

Fruits of the Spirit - Joy & Generosity

Our readings this morning are taken from Luke's two books - the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Well let's take a look at these two wonderful readings. They take us from the extraordinary joy that filled the heart of the father at the return of his errant son or the prodigal son as we know him best as. And when you read the story and as you take a look at it you will see that the joy of the Father is coupled with the joy of the forgiven son. The son was overjoyed! He was full of joy at the acceptance of his repentance. He was overcome with the all enfolding love of his parent as he drew him once again into his arms. He is overcome with joy as he knows himself to once again be surrounded by the arms of his reconciling father and feel the affection of a parent for a child. It is a wonderful story. And this joy we are talking about this morning, this deep contentment, is not a superficially joy. I am talking about a deep contentment of the soul. It is experienced by all forgiven sinners (Luke 7:47). It is the soul that is reconciled with God the Father. I am talking about ourselves now. And of course this joy, this joy of the soul, this deep deep joy within us is the gift of Jesus our saviour because he is the one who has reconciled us to God our Father. He who is love himself has made us love with the Father. And this joy that we read about in the Gospel of Luke takes us through to our remarkable reading in the Acts of the Apostles where we are presented with the life of that first gathering of early believers and here we find this deep-seated joy flowing forth in generosity. A generosity that these believers had never met before. But where they were able to leave behind everything of an old life that turned them in on themselves to an outward giving of themselves in every way. They had experienced the forgiving love of the Father through Christ their saviour. They had been filled with the Holy Spirit, and under the influence of the Triune God they went into the world to proclaim that Good News.

Well, let's pick up our story. Joy filled! These people, the first to know that joy. Text after text in the Acts of the Apostles bear witness to the life changing influence it had on their lives. It was quite literally an amazing movement. It was full of supernatural power. It had an extraordinary vigour. As we hear the story of that infant church we cannot fail but be impressed by it. But I would ask you hesitate here a minute here, because in our admiration, we would also be well advised to note that this early church, admire it as it was, it was not without its faults. It was not totally pure. You see this great movement of the Spirit included those who had many faults and many failings. We are inclined to hold up this early church as a paradigm, a template, of what we would well be advised to follow. Don't we? We say, 'Why can't we be like the early church?' The church was indeed remarkable but I think we would be well advised not to idealise this early church. And then to use that same purist criteria we have created to describe it, to judge and compare it with the work of God in our day.

Two different stories. You see when we look closely we find people in this great movement of God, people like Ananias and Saphiras. You remember them? They kept back some of their proceeds that theyd promised to God. There was the power hungry Simon the Magician. Those who have read the Acts of the Early Church will be aware of all this. (He committed the Act of Simony – selling of ecclesiastical privileges). There was the fearful John Mark who ran away from his missionary brothers. There was the doctrinally confused Apollos. There was the professing Christians in Ephesus who for some time had concealed their black magic. There was the elder in Corinth who had taken his father's mistress. So you will see, what we have to understand is any true movement of the Holy Spirit in this fallen world of ours will always sweep up some debris, and that debris will infiltrate into the church.

