

God in the person of Jesus, sent to fulfil a divine purpose and bring about the redemption and reconciliation of humanity and the whole of creation. Our reading from John alongside the reading we heard from Acts shows us the importance of us following in the footsteps of Jesus, to likewise, be people sent out to continue the work of God. And that in doing this we, too may face rejection or worse persecution.

Acts describes the persecution of the early church in Jerusalem and Philip's ministry in Samaria.

Let's not forget that Saul who approved of these killings, went onto to become a pioneer of the Christian faith. Let's not forget how Saul was renamed Paul and dedicated the rest of

his life to proclaiming the gospel of Jesus from Jerusalem to Rome, where he himself ended up being persecuted for his faith.

But in those early days before his own transformation, we are told that Saul tried to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

But that those we escaped preached the word wherever they went. Philip went to Samaria, And when the crowds heard him and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said.

In the same way Jesus was sent to fulfil the purposes of God, Philip (and later Paul) were sent to proclaim all that Jesus was and had done for them.

As with the resurrection of Jesus, this passage continues to illustrate how God works even through difficult circumstances to spread the message of the gospel.

Sharing the gospel of Jesus in difficult circumstances has been a hallmark of Christianity since its inception. Through persecution, imprisonment, and even death they remained steadfast in their commitment to spread the message of Jesus Christ.

Thankfully the threat of persecution for our faith, isn't something that we have to face, but

there are Christians in our world today who do. Such passages bring this people and faithful communities to mind, as we hold them in prayer, in faith and love as brothers and sister of the same Body of Christ.

Our challenges may not be persecution, but our call to be people sent out to proclaim the gospel afresh in each generation has not changed. And I think our bible passages offer us today some key principles and examples of how we can do this in our faithful living.

Faithfulness in Adversity: If statistics are to be believed, church attendance is in decline. Less people identify as being Christian. Faithfulness in adversity encourages us to remained faithful to our beliefs. To view challenges as

opportunities to demonstrate our commitment to Jesus and to share the hope that we know through him.

**Boldness and Courage:** Acts of courage were common among early Christians, this often led to them finding creative ways to share the gospel.

Do we have this same courage? Are we open to change, to not think about what might go wrong but instead giving things ago. Are we committed to preaching the gospel afresh, with a new energy of creativity, of exploring and growing together with courage and boldness?

**Prayer and Dependence on God:** Early Christians relied on prayer for strength and guidance in difficult circumstances. They

believed in the power of prayer to change situations and hearts. We have two prayers regularly on Pews News, a prayer for a new churchwarden and a prayer for growth, supporting the ministry of Church@4. Are we praying these regularly, as individuals and as a community? To ground all things in prayer is to firstly depend on God for their fruition. But it also comes with a warning, for as people sent by God, we are to seek and be the answer to prayer too.

Loving Others: Jesus taught us to love God, love neighbour and to love ourselves. Perhaps even more difficult, we are also taught to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. This radical love was exemplified by Stephen, who prayed for forgiveness for those who were stoning him.

Forgiveness is perhaps one of the hardest aspects of our faith, not only to offer to others but to accept for ourselves. But God is a loving and compassionate God who in Jesus not only showed the depths of God's love but showed us how to live it too.

We face our challenges in sharing the gospel in difficult circumstances, but the principles demonstrated by the early Christians remain relevant: faithfulness, boldness, prayer, adaptability, creativity, and love.

These principles have empowered believers to share the message of Jesus Christ even in the most challenging situations, may we be faithful to their example and be faithful, bold, prayerful, adaptable, creative and loving people of God too.

Amen.