

Acts 6:1-7

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 April 2025

Preacher: Tim Suffield

[0 : 0 0] Oh, hail, Redeemer, hail, for he has died for me. Wow, his praise and glory shall not fail! May it be, O God, would our hearts do what that great hymn tells us to and praise you forever, for you have conquered death itself, and all enemies fall over when you look at them.

You are king above all, we crown you. Amen. Amen. Dear friends, do take a seat. Good morning. My name's Tim, and we are going to be opening the Bible together now. We're continuing in the preaching series we've been in for a little while through the book of Acts.

We've reached chapter six. If you've got a Bible with you and want to turn there, that'll help you out, but the words will be on the screen in a moment. Just to set the scene a little bit before I read it, we've seen through these five chapters we've read, the early church starts very small and has been growing and growing and growing. They reckon maybe by the time of what I'm about to read, it's maybe something like 20,000, 25,000 people in this church, which starts very small in that city, in this church in Jerusalem. And they've survived numerous challenges.

You might remember a couple of weeks ago, Andrew was preaching the story of Ananias and Sapphira, these couple who chose to lie to God in order to look good. They survived, this church, the threat of hypocrisy. And numerous times through these chapters, they've survived the threat of persecution.

The state has put Peter and others in prison. They've tried to shut them down in numerous ways. And then in this passage I'm about to read today, they have a kind of internal threat from their culture. And the question I'd like you to be thinking about as I read it and then start to explore what's going on is, does this sound at all like us? Does this sound like Harvest Church? There will be yeses and nos. But does it sound like us? Let me read it to you. This is Acts chapter 6, starting at verse 1. I am reading from the English Standard Version.

[2 : 2 7] Now in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews, because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

And the twelve summoned the full number of disciples and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said was, it was a great question. And they said, it was a great question. And the word of God continued to increase. And the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. This is the word of the Lord. So what's going on? They have a problem that has two parts to it. We're going to look at them one at a time. The first part is cultural division. We have described in that passage two different groups of people. My translation called them Hellenists and Hebrews. If you're reading from the NIV in front of you, it might say Grecians and Hebrews. But essentially, what this is, they're all Jews. They're all Jewish believers who've then, sort of Jewish people, who then turn to follow Jesus. But they come from two quite distinct Jewish cultures that existed in the city and in the wider world and were antagonistic towards one another. They're divided firstly by language and they're named after their languages, even if that might not be super clear. So the Hellenists speak Greek as their primary mother tongue. And the Hebrew speak Aramaic as their primary mother tongue. They would be able to communicate with each other.

Most people in this day would speak quite a lot of different languages. And so they're perfectly able to communicate. But language initially divides them. But it does go deeper than that. There'd be quite a lot of cultural differences. These Greek speakers are likely to be wealthy, most of them, or, but most of them, connected cosmopolitan, and maybe even connected to the Sadducees, who are

characters you might have met in the Gospels. The Hebrews are much more likely to be rural, more likely to be poor, more likely to be nationalist about Judea, and more likely to be connected to the Pharisees from the Gospels.

[5 : 23] And so once both people from both these groups come to follow Jesus and they find themselves in this church, they clash at so many different levels. And to make things more complicated for them, all of the leaders of the church at this point are Hebrews. So of Jesus' 12 disciples, at least 11 of them were definitely Galilean Jews. Possibly Jesus Iscariot might have been a Hellenist, but he isn't around anymore. And the 12th one they've appointed also a Hebrew. And yet a very sizable group, maybe even most of the church are Hellenists. Certainly if it wasn't most, it would be nearly most. There's loads, it's not a small group we're talking about, both very sizable proportions of the church. And so they've got a challenge. And it's a challenge that actually keeps coming up again and again in different ways through the book of Acts. So the story of the book is one of expansion.

We start with a relatively small group, about 120 disciples at the beginning of the book, who's still with Jesus after he died and rose and has been with them and taught them. And then very quickly they expand to 3,000 and they keep going and going and going as they preach the gospel. But the story is from Galilean Jews to the whole earth. We find stage after stage, it's like the church expands into a new frontier. And we'll find that as we go through the story.

Oh, this new group come into the church, this new group come into the church, it'll be the Samaritans soon. And then we'll start having actual Gentiles, which doesn't sound shocking to us, because most of us are that, that means not Jews. But very shocking to them. And it keeps expanding and expanding and expanding. By the end of the book, we're in the center of the world in Rome. And stretching on, Paul is thinking about going even to Spain.

