

We are called to Worship.

Welcome

Announcements

Folks, remember prayer and praise is this evening at 6:30... do please come along to that. On the topic of prayer, can I encourage as many as are able to come along a little bit earlier on a Sunday morning to be part of the time of prayer at 10:00 in the Centenary room. Prayer is the engine room of any church and it would be an incredible encouragement to see more of us coming along.

Also, still on prayer, a reminder to the elders that Saturday is our prayer breakfast at 8 am. This is a time when the elders meet for breakfast and spend time praying for you, the congregation. Please do remember the elders in your prayers.

Setting the Scene

This morning, we finish our time in Acts for a while. We will come back to it again after the summer. Today we are thinking about the different roles we all have in the life and ministry of the church.

We look at the church today and wonder why so few people come, why so many seem to have so little interest in the church never mind the things of God. We wonder why we aren't seeing people come to faith. Could it possibly be that something has gone wrong in how we do church, in how we live our faith, in how we serve as a church, a body of believers.

We talk about having to change, having to do something new, something different. I wonder if that is right – could it be that we need to learn from history, that we need to learn from the example of how the church in Acts did things, how they loved, cared for and ministered to one another. This is what today's passage is about. So, while we might think we need to do something new, that new thing is actually an old thing that has been forgotten and lost through time.

As we think of these new things... so we are called to worship through Psalm 96.

Call to Worship

Psalm 96

Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples.

For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.

Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth. Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns.' The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness. **Psalm 96**

Opening Praise

**King of kings' majesty
Jesus, we enthrone you / Majesty.**

Opening Prayer

This morning as we come to God in prayer, we use Psalm 73: 21-26 to help us pray.

I realised that my heart was bitter, and I was all torn up inside. I was so foolish and ignorant – I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you.

Dear Heavenly Father, we can handle getting lost on a trip a lot better than getting disconnected from a vital, robust relationship with you. Because when our fellowship and communion with you is broken, we can start acting, like Asaph, like a 'senseless animal' We get grumpy and critical, whine more than we worship, complain quicker and longer. We start acting like a spiritual orphan, like we don't have you as our loving, sovereign, grace-full Father.

Yet I still belong to you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny.

Then, as the Holy Spirit applies the gospel to our hearts, yet again, we come back to our senses. More importantly, we come back to you. Abba Father, we belong to you, and that's all that really matters. You hold our right hand with a grip of grace, even when we try to pull away. You're actively guiding us, working in all things for our good and your glory, even when we don't see it or feel it. And you will bring your work in us to completion and bring us safely into the new heaven and new earth. What a Father, what a gospel, what a peace!

Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever.

In our most gospel sane moments, we gladly affirm – even shout – Father, you are all we want and more than we need. We desire you more than getting our way and getting more stuff, more than being in control – even controlling you. You don't guarantee us perfect health or easy circumstances in life, but you have given us yourself, the righteousness of Jesus, and a perfect future. We are yours and you are ours, forever. Hallelujah! We pray in Jesus' wonderful and merciful name, Amen.

We hear from God's Word

Reading

Acts 6: 1-7

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 of the Holy Spirit; also, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas 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. **Acts 6: 1-7**

Praise
Sermon

By faith we see the hand of God.
Chosen to serve.

A couple of years ago Julia and I were on holiday in London and, as you do when in London, we decided to take in a west end show. I got very excited when I realised **Only Fools and Horses** was on in one of the theatres. I got even more excited when Julia said to me, what show would you like to go and see. And so, I pointed out that **Only Fools and Horses** was on and really that would be a very funny night out.

So, off we went to **Leicester Square** and the ticket booth. Julia approached the desk; she was asked what tickets she wanted; my sense of excitement was building as I waited to get those **Only Fools and Horses** tickets. You can imagine my shock then when I heard Julia saying the words... Two tickets **for Aspects of love** please.

Apparently, the reason for Julia's sudden change of heart was because she had realised that **Michael Ball** was starring in **Aspects of love**. And so off we went that evening, not to **Only Fools and Horses** but to see **Aspects of Love**. Of course, my enthusiasm had waned at all at this sudden and unexpected change.

You can imagine our collective disappointment then when we realised that we were there on **Michael Ball's** day off, and it was his understudy, whose name I still don't know, in his place.

All of life is a bit like this. We get a hospital appointment, and the letter has the name of the consultant on it, we get there and realise that it is not the consultant, but one of his or her doctors and we think that somehow, we are missing out. (Despite the expertise and years of training the doctor we met has undergone.)

We get it into our heads that to see one particular person makes us special, to get premium seats at an event is an honour... and so the list goes on.

It is the same in the church. When we see that a well known and celebrated preacher is coming to a church or to a mission or a conference we rush to go and hear that person, but if someone else delivered the same material the reality is it wouldn't have the same impact. We get a visit from an elder and we are grateful, but we would really like to see the minister. When I was an assistant in Templepatrick I would have gone to see people, who would say it was lovely to have the assistant visit, but it wasn't the same as the minister.

