

God's means to advance God's kingdom

In the Lord's Prayer we pray: "Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." And God responds by saying: "My name will be hallowed, my kingdom will come and my will will be done, but be careful, I will use means, circumstances and events that you would not necessarily choose, that you will find it hard to understand. "We pray: may your kingdom come, or may your Kingdom advance" and God says, I will move my Kingdom forward, but beware, it is I who will choose the means that I will use.

And in the passage before us this morning, we're going to see how God acts sovereignly to accomplish his purpose, his will, to advance his Kingdom. We will see how he uses perhaps surprising means to do so.

In the book of Acts, God advances his Kingdom. He builds his church. But what means does he use? Persecution, People, the Word.

God uses persecution to advance his Kingdom

At the end of chapter 7, Luke describes for us a spine-chilling scene: Religious leaders who block their ears, who scream, who rush on Stephen, a pious man, full of grace. They grab him and drive him out of town to stone him. And as they do this, a certain Saul of Tarsus nods in approval. This scene sends a shiver down our spine.

And in chapter 8.1 we see that Stephen's death unleashes a tsunami of persecution against the Church in Jerusalem. It is as if the floodgates of persecution are opening. Verse 1: "There was a great persecution that day against the church which was in Jerusalem." Nothing can stop the hatred and violence against the new Christian church. Before, it was the apostles who were persecuted, harassed by the authorities. Now the persecution is against the whole church, all the members. And it is this young man Saul mentioned in verse 58 of chapter 7 and again at the beginning of chapter 8 who is behind this violence against the church. Verse 3 tells us that Saul was "ravaging the church." It is a Greek word that is used to describe what a wild animal does to its prey. Think of a lion or a tiger tearing its prey fiercely, mercilessly. Also in verse 3 we see Paul dragging men and women from their homes and throwing them in prison. He and his men break down the doors of Christians like the Nazis who dragged Jews from their homes during WWII. Christians in Jerusalem are lose their loved ones. They lose their homes, all their belongings. They are thrown into prison and put to death for the name of Jesus.

Try to imagine the fear, the cries of anguish, the Christians who see Saul and his soldiers arrive in their street, and as quickly as possible, they throw some things in a bag, they take their children in their arms and they run to take refuge with other Christians. But they realize that it is too dangerous to stay, that they have to leave and with tears, in the middle of the night, they leave the city with the few possessions they have left. Widows, orphans, traumatized, victims of terrible persecution. And verse 1 tells us that they "were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria." What a disaster for the church in Jerusalem! What a catastrophe for the advance of the Kingdom of God, for the proclamation of the gospel. We'd be tempted to say that, wouldn't we? Losing men like Stephen, a man so good, so gifted at preaching, a man filled with the Holy Ghost, is a real blow to the church. Losing thousands of members to persecution sounds like a total disaster for the church and the gospel.

But looking back and with the discernment given by the Holy Spirit, Luke is able to tell us that instead of destroying the church and instead of destroying the advance of the gospel, this persecution served to send the church in the regions of Judea and Samaria, as Jesus had commanded his church to go. God is using what appears to be a disaster to accomplish his plan, his will. Once again we see that the will of God, the plan of God for the advance of his Kingdom will not be thwarted or frustrated by circumstances which appear to be unfavorable.

In January 1956, 5 young missionaries are killed in the Ecuadorian jungle. The newspapers announce a senseless tragedy, 5 young widows and the children left orphans. It's a waste of 5 young lives. But God uses this tragedy to motivate and send thousands of missionaries around the world. A few years later, a Christian church is established among the people who had killed the 5 missionaries. What seems to be a disaster for the church, God is using to strengthen the church, to make it even more fruitful and to advance the building of his Kingdom.

In 1949, China expelled 637 missionaries from Chinese soil. Seems like a disaster for the church. But the Chinese church grows even stronger. Today there are millions of Christians in China and it is the Chinese church that sends missionaries to other parts of the world. The government in France announces a new law that could have serious consequences for evangelical churches. We pray that there will be amendments to the law and that we can continue to operate in complete freedom but if the law is passed, as it is now, do not think that this law will prevent Jesus Christ building his church in France.

