

Congregation, one of the most frustrating things in being a Christian is that there is always something you can feel guilty about for not having done. And let's be honest, organisations play that guilt card readily. There isn't a day that goes past when some brochure or email or TV advertisement doesn't cross our paths, appealing for dollars to help the poor and underprivileged in this world. And because of that, many churches and denominations have had a major rethink about their responsibility towards the poor, the hungry, homeless, and those who endure poverty. And this is not necessarily bad, because James reminds us that religion God the Father accepts as pure and faultless is to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world [James 1:27].

Yet, having said that, we must ask a further question, "To what end should we set up all these programs and budgets to help the poor?" Many churches are in danger of becoming so focused on a horizontal, social gospel, that the preaching of God's word is nearly forgotten entirely. And that is precisely the concern we see addressed in Acts 6:1-7, with the appointment of the first deacons. The apostles were concerned that prayer and the preaching of God's word would continue and they would not be distracted by having to wait at tables. And one of the primary reasons why Brendan is ordained this morning is not because he should be doing what we all should be doing, but rather that those who are responsible for bringing the word will not be hindered from their task, for that remains primary.

We may sometimes be inclined to think that if we were more active in meeting the needs of the poor in this world, that more people may be won for Christ. However, the wisdom of God has ordained that the word preached is the foremost means that God uses of calling people into his kingdom. And it is obvious that the apostles in the early church had the same desire. People were called into the kingdom in the early church by the preaching of the Word. After Pentecost, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter preached a great sermon and 3000 converts were added to the church. The Apostle Peter not only preached God's redemptive purposes, but also the coming, living, dying and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and his preaching was accompanied by miraculous healing. So much so that the believers even shared their possessions amongst each other. And the church grew. By Acts 4:4, the number had reached five thousand men.

But not everyone was happy. Peter's preaching upset the Sadducees' party. It filled them with jealousy and they threw Peter and John into prison. But despite their imprisonment and subsequent release they continued to preach the word boldly. And we can see from the beginning of our text the numbers of disciples were growing everyday. Yet there was unrest in the camp. There were "Grecian Jews," Greek speaking Jews and members of the church in Jerusalem who complained to the Hebrew speaking Jewish Christians.

Their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. These widows could receive daily help from the common fund provided for all who needed it (Act 4:32-37). However, these particular widows were somehow overlooked. It was not done deliberately along racial lines, but somehow the usual temple funds for widows were not available for those who have now become Christians. Note also, for those who wish to have a jibe here, it is not said that the murmuring arose among the widows, but because of them. The widows were not complaining, but some others had seen the neglect and highlighted the problem. So here we have the first real evidence that there was some trouble in the church and it called for wisdom from the apostles and disciples to deal with it sensitively. I suggest their concern was two fold. First, not only to make sure that this obvious need was met, but second, to make sure that their prayer and ministry of the word would continue unhindered.

Look what it says in verse two. "The twelve gathered 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." The apostles were keen to make sure that the teaching and preaching of God's word about Jesus Christ not cease [cf v42]. It is not that the apostles thought that waiting at tables was too menial a task for them. And it's not that they didn't wish to be servants, in fact the word used here for waiting comes from the Greek word servants and is used more for preachers than it is for deacons. And by the way, the word 'tables' here are not to be associated with the money tables of John 2:15. The tables here were the tables used in the common daily distribution of the food.

Now the decision is taken to choose seven men from amongst them who are known to be wise and full of the Holy Spirit. These men were not just any men, but men with a good reputation as well as with spiritual gifts. Sometimes when Church Councils discuss who should be nominated for deacon, you occasionally hear the comment, "Let's put up so and so, it will be good for them. It will get them involved, or it is good eldership training." That should not be the main the reason why

men are chosen to be deacons. Deacons are chosen because they are to be of good rapport, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom! They are men, who are trustworthy, worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They are to be full of the Holy Spirit and be able to keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. Paul says to Timothy that they must be tested, and if there is nothing against them, then they are to serve.

When you consider these criteria for deacons, then one soon realizes that it is a task that carries a great responsibility. So please pray for your deacons, for their task is not easy. They need to be wise in their own prayer and devotional life. They need to be wise when dealing with the down and outs in society. They need to be wise in dealing with those who only want to take the church for a ride. They need to be wise in helping those who are in trouble. They need to have hearts that are compassionate and full of mercy just as they have been shown mercy. And I suggest they can only do that in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

It is obvious that the group in Acts 6 thought that the suggestion was a wise one and seven men are chosen and appointed. Each of the seven chosen has a Greek name and probably a Hellenist and not an Aramean Jew. This was a wise decision, for the murmuring had come from the Hellenists. And it seems that this trouble was settled, for we hear nothing more about it. Nothing is told of the seven men except for Stephen who is a man full of the Holy Spirit, and Nicolas, a convert to Judaism. Stephen is mentioned immediately in verse 8 and is subsequently stoned to death after preaching a great sermon. Philip is also mentioned in Ch 8 preaching the word wherever he went. Of the others, Luke makes no more mention of them.

I find it interesting that the two that are mentioned preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. Very little is mentioned of them actually waiting at tables. But this is also in keeping with the emphasis we find in our text. These seven men were presented and ordained into office. We read that the apostles prayed and laid their hands on them. The laying on of hands was a symbol that God would bestow the necessary gifts and graces for the task and not as some people suggest that the gifts of the Apostles were somehow conferred to the seven through the laying on of hands.

Our text closes with a progress report. The deacons were appointed so that prayer and the word of God would continue unhindered and spread. We are back to where we began. And because those responsible for preaching the word had been relieved from waiting at tables, the number of disciples increased rapidly. In the original language the imperfect active is used, indicating that the numbers kept on growing all the more. In fact, even some priests were converted and added to the number. It was a bad day for the Sadducee party. Annas and Caiaphas, John, Alexander and other men of the high priest's family had a really bad day. Some left their ranks to become followers of Christ. They had responded to the proclamation of the good news.

So what an encouraging day for the Christians in the early church. The trouble which had the potential to get ugly was settled wisely and the church grew! Br Brendan, to be a deacon is not always going to be easy. In fact, as I said the other night, to be a good deacon is perhaps more difficult than being an elder or a minister. When a minister or elder comes on a visit people expect to be asked about their spiritual walk and their devotional life. People don't generally expect that of deacons, yet I put it to you that word and deed go together.

When someone in need comes to you, show compassion, err on the side of compassion, help them, but don't forget to tell them why you are helping. Tell them that you are concerned for their soul, that they may know Christ as Saviour! Sadly, when you do that well, it may cause personal suffering and pain. But when that happens, remind yourself, that because you are doing this task, the word continues to be proclaimed. Don't fall for the trap to be totally horizontal with no vertical. Rather be like Christ – who came seek the lost and to save and serve them. What better motivation can I give you than to remind you that Jesus came into this world to give glory to His Father in heaven and in the process gave his life for sinners who repent and believe so that they too can praise God. That's the message that is to go out into the world and our communities.

My prayer is that as you do your work amongst the poor and needy, they may also hear the good news of Jesus Christ and be saved to eternal life to the praise of God our Father! And thanks for being willing to serve. May this extra work be a joy to you and encourage you also. Amen.