And so throughout the story, what we find are frequent challenges to how on earth does that work? All these people from all these different cultures who've come to know Jesus, and yes, they're united because they love him and he's gripped their lives and he's rescued them and they're all one in Jesus. And yet, how do they live together, as it were? How are they going to be a body together? Because they're quite different. How's that going to work? And the challenge keeps coming up and up and up, and this is the first time it does.

The church, ever since the beginning, has been a church of many cultures. And at least on that level, we're like them. Lots and lots of different cultures, lots of different British cultures, and there are lots of different cultures from around the world in this room in front of me today. Hey, even this afternoon, we've got this All Nations event. Why don't you get yourself there and experience some cultures perhaps that are different from the ones that you know and worship together, discover that we're all one in Jesus? But it can be tricky, right, being a church of many cultures. To give you some very small examples, I was thinking this week about my friends, Marvellous and Blessing. They're Nigerian. They live in Nottingham. They became very good friends of ours from the time that we were in Nottingham. Initially, got to know that Marvellous was at the same workplace as me, and they'd just joined our church. And so we were like, oh, we should get to know these guys. And at this point, I don't know that we knew a lot of people from different cultures. And so this was a kind of, hey, we'd love to get to them. I don't really know how this is going to work, but let's try. We invited them over for Sunday lunch, like you do.

[9 : 01] And they, you know, they were at church on that Sunday. We go home, the dinner's in the oven. It's cooking. It's smelling good. It's kind of getting towards the time that you're sort of hoping they've arrived. Certainly the time you ask them to arrive has gone by. And me, and this is my problem, I start to think, oh, they're Nigerians, aren't they? They're working on African time. And that's okay, because that's just a different culture. I get that, and I need to come to understand that. It works differently. And then I sit there, and I think, and I wait, and I'm still not coming up. And eventually, I just pick up the phone, it's marvellous, and say, I thought you were coming home for lunch. And he says to me, but Tim, you didn't text me to confirm yesterday. British people always text to confirm. Essentially, for all I'm sitting there thinking, he's just late, isn't he? He's like, Tim just didn't mean it, did he?

Which is much worse than what I'm thinking about him. But then I'm like, well, to come anyway. We've got food, come over. And they come over with their kids, and we sit down, and we eat. And to be honest, in some ways, this made it easier, because you can laugh about it. And it kind of gets you over that initial challenge of becoming friends. And we got to become good friends with them.

At the end of that meal, that first meal, I think it was, marvellous turned to look to us and said, you know what? I expected your food to be really bland. And he was pleasantly surprised that it wasn't. And then we got to know them quite well. Certainly when we moved to Birmingham some years later, I was travelling back to Nottingham for about a year for work. So I stayed with lots of friends. And I stayed with Mildless and Blessing numerous times. And by then, I knew them quite well, which was always an adventure in terms of what I'd get to eat. Grew to love, jollof rice and plantain and the fried fish they'd give me. And lots of things they'd be like, don't worry, that one's not spicy. And then you, pfft. But I often found being in their house bemusing or slightly confusing. It was different to how a house that I would be used to would run. And because by this time we're good friends, I'm just like, great, fine, it's different, wonderful. And then I started thinking, I wonder if this is what it was like for them first coming into my house.

Was it as bemusing and confusing? Surely it would be. And actually they didn't know me then. And I'm not, I'm thinking, I love them. And so this is just what the house is like, wonderful. I wonder if you don't know someone, it's actually quite scary to come into a place where you're like, I don't understand how anything is working here. Like what do I eat with? How does this work? What cutlery do I use? Where am I supposed to sit? Like just simple stuff that you're like, I can tell it's not what I'm used to, but I don't know what the right answer is. Maybe it's quite scary. If you love it, it doesn't matter.

But before you get there, tricky. And these are small examples. So it's interesting, of course, that in Acts chapter 6, it's also eating together that causes the challenge. That's often where we notice. The thing that we have to remember, and the thing that they were trying to learn how to live out in this chapter, is that the cross of Jesus unites us. Because it makes Jesus the only way. It means that actually the greatest thing in all of our lives we have in common doesn't suddenly make our cultures the same. But it's like, oh, but we're united.

[12:41] So we have to figure out how we're going to live that out. How we're going to be united actually in our lives, rather than just in what we say. It says in Ephesians chapter 2 that the dividing wall of hostility is torn down by the cross. And it's talking about Jew and Gentile.