Well let's just ask ourselves. Are we seeing anything like this today? - In our own church life? Well the answer to that is 'Yes'. Of course it is 'Yes'. The church of Christ in our day has been hit by terrible scandals. Throughout the world, but in particular in Europe and in our own land. We have had sexual impropriety, fraud, false teaching. Have you not felt, as I surely have, that our backs are against the wall? And we've nearly lost everything. You must have done. We have heard it on television, listen to it on radio, read it in our papers. And of course the secular society in which we live is only too pleased to pick us out and criticise us. And we deserve it. Well, feel like this we may do, but can I tell you – don't be dejected. Do not allow yourself to believe that the awful decline of the Christian church in the western world and in the United Kingdom, and throughout so much of our land. This is not true of the church throughout the world. Let me tell you something. The Christian church throughout the world is growing at an extraordinary rate. I give you just one or two examples. Take Korea. In my parent's generation, and in the old atlases and encyclopaedias we had at home when we were growing up, the religion of Korea was stated as Shamanist and Buddhist. Well if you take a look at a modern encyclopaedia which carries these facts and figures you will see that it has now been re-designated as a country where the largest religious affiliation is Christian. And did you know that at this present time due to God's good grace the Church in Korea is training and sending out thousands of missionaries into and across Indo-China and around the world. And take another country which comes in for our opprobrium and criticism – China. The official figure for the expansion of the Christian Church in China from a mere handful to approximately a hundred and sixty million today is extraordinary. It is more than extraordinary because that 160 million is only the official figure. And we doubt everything that comes from China when it comes to figures. The true figure is much greater. Including the many many millions who belong to unregistered churches and congregations across that land. Professor Michael Green, unfortunately recently deceased now, has declared with some authority that in China we are seeing the emergence of the next great Christian nation. It is the same around the globe. Even in the Muslim world. Great things are beginning to happen. At a church convention (Spring Harvest 2018) some years ago we were told of the conversion of a greater number of the Berbers. The Berbers, that ancient nomadic people of north Africa. You will have heard of them. So great is the movement of the Spirit among them that did you know that at that conference I attended 20,000 bibles were requested so that they could be sent to them in their own language. That is what they wanted us to do. Well when we hear about these things, when we read about them we should REJOICE and give thanks. But as we do we must also be aware that mixed in with the great expansion that is taking place around the world there will be much that is imperfect, there will be much that is immature and open to corruption. This too you will read about. We hear all about it, don't we? The Christian Church always has been criticised and always will be. But as we are told about the things that may go wrong - the erroneous teachings, the wrong paths taken, we must never assume that this great expansion that is taking place in so many places is not of God. You see when the Kingdom of God sweeps through a people, sweeps through a region, it is as if, as we have said, a great net is thrown into the sea. And a great net that is thrown into the sea gathers up every type of fish, and sorting out all those fish must happen. Not all are edible. And that sorting has to come later. So what have we seen? Well, we have seen that that LUKE delights in giving us the Gospel, and in his documented growth of the Christian church in the early years. He delights in telling us about it. But interestingly Luke does something else. Luke's report not only describes the growth of the Christian movement. He also wants to show us how the various internal threats to the church and possibly the obstacles to its growth and indeed maybe to its failure in certain places. He is trying to tell us how these things can be overcome. Now, I want to take you to that place because I think it is pertinent for us today. You see, we are the church today that seem to be wallowing in self-defeat. Well, let's jump forward a few chapters in Luke. In Luke-

Acts Chapter 6, the first seven verses, we find a little story there, it is about the growth of the church, but sandwiched between two wonderful declarations of growth there is a little *threat* mentioned. Luke mentions a threat here that had presented itself. A threat to this infant church, and to the Christian movement. And how that threat was eventually overcome. I just read you the two verses.

