

Littlebourne Sunday 8th January 2023 – Acts 8:1-8

And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ² Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³ But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. ⁴ Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵ Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶ When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷ For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralysed or lame were healed. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

It's been a while since we last looked at Acts. We've seen how the church grew, numbers were added daily and the apostles performed miracles – casting out demons and healing the sick. All was going so well. The Sanhedrin were unable to deal with Peter and John because of the supporters in the crowd. Then it all changes: Stephen lacked supporters, and he was stoned to death by men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen: the Scribes, Pharisees and teachers of the Law: the religious men of influence who called together the Sanhedrin to complain about Stephen in the same way that they complained about Jesus. Jerusalem was a city of pilgrimage... as we have seen when we looked at the Psalms of ascent: full of people during the feasts and far fewer when they had all gone home. One moment the crowd is chanting "Hosanna" as Jesus rides into Jerusalem and a week later they are shouting "crucify him". So in a few months, probably under a year, after the crucifixion, there is growth in church as many hear the Good News and see the miracles.

Verse 1 And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

After the stoning of Stephen, things change dramatically. Luke who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, introduces Saul as a persecutor of followers of the Way (its first mention is in chapter 9). All but the apostles have fled Jerusalem. Many of the first Christians would have been visitors to, rather than residents of Jerusalem; some would have been in the crowds who had followed Jesus in Galilee, the Decapolis, Judea, Samaria and even outside the Jewish homeland areas, like Damascus in Syria. They would have homes to go to back in the countryside and small towns. The apostles were mainly Galileans, yet they stayed in Jerusalem. It seems as if the synagogue authorities had had enough of these ordinary folk turning away from their Jewish traditions, rejecting the authority of the recognised teachers of the Law who couldn't do the miracles the apostles did. Envy, hatred and pride motivated Saul the persecutor. These three attitudes are common today among those who reject Christianity. Envy because the world knows that righteousness, kindness and goodness are admirable, but because they require self control and selflessness, it is too hard to compete with Christians and so they need to be pulled down a peg or two. Hatred because those in the dark hate the light. Pride because the self righteous folk want to think themselves better than everyone else, better than they really are, when in fact they are all outward show and are often exposed as hypocrites. Over and over we saw the Pharisees and Sadducees and teachers of the Law seeking to trap Jesus, seeking to accuse him of things he wasn't, and seeking to denigrate him simply out of envy that he could perform the miracles that they wished they could perform so that people would admire them. Next week we'll look at someone who admired the miracles, and wished he could do them and be a somebody.

There has been much written as to why the stoning of Stephen was allowed to happen by the Romans and we have no record of Roman involvement. The fact that remains is that the crowd with the tacit support of the Sanhedrin had got away with punishing someone with the death penalty, and the fear created in the city was such that Christians left rather than face hostile crowds intent on murdering them. The lack of Roman intervention emboldened the Jewish religious zealots, and mobs are really dangerous to any minority under threat.

Since the second world war, nearly every Jew in the Islamic world has left property, businesses, and homes behind because of persecution, despite having lived in these countries since the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles in the seventh century BC. Now after the rise of Islamic fundamentalism funded over the last 60 years by the oil rich kingdoms putting in teachers, providing madrassa schools, and financing mosques throughout the world, nearly all the Christians in the Islamic world have left property, businesses, and homes behind because of persecution, despite having lived in these countries since the first century AD. The only footholds left are among the Copts in Egypt, the Maronites in Lebanon and a few in Syria. Persecution is occurring all over the world: in many African countries, in

India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia and China. False accusations supported by religious fanatics as well as envious neighbours seeking to steal property from Christians are common, as are raids by mobs on Christian schools, businesses, homes and churches. The authorities too often turn a blind eye to the injustices committed.

² *Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.* ³ *But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.*

Luke points the finger at Saul to emphasise in the rest of his book the change in Saul. The Romans again seem uninterested in this religious conflict. Divide and rule – a saying attributed to Philip of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great) and Julius Caesar in his Gallic wars was a policy that the Romans used in conquered provinces where the locals would be too busy fighting amongst themselves to bother fighting Rome. But Judea had been a troublesome province for many years with revolts against Roman rule occurring regularly when the religious groups managed to settle differences for a common cause. We saw how the wise Gamaliel stopped the Sanhedrin from pursuing the apostles further after they escaped from gaol, by mentioning revolts led by Theudas and Judas the Galilean which came to nothing. This time putting Christians in prison was having an effect. Not quite the effect that Saul and religious authorities expected. When men do things with the best intentions that are wrong, there are usually unintended consequences.

