

“Stephen”

18 April 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Come, People Of The Risen King

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Acts 6:8-8:1a

Sermon:

In the first six chapters of Acts, we saw the story of how the Church was established in Jerusalem after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. She was doing very well as Acts 6:7 summarises, a good start . . . but what should happen next?!

When faced with such a situation, it is good to remember the vision statement given by Jesus to the Apostles for the Church, to be witnesses of Jesus and the Christian faith first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria (the surrounding areas) and then into the world (1:8). It is a global vision and in the following six chapters, we will see how the Church was a witness to Jesus in all Judea and Samaria in the power of the Holy Spirit and laid the foundations for ministry to the world. The foundations for this movement are laid and focused on the lives of four men: Stephen in Ch. 6/7, Philip in Ch. 8, Saul in Ch. 9 and Cornelius in Ch. 10. These are the biographies we are going to read and consider over the next number of weeks, setting the foundation for outward movement and mission.

In last week's Irish Times, there was an article about David Putnam, a film director who lives in West Cork. He directed many films, including one of my favourites, *Chariots of Fire*, about the life of Eric Liddell (Scotland) and his principled stand on not competing in the Olympics on Sundays because of his Christian faith. His life was an inspiring, challenging example of the reality of following Jesus.

Over the next four weeks we will examine the lives of these four men, as God uses them to bring the good news of Jesus to the world and lay the foundations for mission. I believe these biographical stories are important for ARPC as we consider the challenges and opportunities we have post-Covid to re-engage with the community around the church building in Dublin 2 and wherever God has us in the city.

I. Stephen's Message Opposed (6:8-15)

I hope you have had the opportunity to meet a godly man or woman at some time in your life. I met someone I consider to be a godly man right here at this spot after he had spoken to a conference of ministers: the Rev. John Stott, rector of All Souls Langham Place in London, writer, and respected Christian leader. I remember being somewhat overawed, but he was warm, had a welcoming smile, engaged seriously with me in the moment and encouraged me to keep up the good work of ministry, at that time in Fermoy and Cahir. It was a positive experience. Knowing Jesus, being filled with the spirit of God gives us the character of Jesus and that is always a good thing.

Stephen was a godly man, “full of God’s grace and power”. He had the ability given by the Holy Spirit of an apostle, doing great wonders and miraculous signs. He had wisdom and ability to speak and engage in debate, called apologetics (v.10): “they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.” He was a blessing to the Church; he was a blessing to those he met, meeting their needs practically as a deacon and spiritually as a gifted speaker. He was a leader within the Church, and he reflected the person he served, the Lord Jesus. I am convinced that meeting him would have been humbling and helpful.

However, what he taught about Jesus was opposed by some, specifically Jewish slaves who had been freed by the Romans and met in a particular synagogue, the Synagogue of the Freedmen. The opposition was initially theological, at the level of debate, about what he preached from the Scriptures, specifically concerning what Jesus said about worship and the word of God. It appears he knew the Bible well and was gifted by God with great wisdom about the things of God. He won the argument! Sadly, then, the opposition became more sinister and included slander and false accusation (v.13). Then, the opposition moved towards injustice and violence. He was seized and brought to the Jewish religious court of the Sanhedrin. Eventually, he was killed in an unjust mob lynching and is known as the first Christian martyr.

What brought on the hostile reaction is outlined in v.13-15. Stephen is accused of blasphemy. Blasphemy is defined as a verbal attack on God’s character and actions; in essence it is breaking the third commandment and, in Jewish law, was punishable by death. He was considered to have spoken against the Temple, the place of God’s presence, and the Law, the words God spoke. Stephen undoubtedly spoke and highlighted what he understood Jesus to have said regarding the Temple, that He would replace the Temple with His body and with the Church (Luke 21:5ff; Mark 14:58, 15:29; John 2:19ff). To claim it would be destroyed, incorrectly understood, is blasphemous, but when Jesus is seen as the continuation of the Temple and the Law in His presence and words, then it most certainly is not blasphemous!

