

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Today we continue our journey with the early church through Acts. We have seen the excitement of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; experienced the first problems within the church when the Greek widows felt neglected and how the Apostles asked the people to appoint the Seven to solve the crisis. Leading us to consider the gifts we have been given and the importance of using these to build God's Kingdom. This week we hear about the death of Stephen the first Christian martyr and the persecution of the Church in Jerusalem.

This morning we are going to look at three themes from our reading:

- 1 God brings opportunity out of adversity
- 2 People may be called to more than one type of ministry
- 3 The Apostles recognised the need for succession planning

God brings opportunity out of adversity. There is a saying that it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. We can see an example of this in today's reading from Acts.

The first half of today's reading sets the stage for what is going to follow. First, it is linked to what has just gone before, the martyrdom of Stephen, followed by widespread persecution of Christians, which, in turn will lead to the unexpected conversion of the chief persecutor, Saul.

However, the persecution in Jerusalem, we can now see was a blessing in disguise. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good." As a result of the persecution, the Christians were forced out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. The scattered Christians were bringing their message to new areas; fulfilling the second part of Jesus' command in Acts 1 verse 8, 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' Eventually – often as the result of persecution – they would carry their message to the very ends of the Roman world.

God brings opportunity out of adversity, these early Christian leaders grasped the opportunity with both hands and spread the good news wherever they went. What is our attitude when we meet trouble or opposition? Do we look for the opportunity that might be lurking underneath trusting in the Holy Spirit to guide us and enable us or do we give up because it might be too difficult and cause us to stand out from the crowd. We may not want to experience it, but

discomfort may be the best thing for us because God may be working through that discomfort. The early Christians had to move out of their comfort zone to spread the good news. How willing are we to move out of our comfort zone to spread the good news of the gospel?

People may be called to more than one type of ministry. Among the fugitives was Philip. He was one of the Seven who, with Stephen, was chosen for special 'service', to help with the food distribution programme. Philip is now a full-blown evangelist, who preached the good news about the Messiah, healed the physically handicapped and drove out evil spirits. This confirms what we heard last Sunday, that when God calls us to a particular ministry, it may not necessarily be for life! We must always be open to God calling us on to different ministries as we grow in faith and Christian maturity. Here we see that Philip who was originally called to a menial role is now a full-blown evangelist. When God calls us he has plans for each of us that will enable us to help build his Kingdom here on earth but we must continually be discerning at each stage in our lives what ministry he might be calling us to.

Here we can see the result of Philip grasping the opportunity that the persecution presented. The effect was that "there was great joy in that city". This joy was because of what Christianity brought to these people. It brought the story of Jesus, the message of the love of God in Jesus Christ. It brought healing. Christianity has never been a thing of words only. It brought, as a natural consequence, a joy that the Samaritans had never known before. It's a phoney Christianity which brings an atmosphere of gloom; the real thing radiates joy.

Finally, there is a lesson for us here in "succession planning". In the previous chapters, it was the Apostles who played a prominent role in Luke's record of the early church, but now we see the emphasis shifts to the second generation of leaders like Philip. Passing the baton to new leaders is vital if the church is to continue to grow and to reach out to those who do not yet know Christ as their Saviour. Sometimes there is a natural hesitancy to embrace change but here we see that the Apostles accept the changes after giving them due consideration. In the early church the Apostles knew how important the innovative advances of a new generation of leaders like Philip were, so they not only encouraged them, they learned from them. In verse twenty-five, we hear that Peter and John also proclaimed the good news to many Samaritan villages as they returned to Jerusalem. This after John had earlier asked Jesus whether to call down fire on some Samaritan villages in Luke 9 verses 51-55. We too should be similarly

encouraging all in our congregations to ask themselves whether God might be calling them to positions of leadership within the church.

Remember stepping outside our comfort zone is supposed to feel uncomfortable because we're in new and unfamiliar territory. Being uncomfortable is a sign of success, NOT of failure! So if we are uncomfortably outside our comfort zones, then that means we are growing!!! And THAT is cause for celebration! In Jesus' name. Amen.