

29th Dec. 2019 St Stephen
Acts 7:51-60 Gal 2:15-20 Matthew 10:16-22

Intro

In last weeks Church Times there was an interesting article by +Stephen Cottrell - previously +Reading and soon to be the new Archbishop of York

If you have not read it I do recommend it "A ridiculous day for a stoning"

+Stephen starts the article by saying how, as a child, he wondered why on earth we celebrate St Stephen on Boxing Day. Immediately after the joy & celebration of Jesus' birth we are plummeted into remembering the first person to be killed for being a Christian!

He goes on to suggest that we cannot celebrate the birth of Jesus with integrity unless we see it in the full context of where Jesus has come from and to where He is going.

Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is the start His earthly life which culminates in his death on the cross, resurrection & ascension 33 years later.

We cannot celebrate one without being mindful of the other

Jesus' ministry has an impact on those who follow Him and on 26th December we remember St Stephen, one of His early followers.

As we are rarely in church on 26th I decided to use those readings and remember St Stephen today.

Stephen

So - what do we know of Stephen?

He was not called personally by Jesus, his ministry started after the first Pentecost, in the early days of the church as it was growing rapidly. He was appointed by the 12 disciples as one of 7 whose job was to help manage practically the needs of the increasing number of believers.

He and the others were chosen because of their proven integrity, wisdom and sensitivity to God I encourage you to read his story in Acts 6 & 7

In summary: after being chosen to serve practically opposition arose and people began to argue with Stephen and we read in Acts 6:10 that the people could not stand up to Stephen's wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. False witnesses were instigated and when he High Priest asked if the charges against him were true Stephen starts his address... Listen to me!

Stephens address to the High Priest and those sitting in the Sanhedrin takes up 53 / 60 verses of chapter 7 of Acts. Our reading starts with the final 3 verses of that address.

He covers Old Testament history to show that the Jews had consistently, over time,

1) - rejected God's message and his messengers - the prophets.

vs 52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not prosecute? You killed those who foretold of the Righteous One and you even killed Him

And he concludes by saying that they have rejected the prophets, rejected the Righteous one and have now killed Him

2) - for ever opposed the Holy Spirit vs 51

3) - received the law but have not kept it

In the midst of his address Stephen challenges one of their greatest beliefs. For the Jews The Temple in Jerusalem, built by Solomon, was where they believed that God dwelt, hence their regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem at key times of the year. In vs 48 Stephen says

“The Most High does not live in houses made by men” Stephen believes that it is in Jesus that we now behold God.

Stephen speaks from his heart, challenging all those who heard him, to think anew, to understand the significance of all that happened in Bethlehem and in the intervening years before Jesus death on cross in Jerusalem.

Out of a heart for reconciliation and restoration, Stephen speaks words of truth

But these were not received well and we read that those hearing his words ‘covered their ears and with a loud shout all rushed together at him’ vs 57

(Put fingers in ears and sing la la la la !!)

Stephen says to those there, trying not to listen ‘was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?’

And then he suffers the same fate.

They dragged him out of the city and stoned him!

Stephens final words were “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”

Where else have we heard almost identical words?

Luke 23:34 Father forgive them for they know not what they do

Stephen was passionate about the message he declared.

He was not just having a good old rant.

He was desperate for restoration and reconciliation between God and His people.

He desperately wanted them to understand that God could now only be found in Jesus and he was a witness to that truth.

Stephen is known as the first Christian martyr and to be a martyr means to be a witness.

He had been a witness to God’s love, grace and power, firstly in practical ways - by serving in the daily distribution of food, then through great wonders and miraculous signs (Acts 6:8) and finally through the spoken word.

Being a witness to Christ’s message, whether in word or deed, can meet with mixed consequences. We may be applauded for what we do or say, but there is often a cost too resulting in consequences that are not welcome

Jesus knew the end to which he was heading. And he knew that for his followers there was risk and challenge. In our gospel reading this morning he says to his disciples as he sends them out to minister in his name ‘See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves...” Matt 10:16

No matter what the consequences, we are all called to be a witness to Christ’s truth.

At our Midnight Service I was talking about Jesus being the Light of the world. How darkness is the absence of light and how Jesus brings light in to dark places.

In another article in the Church Times Mark Oakley writes

“There is darkness in this world at the moment as we well know: lives are being ruined, diminished, and even ended by militarised regimes, by poverty, by hunger, by terrorism, by hate crime, by an inability to imagine what it might be like to be someone other than us.

The real danger is that we start to fail to notice. We get used to the TV pictures and we get used to the language that the press, politicians, and society at large begins to use casually; where the bombing of a school full of children is referred to as collateral damage; where someone fleeing for refuge, leaving home for their family’s safety, becomes and immigrant; where degrading sexual boasts about behaviour towards women are just ‘locker talk’, where people who are trying to sleep on the streets outside must have chosen to be there...

All this is increasing the darkness. Who will rescue the victims of it? Who, when society wants to push a person into a dark background, out of sight, will shine a light and say ‘Don’t you dare!’

The answer needs to be: the one who believes in God, the God who loves equally all that he has made.” Mark Oakley in Church Times 20/12/2019

Stephen knew and understood the God who loves equally and who served those who were on the edges of society. He spoke out about God’s love, challenged the leaders of the day and became the first Christian martyr.

Today the word martyr fills us with dread, because we associate it with suicide bombers or people who drive their cars into crowds of innocent people, instead of being a word of hope that describes someone who will go on loving to the end and who is faithful to The Truth found in Christ.

Stephen Cottrell says that ‘martyrdom is not firstly about shedding blood but primarily about being faithful to truth’

Peace is not the silence after the guns have finished. Real peace is about the indwelling presence of Jesus.

Stephen lived out the love and truth of Jesus in action and in word.

He held up the light of truth to those before him, even though it was met with childlike rejection

He spoke out of love as he longed to see the world reconciled to the God they had forsaken

He kept on loving until the very end, using his very last words to ask for forgiveness for those who were killing him.

How is God calling us to be a witness to Him and the truth of Jesus?

May we have the conviction, humility and love so that we too may be witnesses to the truth and love of the Light of Christ in this dark and lonely world

Amen.