Now with me and my friend Marvellous, we're both Gentiles. He's a, I'm English, he's Nigerian. But nevertheless, the cross tears down the dividing wall of hostility between us. In Ephesians chapter 3, it says that the mystery of the gospel, and you're like, oh, what's Paul going to say? What is the great mystery at the bottom of the gospel? He says it's that the Gentiles get to become heirs of Abraham. That they get to, they get essentially to get in on all the promises given to the Jews. That's the great mystery. Which again extends to actually it's that all nations get to come in, that the gospel is for the world, that Jesus is for the world, because he loves all of the nations of the world. It says later in that same chapter that we become one new man in Christ. So it's like we're one. Then the tricky bit is how do you live it?

How does that actually, it's great. We can say in here, we're one, and we can sing songs together, wonderful, we can do the same this afternoon. Do we look like that around our dinner tables, I guess, is one of the things that they're challenging us about in this chapter. So that's problem number one, cultural division. Problem number two is that cultural division between Hellenist and Hebrew is applied at the pinch point of feeding widows. That's where they notice it.

And in this culture, widows are particularly marginalised. Essentially because if your husband's died, how on earth are you going to eat is the very present challenge. Like where is your money coming from to get food? Or where is your food coming from? How are you going to look after your kids? And so the church is making sure they've got food. That's the context here. They're like, well, we've got to feed them. But some of these widows seem to be being left out. We assume accidentally, but still they're being missed. And the Bible is particularly concerned by, let's call them the marginalised, those who are easy to miss on the edges. Like widows. In fact, the Old Testament would usually use as its examples of people on the edge, it's always the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. The person who's in another land. And sometimes adds to widow, orphan, foreigner, just the poor. And we know that God loves the poor. And sometimes that's a fifth category of the barren, the childless woman. They're the five examples the

Old Testament continually gives of people who are on the edges and who need to be cared for by the people of God because they're probably struggling. And they need the people of God to make sure they're included. I wonder if you've ever noticed, this is an aside, forgive me, but I wonder if you've ever noticed that every great act of redemption in the Bible starts with a childless woman.

That is a very deliberate act in the story. From Eve to Sarah to Miriam to Hannah to Mary, and that's in numerous other smaller examples as well, but all the great acts of redemption, the story starts with a childless woman. That is not a mistake. Without going into all the detail, God always looks and starts with the margin. That's who he came for.

[16:21] And our cultural challenges are usually felt on the margins, I think. Why? Because you can't see them. That's why you don't notice the people at the edge. For right or wrong, I think that's just human nature. We don't see the people at the edge. And so that's where our cultural challenges will be particularly felt. And so the question that we have to ask ourselves as a church is, who are we missing?

Who are the Hellenist widows among us? It might be actual widows. It could well be other groups of people. I think probably the person who most obviously fits the archetype of the widow in 21st century England. There's probably a single mum who is struggling to get by, struggling to feed her kids, struggling to get everything done in life all on her own. It's essentially what a widow would have been facing in that day. There'll be others too. So the thing we need to know as we start to look and think, hang on, who are we missing? The thing we need to know and remember is God loves the widow.

No. God loves the orphan. God loves the foreigner. God loves the baron. God loves the poor. How do we know he loves those groups? Well, because the Bible actually tells us that's such great length, it's really difficult, not really difficult to miss it. But how do we know? Because he came to get us.

And from an angle, we're all on the margins. We're all lost before a holy God, but he came to get you, which is the sign that he loves people who need getting. And he'd like us to do the same thing. What's the solution? How do they solve it? So they've got this problem, cultural challenge of these two groups who don't naturally get on, but they're trying to learn to live together.

[18:14] And they've got a challenge that they're not feeding the widows. What do they do? Well, the 12, these disciples, they recognize their limitations and they recognize their calling. They say, well, we could do it, but I think if we do, we'll stop doing all the other stuff that I think we are meant to be doing, preaching the word in prayer is what they said it should be.

So they said, I guess we need other people, right, to do it. And so they appoint some. They appoint these magnificent seven. I don't know if you'd noticed me reading it out, but they've all got Greek names. That's unusual. It almost certainly means that they are from this Greek-speaking group. So what the Hebrew 12 have done is they've said, oh, we need more leaders.

We need more leaders from over here. And they've asked the people for a bit of input and they've thought together and they've prayed and they've gone, right, it's these guys. So they found godly leaders among that same culture, not because they had to be, but because they thought they'd be more effective. Why will they be more effective? Because they know where to look.

Come back to that thought in just a second. They're still all Jews. There's an interesting guy at the end, because Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch, that means he wasn't born a Jew. He converted to Judaism at some point in his life and then came to follow Jesus. That's what it means to be a proselyte.