Such hostility is surprising to me toward a good man who helps people and shows ability and wisdom in how he speaks about Jesus. We have seen this in the examples of many from around the world who are treated in a similar way, men and women who do good things in the name of Jesus but their message and its effect on people angers those who are opposed to the message of Jesus. Jesus taught His disciples, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). Being a godly, Spirit-filled Christian will bring opposition from some and we should expect it.

II. Stephen’s Defense (7:1-53)

What was the point of Stephen’s speech? Many have criticised its length, its rambling nature, his arrogance in telling the Jewish experts what they already knew and all from a young man who should have known better. Verse 1 tells us he is invited to answer the charges, and we will see that his speech disproves the accusations while confirming the truth of what he says and believes. Christian faith is based on truth, Jesus is the Truth, His Word is the truth, and so it is essential that we hold to the truth as given in the word of God. Stephen sees everything about Jesus - His life, His words, and the opposition He faced - as confirmed in the Old Testament Scriptures, and he is passionate, articulate, and knowledgeable about what it says concerning the accusations made against his message regarding Jesus, the Temple and the Word of God. His desire is to convince them of its truth,

and though he wins the argument, they take his life. Yet he holds no grudge against his attackers and prays for their forgiveness.

His defence focuses on the lives of Abraham (v.1-8), Joseph (v.9-18), Moses (v.19-43), and David/Solomon (v.44-50). In recalling their lives, he outlines truth about the presence of God (Temple) and Israel's relationship with God's words (Law).

A. The Temple: the place of God's presence

The Temple was central in Jewish thinking as the place of God's presence. It marked Israel out from other nations and promised them protection and status because God was with them. Their devotion to the Temple was real. The psalmist says in 27:4-7: *"One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek Him in His temple. For in the day of trouble He will keep me safe in His dwelling; He will hide me in the shelter of His tabernacle and set me high upon a rock. Then my head will be exalted above my enemies who surround me; at His tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD."*

In Jewish thought, God's presence was inextricably linked to the Temple; it was inconceivable that God could be with them without the Temple.

However, Stephen's quick tour through Old Testament Jewish and salvation history shows that God was the God of the universe, meeting people personally where they were and promising to bless them and be with them if they believed and obeyed His words. Even when the Temple was built, He never tied Himself to the Temple, because He could not be contained in a building, as both David and Solomon, who conceived the idea and built the Temple, testified. Let's see how he does that!

Abraham: God takes the initiative - God spoke, God called and covenanted with Abraham in Mesopotamia, Ur, Harran. In fact, Abraham had no land, not even a foot of ground; he had no child and no prospects of one. He only had the promise of God. God was not tied to a special place; He came to Abraham where he was with a covenant promise.

Joseph: Similarly, God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. Where? In Egypt, and the only connection he had with the land promised to Abraham was to be brought back to it for burial.

Moses: This is the longest section, probably because he was specifically targeted over his thoughts on Moses (6:11). He looks at the life of Moses in three, 40-year chunks: in Egypt (v.20-29), in Midian (v.30-36), and in the wilderness (v.37-43). Again, God proved that He was with him in each place; we read of God being with him and showing him favour.

- He was no ordinary child (v.20). It might mean he was a beautiful child or that he found favour with God, God's grace was upon him.
- In Midian, he experienced God in the amazing theophany of the burning bush: *"take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground"* (v.33). God met Moses where he was at in Midian; that ground was holy, not tied to a building.

- In the wilderness, God was with Moses and confirmed it, as He had with Stephen, by miraculous signs and wonders (v.36). In the most inhospitable and difficult place, God was still there. A temple with gold furnishings and special symbols of His presence was not needed.

David/Solomon/Monarchy: My daily Bible readings this week are in 2 Chronicles, and the early chapters are all about the Temple that Solomon built; there, too, we get the summary point. The temple wasn't God's idea and He doesn't live in buildings made by human beings. David and Solomon knew that.