⁴ *Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.*

The gospel spread out from Jerusalem into Judea and wherever the believers went. As we shall later when shortly after Stephen's death, Saul was in Damascus, there were already Christians there. Today when we have received good news, do we spread it wherever we go? Could that be our new year challenge?

⁵ *Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there.* ⁶ *When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said.* ⁷ *For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralysed or lame were healed.* ⁸ *So there was great joy in that city.*

Philip was another deacon, along with Stephen, who not only dealt with the widows, but spread the word wherever he went. But he went in the power of the Spirit, performing signs and wonders – casting out demons and healing the lame and paralysed. The promise in Mark 16:15-20 was being fulfilled. You'll remember that these last verses of Mark's Gospel have been thought to be later additions as many manuscripts ended abruptly at verse 8, which seems rather as if the last page had been lost. However without these last verses the Gospel would have been incomplete.

¹⁵ *He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.* ¹⁶ *Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.* ¹⁷ *And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues;* ¹⁸ *they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on people who are ill, and they will get well.'* ¹⁹ *After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.* ²⁰ *Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.*

Luke is now establishing the credentials of Philip so that we know what he did when we come to the account of Philip and Ethiopian eunuch. Luke is putting his reports of what the early church was doing in some kind of order so that important new characters don't just appear without some background. Philip, one of the seven deacons, like Stephen, was an evangelist. After leaving Jerusalem, he is in a city in Samaria... the city is not named, but there weren't many cities in Samaria apart from the city of Samaria itself. Philip was doing what was written at the end of Mark's Gospel, which stated that signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the Word. There was great rejoicing that those afflicted by demons were freed from them, and that the paralysed and the lame were healed. Both in Jerusalem and in other places where the first evangelists went out to preach about Jesus, the people seem to be very impressed by the miracles which confirmed that the message about the Messiah was from God. They probably would be as impressed today.

The Samaritans had the Old Testament and worshipped God. Why you may ask? The Samaritans were displaced people from parts of the Assyrian empire put into Israel to replace the Israelite people deported by the Assyrians to parts of their empire. The Assyrian policy of removing troublesome tribes in the empire and spreading them out where they wouldn't be numerous enough to cause trouble is no different from that carried out by the Soviet Union which carted off Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Ukrainians, Cossacks, Volga Germans, Chechens and any suspect or

troublesome minorities to Siberia. (We can see from the book of Esther how the Jews were spread out all over the Persian empire). Loyal tribes would be settled and if there were a remnant of Israelites, probably servants and women mostly, as the men were nearly all deported, then the new comers might take over the religion of the natives, especially the women. That happened a lot in Israel and Judea, which is why judgment came for following foreign gods, usually because women were brought in who weren't Israelites and they carried on with worshipping Baal, Dagon, Astarte, the Queen of Heaven, and what they did, their menfolk decided to do as well. By abandoning God, the Israelites were nearly all deported after their lands were conquered. The Samaritans were reckoned to be interlopers by the Jews, who despite worshipping God and following the Mosaic Law, were not descended from Jacob through the male line. They too read that a Messiah would come. The Samaritan woman at the well looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, and Jesus told her that he was the Messiah.

Because of the persecution, the Gospel was forced out of Jerusalem to other parts of the middle east into areas where there were both Jews and Gentiles. This fulfilled what Jesus said would happen.

So what can we take home from this passage?

What are our expectations as disciples of Jesus?

How well trained do we feel to go out to share the Gospel?

The disciples had about three years with Jesus and pretty early on they were sent out in twos to the villages to preach Good News. Yes, despite being fishermen and apparently fairly ordinary men, they all knew their Bible – the Torah which every boy must memorize to pass his bar-mitvah – and some of the psalms and prophetic books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel.

So knowing what the Bible says is important but most important is being filled with the Holy Spirit, who promises to come alongside and reveal what we need to know and what we need to do ... and it must always be for God's glory, not our own vanity or pride. God gives his grace to the humble and resists the proud. It's not just for church leaders: sharing good news and testimonies is for everyone who loves the Lord Jesus.

Let's pray.