

SUNDAY AFTER THE ASCENSION: MAY 16TH, 2010

Acts 7:54-60; John 17:20-26

Notes:

- The section needs to begin with verse 54 as it links Stephen's speech to the overreaction and the stoning.
- The Greek for *they were enraged* could be translated literally as reading *they were ripped through their hearts*.
- The grinding of the teeth is a standard sign of hostility and in the bible is usually used for the anger of the wicked being expressed against the righteous.
- Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit which for Luke is a way of putting him on the same level as the prophets of old. Thus, those who in the past have always resisted the prophets and have put them to death are still doing it, ignoring the cry of the Spirit of God to listen to his word through the prophets.
- Stephen looks into heaven and gazes upon the *glory of God*. There is a tradition that links the martyrdom of a man of God with a vision of heaven and a glimpse of God's glory shining. This is what is happening here. God is clearly with Stephen and has clearly abandoned those who are stoning him.
- Stephen sees the risen and ascended Jesus on the right hand of God standing there ready to receive him into heaven.
- As with the story of the baptism of Jesus, heaven opens in anticipation of the martyrdom.
- The members of the Council stood up with their ears stopped which is a magnificent action highlighting exactly the charge made against them by Stephen, that they had *uncircumcised ears (7:51)* and so were resisting the Holy Spirit.
- The false *witnesses* put their clothes at the feet of Saul (Paul) suggesting that he was one of the leaders of the people in their actions against Stephen.
- In language that is reminiscent of the language used by Jesus as he dies, Stephen cries out *Lord Jesus receive my spirit*. This is important for Jesus is now proclaimed to be the *Lord* who is standing at the *right hand of God*.
- Stephen prays in a way that is again reminiscent of the prayer of Jesus *Lord, do not hold this sin against them*.
- As Stephen died Luke says *when he had said this, he died* again having Stephen speaking in language similar to Jesus of whom Luke says *with these words he breathed his last*.

Stephen's speech is worth reading (chapter 7). It is important in the story of Acts for it sets out Luke's understanding of just where Jesus fits into the history of the people and their dealings with the prophets sent to them by God. If the reader can see their present experiences of persecution and suffering in the light of Israel's past they can better appreciate what is really going on around them and why the move in a new direction, towards the Gentiles, is both necessary and divinely commanded.

When Jesus began to speak of his own ministry in terms of the ministry of the prophets the people were enraged and sought to kill him. Stephen had reminded the leaders of the Jews that their ancestors had stoned the prophets and had put to death the Son of Man and that they were continuing with their attempts to stymie the work of the Spirit. Their stoning of him, if nothing else, proved that his accusations were spot on. They were not primarily interested in God and the mission of the Son of Man. They were primarily interested in themselves.

Luke goes on to present a picture of Stephen that is built on the ministry and person of Jesus. When we read through the story of the stoning we are left with a very clear link between what happened to the Son of Man and what is happening to his servant Stephen. As Jesus had done, so it is with Stephen. As the authorities had reacted to Jesus so they are now acting towards Stephen.

In this account of the stoning what we see emerging is not so much a picture of Stephen the man but a reminder that the gift of prophecy continues on in the Church. As in the time of Israel of old, God still raises up men and women to be his prophets among his people. It is to such people that he promised that he would *give you speech and wisdom such that all those opposing you will not be able to resist or contradict (Luke 21:15)*. What we see at work in Stephen is not so much the strength of Stephen but the power of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit has been there from the beginning, raising up Elijah and Elisha, John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles, Stephen and as we shall see, works still in Phillip, Barnabas, Paul and those who take up their vocations as the new prophets of the Kingdom of God moving out beyond Jerusalem and into every nation and every time.

With the death of Stephen the story of the Church of Jerusalem is effectively ended and we shall now see the emergence of the new prophet. His name is Saul and he will become Paul to us, the one called to take the Good News out to all nations. It is odd though, Luke presents Saul to us as the man who has a key role to play in the murder of Saul. He will go on from there to begin a ferocious persecution of the believers and under the onslaught of this persecution the Church will be scattered with missionaries moving out from Jerusalem to the far flung reaches of the Empire – taking the Gospel message with them. And that is one of Luke's key points. Out of persecution the Church spreads.

Writing around the year 200 AD, Tertullian, one of the great fathers of the Church famously wrote: *As often as we are mowed down by you, the more we grow in numbers; the blood of the Christians is the seed*. This has been used by the Church in many circumstances and is usually rephrased as *the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church*. This expresses very much the sentiments of Luke and builds on not only the warnings of Jesus but also the example of his very own death on the cross.

Stephen was stoned to death because he was a prophet proclaiming a message from God that was unsettling to the leaders of the people of his time. He pointed out their sins and weaknesses, their blindness, their deafness and their self serving ways. He challenged them and their lifestyles with the Gospel message and dared them to allow God to be bigger than the little prison in which they were trying to hold him. He preached about a God who could be known outside of the Temple processes, a God who reached out in love and mercy through his only begotten Son. Stephen preached the Good News, a news of freedom, a message about how God included all men and women in his blessings; news about a Kingdom that was for the sinner, the outcast, for those who failed, for those who lived on the margins, for the sick, the dying and yes, even a Kingdom in which the Gentiles could find a home.

