

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The point of the passage in Acts is that God calls all his people to service, he calls different people to different ministries. This means that as Christians we need to think seriously about our gifts, skills and abilities and whether those gifts are being used in the way God intended. [Repeat]

This episode is an exciting part of the story of the early church. It is comparatively small and hasn't got its own identity. It still seems like a sect of Judaism. Here we see the church faces a problem that could threaten to distract it from its primary task – the task of proclaiming the good news about Jesus.

In verse 1 we hear:

...when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.

Defending the welfare of widows and the poor were serious matters because in the Old Testament God had made this obligation clear. We don't know whether this problem was a deliberate act of favouritism or simply an inadvertent omission caused by poor administration or supervision. Whatever the cause of the problem, the apostles perceived a deeper issue. It was not their primary task to supervise the financial arrangements of the community or take an active part in social welfare.

So they call the believers together, telling them: "It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

There is no suggestion that the apostles regarded social work as inferior to pastoral, teaching and preaching work. This was not a question of hierarchy but was entirely a question of calling and priorities. The disciples rightly decided that they couldn't be distracted from their primary task of praying, preaching and teaching the Bible.

So this is the choice they faced: they could teach, preach and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ OR they could serve in welfare administration & food distribution. [pause]

Notice that they didn't impose their solution on the congregation. The apostles recognised that the whole church has a ministry to each other, so they gave them ownership and responsibility. They asked the congregation to select the seven from among themselves. This solution meant the community of believers would recognise and respect the appointments because they had shared in the decision making process.

And the importance they placed on the task is shown by the qualities required of those to be selected. They needed good reputations, an ability to deal wisely in sensitive situations and above all be full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom. In the appointment of the seven, the apostles delegate the social work so they can get on with preaching and teaching. The direct result is that the word of God spreads and disciples increase.

So this is the vital point of this passage: God calls all his people to service and he calls different people to different ministries. We need to think seriously about our gifts, skills and abilities and whether our gifts are being used in the way God intended. [repeat]

This is a serious question for the church. It's a question of priorities, calling and gifting. The apostles' actions aren't motivated by selfishness, but by a concern that God's word isn't neglected and they're devoted to the tasks to which they're called. They don't want God's people to be neglected but they want to ensure that the correct people are doing the right tasks.

So how should we apply the principles of this passage here in the Benefice? We can see from today's text that those serving as preachers and teachers shouldn't be distracted in order to do other service - even where that other service is also legitimate and important. These other acts of service are meant to be done by other Christians so that the minister doesn't neglect the word of God and can be devoted to prayer and serving the word of God.

This is a vital message for the health and growth of a church. If the minister is overwhelmed with administration, finances, building maintenance, social welfare and other important distractions, the standards of preaching and teaching decline because they have insufficient time for preparation and prayer. What also happens is that lay people don't take on their God-given roles, because the clergy do everything. So the congregation is inhibited from growing into maturity in Christ

If we have a basic biblical recognition that God calls us to different ministries, then people will look to set their minister free from unnecessary administration so they can devote themselves to ministry of the word. The minister will be trying to help people discover their gifts and then develop ministries where people can use those gifts.

So the expression "full-time Christian ministry" shouldn't be restricted to church work or missionary service. "Full-time Christian ministry" is what every one of us is engaged in all day every day. Our ministry to the world must be exercised in government, in professions, in schools, in business and industry and in the home. So for the church to function correctly, both locally and as a witness in the world, we all need to think seriously about our gifts and whether we're using those gifts in the way God intended.

Ultimately we're called to service because we're seeking to follow in the steps of our saviour Jesus Christ. "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many". [Mk 10:45]

So in thinking about our gifts and how we will serve the church here in the Benefice, in our jobs, at home, in our relationships and in the world - our attitude should be the same as Jesus. In Philippians 2 verses 3-8 we read:

"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

As followers of Jesus, God has called us to serve Him. This means we need to think seriously about our gifts and whether those gifts are being used in the way God intended. In Jesus' name. Amen.