**Sunday 24th January 2021: Grace under pressure**

**Check in**

* How's this week been for you and how are you today?
* How did you get on putting into practice any application you chose from the last reflection notes?

**Acts 6:1-12**

This is a story with a tremendous back story. Following Pentecost, the emerging Church grew from hundreds to thousands, and with that came new challenges to address. Whereas the first disciples and first believers were Aramaic speakers, the rapidly growing Church now incudes Greek speakers. And this is happening at the time of a food shortage, which is affecting widows in a specific way. On losing their husbands, rather than his family drawing them in and caring for them, many widows found themselves ostracised because of having become followers of Jesus. So, what would the church do? Duncan compared the circumstances and leadership challenge facing the apostles to that facing Solomon, stepping into the shoes of David.

They were times of stress and worry, as are our own times right now. Although against the broad sweep of history, we are living in successful times, right now the pandemic is facing many of us with the hardest time of our lives. Jobs and finances precarious, our relationships under strain. Grace is really under pressure. And finding our way forward, a day at a time takes wisdom, grace and God’s Spirit – just as with Solomon and with the leaders of the early church. They needed good judgement to make good and right decisions. So they appointed the seven, filled with the Spirit, wisdom, grace love and faith, to face the task before them.

* As followers of Jesus, we all have the Spirit living within us, and at work in us. But we are invited ask the Spirit to fill us afresh, and to have faith, to know that God wants to be involved in our situation to help us, work with us, to advise us, guide us and lead us. This week, is there a situation you’re facing, into which you can invite God now, and invite Him to refill you with His Spirit to enable to find your way through it?

Duncan was fascinated that the passage acknowledged discrimination in the early church. Those with thousands of years of Jewish, Aramaic speaking history and culture, found themselves asked to embrace and include those with quite different backgrounds and cultures. Duncan said that he didn’t think they deliberately discriminated against the Greek speaking widows. Rather, once they became aware, they were really saddened by it. They hadn't realised that the language barrier the cultural distance had created an unconscious bias in favour of the Aramaic widows. They were saddened, seeing the error of their favouritism and chose to address it. The seven they appointed were not only Greek speakers, but they had valuable gifts and experience, and were filled with the Spirit, had wisdom and power. This was not a token gesture.

Duncan compared this to what we learned last year in our own country and within our church. There was a hurting group. Those of ethnic minorities who were in great pain. So, we've tried to learn from the Word of God how to go forward. And as of this month, four out of twelve of our church leaders are from ethnic minority backgrounds, and are all are filled with the Spirit of God and wisdom. We’ve become a multi-cultural church, in a similar way to the early church in the passage, and to help us learn from each other and go forward together, Duncan invited us to join a course on embracing and celebrating our unity in diversity, on Thursday the 18th of February, at 8pm. So look out for details of how to sign up.

While in the passage, one focus is on the inward dimension of facing this need, Steven’s story also highlights the outward dimension, challenging his listeners to stop trying to ‘put God in a box’, to recognise who Jesus really was. Steven lived, and died emulating Jesus, even praying for the forgiveness of those stoning him. Duncan reminded us that Steven was not full of himself. He was full of the Holy Spirit, full of grace. And when he was squeezed, under pressure, what came out of him was wisdom, faith, love, and power.

* As you bring to mind your own ‘squeezed’ situation, your pressurised circumstances, can you turn your thoughts and feelings into a prayer? Can you ask your Father for grace, for His Spirit, resilience, strength, and wisdom to go forward?

**Check out and Application**

* What do you want us to ask you next week?
* How can we best pray for you?