He preached as did Jesus preach and it was for this he died – just as Jesus his saviour had died. But what the Pharisees and the Chief Priests, the plotters and the planners, the gossip mongers and the scandal rakers could not understand was that the death of Jesus was not the end of his Kingdom. Yes they humiliated him. Yes they executed him in a vile and demeaning manner, as a sinner put to death outside of the City of God. But what they did not expect was that he would be raised up from the grave, that he would ascend to the Father and would rule from God's right hand. As with Jesus, so with Stephen. He too was abused, unjustly treated and humiliated and like Jesus was put to death. But did it stop the Good News from spreading? No. The Spirit took over the heart of Saul who became Paul and in the act of killing Stephen a new prophet was born. Out of pain the seed is planted and grows.

That is how Luke sees it and how Tertullian and the fathers of the Church saw things. It is how we have always understood the trials of ministry down through the history of the Church. God will always raise up prophets. They will always be misunderstood. They will always be mistreated, abused and sometimes even put to death. But their ministry does not cease. Out of their willingness to endure all things for the sake of the Gospel, the grace of God works its

miracles. Out of their blood, sweat, humiliation, pain and tears the Church grows. God does not allow their suffering to go unnoticed.

I guess that is really what this reading says to our Church of today. The kingdom will only grow through the willingness of the disciples of Jesus Christ to sacrifice. If we are not prepared to bear the burden of what it means to be a Christian then we should not presume to carry the name. The Kingdom was given life in the death of the Son. The Church grew out of the blood that flowed out of the side of Jesus and it has grown at the price of the blood of men and women down through the ages. It will continue to grow and to spread only through the willingness of believers to sacrifice, to suffer and to die for the Gospel. It is a high price to pay and the New Testament does not disguise this in any way. It is exactly as Jesus had warned: *anyone who wants to be a follower of mine, must take up his cross daily, and follow after me.* How prepared are we to do that?

Notes on John 17:20-26

- The narrative is broken into with this prayer of 17:1-26. Jesus addresses his prayer to the Father and the apostles sit back and listen. It concerns them as well as all those who follow after them as believers.
- Jesus prays (20-23) that a oneness among those who believe in him might make God known to the world. The key thought here is *that they might be one.*
- The next key message is about being glorified (24-26). Jesus prays that the chosen ones may actually see the glory of Jesus and so become a part of the oneness that unites Father, Son and Spirit. In knowing God in this intimate way, they might then be able to make him known to the world.
- Jesus concentrates on his message of making God known to a world that is hostile. This was his role and he is now passing it on to his disciples.
- Jesus connects the oneness of the apostles to their mission. They are to be one so that that the Good News of the Kingdom can be proclaimed successfully in the world.
- This is not just meant for the disciples. It is also meant for those who will come to believe through their missionary works. Oneness is a characteristic of the Church.
- The God to be revealed through their missionary activity is a God who is One.
- The first fruits of the ministry of Jesus is the oneness of the disciples. Knowing the Father means that they can become a part of the very life of God – in Christ.
- Jesus does not pray for the world. He prays for his disciples whom he sends into the world.
- Jesus gives God's *glory* to the disciples that they may be one. God's *glory* (*kabod* in Hebrew) is what he has revealed of himself to his people Israel. This is most clearly revealed on Mt Sinai when he made a covenant with them. God's glory is now revealed in Jesus his Son and is manifested in the love of the Father for the Son and the love the Son gives in return to the Father. God's glory is divine love.
- This is why Jesus prays that the disciples love one another as it is love that most richly reveals God and it is in love that God is to be found.
- Jesus makes it clear that it is the Father who makes such love possible. On their own the disciples will struggle with the limitations of their humanity. God, however, can lift them beyond those sinful limits into love.
- This is what is revealed to the world: if these people can love each other a window to God is given to the world, showing what is possible for those who believe. This is where the missionary note to the reading comes into play.
- The disciples are fragile, are weak, will struggle always with sin. They are in the world but are not of the world. In a situation that is controlled by love this fragility is overcome and there are no limits to what is possible.
- What is offered to all believers is a view of a world beyond all worlds, an existence as it was *before the foundation of the world* (vs.24b). This is the hope to which we are all called.

- Jesus is praying that the Father will love the disciples in the same way, with the same love with which he loves his own Son. He prays that God will be a Father to them in the same way that he is his Father.
- The one dark cloud on the horizon is that this love will be most clearly shown in the cross, when the Son is lifted up.
- In all of this there is a common theme: to make Christ known. This is what the mission of Jesus was about and this is now the mission given to the Disciples. It is not about them having warm and fuzzy feelings. It is about making Christ known.

This prayer of Jesus comes at the end of his last meal with his disciples. The next chapter begins with the terrible words: *after he had said all these things, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kedron valley.* He prays and then he goes off to his death. So what we have here in our prayer of chapter 17 are the final prayers and wishes of Jesus. And what are they? Jesus prays that the disciples become caught up in the love of the Trinity so that the world, observing how the disciples love one another, can come to know God.

