

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Service on 4th July 2010

Acts 8:1-4 - "The seed of the church"

I want to start this morning with two episodes in the history of the worldwide spread of the good news of Jesus.

The first comes from America in 1742. David Brainerd was a student at Yale University, training to be a church minister and he got thrown out of the university. What happened was that some of the students had come under the influence of some over-enthusiastic preachers and had started questioning whether the faculty were real Christians. Brainerd was overheard saying that one of the tutors 'had no more grace than a chair'. He even wondered aloud why the Rector of the college hadn't dropped dead under God's judgment for fining the evangelical students for their zeal. So he was hauled up before the authorities and duly expelled.

The sequel, however, is significant. David Brainerd's route to a stable pastorate was immediately cut off. A few careless words and you could argue that his life fell apart. But **God had other plans...** Because David Brainerd went instead as a missionary to the Native Americans of New England. He died young but Jonathan Edwards wrote a biography of him and that short book was, under God, the start of the modern missionary movement.

It inspired people to take the gospel to others: Henry Martyn went to India and Persia because of it. William Carey, Murray M'Cheyne, David Livingstone, Jim Elliot and others were also challenged to give their lives for the spread of the gospel overseas. Sorry if those names don't mean much to you, but they were the trailblazers of modern Christian mission.

Fast forward two centuries for the next episode. It's 1949 and the China national Govt is defeated by the communists. Overnight the 637 China Inland Mission personnel are obliged to leave. The news rocked the Christian world. The preacher Dick Lucas tells how he met one of the missionaries by chance on a train and heard the story of his expulsion from China and tactfully said how sorry he was. To his surprise he was given a rocket by the missionary which lasted the entire length of that very long tunnel between Sevenoaks and Tonbridge, if you now that particular line. Because it wasn't a disaster at all. **God had other plans.**

For a start, within four years 286 of the mission partners had been re-deployed to SE Asia and Japan: which was of huge significance in progressing world mission.

Secondly the removal of Christian workers from overseas forced the young Chinese church to stand on its own two feet. In 1949 there were 1.8 million in protestant denominations. By the year 2000 that number had grown to 26 million despite severe ongoing persecution. To say nothing of at least 45 million unregistered Christians in house-churches.

Those two episodes are examples of the principles in Acts 8, as we pick up from where we left things a few months ago. The book begins with Jesus making a promise to his followers:

'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth'.

That is God's great over-arching plan – and nothing ultimately will block that purpose. Nothing **ultimately** – because there has been plenty of opposition from outside the church – with the apostles repeatedly arrested and commanded not to preach in the name of Jesus. There have been set-backs from within the church as well – the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira; a bust-up about whether some widows were being given better treatment than others.

So there are obstacles, yes. But nothing **ultimately** has blocked God's purpose for more and more people to hear about Jesus Christ and become his followers.

That same lesson is going to emerge in the short passage we are looking at today. And it is an important one for us all, whether we are Christians or whether we are still looking into the Christian faith and considering it for ourselves.

Obviously if we are Christians then it makes sense for us to bring **our** life plans into line with **God's** great plan. Part of what it means to become a Christian, surely, is that I stop forming plans for my life without reference to God's great purpose. I pray as taught us: 'your will be done'. And over time it emerges that that is the best way to live.

But even if you are not yet a Christian today, this is still important for you: if you are to become a Christian, it will involve signing up to different goals for your life. But excitingly the goal to which you commit yourself is something much bigger than my advancement or my children's advancement. I am so thankful to have something bigger to live for than that – a global plan and an eternal plan.

The specific situation which precedes our reading today was the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. He was arrested and put on trial. But it's almost as if the defendant becomes the prosecutor. Stephen is charged with speaking against the temple and against the law of Moses; but he turns the fire against his persecutors and charges them with always resisting the Holy Spirit and rejecting God's prophets. He accuses them of being stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears – which is another way of saying that they are no better than the godless nations all around them.

Not surprisingly they are furious and they are even more unimpressed when Stephen says that he can see Jesus alive and well on the throne of heaven. They hate that name with a passion. So Stephen is dragged outside the city, to a place of execution and they start raining down boulders and rocks on him. Stoning someone is jolly hot work in the Middle Eastern sun and so everyone needs to take a layer of clothes off to do the job properly... and they lay their clothes at the feet of a young man called Saul. And while they are yelling their abuse, Stephen is praying for his enemies, until at last his voice falls silent and he dies.

