in black and white so then it's clear. Here you go. Make another rule. That'll fix the problem.

[12 : 55] Is that what the church does under God's leadership? Let's look at verses 2 to 6. 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 we'll give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

And they presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. So what's the pattern in God's family for solving this problem?

The leaders get everybody together and they lead by acknowledging the problem, don't they? But they also keep their priorities in view. It wouldn't be right for us to just get distracted by this completely.

[13 : 55] And they lay out a solution. And it actually says it was a solution that pleases everybody. Well, I'd like to have the notes from that one. And it's a solution that pleases absolutely everybody. And then you notice that everybody actually has a hand in filling in that solution because the leaders say, you pick the guys.

You pick the ones. Church family, this is why we have members meetings. And have you noticed who they appoint? Verse 3.

So they appoint, brothers and sisters, seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit. So their hearts are right. Full of wisdom.

So they have practical skills. They know what to do with their knowledge that they have. And they are known. So they have a good reputation. And those are our qualifications for deacons.

That's why we have deacons in the church. And really interestingly, do you know where they come from? They come from the group that's disadvantaged. Because all of the names that we've just read out are Greek names.

[15:03] So they're from the party of the Hellenistic Jews. So those who need better care are appointed to organise that care. And that's God's pattern for his people and it solves problems.

It doesn't mean you tear up the whole rule book and you start all over again. And it doesn't mean that you just make more rules for people to follow or educate them better. Actually what's happening here is the leaders are drawing more people into caring.

Aren't they? Can you see that? And they're involving everybody in the process of drawing more people into caring. And they are drawing them in according to their gifts. So they're not shoving square pegs in round holes.

They're not getting the accountants to tell all the jokes. You don't have apostles organising T-roaters. Is that what we do as a church? Speaking to the Christians here for a moment.

Do we draw people in to caring for each other as a way to solve problems? And perhaps you're already feeling very drawn in to caring for people.

[16:09] Then here's a question for you. Am I in the right area? Am I helping in the right way for my gifts? Because they appointed the right people for the job.

You notice that? And perhaps you're not serving and it's worth asking yourself this question. Am I expecting someone else to do all the serving? Am I expecting the apostles to not only lead me, tell me the truth about the Lord Jesus, but also wait on all the tables?

God's pattern is a bit like my ice hockey team. I have a playbook and everybody has to know the plan and the strategy, but then you also need gifted individuals in the right positions to carry out that plan, that strategy, to play out the playbook, don't you?

And you need them more than that to be convinced in their heads that this is a good plan and committed in their hearts to carrying it out. But you need more than that.

You need a coach who helps them and you need a captain who leads them. God gives his family the players and the plan.

[17:21] He is their coach and he's also the captain on the field with them, the Lord Jesus. But God does even more because God does what only God can do and he changes people's hearts so that they are convinced and committed.

That's what Emma and Karen have said today, isn't it? They're convinced. They're committed. And then when we give ourselves to him and we follow his pattern for our lives with his power, then we really solve problems.

Have you done that? If there are problems in our families or our church or your friendship group or your office, then ask God to start by changing your heart.

Get on God's team. Follow his pattern by his grace. Okay, we've done lots of description, but what does this boil down to? Karen, Emma, I guess you want to keep growing as human beings after today.

You don't think the journey stops here. And I guess everybody in the room, if we're being honest, would say, we still need to grow as people, don't we? And we want God's family to grow too, right?

[18:38] Because that means more people have hope and forgiveness and life forever. Acts 6 shows us how to do that. And there are all kinds of decisions and problems to deal with.

How? Well, just notice the reason for what the church does and decides and the result. Let's look at verse 2. 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.

And verse 4, we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. So the reason that the church doesn't ignore the problem and decides to apply this pattern is because the one thing that they absolutely must do is keep ministering the word.

In other words, keep bringing God's message to people. What are they doing? They're concentrating on the one thing that really will solve the problem, really will bring people together and keep them together, the thing that changes hearts.

