

## Disciples and Leaders - Acts 6:1-7

The early chapters of Acts record events in unprecedented times.

There were miracles, imprisonments, persecutions, preachings and a steady growth in the number of those choosing to follow the Apostles' teaching.

As the teaching was in the outer court of the temple the audience was Jewish but made up of at least 2 distinct groups - The Hebraic Jews who spoke Aramaic and were Palestine-born; and the Hellenist Jews who had probably converted to Judaism, spoke Greek and either lived abroad and were temporarily in Jerusalem or had moved from Greek speaking areas to live and work in Jerusalem.

It was a question of race, culture and nationalism. Does that sound familiar?

This part of Acts is also a key stepping stone for a change in direction, as we shall see. The number followers of Jesus had grown. Some had sold lands, fields and other property so that no one need be hungry. But it seems that there was some inequality between who got what and there was prejudice that favoured the "true Jews" over the in-comers and converts to Judaism.

Some Hellenistic Jews approached the leaders asking for equity. The Twelve - that is those who were with Jesus during his life, minus Judas and plus Matthias - had a twofold response to the problem.

First, they recognised that their ministry and calling was to continue praying and the ministry of the word of God. But, second, they acknowledged that something needed to be done officially to remedy the situation.

It is significant that 7 men were called to be set apart: 7 signifies completeness, a sign of unity through the 4 ends of the earth and the Trinity, and the number for perfection.

It is also significant that they were to be Spirit filled. This would set the die for future church leaders.

So, seven were chosen. And it is interesting to note that all had Greek names. Those who felt aggrieved were given positions of authority to solve the problem. And, as you know, it is from this group that we have the first Christian martyr in Stephen.

And the consequence of choosing these men to serve at tables? The church grew further. I think we have all been appalled at the death of George Floyd and been in awe at the subsequent marches, demonstrations and global reactions. Black Lives Matter just as much as the Hellenistic widows mattered. The church responded then and the church needs to respond now.

I stood with those who marched in Guildford a couple of weeks ago. (Making sure I kept social distance!). We cannot be proud of our slavery past but there is still slavery going on in our country today. One website suggests there were 136,000 slaves in UK in 2016.

But in the midst of aftermath, I've seen video coverage of Christians worshipping and folk coming to faith and being baptised right on the road where George Floyd was murdered in Minnesota. God is turning the awful to the awesome.

We live in a predominately white, privileged, middle-class community. We don't see or experience racial tension other than on our TVs. Stuart Davison quoted the following statistics on Friday:

Black people are:

- 9 times more likely to be stopped and searched by the Police than white people;
- 3 times more likely to be arrested;
- 5 times more likely to face force when being arrested;
- disproportionately represented in the prison population – 25% of the prison population, when only 14% of the population is BAME; 50% of those in Young Offenders institutions.

We know there is injustice but let us not put up with it any longer. Let us pray that God would raise up Spirit-filled women and men to show God's unconditional love to all. When that happens, our churches will grow. Disciples will be added to our number and we can rejoice in the diversity of the Kingdom of God where there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3v28).

This is not nationalism but radical Kingdom. And the early church shows us how to do it.

***Mike Stanbrook***