In summary his argument from a review of the Old Testament concludes that God comes to people where they are at by His sovereign initiative, He accompanies them in life wherever they are in the world, based upon His covenant promises when they believe and hold to His promises by faith in what was spoken to them - God's words. Stephen grasped the truth of this and lived out his faith in Jesus as the fulfilment of the Temple and its replacement. Jesus is the dwelling place of God's presence and it could not be more personal. Jesus has captivated Stephen's heart.

B. The Law: God's Word

Stephen is also accused of speaking against the Law, but his review of Scripture shows that Israel, the Jewish people, are the ones who continually have difficulty with the words of God. He underlines the importance of the Law in v.38 where he uses the term "living words" (a way of describing specifically the Ten Commandments) to be passed on and obeyed as the source of life.

Abraham: obeyed the word of God and believed the promises spoken by God to him and he was blessed.

Joseph: Stephen's emphasis is on the disobedience of Joseph's brothers, the patriarch's, towards Joseph, who by dreams spoke God's word to them. And Joseph was blessed in Egypt.

Moses: Here, his argument is clear. The people of Israel did not listen to Moses - they rejected him as ruler and judge, they refused to acknowledge his leadership, they "*pushed Moses aside*" (v.27). This picture speaks clearly of their refusal to listen and accept him. This attitude deteriorated in the wilderness. Even when Moses had given them the living words of God from Mount Sinai, they refused to obey, rejected his leadership, turned their hearts to idols and became active in the worship of idols (v.39-43).

Prophets: Again, they were messengers of the word of God. The people rejected what they said and they were persecuted. Recently, the Jews even rejected and killed Jesus (v.52).

In a devastating concluding statement, he states emphatically from the evidence of the Scriptures and Israel's history - past and present - that the religious Jews were stubborn and resisted the Holy Spirit (v.51). They persecuted and killed the ones who were messengers of God's word - the prophets and Jesus - and with a reference to the role of angels in giving the Ten Commandments, he says "*you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it*" (v.53). They are the ones who have not understood the presence of God in the whole world, even

killing His personal presence, Jesus, and rejecting the words of God, the living words, the words of life and salvation.

They understood what he said because they were furious and, in an act of uncontrolled violence, killed the messenger (7:54-8:1).

III. Our Response

- Change is difficult. Concept shifts take time to accept and work through. Just consider digital watches! We manage change by careful examination of the Word of God. We may have attachments to sacred traditions, this building or ministries, but the shift to a post-Covid world, or a secular society, or being in the minority, or enduring persecution, will require careful and prayerful holding to the Scriptures. I read in the Presbyterian Herald an article about the use of social media by Rev. Steve Stockman. I think it is very good and helpful, rooted in Scripture, specifically the idea of discipleship. Based on the letter to the Philippian church, he explored this topic under the headings of insight, incarnation, integrity and intention.
- We can, however, be assured that God has come to us. His presence, the Holy Spirit, is our help and makes us holy. His words are living words and they are the words of eternal life. When you hear His voice, listen and obey to receive His promise of life.
- Expect opposition! Understand opposition to be primarily against the message and the person of Jesus Christ, not you personally. Remember Paul's teaching in Ephesians 6: our fight is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, authorities and powers of this dark world. Try not to allow it to be personal and keep your focus on the truth.
- 1st Peter 3:15: *"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."*
- Ask of yourself, "Where am I in the story? What is my reaction to the words of Jesus?"
- What place has this building in our view of church? God meets people, the Church is the people of God. It's about people more than place.

Praise: Behold Our God

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: I Will Glory In My Redeemer

Benediction: "To Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before His glorious throne without fault and with great joy - to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen." (Jude 1:24-25)

Discussion & Application:

Why is Stephen seized? What is he accused of?

How does Stephen respond to these accusations?

In his speech, Stephen reminds us that God's words are alive (7:38), not dusty and irrelevant. How has this portion of God's Word instructed you? challenged you? encouraged you?