Not just policies or pay scales. And that's the good news about Jesus. In other words, they keep the main thing, the main thing. And the main thing is the good news of Jesus that he died to heal the division between us and God so that we could be forgiven, so that we as a church family, as Christians, in the end as a world, can be one despite our differences and that we get to the destination that the family is going to.

[20 : 11] And if we don't keep the main thing the main thing, then the church is just another charity, isn't it? It's a club for people who try their best to be nice and help where they can.

And that's good, but that's not what the church is. If we don't keep the main thing the main thing, we won't grow as individuals, we won't grow as a family. So at some point as a church, we need to take a step back, don't we, look at everything that we're doing and ask that question.

Are we keeping the main thing the main thing? And what happens when you do? Verse 7. So the word of God spread.

The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. What happens is individuals grow. They're participating, aren't they?

And they are serving. And with the Holy Spirit's help, the kingdom of good news grows in number two. And did you notice the little detail there?

[21 : 16] Now it crosses those cultural and class boundaries that were exactly the problem at the beginning. Because if even the priests, the religious upper classes, are coming to join God's family, then that's different.

That's new. And that tells us what we need to do as a church and as individuals. If you want to grow as a church, as individuals, Emma, Karen, keep the main thing, the main thing.

And just a little note, in order to do that, we need to pray. See that in verse four? We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

If you've been here the last few weeks, then you'll remember that we said this book, Acts, has a theme verse, a verse which helps us understand the whole. And if you've really been paying attention, you'll remember what it is. It's Acts chapter one, verse eight.

Jesus says, you will be my witnesses. You will say what you have seen. In other words, that's what Emma and Karen have done today. They have seen the work of God in their lives and that is what they are saying.

[22 : 27] So here's a question for us to think about. In our own sharing with our friends and neighbours, are we keeping the main thing, the main thing? Are we so busy serving them socially and emotionally?

That's good if you're doing that. Please carry on. But are we so busy doing that that we never actually get round to telling them about the one thing that by God's grace could change them from being friends and neighbours into being brothers and sisters?

It's the good news about Jesus. Maybe you're here and you don't have a faith and you're wondering what's all the fuss about? Why do we need to keep this good news the main thing?

Well, stick to what you know. I'm going back to ice hockey to explain it. The good news is a bit like going up to the cup final when your ice hockey team is tiny.

You shouldn't have made it there in the first place and better still, your mate has paid for the ticket. That's what happened in my case. Guildford Flames should never have been in that final and my mate paid for my ticket.

[23 : 37] I've got no right to be there. Neither has my team and yet we're both going. And so the whole drive up, the whole journey, you know it's win-win because your side has made it.

You didn't even have to lift a stick or net a goal or anything to get there. You can just ride the wave knowing that at the end of the journey there is going to be a game and it's going to be fun to watch and if we get anything out of it, that's just going to be icing on the cake.

And that's the good news of Jesus. Jesus has already done all the sacrifice and the graft necessary to get us to the biggest venue there is, the biggest event, heaven itself.

And if you trust him, his team is your team. He's your captain. He's your player coach. And you might be the worst hockey player there ever was.

It doesn't matter. It's forgiven. All you need to do is take the ticket and get on the bus. And the drive might be long.

[24 : 39] It might be short. It might be quiet. Or you might find the M1 is shut on the way up. Yes, that happened. It doesn't change the destination. It doesn't change the joy.

It doesn't change who's driving the bus. Emma and Karen are on the bus. Are you? Let's pray.
Lord, we thank you for all you've done for us. We thank you that you know us, human beings with all our good qualities and all our problems. We thank you that you know our needs.
We need food. We need clothing. More than that, we need you. We thank you that you provided for us, that you came and died to pay the price for our ticket, that you rose so that we know that there is real hope.
You rose so that we know that you're with us every step of the way. Please help Emma and Karen who would buy your spirit's power to stay on the bus who have made many more of us be on the bus with them until we reach that glorious destination.
[26 : 00] In Jesus' name. Amen.