This is a prayer that is always used in the week for Christian unity. That is really odd, as the disciples themselves would never have been able to understand how on earth a group of believers would be divided in the first place. The idea of being a follower of Jesus and at odds with other disciples would have made no sense. Indeed, it would have seemed to be an evil parody of what a faith community is really all about. The Church, in the light of this reading, is a community of believers who are caught up together in the love that the Trinity has between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. For John, this is the only way to actually be the Church. We cannot be a community of believers and live outside of God's love. Equally, we cannot be a community of believers if we do not love one another in the same way that God loves us. It is a powerful definition of the Church.

As we read through the Gospel of John we will understand that the Gospel was written to help the believers understand that they were inheritors of the same mission the Father gave to his Son. What was the Son's task has become the vocation of all who believe. The Son was sent to make the Father known and this he did by his teaching and his ministry among the people. The Son is sending the disciples out into the world to reveal the Father in exactly the same way. Through what they say and by how they live in a hostile world. Our lives, along with our words, are our tools of evangelism.

This is an understanding of Church that permeates all four of our Gospels. Those who seek to follow Christ must accept that along with the gift of faith comes a further vocation: make Christ known. Paul puts this well when he speaks of believers being a kind of window into God. The outside world looks at the life of the individual believer and at the way of life of the community of believers and sees God. Or at least that is the vocation. We are called to be that window in the world. When the world observes us and the way we live with each other and the way with live with strangers and outsiders, they should be seeing something of the love that God has for each and every human person. As the Son reveals the Father by what he does and how he does it, so we who are called to be disciples also reveal God's love and mercy to everyone we meet.

It would be a much easier reading to digest if Jesus allowed us to simply love those we find it easy to love. It is no big ask for us to love our friends with the love the Father has for the Son but this is not the love Jesus is talking about here. The love Jesus has in mind is the love that is soon to be modelled on the cross when he can look at those crucifying him and pray: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.* The love Jesus has in mind is the love that asks that we bend down and wash the feet of all those we meet. The love demanded of us is the love that moved Jesus to humble himself and to take on our humanity by being born of the virgin and living among us, like us in all ways but sin. That is the love

that is expected and it is not easy. It is much easier to strike out at those who harm us or to at least ignore them and hope they go away. This is not the love Jesus demands here.

I sometimes wonder just what the world sees of God when it looks at our Church and the love, or lack of it, that Christians display for one another. At times it is hardly edifying and the way we can treat each other is not a recommendation of what God is like. Sometimes God is the last person to be revealed by our fights and our squabbles. If we cannot love each other, why should the world ever contemplate coming to life in the Kingdom? If we cannot as brothers and sisters in Christ love each other, what hope is there for people, for families, for communities or for nations? If we cannot love each other then we are dooming them to a life of conflict, suspicion and pain for how will they ever come to know God unless he is revealed to them in us? We should not then be surprised, if when standing before the judgment throne of God, we find that he is less than pleased with what we have done and with what we have failed to do.

Conclusion:

We continue to move towards Pentecost and the reading continue to shape our understanding of who we are as disciples. In the Acts we are warned that if we wish to live a life of discipleship then that life is going to have to be built on sacrifice. If we think that as disciples all will be smooth and comforting then we are sadly mistaken. In fact, we will be able to measure our faithfulness to Christ by the cross we have to carry. The more Christ-like we become the more likely it is that we will have to endure the pain of the cross as more will be demanded of us. Few of us will physically die for the faith but there will be moments, encounters, relationships and opportunities when we have to decide whether we will go the way of the world and strike out at another person or whether we will follow the way of Christ and die that the other person might live.

The way of the world is to strike out. The way of the Kingdom is to allow God to judge others in his own way, in his own time. We are not judges we are disciples. But it is pride and selfishness that so often blinds us and causes us to act according to our human emotions, our human feeling and our human agendas and to harshly judge another. The prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, Stephen, the apostles, the martyrs, countless millions of men and women down through the ages all proclaimed the same message: *from the blood of the martyrs the Church is born*. If, in each and every moment and encounter we are willing to shed our blood for the other person, the Church will grow. Each time we strike back and respond with self interest and personal agendas, the Church dies and harm is done to the Gospel message.

This is exactly what John is saying in his Gospel. God's glory is revealed to the world by the oneness we have as believers, in the love that we show, one to another. It also follows that when we fail to love others, when we are unable or unwilling to show love for another person (for every other person without exception), then we hide God from the world. We live in a world desperate for God, desperate to know that there is something more than they can create and build but when they look at the Church, when they look at us and the way we live together, they fail to see God. All they see looking back at them is the same hopelessness, the same spite, the same anger, the same judgment the same sinfulness that is making their own lives so unhappy.

Pentecost is coming. It is time that we lived as though we have truly been healed and forgiven in the risen Jesus. It is time we lived in a manner that reflected the Kingdom of God so that others may see something of the glory of God that is possible now, in their lives today. There is simply no other way to be a Christian.