

Acts 6: 1-10

Today I want to look at the way in which the apostles in the early church differentiated between essential and important tasks; how they went about solving a problem by appointing members of the church to deal with it to look at the lessons we can learn during our period of vacancy

1. The “Acts of the Apostles” is often described as the Acts of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit which enables and empowers us to get on and do things. It’s why the book is called “Acts” and repeatedly we read of occasions when the Power of the Holy Spirit was apparent in what they were doing.

Today we learnt of a man called Stephen, a man we are told who is “of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom”. He is identified as one solution to a problem,

Luke sets out the problem facing the apostles in the very first verse:

“Now during those days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution of food.”

Remember, the action is taking place in and around Jerusalem and the Hebrew speaking Jews were indigenous to the area, mostly born and raised in Judea and Galilee.

However, the Greek speaking Jews, or Hellenists, were the Jews who had been born and raised in the lands of the dispersion; the tribes of Israel were scattered during the period of exile and other times to many lands outside Israel and Greek was the language common to all those areas and inevitably small but significant differences in their traditions, ideals and customs arose.

Some of you will remember or at least have read about that group of settlers known as the Windrush migrants, so called after the ship which brought them from the West Indies to Britain in 1948; all were commonwealth, English speaking citizens and most of them were Christians and inevitably they brought different traditions and needs with them.

Yet, on their arrival, many if not the majority, of we indigenous English tended to look down on these incomers as we judged their attitudes and daily habits as inferior to our own resulting in a strained and tense relationship. In short, very like the situation in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago.

Then, the Hellenist Jews were complaining that the widows of their group were being overlooked in the distribution of food, a charitable pastoral responsibility accepted and observed by custom.

It was extremely rare for women to earn money other than through prostitution and a woman was dependent on her husband for provision; indeed she was his property or chattel.

So if the husband died she could very soon find herself in dire straits because unlike in 1948 there was no welfare state or social security to fall back on.

Being incomers, the Hellenist widows would not be well known, if at all, by those distributing the food and quite soon find themselves in a dire situation.

It was this undercurrent of mutterings and complaints that the Apostles had to deal with but they chose, importantly, not to impose a solution on the church.

Instead as we read in Verse 2: “the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said it is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables”

I do not believe that this infers in any way whatsoever that they were disdainful of undertaking a potentially menial task such as food distribution. No, this shows their understanding of the difference between an essential task and an important task.

2. Certainly the distribution of food was important, but it was not essential, whereas their directly commissioned task of growing the church through prayer was essential.

In effect they were saying ‘this is a church-wide problem and it is something we have to face and solve together’. They task the community with selecting seven people, but not just any old seven.

Verse 3; they had to be “of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” and the apostles seal their approval of the chosen seven in verse six by praying for them and the laying on of hands. In other words, the church chose the men and the apostles approved them.

3. In many ways these principles will be used to appoint our next vicar. From our reading we learn that church leaders should be people of good standing, wisdom and full of the Spirit; and in the instance of Stephen “full of grace and power”

In our survey which we sent out to you this summer we stated that our new vicar, by default, would be a Godly person. By that we meant someone who understands that God is love; would be seeped in the teaching of the bible and be prayerful.

Like Stephen the person would be of good standing, full of spirit and of wisdom. These were the absolutely core characteristics needed.

To what extent the applicant is Godly will be one of the tasks for the interview panel to discern in due course.

Given that the person would be Godly, the survey asked us to choose 5 essential qualities and 5 desirable qualities we would look for in our new vicar – mirroring the difference between essential and important tasks faced by the apostles – and we gave a choice of 20 different qualities to choose from.

First and foremost there was not one clear and obvious essential quality chosen. The highest was that the person should be a good preacher. Whether that means that people like Jane and myself are not good preachers or that we are and the new vicar should be as good as we are, I leave for you to decide.

But the serious point is that that good quality teaching through the format of preaching is essential. This was closely followed by leading in a collaborative style and being friendly.

When it came to the desirable qualities, again, there were no clear and obvious conclusions to be drawn. The highest desirable quality expected of the new vicar was that the person would be organized; followed by being friendly and a good listener.

If you put the two categories together friendliness and good preaching skills are equal highest.

The survey also asked what we considered to be the vicar’s top 3 priorities and here there was a much clearer outcome from the responses:

Significantly highest was vision followed by family ministry and pastoral care – and all three were considerably higher thangood preaching.

I’m not sure if this is an anomaly or statistically relevant in just the same way as if you look at the qualities which received the fewest responses

Right down there at the bottom in both the essential and desirable qualities required was a concern for the marginalized and visiting the bereaved; and that seemed to me to be at odds with what I thought were core Christian ministries but more importantly showed that my understanding and/or priorities, whilst possibly valid were not necessarily truly representative of the church family as a whole.

Now as Benjamin Disraeli, Mark Twain and Winston Churchill have said along with thousands of others:”there are lies, damned lies and statistics”.

If there are any statisticians amongst you, perhaps you will talk to me afterwards. Because it is important to realise that our responses are not clear cut and there’s still a good deal of ongoing analysis to do yet

So a few thoughts.....

My first thought is that the survey reveals that we are a church family holding many different views and priorities which is why there is no clear and definite response to any of the questions asked.

This is in sharp contrast to another church I know of, where during a recent vacancy, there was almost unanimous acclamation from the congregation that sound evangelistic biblically based teaching and leadership were required from a new vicar.

This does invalidate or mean our views were wrong; it merely means that our corporate response was different.

In that other instance, a much simpler task for the interview panel, I suspect.

My second thought was, did I know of anyone possessing the essential and desirable skills set capable of leading us on our collective faith journey and looked good and hard in the mirror – and had a Eureka moment – yes I knew the ideal person - Jesus Christ.

He would meet all of the essential or desired qualities we listed; he was humble; thoughtful; wise; dynamic; friendly; authoritative.

He was a visionary; he was not a good preacher he was a great preacher; he was interested in children; he was enthusiastic about new styles of worship; he was an encourager and taught others well.

My third thought was – hang on a moment.

The Diocese require the new vicar to be highly educated; at least a BA or MA and to have gone through vicar training school – Strike one against Jesus.

Thinking about our survey essential and desirable qualities - he had an immense concern for the marginalized and visited the bereaved – Strike two against Jesus

He ascended to heaven some two thousand years ago – Strike three against Jesus.

My fourth and final thought turned back to today's reading from Acts.

The Apostles instructed their congregation to select 7 members to solve the problem which had arisen: the vacancy team has seven members. Seven is biblical number of perfection – not much pressure on us, then.

The process directed by the apostles required congregational participation. The survey was intended to enable participation from the wider church family.

And the apostles laid down their priority as devoting themselves to prayer. Prayer is at the heart of our search for our new vicar.

Our congregational prayer is one way in which every member of the church family can become involved in the search for our new vicar and which is why we say it every week during our service.

We have given you prayer book marks to encourage you to pray daily and Fleur leads 30 minutes of prayer here every two week specifically focused on the search for our new vicar.

No matter how busy Jesus' ministry got, he always found time for prayer.

The vacancy team would appreciate your prayers for wisdom, discernment and energy to continue all that is required of them until the Godly person we seek has been chosen.

Let us pray.

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