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Sermon

Stephen, full of the Spirit

Acts 6, 7:55-60; Matthew 23:34-39

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This church has been named after Stephen. In what way is Stephen an inspiring example for us?

We need to look at Stephen's character and to investigate where his strengths came from. That is why we had the reading of Acts chapter 6 where his calling and ministry is described. Acts 7 describes his defence before the Sanhedrin.

Food Distributor

Acts 6 starts with a dispute which had arisen between Hebrew believers and Greek believers. The Hebrew Jewish believers were locals brought up in Israel, speaking Hebrew and Aramaic and now followers of Christ. The Grecian Jewish believers were Jews who had grown up in Greek culture. Some of them may have been Greek converts first to Judaism and then to follow Jesus. The Grecian believers complained that the daily food distribution for needy widows was overlooking their people.

The Apostles resolved the dispute by asking the people to choose some men to take on this responsibility. Then the apostles appointed the people's nominees. All of them had Greek names which suggests that any concern about bias was squashed by choosing the workers from the very group that had felt discriminated against. The Apostles set a qualification: these workers should be full of the Spirit and wisdom. Would that have been your first idea of the necessary qualification? It is important that the work of the body of Christ is done in a Christ-like manner – so we should at least start with Christians in these roles.

Some verses later in we are told that Stephen was “a man full of God's grace and power [who] did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.”¹

So he was full of the Spirit and wisdom, full of God's grace and power, a doer of wonders and miracles.

Where did this wisdom come from? Surely from the presence of the Holy Spirit within him. Wisdom is a gift of the Spirit² and is seen in the life of Jesus. John said Jesus was full of grace and truth.³ In fact there is a lot in this description of Stephen which is like Jesus here: wisdom, grace and the power to do miracles.

¹ Verse 8

² 1 Cor 12:8

³ John 1:14

Grace is God's kind, unmerited favour. It has been said that grace is giving someone what they do not deserve, while mercy is not giving them what they do deserve. But this grace in Stephen is, I think, God's power and gifts being released in and through him to bless other people. And so it is reported that Stephen was one who had the gift of miracles. We are not given any detail.

Apologist

As he developed in his ministry, Stephen became a powerful apologist, defending the faith against those who would reject or attack it. Here too, he had great ability: Those who tried to debate with him, "... could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke." ⁴

Again there is reference to the Spirit – not his own spirit but the Holy Spirit. When you hear that "they could not stand up against the Spirit by whom he spoke," it brings to mind Jesus' statement, "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say"⁵ ?

Stephen was so effective in debate, that the men of the synagogue resorted to dirty tactics. They got false witnesses to swear that he had said that the temple would be torn down and that the Laws of Moses was to be set aside. Then they brought him to trial for blasphemy.

Blasphemy Trial

In chapter 7, a long speech of defence is recorded in which Stephen recounted the history of the Hebrews from the call of Abraham through to Moses and of Solomon building the temple. This is all covered quite factually. Then he accuses them of being like their forefathers resisting the Holy Spirit and persecuting the prophets.

Here too there are echoes of Jesus. In the gospel reading, we heard his lament over Jerusalem; how the people have resisted and rejected God's messengers. Jesus spoke of their rejecting those he would send to them just as they historically persecuted the prophets. He summed up the killing of the righteous in the Old Testament from Abel to Zechariah. Abel was first man murdered by his brother Cain in the early chapters of Genesis. The death of the prophet Zechariah is recorded very near the end of the Hebrew Scriptures. So Jesus is summing them all up in a coincidental A-Z of the righteous who were killed by the unrighteous. The natural bent of all mankind is rebellion against God and the easiest way to avoid the rebuke it to get rid of the messenger. Yet even as he declared that, there was a tenderness from Jesus. He lamented,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."

⁶

We might think that Stephen lost his cool or the plot or both when he suddenly turned against the Sanhedrin and accused them. However this has been a carefully argued and lengthy debate so far, so it is unlikely he would lose his temper at this stage. Furthermore as we have seen he is very much in tune with Jesus' words. Add to that the fact that when he started the speech Luke tells us that,

"All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel."⁷

It is reasonable to think that Paul who was present told Luke that. Now most of us probably don't know what the face of an angel looks like, but presumably it is pretty impressive and holy. When they attacked him, Luke tells us that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit and was granted a vision of heaven opened.

The Bible tells of Peter, James and John seeing Jesus glorified at the Transfiguration. John had a vision of the glorified Christ which he recorded Revelation 1. In both cases, they said his face shone like the sun. His glory

⁴ Acts 6:9-10

⁵ Luke 12:11-12

⁶ Matthew 23:37

⁷ Acts 6:15

was a blazing, blinding radiance. Stephen said he saw the glory of God and he saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

That is the inspiration for the rear window of our chapel – the blazing light of God’s glory.

The Sanhedrin was really angry by then as they believed he was blaspheming and so they dragged him outside the city to kill him by stoning. As he died he committed his spirit to Jesus and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."⁸ Again acting in the spirit of Jesus who said from the cross, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."⁹ This is all the operation of grace.

Conclusion

What have we seen? Wisdom, faith, grace, courage, miracle-working powers. And in each mention of these things, the Holy Spirit is obviously associated:

- full of the Spirit and wisdom,
- full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,
- full of God's grace and power,
- doing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people,
- unanswerable wisdom in the Spirit in whom he spoke
- face like an angel
- full of the Spirit as he is attacked.

The conclusion surely is that it is the Holy Spirit who enables all this.

The gospels make it clear that Jesus operated in the power of the Holy Spirit during his earthly ministry. Stephen received the Spirit of God and allowed him to equip him powerfully for ministry.

So if we want to learn from Stephen, isn't the lesson that our Christian life and ministry needs to be full of the Spirit? Stephen was not an apostle, he was appointed to a ministry of dealing out food – a soup kitchen manager. But he quickly moved into miracles and preaching.

All of us can pray for others, talk to people, help them. We might be serving in the kitchen and so have a significant conversation with someone who is in troubled by something. You might be talking over morning tea and find that someone has a physical problem – you can offer to pray for them. Maybe you're at work and a colleague asks you a question which shows they have watched you and wondered about your faith. Maybe you are volunteering in the Op Shop and a person comes in weighed down by fears. Opportunities come. We are equipped by the Holy Spirit to minister to people – but we do have to make a move so that he can back us up.

We all need to be filled and continually refilled with the Spirit of God. And that comes by seeking him and asking people to pray for us to be filled with the Spirit. The Bible tells us we are led to know Christ by the Holy Spirit and then given the gift of the Spirit when we are saved. Luke tells of the disciples being filled with the Spirit on multiple occasions. We can come back to him often and ask for more of his Spirit. To receive more of the Holy Spirit is to be more open to him and ready to allow him to work through us.

The Spirit of God is gracious and loving. There is nothing to be afraid of and much to be grateful for. I encourage you to press in and receive more from God.

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⁸ Acts 7:60

⁹ Luke 23:34