What happened next? If you've seen that TV quiz show, a Question of Sport, you will know that that is one of the rounds most weeks. The video sequence of some sporting contest freezes and the teams are asked what happened next? And they have to pick between 3 equally bizarre outcomes. Well, what happened after Stephen's death? I have three outcomes and in this case they are all true.

First, great opposition. That much is clear from verse 1 ***¹And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.***

So Saul was not going to dirty his hands with the execution, but he certainly approved of the action others were taking. And no time was wasted once Stephen had died. His blood was still soaking into the ground when angry fists began pounding on the doors of other Christian homes.

The Christians weren't wasting any time either – put yourself in the shoes of a Christian as the news gets around that Stephen has been arrested and then killed. You're terrified: you throw a few things together and get out of town quick; it could be you next.

Verse 3 makes it clear how dangerous it was for those who stayed. ***³But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.***

This time, Saul **is** physically involved. He is the one dragging people from their homes, even the women. Of course, we are meant to remember this a chapter later, when Saul is converted and the arch enemy becomes an advocate. God sometimes chooses to show how completely he is in control by turning around the ring-leaders of the opposition.

We need to remember this. Maybe there is someone hostile to God in your life right now: well, God has a track record of making his adversaries into advocates. That's what happened with Paul.

Psychologically, maybe part of his intensity was because he was fighting what he knew deep down to be true. But still the first what- happened-next is unmistakable: **Great opposition.**

Here's the second: **Great Devotion.**

Verse 2 is something of a puzzle– just dropped in without explanation: ***²Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.***

I have no doubt that Saul if you asked him would have defended what he was doing as a work of religious devotion. Misguided religious devotion. Here, Luke pops in a contrasting snapshot of **genuine** religious devotion. Rather than leave Stephen to die the death of a common criminal – unburied and un-mourned- some unnamed godly people give him a fitting funeral (although that was almost certainly to risk the same fate themselves).

It's very striking, with the opposition intensified as a direct result of Stephen's speech, that he is still honoured and not blamed.

Can't you imagine some cautious and well-meaning believers in Jerusalem muttering amongst themselves: 'What Stephen said was completely uncalled for. Did he really have to call the Sanhedrin 'stiff-necked uncircumcised people'? Hotheads who speak before they think always get other Christians into trouble! Now we all have to live like refugees in Judea and Samaria'.

But when Luke tells the story he is careful to make it clear that Stephen was right to speak as he did. He tells us that Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit when he spoke the words which enraged the council.

And here it is 'devout' people who buried him. So Stephen is honoured not blamed for the persecution – or at least he is honoured by devout people.

We ought to take note of that: when persecution comes because of courageous, faithful, God-honouring obedience, **godly** people don't blame the servant of the Lord, they **honour** him.

I was challenged this week by an open letter sent by Afghan Christians about their plight. The government there, from Mohammed Karzai, downwards - have apparently given their full backing to the Islamic death penalty for people converting to Christianity. And Afghan Christians have written asking how can Western Christians stand by and do nothing. 'You should be honouring martyrs and suffering Christians, not standing by silently'. It's hard to argue with that... It is the lesson of the **great devotion** in our text.

On to a third what-happened-next sequence: **Great expansion**.

This is of course the point of Chapter 8 verse 4.

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

What did they do? They '***preached the word***'. So this wasn't the mistake we often make – evangelism without the evangel. They had a **message** they wanted to communicate. I think it was Francis of Assisi who first said: preach the gospel and if necessary use words. In other words live the gospel and that will be enough. That may suit our post-modern age which hates to put across one opinion at the expense of anyone else's. But the early Christians would never have understood that concept. They couldn't help speaking about what they had seen and heard.

Where did they go? Well, verse 1 told us: '***throughout all Judea and Samaria***'. And we are meant to pick up the verbal echo of Jesus' promise at the start of the book. Jesus had promised that his followers would be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Chapters 1-7 have seen the good news of Jesus gaining a firm hold in Jerusalem – the very city which only weeks earlier had killed Jesus Christ. But up to this point we are still in stage one: Jerusalem.