‘In those days when the number of the disciples was growing there rose a complaint from the Greek speaking Jews against the Hebrew speaking Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food’. Now this may seem to you a pretty small disagreement – the daily distribution. But let me tell you, this was a threat! And let me explain this to you. This threat to the church comes in two parts. The first is the conflict, in the story itself between the Greek speaking Jews who had become Christians and the Aramaic or Hebrew speaking Jews who had also become Christians, the ones who had lived around Jerusalem. They of course spoke Aramaic, the language of Jesus. The problem presents itself as the failure of the church to take care of the widows and orphans of the Greek speakers. You see there was a bit of snobbery here. The Judaistic Christians were looking down on those who were considered to be foreigners. Verse 1 tells the story. The Grecian Jews complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. Now don’t think little of it - this was a very serious matter. What we are seeing here is the emergence of some cultural and ethnic tensions in the Christian movement. These were two peoples who saw themselves as entirely different even though they served the same Christ. The church’s caring system. A system developed by the Jews over the centuries to take care of the poor was not working for the Greek minority in the church. And tensions were beginning to erupt. No doubt, if they were allowed to continue they would have brought this infant church, a movement that had been founded on love and forgiveness, into serious disrepute in the eyes of the world. In other words, the Christians would have begun arguing with one another. They would have been criticising one another. They would have become even hating one another. ‘So much’ the world would have said, ‘for the religion of love!’ Well that is the first part of the problem. The emergence of the issue. An issue that would bring a threat to the spread of the word of God. The other part of the threat to the movement is what would happen if this difficult was solved in the wrong way. In other words, one section of the community overcoming the other, that would have been wrong. How could they solve it then? Well we see this in verse 2. We read that the twelve apostles summoned the body of the disciples. This is what they said. They said ‘it is not right that we should give up spreading the word of God to serve at tables’ (Acts 6:2). Now that sounds very much like some of the apostles having to defend themselves. Someone must have said to the Twelve, ‘Come on you guys, you that are high and mighty. We have heard of all the talk. It is now time for you to get your hands dirty!’ Get stuck in and start helping with the needy and the sick!’ In other words, ‘come down from all your preaching and all the rest of it and get your hands dirty. Get stuck into the social work get stuck into the organisation. Can you see it all now? The second part of the threat to the infant church was that those who were called to the ministry of the word, the evangelists, should leave their calling to take care of the everyday running of the church. Now It must be said, and let me make a strong point here, that looking after the widows, looking after the sick, looking after the children, is very good, it is not just very good, it is Very! Very! good! It is an essential task. But Luke is telling us that the temptation that required that this work to be done at the expense of the evangelism of the peoples around them, at the expense of the proclamation of the Gospel, would be a major threat to the church! HE tells us in verse 2 that leaving the Word of God would be a grave mistake. Well, we know they didn’t give up their preaching, they continued to do so. Then in verse 7, in order to underline all of that for us, that the apostles did not forsaking their calling, but continued with their calling to preach the word

of God.' Luke reports for us in verse 7 (Acts 6:7), 'because they didn't stop, because they didn't leave their calling,' Luke says the word of God increased and the numbers of disciples multiplied greatly and that included many priests (in others words Jewish rabbis). What a wonderful tale! Well this is great stuff. Can you see what Luke is doing? Luke is telling us how to protect the Gospel message. And at the same time overcome difficulties that will beset every congregation. How did they do it? God led people to overcome both parts of the threat by not playing them against each other, but rather they were instructed to appoint seven leaders who were full of the Holy Spirit to take up the ministry to care for the needy. In other words, they delegated. Their solution was using the diversity and gift of calling that are contained in every healthy congregation. This is what we call 'all member ministry'. You know what this means? This is a real message for the whole of the church throughout our land. It means all of us are asked to take up that responsibility within the Body of Christ, that is our local church, which God has called and gifted us to serve. And each of us will have some gift to offer. Did you know that? Every person who is called by Christ and filled by the Holy Spirit has a gift to offer? And as we approach our Christian life together in this way. We will find that when we do this we have all that we need to do what has to be done. The message is, 'we must not leave it to a few'. It requires all of us!!

May I finish by reminding us all that each one of us are members of the Body of Christ and in that body there is a function for you and for me to fulfil. It is so important for us all both individually and as the body of Christ in this wonderful ancient old church to find out what God is wanting us to do. We must find out how God is wanting to use us. You know the Christian life was never one where you were asked to sit in an armchair – you were asked to go out! Both the caring ministry in all its varied work is a primary task but the main task, the task of the proclamation of the Gospel, the evangelism of our land and those around us - this is critical! But it is the willingness of all us to take up our part of the burden that will enable the word of God to be heard. And it is when we all take up our God given task that the love of God, in forgiveness and salvation will spread over our land. Let me tell you, when we walk to God in this way, and ask for him to use us, then the power of the Lord will shine through of us. **AMEN**