



Sunday Service

Sunday 23rd August 2020

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Opening Prayer

Lord of all creation, we come together now to celebrate your one true sacrifice which alone takes away our sins and brings us the joy of eternal salvation. In our prayers and praise, keep us faithful to your Word and, through your everlasting grace, keep us safe in your presence in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Bible reading

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) - Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia - who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.

Acts 6 : 8 - 12

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Acts 7 : 54 - 60

Reflection

In today's reading, as Matthew Henry puts it, 'We have here the death of the first martyr of the Christian church'

His name was Stephen, but **who was Stephen?**

- Last week we learned that Stephen was one of 7 new believers who were chosen by the apostles to make sure that the Greek speaking widows would receive their fair share of support from the church;
- Stephen became a deacon [Greek: **διακονώ** = I serve] because he had impressed the apostles with his integrity;
- Stephen wasn't an apostle or a disciple of Jesus – he served the early church much as you and I do today. We too are deacons;
- He hadn't studied at theological college, but he had read the Scriptures and had correctly understood the prophecies.
- We also learn that Stephen was 'a man full of God's grace and power' and that he 'performed great wonders and signs among the people';
- Most significantly, Stephen was the first Christian martyr. God chose the most recent and junior of his followers as an example of great faith and virtue.

What happened at the trial?

- Stephen is the latest believer brought before the Jewish Council for preaching the Gospel;
- He is accused of saying that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple of Jerusalem and change the customs of Moses;
- The Council members 'looked intently at Stephen' – with such intense scrutiny, you or I might feel extremely intimidated – but not Stephen, whose face 'was like the face of an angel';
- The trial starts when the high priest asks Stephen 'are these charges true?'
- Stephen's speech recalls Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and the prophets. He weaves the story: the first covenant, the flight to Egypt, slavery and escape, the commandments. It encompasses the Old Testament;
- Stephen has committed no blasphemy in his speech. He has simply reminded his accusers of what the scriptures say.

Why did Stephen have to die?

- After all, Peter and John had been hauled before the same Council not once but twice before and had managed to escape with their lives;
- But this time the Council would not be humiliated;
- So far Stephen has simply summarised the Scriptures, but he has one final point to make:
- *'You stiff-necked people, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his murderers.'*
- The Council members are incensed by Stephen's accusation; *'they were furious and gnashed their teeth'*;
- In contrast, Stephen is serene. He says *'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'*;
- But the Council, instead of listening to him, instead of looking up to see what Stephen can see, cover their ears and seize him;
- There is no due process of law with checks and balances in what they do. Where is the 'wisdom of Gamaliel' that we saw in Chapter 5? Where, in measured tones, is the voice of Jesus who asks 'let him who is without sin cast the first stone'?
- They take Stephen outside the city where they stone him.

So, what happened next?

- Almost a footnote at the end of this reading is a little sentence: *'And Saul approved of their killing him'*;
- Stephen's martyrdom spurred on Saul: *'On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.'*

What can we learn from this reading?

- Not all of us can be Stephens, but we can all be Christians.
- Speaking the truth can be the most difficult thing in the world, but it can also be the most faithful.
- Perhaps you know someone who relies on something unhealthy to fill a void in their lives but you're too afraid to say anything;
- Or maybe you know someone who treats others badly but you're unsure how you can help;
- Or maybe you need to be honest with yourself about something you need to change in your own life?

What does it mean to 'finish well'?

- There are many characters in the Bible who live according to God's will, but then it all seems to go wrong;
- King Solomon started so well, ruling with wisdom, but then he became corrupted;
- Saul, also called Paul, started badly but finished well. He started as the persecutor of Christians but was converted and then became the greatest advocate of the Gospel. In Paul's last letter before he himself was martyred he tells *Timothy: 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the winner's crown of righteousness'*.
- I wonder if Paul was remembering Stephen's martyrdom when he wrote that letter? Was he mindful of Stephen's last words as the executioners, of whom Paul was one, closed in for the kill? And was it God's plan that Paul should be saved from damnation when Stephen forgave him saying 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'?

A prayer for all those affected by coronavirus

Keep us good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy.

Sustain and support the anxious, be with all those who care for the sick,
and lift up all who are brought low;

that we may find comfort knowing nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Final prayer

Almighty God, mercifully grant to us your grace, that we, living faithfully to your Word in the power of the Holy Spirit, may receive your gracious promises and know our eternal place in your presence, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Blessing

And now may our eyes be fixed on Jesus, who died and rose again for us, and now reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us all, now and for ever more. Amen.