

Acts 7
Feilding Baptist
14.4.24

Call to Worship

Welcome to worship at Feilding Baptist Church!

The Bible is an honest book. It does not varnish over pain and troubles. It is real. One part of the Bible called Lamentations talks of the rawness of life. Sometimes it's like grinding our teeth on gravel (3:16). But in the middle are these verses, chapter three from verse 19,

I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.
20 I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.
21 Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:
22 Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
23 They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
24 I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion;
therefore I will wait [hope] for him.'

Father, because of Jesus, we have hope. We hope not that everything will work out, but that Your great love never fails, and Your compassion never ends. In Jesus we have hope that our story goes on, that whatever happens here on earth, our story continues.

And so we come to worship, thankful for Your great faithfulness, thankful for what You have done for us already, and with confident hope in what You will do for us in the future. Holy Spirit, please grow our hope, grow confident hope in Jesus as we worship this morning. Please speak to us, and warm our hearts. Amen.

Message – Foundation of Hope

Things don't always turn out all right, so we put our hope in the faithfulness, goodness, compassion of God.

She was the life of the party. She was the life of the workplace. Holidays were filled with fun and creativity. This was the life of 46 year old Fiona Warring whose funeral we went to yesterday. A victim of bowel cancer. Sometimes things don't turn out okay.

The same could be said for the 14 people innocently shopping at the Westfield Mall in Bondi yesterday. Things didn't turn out okay for them in an evil attack on random people.

I wonder what you're going through? What matters of injustice? What's not fair for you?

As Digby Wilkinson said at the funeral yesterday, hoping that all will be well, isn't a great hope. Hope needs to have a more solid foundation. We need a hope that gives meaning to the present day, a hope that gives life in the midst of suffering.

Jesus points to an eternal kingdom, the place of the future for us. That's why Fiona had a tattoo on her arm, 'This is not the end of my story...' And we were each given bracelets with that on. Fiona had courageous hope, that she would beat the cancer. But she faced hurdle after hurdle. And then she realised, that either way, she wins, either way she lives.

When life goes pear shaped, what is hope? Is it a feeling that ultimately everything will turn out well, that suffering will stop? (No. We need a hope that all will make sense, that there is purpose. We need a hope that is strong and deep, that life at this moment is worth it because God's love and compassion never fails, even in the midst of the nasty stuff we have to deal with (Lamentations 3). Life might not work out, but it will be okay. Hope is a gift of God. Fiona had this gift, her family hold onto it. Her life was worthwhile.

The people of Acts 6 might have thought all would be well? The numbers of disciples, followers of Jesus were growing at tremendous rates. It looked like nothing could go wrong? The troubles over food at the start of the chapter were sorted out. A new team of seven was established, dedicated to ensuring the Greek speaking widows got their fair share of food.

The leading light was Stephen, a man we read was full of faith and the Holy Spirit (6:5), and full of God's grace and power, and who performed great wonders and signs among the people (6:8). This is the first surprise. They sound like the qualities of Jesus! For this was a man, along with the other six who was appointed to 'serve on tables'. This was a practical servant.

Too often we look at those who serve practically, and we think that, that is their lot. Practical service. But remember last week's passage, the first seven verses of chapter six, where the main point is that centre verse four, the apostles didn't want to be distracted from praying and the ministry of the word. Prayer and telling people about Jesus was to be the main thing the church was about. And those two vital goals (prayer and witnessing for Jesus) weren't just for the stooges on the stage, they were for everyone!

Still, it should be a little surprising to see one of these practical people teaching! We must be careful in saying 'no' to God when we're being nudged in a certain direction. And we must be careful not to think that God can't use certain people.

That can be scary, we might think we're being called to something when we're not. How do we discern if it is God nudging? Prayer, friends, talk about it. Try that direction. God will close the door if it's wrong – if you've prayed first.

No matter what our role, no matter who we are, we are still to take prayer seriously, and be witnesses for Jesus! Well, Stephen certainly did that. Witnessing or preaching at the local synagogue. This wasn't the temple. Synagogues were more like our marae. They were places where worship happened, and much more! A synagogue was a meeting place for Jews to discuss community issues, share meals, make decisions regarding law, a place to collect and distribute money for the purposes of social welfare, provide basic schooling, study the Torah, store the scrolls of Scripture, provide a place of residence for synagogue officials. It was also a hostel for visiting Jews (Schnabel, 345).

Anyway, this is what was going on;
Acts 6:8-15 New International Version - UK
Stephen seized

8 Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) – Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia – who began to argue with Stephen. 10 But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, 'We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.'

12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, 'This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.'

15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

[The Sanhedrin is a council comprising of three groups, the leaders, elders and scribes. The leaders are the priests and their families, the elders are the Jewish elite, scribes are the specialists in the law, often talked about in the same sentence as Pharisees.]

And then we turn to chapter seven, for the longest speech or sermon in Acts, delivered by who other than Stephen. Not only is he performing great wonders and signs among the people, he can also teach! For this is teaching, not defence. Stephen is before the Sanhedrin, and he is asked if the charges against him are true (7:1). Instead of defending himself, he convicts the Sanhedrin with a remarkable message.

If you have a read it looks like Stephen is reminding the experts of their history. And he is, sort of. The NIV has footnotes to ten Old Testament passages. Stephen's speech in summary deals with the three great pillars of Jewish piety, the land (v2-36), the law (v37-43) and the temple (v44-50). Basically, it was these three things that they are putting their hope in, the land, the law, and the temple.

Repeatedly reminding the leaders that God worked in places outside of Israel or Judah was Stephen's way of trying to get the leaders to look out. Remember God had said to Abraham to go, to be a blessing to all the earth. Yet the vision had got smaller and smaller, reduced to Israel, to Judah, to Jerusalem, to the temple.

I wonder if we can do that with our faith too? Remember the other six days? Or the other 167 hours? I wonder if we can reduce faith to one hour a week, here in this building? We're supposed to let faith infuse all of our week, all the things we do, wherever we are.

Stephen is trying to convince the Sanhedrin that the central part of faith now is Jesus, the very one they killed! Which didn't go down too well. In fact, they became so angry with Stephen that they dragged him outside the city and stoned him to death.

Perhaps like Fiona, Stephen realised that either way he wins, his hope was in the compassion of God, found in Jesus.

These experts in the law should have known from Deuteronomy 18:15 – that God would send a successor to Moses. Jesus is the new Moses like figure, forming and sustaining the new people of God around Himself. Not around an earthly building or mountain. It is evident from Scripture that God's presence cannot be localised, that no building can confine God. If God has a home on earth, it is with us. How good is this?!

Stephen is a model of faithful witness and godly response that those who may be in the midst of opposition and suffering, might well find helpful (Peterson, 244). It's his hope, grounded in Jesus that should encourage us, and help us, when things don't go to plan for us.