

May 3rd - The Stoning of Stephen

Acts 7.55–end
John 14.1–14

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I feel sorry for Stephen - not because he was martyred - but he was the first Christian martyr and so given the saints day closest to Jesus so he would always be remembered. His feast day is 26th December! When most churches are closed these days and most people forget about Stephen.

But he was the first to give up his life for Jesus. The apostle would all follow (except John in exile on Patmos) - but of course Stephen wasn't an apostle. He was a lowly deacon.

The early church is growing, and there are some growing pains - some Jewish Jews and some Greek converts to Judaism - they feel they're widows are being left out.

So the 12 get together and they decide to have a prayer meeting

Actually they don't, but they do decide to delegate.

Choose 7 of you - wise and full of the spirit - to look after the distribution and the serving of tables.

7 for the Gentiles

They are called Deacons - servants.

The 3 fold order of the Church of England and Rome and Orthodox - Deacons, Priest or Elder, and Bishop - episcopoi, or overseer.

(Some more congregational churches have a 5 fold order based on tasks - apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.)

So Stephen has a spectacular cv -

Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; - and then a few verses later it says he was full of God's grace and power,

And it seems that when God calls you to a job - you will often find yourself doing something more.

The fisherman - James and John and Peter and Andrew - called to follow Jesus, then sent out to do miracles on their own, then to lead the early church, and be missionaries.

So often with jobs in church we ask people to do things because we want the job doing. Not because God has called them to do it.

And even when people feel called to do something and are encouraged or allowed to do it, the leaders step in, - wait,. Why are you doing that? I thought you were just going to do this..

Paddy and Carol who founded the Trussell Trust food-bank had that kind of story. They put their army experience to good use - called to help those short of food or whatever in Romania or Serbia and Croatia. Then someone said - I'm going to sleep hungry in Salisbury, what are you going to do about it? So they set up a food bank in Salisbury. Pretty soon, they've got 200 food banks all up and down the country. What if they'd just said - nope - my job says just Romania. Where would God's kingdom have been then?

So soon Stephen's performing great wonders and signs among the people.

And he's arguing and persuading people about Jesus - he's preaching, teaching, and doing healing miracles!

He's quite a guy. Almost a candidate to join the 12 you'd think!

But his popularity upsets the Pharisees. He makes enemies, especially as a Greek speaker and non native Jew.

You've got to remember Christianity is still mainly a Jewish thing at this time. The people who've heard of Jesus are Jews, people in Israel.

So Stephen is falsely accused. But he has no fear of humans or the consequences of his stance.

In front of the Chief Priests and Elders, the same group that sentenced Jesus to death just a few months before - he gives a long speech - all of Acts Chapter 7.

I have to say, its a pretty strong rant.

Sure - he gets facts wrong - but in those days people were less excited about whether Moses was buried In Shehem or in the cave of the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre.

But I have to say I've found whole websites dedicated to showing how Stephen's mistakes aren't in fact mistakes..

The main thrust of the argument is that God has been trying to reach the Jews for a long time and they haven't listened, and when he came himself, they killed him. But that doesn't stop God. And they should be ashamed for killing Jesus.

This speech does come across as pretty anti-semitic, especially from this greek speaking Stephen.

The council get outraged - the crowd too - and they pick up stones to stone him. He prays for their forgiveness, and then sees a vision of heaven opened.

And Saul, also known as Paul, is witness to all this - and I wonder what he was thinking?

If people are willing to die for Jesus, then this might spread - I better stamp it out?

Btu what if its true?

Now Stephen makes me think -

Its so un-church of England - to die for your belief? We're far better at fudge and compromise.

The people who do give up their lives for faith or belief - we think they're nutters or dangerous Extremist! Look at Extinction rebellion or Fathers for justice.

They're' just throwing paint or blocking motorways and we hate that. We hate their passion, their commitment, their methods.

Imagine giving up your life.

Is there anything you'd give up your life for?

Any one, you'd give up your life for?

A recent poll said Half of young British people would never fight for the country, with only 38% saying they might do so "under some circumstances,".

Ok - so its different times we live in.

We seem to think there's nothing worth dying for..

What do you think? What does that mean? Is there nothing so important to live for or fight for?

And yet - there are still stories in the paper of 'heroes' who rush into burning buildings or into the sea to save someone's life. And we think that's good (although inadvisable)

And what if we put the question the other way round -
Alright we're not prepared to die for anything, Jesus, the UK, whatever..

But what are we prepared to give up for Jesus Christ?

No wait - what DO we give up for Jesus?

You've given up time to be here - we're all busy, that's quite a sacrifice.
Sometimes you don't feel like coming, but you do anyway.

You've given up money - most of you - superficially to keep the church running, but your deeper motivation is as an offering to God. And that money you could have spent in so many different ways. But you chose to give it here.

Its a choice.. seems like what is important here is the intention.

There are plenty of people who are rich and throw money at things. But God's not interested.
There are people - me among them - who work really hard at something, but not really with joy or generosity - its - I'm the one pulling the trailer.

You see - its about things being given, rather than it being taken.

Stephen gave his life - it wasn't taken - he chose, his intention - I have a life, and this is what I choose.

No one can steal, what you freely choose to give.

When we give up an hour - we are doing it from choice, from intention.
If its dragged out of us, or we do it from duty, or because our parents tell us to - that is not an offering to God - it become resentful.

Rather than thinking - I can never be like Stephen, I can't lay down my life.
Think about what you do give up to God. Really notice it.
Think about it. And offer it joyfully, willingly.

And I think if we begin to notice what we're giving to God, and give it intentionally, thoughtfully, I think we'll begin to notice that there is something we get in return.

Stephen was granted a vision of heaven - we may just get a warm feeling, or we may notice that although we gave an hour on a Sunday, we might get more out of it, or made a few friend, or simply we still had time to do all that was necessary.

Again and again in the bible its not about how much is given or the job that got done - its what's in the heart that counts.

God loves a joyful giver it says. So whether you're called to lay down your life, or just spend a few hours in a PCC meeting - (which sometimes feels like it might be similar) - let us offer what we have, really notice it, and willingly give it to God.