A church in Nantes will soon lose a missionary family that is at the heart of church life, a family that touched the lives of everyone in the church and many people outside the church. This family will be leaving in July at the same time as another family of 7 will be leaving. A third of the church is going to leave at the same time. And one is tempted to say: "What a disaster for the church!" But while it is true that we would prefer these two families to stay, we recognize that God is sovereign over their coming into the church and over their leaving. Although sad, their departure will not prevent God from building his church in Nantes. We will be sad to say "goodbye" to them but let's not be discouraged. We serve a great God, a sovereign God who accomplishes his eternal purposes under the most adverse of circumstances to give glory to his name.

In Jerusalem, persecution does not destroy the church. God uses persecution to make the church stronger and to advance his Kingdom elsewhere.

God uses his people to advance his Kingdom.

So far, it is through the preaching of the apostles that people come to faith in Christ. We studied Peter's great speeches in chapters 2 through 5. God uses Peter's preaching to touch the hearts of thousands of people. The proclamation of the gospel is done mainly through these great sermons. But for the first time in the book of Acts we see a change. For the first time we see the members of the church, the "ordinary" members, spreading the good news. When I say "ordinary", I mean members other than apostles like Peter and John and other than deacons like Stephen or Philip. I mean, those who don't have a particular ministry, the average church member. Look at verse 4: "So those who were scattered were going from place to place, preaching the good news of the Word. We know that these are not the apostles because verse 1 tells us that the apostles remain in Jerusalem. They are not trained preachers in the preaching of the gospel. These are not the leaders of the church, people who have done 3 years of Bible school. They are new converts whose hearts are overflowing with love and gratitude to the Lord Jesus Christ and who speak of him wherever they go. And God is using these ordinary people to fulfill the mandate given by Jesus to his church. They go to the regions of Judea and Samaria.

What can we say about their testimony? First, it's courageous.

Despite everything they suffered: violence, persecution, threats, despite being in the region of Samaria, a region which is far from welcoming to Christians of Jewish background, despite their concerns. For the future, these ordinary people, wherever they go, they announce the good news of the Word. They know very well that sharing the good news could again attract persecution. But they do it. Their testimony is courageous.

And then their testimony is spontaneous or natural. There is no one forcing them to talk about Jesus, no one twisting their arm. It's so natural. They're going to a new place, what do they do? They announce the good news. Several commentators offer another legitimate translation of the phrase "to announce the good news". They say that Christians refugees "chatter the good news", they "gossip the good news".

In the new region, they are asked where they came from and why they came to Samaria. It is an open door to talk about Jesus. They're chatting the good news. The Samaritans want to know how come these refugees are so joyful. It's an open door to chatter the good news. They're chatting about the good news.

And we have lessons here that we must learn. Sharing the good news is not an activity reserved only for church leaders and leaders. The vast majority of people in the church are members without any formal ministry, but all can chatter the gospel.

Let us try to imitate this courageous and spontaneous testimony. We must not accost people, grab them by the throat and force them to listen to us. This is not natural. What is natural is to offer to pray for a friend who is going through difficulties. It is natural when talking about the coronavirus to say that you have read a good book on the subject and to offer the book to the person you are speaking with. It's natural to say that on Sunday you go to worship and invite a friend to come with you. Maybe they will say "no" but they will never say "yes" if we never invite them. And we must not think that every time we speak with people, we must announce all the biblical teaching about the person and work of Jesus Christ. No, by little comments, by questions, by words, here and there, we open the door to a conversation on faith, on hope, on the good news. It needs patience. It needs persistence. Don't be discouraged if the first time you try to open a door to a conversation, the person doesn't go through the door. Think about those who shared the good news with you. It took a long time. Who among us believed the first time we were told about Jesus?

Let's chatter the good news, with our neighbours, with our colleagues at work, with our loved ones, at the sports club, little comments that leave an open door to go further, that invite people to a more in-depth conversation.

If you go to any church, other than people who were raised in a Christian family, the overwhelming majority of people, their journey of faith begins with a friend who dared to chat about the good news. Apart from the people who hear about Jesus in their homes, the overwhelming majority of Christians, they take their first step in the faith thanks to an ordinary Christian who tell them about Jesus. God could, if he wanted, send angels to share the good news, as he did when Jesus was born. He could speak for himself with a loud voice that would be heard by every human being in every country of the world. He could do that. But he chooses to use his people who gossip the good news. He uses people like you and me. He grants us this enormous privilege of chatting about the good news of Jesus Christ.