It takes this new surge of persecution to force the rank and file Christians out from Jerusalem to the next two stages: to all Judea and Samaria.

They move out, running for their very lives – ***but God has other plans***. As they go they take with them the good news of Christ to the next two stops on a journey to the ends of the earth.

It took nothing less than the death of Stephen for the next stage in the spread of the Christian faith to happen – but it was God's plan all along. Arguably Stephen accomplished

more in his death than he ever would have by a long life... Though no-one probably recognised it at the time.

That is a reminder that we never read very well what God is up to as events are unfolding; it is rarely possible for us to judge the true significance of events at the time they happen.

Perhaps someone here needs that reminder today. I was speaking to someone recently who had had some serious, unexpected suffering to deal with and he said that he didn't want anybody else to tell him that God moves in a mysterious way.

He was probably afraid that if that happened his fist might move in a mysterious way towards their nose! God's sovereignty is not an easy truth for us to grasp in the thick of suffering, because we cannot normally see what God is up to.

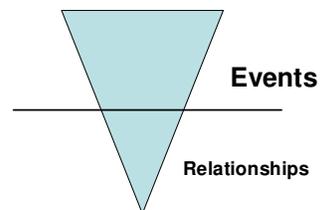
But what happened in Acts 8 leaves very little doubt that God's great plan is to see that the gospel reaches to the ends of the earth and that it does so through ordinary Christians sharing the good news of Jesus wherever they find themselves.

Here is the Great plan of God **in line with which I must bring my life**. It's often said that sharing the gospel is the one thing I can do now as a Christian which I will not be able to do in heaven. This alone explains why God has delayed the return of Jesus – it is his plan now for Christians to tell others about Jesus.

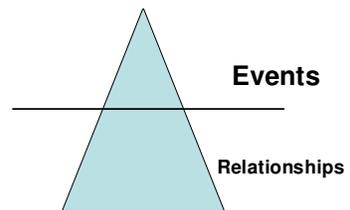
Which gives me all the encouragement I could hope for, to recommend the October Outreach to you!

If I may venture one comment that I have been pondering it is this: that for events to achieve anything, we need to have friends to invite to them. Having an October Outreach is no use at all if we are reaching out only to ourselves!

I wonder if you have seen these two models of church witness before. The first is an **unhealthy** one where above the line is what we can see of a church's outreach strategy. It relies massively on **events** – but out of sight, below the line, there is very little investment by Christians in **relationships**. So of course there are events and Christianity Explored courses... with not many people present. Of course that model is precarious, and out of balance.



For a healthy pattern, you need to flip the triangle. This is an outreach strategy on a secure base. The events are what we see but they are resting on much broader and therefore much more secure relationships base, because **unseen** Christians have many relationships with people whom they can invite to events.



Let's turn the slide off - but do you grasp the difference between the two? The million dollar question is this: **do I see the place I am in with the network of relationships I have as part of God's grand plan to take the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth?**

If I am a Christian, the chances are that I have some friends and acquaintances for whom no-one is better placed than I am to bring the gospel to them. Can you pause right now to think about someone for whom that is true in your case? Is it not likely that your paths have crossed because God wants them to hear about Christ from you. It's not an accident that you are in a place you can reach them. It is God's plan. We must invest in those relationships **for the gospel**. Even if it involves serious hardship and persecution for us.

If you are not yet a Christian yourself, then be sure of this; it is no accident that you are hearing this today. It is part of God's plan for you to hear about Jesus Christ and respond to him. That may involve you in mockery and suffering: it almost certainly will if you are to be a genuine Christian. But might it not also be God's plan that you are as a Christian in a brilliant position to tell others about him?

That great expansion is what happened when Stephen died – and his death had a place in God's plans which is far surpassed by the death we celebrate in our communion now.

Like David Brainerd, like the missionaries being booted out of China, like Stephen... when Jesus hung on the cross it seemed a complete disaster. **But God had other plans.**

Because that death brought the blessings of the Gospel to the ends of the earth, including to Little Shelford. Make sure you thank God for that today...

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)