

# Hope of the World

## Part 3, Acts 6:1-7

### Acts 6:1-7 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup>So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup>Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup>and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

<sup>5</sup>This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup>They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup>So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

God is good and his message is simple, he loves us and wants us to be whole, its complicated human beings that makes everything a challenge. Years ago a close friend of mine, landed on my doorstep looking very distraught. His dad suffered from mental illness and had terrible episodes of paranoia, and that evening he had attacked his younger brother and for the first time he had physically fought his father in order to protect his brother. As he sat on the front steps of my house, choking back the sobs, he told me that what he had done was wrong, that he should honour and love his parents and it was wrong to hit his dad. But at the same time he couldn't just sit back and watch his brother being attacked. He asked me for my advice and all I could say was that he was caught in a terrible situation when he had to choose between the lesser of two evils, but it was for situations like this that God had invented grace, love that covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). It kind of seemed to help and we spent some time praying for his dad and the family.

The world seems to be constantly throwing up both little challenges and massive challenges to our journey of faith.

Consider this massive challenge:

Early last Sunday morning (June 12 2016) in an Orlando night club in Florida, Omar Mateen, an American of Afghanistan heritage shot and killed 49 people and injured 53 others, he was himself shot and killed by the police. This was the largest single mass shooting in US history and left the Orlando community and particularly the gay community stunned and grief-stricken.

The desperate question circling the globe was how could someone do such a thing? How could they hate so much? The picture emerging of Omar Mateen is of a socially awkward confused and conflicted person desperately seeking some kind of significance and identity. To this end, his final act in life, was to declare to the world in death and blood, that he was a faithful Muslim. He probably believed or at least

hoped that this act would be his salvation. It probably won't surprise you to hear I think he was wrong.

Omar is the kind of person that Jesus had in mind when he said that He had come to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). Jesus taught that terrible things come out of lost people's hearts including murder (Matthew 15:19). Jesus also taught that the hope of the world is when lost people come to personally know the Loving God who will save them from the darkness within and transform their life from the inside out through the power of God's love (1 John 1:5, Luke 15:11-32). Jesus also taught that it is through God's power we learn to love and not to hate (Luke 10:27), to do good, even to enemies (Luke 6:27), to forgive, even those who harm us (Matthew 6:14), and to be people of light and life (Matthew 5:14, John 10:10). It's for this reason that Jesus founded the church, so we would meet lost people and draw them into a loving relationship with the God who can change their life (Matthew 28:18-20). If something like that had happened to Omar Mateen then this tragedy would never have happened. In this way we understand the task of the church to be the hope of the world, saving one lost heart at a time.

The history of the early church, preserved by Luke in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, records how the founders of our church went about this task of being the hope of the world. In the second chapter we read how they lived out a life of love, selling everything they owned and giving to people in need. Living in vital community together, studying the teachings of Jesus and being known as a people who walked in the power of God and everyday lost people found a new home and a new life in this family of faith.

Which is not to say that everything was smooth sailing, far from it. Because this movement we now call the church was new it cut across established cultures and beliefs. Because of that the followers of Jesus were harassed and persecuted by just about everybody, which was hard, but it did not deter them. Because their experience of the reality of God's love was so real and so profound they were prepared to die rather than give up what they had found.

What was more threatening to the early church was when the old divisions in human society began to work their way back into the church. In chapter six of Acts we read:

*In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. (Acts 6:1)*

This was a real test of the transforming power of God. Jesus had founded a community built on the principle of absolute equality before God. There were to be no barriers between people on the basis of race, class or even gender.

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)*

The principle was very clear but the practice – the practice is always tricky because of the complexities that human nature throws up. You see there is something deep in the human psyche that both wants and needs community but defines our community over and against other communities. It's seems that there is something in us that needs to make judgements about those people over there, we define

ourselves as not being like them, we're better than they are. And it is this tendency to judge others which creates the ground from which contempt for others grows, enemies are created and hate comes into being. This is the ground from which Muslim extremism believes that the salvation of the world will actually happen by killing the ones that are not like us. Jesus was 100% crystal clear that his people were not to go down this path. Do not Judge he said, because if you do you will be judged. Don't look at the specks in other people's eyes because you will discover a great big whopping plank in your own eye (Luke 7:37-42). Do not judge, because we are all equal in the eyes of God, we are all broken, we are all sinful (Romans 3:23) and only God has the capacity to make a fair assessment about our lives.