

Stephen To follow the Christ is to suffer

Readings: Acts 6:8-15 and Acts 7:1-3 & 7:51-8:3

Happy Saint Stephen's Day! Today we are going to look at the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. It would have been helpful to have read the whole of chapters 6 and 7 this morning but that would have been too long for a Bible reading.

Inevitably I will have to refer to the verses surrounding the sections we had read this morning. I encourage you when you go home to read both chapters to get the full blown picture. So today I want to put the story of Stephen in its context within Luke's account of the early church, look at the character of Stephen, specifically his defence before the Sanhedrin and finally some lessons for today.

Context. It is vitally important to see this story of Stephen in the unfolding narrative that Luke is giving of the spreading out of the early church in the book of Acts. At the start, the church was centred upon Jerusalem; the city where Jesus died, was buried and rose again and the city where the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the small core of disciples. But Luke is going to show how the gospel spread out from there as far as Rome, as the ongoing fulfilment of what Jesus said "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8). Some of the key people involved in this expansion are named in these two chapters of Acts. We are introduced to Stephen, Philip and right at the end to Saul who was later to be St Paul. After Stephen's stoning we read "That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1). And where ever they went they took the gospel with them and so the good news began to spread to Judea and Samaria.

Stephen and Philip are introduced as being appointed to look after the distribution of funds and food to the widows. As the church grew in numbers the pastoral needs grew as well. It seems there was a problem in the distribution of help to the widows in Jerusalem, those who spoke Greek were at a disadvantage to those who spoke Aramaic or Hebrew. It may well be that they met in different synagogues. The apostles were already stretched in their ministries and suggested that others be specifically chosen for this role, which the church agreed to. Among those seven selected were Stephen and Philip. We concentrate today on Stephen, but Philip was to play a key part in the spread of the gospel to Samaria and to Ethiopia (remember the Ethiopian eunuch on the Jerusalem to Gaza road?).

Stephen the man. All we know for certain about Stephen is contained within chapters 6 and 7 of Acts. We know nothing about his life before, or of how he became a Christian. What we do know about him is that he had a fantastic CV – he was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit (6:5), full of grace and power, and did great wonders and signs among the people. (6:8), and his opponents could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke (6:10). From his defence in chapter 7, he was obviously well-versed in the Scriptures and able to distil the overriding narrative. Oh, for more men and women like this in the church of today!

We must understand that not only is the fledgling church at this stage very Jerusalem focused, but it is also trying to work through the implications of Jesus' teaching, ministry, sacrifice and glorification. How were they to incorporate Jesus'

words about the coming destruction of the Temple, where one stone will not be left on another? Was this to be linked to what He said to the Samaritan woman "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:21-23). If Jesus was the true sacrifice for sins then what was the place of the Temple sacrifices? Was the Christian community to be a subset of the Jewish religion or was it the fulfilment of all that Judaism looked forward to? Was Jesus the "crown and summit of Judaism" to coin a phrase by Michael Green? These were some of the weightier matters the early church was beginning to grapple with and Stephen perhaps had begun to see further than many. The writer of the book of Hebrews would expand things further, as indeed would the apostle Paul, but Stephen was beginning to understand something of the ramifications of Jesus' life, death and resurrection on the beliefs and activity of the early church. One suspects that this was what was really disturbing some of his fellow Greek speaking Jews in the synagogue.

Stephen's defence. So for doing all this great work Stephen was arrested and taken before the Sanhedrin. It is interesting to see what his accusers had to say. They basically said Stephen was preaching against the customs of the Jewish faith and against the Temple. What makes this so interesting is that this is exactly what Jesus was accused for. And like Jesus before him, the accusations were not outright total fabrications but subtle misrepresentations. Stephen in his defence, tackles these accusations head on by taking his accusers through the whole of the Old Testament. It is easy at first sight to see Stephen's defence as a rehash of Jewish history followed by an angry polemic that sealed his fate, but Stephen is very carefully answering the accusations made against him and, like a prophet of old, calling them back to listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to them. As Blaiklock said "Alone of ancient peoples, the Jews saw in history the outworking of a divine plan and divine law. Repeatedly we see the faithful of the Old Testament turn to the past to trace again a story of mercy and deliverance. Stephen stands on familiar ground when he returns to Abraham (v2-8), and shows how not only Moses but all history, when set in clear perspective, culminated in Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, he took the tradition his accusers professed to defend, and turned it with eloquence and deadly logic against its self-styled champions".