This is what was happening in Acts 6. It is the first real dispute that we hear about in the church. One group of widows unhappy that another group of widows were receiving preferential treatment and it seems they were expecting the apostles to sort the problem out.

Of course, the apostles were already busy doing what Jesus had told them to do. They were being witnesses, to the people in the city, of all that Jesus said and done. They were already preaching Jesus, praying that more and more people would come to faith in Jesus. For the apostles to get involved in this problem would distract them from what they were called to do.

It wasn't that they thought these widows' concerns were unimportant, it wasn't that they thought the widows should pull themselves together and sort it themselves nor was it that they thought dealing with this problem was below them.

The apostles took this problem so seriously they gathered the whole church together. While they understood the importance of their calling, to preach and pray, they told the church to appoint seven men, we might say to day seven people, to have responsibility to solve this.

...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. (Acts 6:3-4)

There are echoes in this story of the time when Moses father-in-law came to visit him while leading the Israelites in the wilderness. Moses had been sitting as judge over all the people's problems and his father-in-law worried about his health, his ability to keep doing what he was doing and to lead the people effectively. His advice, set up judges who could filter out the cases that were easily solved and so Moses would only have to deal with the most serious of matters – allowing him to be a much more effective leader, which is what he was called to.

Notice the criteria that the apostles set down for the seven to be chosen, ***full of the Spirit and wisdom***, this was no minor task. This was a role for people committed to Christ, who were already serving the church, who, like the apostles, had been filled with the Spirit – the Spirit of God was already at work in them. This was gospel work, requiring committed Christians, experienced Christians.

The church was never intended to depend on one man, or woman. The role of minister, elder or GB captain, or youth worker or youth leader or anything else was never intended to mean that one person should be responsible for everything that happens in the congregation or organisation. The church was always intended to be body, a collective effort with Christ at the head.

John Stott, who was one of the great bible teachers of the 20th century, described this issue as one of the greatest dangers to face the church because it had the potential to cause the apostles and the church in general to be distracted from their calling. Imagine for a minute that the apostles said this is our responsibility, would we then have had Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin and him being martyred (if he was still martyred would it have had the same impact, would it have been recorded if we had the attitude, he wasn't an apostle and so he wasn't important). Would Peter have had time to write his letters, or John his. Would Peter have gone to see Cornelius or would he have been in Jerusalem dealing with another problem. Would he have been distracted.

Has the church today become distracted? Have we fallen into the trap of expecting a small group of people to be all things to all people, that some prayers are more effective than others, that God listens to one more readily than another? Have we forgotten that the church is a body and treated it as though it only had one part, or that only one-part matters?

Are we missing opportunities to go to different places and people because of what we have allowed ourselves to become?

You know once I got over the disappointment of not getting to see **Only Fools and Horses**, neither Julia nor I really noticed that Michael Ball wasn't on the stage during **Aspects of Love**.

The show was brilliant, the actor, whoever he was, was brilliant he had a fantastic voice and presence.

Does the church, do we, need to remember that the people we have elected (just as the church in Acts appointed the seven) that they have been elected because we as a church have recognised that they are full of the spirit and wisdom, be they elders or committee, be they appointments to organisations or leaders in other capacities. They are there because of how we have seen the Spirit of God in them – and so do we need to free them to serve, free them to minister to us in order that others would be released to their calling, to reaching out to a lost world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Imagine the possibilities, imagine what might happen if we rid the church of this notion of celebrity or position or importance and each of us were empowered to serve as we have been called.

God doesn't create celebrities, he doesn't create a hierarchy of importance in ministry, he creates a jigsaw of called people who form a body, and it is only together they complete the picture; it is only together the full mission is worked out. As we leave Acts for a while, this is the challenge we are being left with... will we recognise the whole body, will be part of the whole body, will we celebrate God's calling on everyone and not just the few. This is what it is to be a church on fire for Jesus.

All too often as congregations we focus on our needs. We put all our energy into caring for one another, into caring for ourselves. This story is telling us that as important as this is – it cannot be the reason we stop preaching, proclaiming Christ, to a world that does not know Jesus. This is a reminder that we cannot forget that if we stop proclaiming Christ, then people stop hearing – and as Paul reminds us in Romans 10, how will they respond if they do not hear.

If, however, we change our understanding of ministry, of what it is to serve as a body of Christ, if we empower and release God's called people to serve as he has called them, we can only begin to imagine what God might do when we begin to serve as we have been called.

We respond to God's word.

Praise

Not I but Christ through me

Family Reading

Romans 10: 14-15

How then can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: **How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.**

Family Talk

The chain of people to take the good news out into the world.

Family Praise

We want to see Jesus lifted high.

Prayers (Lord's Prayer)

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; they will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever, amen.

We are Sent Out to Serve in God's World

Praise

Sing to God new songs of worship.

Charge to the People

Isaiah 43: 18-19

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

Isaiah 43:18-19

Benediction

And now, may the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all both now and forever more.