God uses his Word to advance his kingdom.

The great 19th century English preacher, Charles Spurgeon is said to have said of the Word of God "The Word of God is a lion. No need to defend a lion! You just need to release it, it will defend itself." For this great preacher, it was necessary to let loose the Word of God and not to protect it, to keep it in a cage. And in Samaria, the Christian refugees and Philip, one of the 7 deacons of the church in Jerusalem, they let loose the lion of the Word of God. Verse 4: They went from place to place, "preaching the good news of the Word." Verse 5: Philip "preached Christ". Verse 14 tells us what Philip preached: "When the apostles heard that the inhabitants of Samaria had received the Word of God". At the heart of the advance of the Kingdom of God, at the heart of the building of the Church of Jesus Christ, at the heart of the conversion of the Samaritans, is the Word of God. We will see in the coming weeks an entire city transformed by the Word of God. We will see Philippe with the Ethiopian eunuch. What are they doing together? They are reading the Word of God. Philip explains the Word of God to him. And there is nothing new about this. Isn't that what we've seen throughout this book, lives transformed by the Holy Spirit using the preaching or the proclamation of the Word of God. This is one of the things that struck us about Stephen's speech. It was packed with the Word of God.

And in a time when the church seems to have lost confidence in the Word of God, in a time when the Word of God is relegated to a back seat, we need this model of the early church and we have to assert ourselves as a church where the Word of God is at the center of everything we do. We are convinced of everything the Word says about itself: The Role of the Word in Faith: Romans 10:17 "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ." The role of the Word in conviction of sin: Romans 7.7 "But I only knew sin through the law. For I would not have known coveting, if the law had not said: Thou shalt not covet"

Hebrews 4:12: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

The role of the Word in equipping us in the Christian life: 2 Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

We must resolve to keep the Word of God at the center of everything we do in the church. It is the Word that describes our sinful condition, that describes our spiritual need. It is the Word that speaks to us of the salvation offered to us in Christ. The Word that speaks to us of Jesus, the Eternal Son of God, the Messiah, the one who died in our place, who rose again, who reigns at the right hand of God and who will soon come to judge mankind. Where do we learn these things? It's in the Word. When God advances his Kingdom in Judea and Samaria, he does so through his Word. When he advances his Kingdom in my life, in yours, he does so through his Word. Parents, when God advances His Kingdom in the lives of your children, He does so through His Word. Keep his Word at the center of your family's life. Gather your children around the Word. Read it together. Build your life on it. The Christian church, the Christian family, the Christian couple, the individual Christian, all are weakened when the Word of God is neglected. God uses it to advance his Kingdom. To those who spend time in the Word each day, I encourage you to persevere in it. Make this time a priority in your life, even if you have plenty of other things to do. If this is not your habit, individually, as a couple, as a family, spend time in the Word. Perhaps you have given up on regular, daily reading of the Word of God. Resolve before God today to come back to the Word. Tell a brother or sister in the church that you want help to keep this regular time in the Word. I encourage you to take advantage of Bible study every week, a time when we dig into the Word together. It is a true blessing for all of us who participate and God uses it to strengthen us, to change us, to encourage us and to advance his Kingdom within us.

Dear friends, I ask you to read verse 1 of chapter 8. The murder of Stephen, the persecution of the church, the church routed by the violence of Saul. We could say: "It will be really difficult for Jesus from now on to build his church following this devastation." Now read verse 8. A persecuted people chatter and preach the Word of God and lives are transformed by Jesus. And we look at the church in France in 2021. We look at the society in which we live. We look at the hostility of society towards Jesus, the hostility of hearts, the hostility of our loved ones. And it looks like this is an unpromising situation for the advance of the Kingdom of God. But we know what God can do with a persecuted people chatting and preaching the Word. We know the impact such a people can have in homes, in a city, in a region. We pray: "may your Kingdom advance" but are we ready to be the answer to this prayer? Are we ready to say to Jesus, "Lord, use us, your people dedicated to the advance of your Kingdom."? A persecuted people chatter and preach the word. Let's do the same and may God use it for his glory.