It is evident that Stephen had not only a great knowledge of the Scriptures, but also had a great respect for the Patriarchs and for Moses. He was also at pains to point out to his accusers that God's unfolding revelation of himself in many cases did not take place in Jerusalem or even in the promised land. God spoke to Abram in Mesopotamia, Moses received his marching orders to go to Pharaoh at Mt Sinai. He could have added the amazing prophetic words received by Daniel and Ezekiel in captivity in Babylon. Their God is the Lord of the whole earth, who does not dwell in houses made by hands. But the major thrust of Stephen's message is that although God had plainly spoken, they had often disobeyed his clear directions and rejected his chosen spokesmen. Even when Moses was being given the ten commandments on the heights of Mt. Sinai, they were asking Aaron to make an idol for them to worship. And it was Moses himself who spoke of God raising up another prophet like him from among the people who will speak everything that God commands, for God will put His words into this prophet's mouth (Deut. 18:18). And finally Stephen

says you killed God's righteous One, this prophet of whom Moses spoke, the Lord Jesus. You have again rejected God's messenger, just like your fathers did to Moses. One of the problems with the written word is that it often misses out the tone of voice with which the words are spoken. It is easy to see Stephen's words in verses 51-53 as unnecessarily condemnatory. Personally I see them as totally Biblical, you can find many of these expressions from God himself or from his prophets. Stephen began his defence with the words "brothers and fathers" (7:2), so I think that his words were spoken very much in the same spirit as Jesus' words over Jerusalem "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! Behold, your house is forsaken." (Luke 13:34-35a).

Stephen's experience before the Sanhedrin had many parallels with that of Jesus, but remember many of the same Sanhedrin would have been at the trial of Jesus. When Jesus was challenged whether He was the Messiah He said "But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God." (Luke 22:69). And what did Stephen see? "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:56). Stephen effectively says I have seen that what Jesus said is true. If the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus for his testimony they were obliged to condemn Stephen for similar perceived blasphemy or confess their error. But this is the crux of the widening rift between traditional Judaism and fledgling Christianity – who was Jesus? He was either the Messiah and everything changes or he was an imposter. We today like the Sanhedrin of old have to choose.

Lessons for today. So what can we learn today from the life of Stephen? Three things stand out to me. Firstly, Stephen as the first martyr for the Christian faith, illustrates what Jesus said about his followers. Jesus didn't say follow me and your life will be a bed of roses. Yes, hallelujah, He came to bring us eternal life, life in all its fullness, the abiding presence of His Spirit with us at all times, but he also said you will suffer persecutions. Indeed He said "blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (Matt. 5:11). Someone has said that the New Testament was written by persecuted Christians for persecuted Christians in the context of persecution (think about that). Richard Drury from Barnabas Aid reminded us a few weeks ago of the growing numbers of Christians worldwide who are being put to death for their faith. This week I read a report from Pakistan where some Christian families have made the decision to go to different Christmas services for the grim reason that, in the case of a church attack, some family members will survive. Being a Christian is not an easy option. It is becoming more difficult even in the so called Christian West, where a public stand on the clear Biblical message is ridiculed and treated as irrelevant or even as hate speech!

Secondly, it would be easy to look at the amazing qualities of this man and say what a waste! Why did God allow this amazing man to have such a short ministry and to suffer such a horrible death by stoning? I honestly don't have an answer, but I believe that God was with him in his sufferings. In his hour of greatest need, Stephen was given an amazing vision of the glorified Lord Jesus. God was working his purposes out. In particular, there was one onlooker to Stephen's martyrdom who I believe was deeply influenced by Stephen's witness to the gospel.

Saul was to become one of the greatest missionaries and one of the greatest theologians of the early church. Only God can see the big, interconnected picture of life from beginning to end and I believe He is good.

And finally we need to be careful that we do not fall into the same trap that the Sanhedrin did. Stephen says to them “you always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51). We need to have Spirit anointed ears and hearts that are in tune with what He is saying to us as a church. We live in exceptional times when the foundations of our society are being shaken. Let us be alert to what God is leading us into by His Spirit. May it never be said of us that we resist the Holy Spirit. Amen.