Which is interesting. The Gentiles don't get into chapter 10, but ha-ha, here's a Gentile in all the way at chapter 6, because what Lucas, the author, always wants to do is go, look where we're going. The whole world's going to come in.

[19:53] Because Jesus came for the world. And so the 12, they focus on word and prayer, and the 7, they focus on serving at tables. We could get confused and think one's more important than the other. They're actually quite keen to stress that it's not. Let me show you that. So in verse 2, this is the 12 talking, and they say, it's not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. You might think, is that because serving tables is like beneath you?

It's not. And we know it's not, because in verse 4 it says, but we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. The thing that you might miss, at least in the translation I read out, is that the word for serve tables, or serve, in verse 2, is the same word in Greek as the word ministry in verse 4. So it's the service of tables and the service of the word. They're like, we're doing the same thing, but we're doing it in different arenas. They're not saying, this is more important. They're saying, this is important, so we shouldn't stop it.

But that's important, so let's get some people to do it. It's not a value thing, as though it's like, we're too fancy to feed widows. Let's find some chumps. That's not it. These are both important things.

And actually, these principles led later in the New Testament to the appointment of deacons. The 12 aren't elders, and the 7 aren't deacons, but the logic was later applied in the church when they had elders and deacons. So they appoint the 7 because they can see. What do I mean by that?

This is my last thought for you. If you're driving in your car on a multi-lane road, and you want to change lanes, you're on a motorway, you want to change lanes, you know you're supposed to look in your mirrors and you glance. And you're like, how's the lane? Free? Yeah, it's free. I'll tongue out. We all know, but rarely do, there's a little bit in the back of your car over here that we call the blind spot that you can't see in your mirrors. It's about this big, and you could fit a bus in it. I don't know if you've ever noticed that. But you can't see it. You cannot see it in your mirrors. You have to look over your shoulder.

[21 : 58] To have a look. And I imagine most of us who drive have had that experience when you change lanes, and then you go, oh gosh, they were close. I probably didn't look properly because that is close.

That's basically the principle here with the 7. Because they're stood in a different place, they don't have to bend over backwards to see this blind spot. Right? Because they're stood over here, they're like, well, there's a bus there. Don't change lanes. And so what the 12 are saying is, we need people who can be over here and go, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, this is a problem. We need to do something about this. And it's not in this passage, but it would work the other way around, because also it doesn't work in my analogy, but over here you'd be able to see their blind spot too.

Which means, if you can see problems, cultural problems, problems at the margins in this church, and you're like, someone should do something about that, I don't think it's right.

Maybe no one else can see it. Typically, if you're from that background, or you've had those challenges, you will find it easier to see. That is not a bad thing that other people can't see, they need your help to see it. Which means, if you can do something about the thing that you're like, someone should do something about that, well, maybe it's you. Maybe. But if you can, try first. But if you can't do something about that, do tell someone. Tell your life good leader, tell a deacon, tell an elder, tell someone in leadership, so that we can see. Because it's not ill will that people can't see it, they just can't see. I need your help to see. Those with the same background can see better.

[23 : 45] Let me leave you with this thought. It's not unlike the fact that he who was nothing like us, the creator of the world, chose to become like us, so that he could serve us. Do you see that?

He became one of us. It's almost like he actually, he would be able to see all the problems, but he became one of them to experience humanity in order to come and rescue us.

It's the incarnation. That's what we're saying. You have to be in the thing to see the problem. And we all need to look out for the least and the lowest, because that's who Jesus came for.

He came for the least and for the lowest, because he came for you. The church is the least and the lowest. We are the very scum of the earth, Paul says, lifted up by God. It's like he got low enough that he could get in the dust so that he could lift us up to the heavens. And he's saying, live like that.

Dear friends, the band are going to come now, and then we're going to worship this God who lives like that for us, who chose to become nothing so that he could serve us, who loves the least and the lost, who loves the poor, who loves widows and the barren and orphans and foreigners, who loves you.

[25 : 14] He really does. Why don't you stand with me if you're able. I'm going to pray and then we'll sing. Jesus, thank you that you would choose to come for us, to serve us. Help us learn how to do that.

It doesn't come naturally to us, but Holy Spirit, would you fill us with a desire to serve others? Would you fill us with a desire and an ability to see what we can't see? Would you show us, Lord, where the problems are at the margins? Give us the ability, the skills, the people who are well-placed to help us do something about them. Lord, most of all, would you fill our hearts again with delight that you came for us and that you love us. Amen. Amen.

Thanks, Tim. We're going to respond now, and we're going to sing Build My Life.