



## Sermon

### ***Stephen – Challenging Culture***

**Acts 7:51-60; Matthew 23:34-39**

4<sup>th</sup> August, 2019

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Here we are at that time of year when we think about the Patron saint of this parish, Stephen. Stephen was, of course, the first Christian martyr. We have just heard the account of his death which is estimated to have happened around 36AD.

Stephen was a gifted leader in the very early church. He is described multiple times as being full of the Holy Spirit and was powerful in preaching and arguing for the faith as well as greatly used in miraculous ministry. To shut him down, eventually false witnesses are brought against him to accuse him of blasphemy. That portion of Acts we heard is the end of a long speech Stephen made in his defence to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body.

There were two main accusations: That he spoke against the temple and the Law of Moses saying Jesus would destroy the temple and change the Law.<sup>1</sup> In his defence concerning the temple, he covered the history of God's dealings with Israel focussing particularly on Abraham, Joseph, Moses and David showing that in each case God was actively involved with his people without being limited to a single building. Then our reading picks up his defence to the accusation of diminishing the Law. In fact, he turned the tables on his accusers and said it is they who had disregarded the Law along with their fathers. He said they were guilty on three counts.

1. They had resisted the Holy Spirit: when God sent prophets to speak his message they and their father had rejected those messages, and persecuted and killed the prophets.
2. They had betrayed and killed the Messiah when he came.
3. Although they had received the Law they had not obeyed it.

This so enraged the court that abandoning their proper protocols, they drag him away to be killed by being stoned to death.

In the gospel reading, we heard Jesus saying such things would happen. He was also in dispute with the Jewish religious leaders. In a similar vein, he warned them that they were guilty with their fathers of persecuting God's messengers the prophets and that they would do the same again to those he would send to them. He was looking beyond his resurrection when he said this – looking into the early church years as the Jewish religious leaders would reject those who followed him. But do you hear his compassion for them even in their opposition to him:

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 6:13-14

<sup>37</sup> "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.

A hen gathers her chicks under her wings to protect them from danger and to keep them warm. It is an image of safety, of protection, of nurture – yet they would not have it.

As the pressure mounts against Stephen, he has a vision of the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand. Jesus promised his disciples that he would prepare a place for us and come to receive us. Here, as Stephen is about to die, Jesus comes to him and grants him a vision of the glory of God to strengthen him for what is to come. Stephen goes to his death in the manner of Jesus: both prayed for those killing them; each prayed that God would receive his spirit.

In the collect for St Stephen's day, we pray that Stephen's vision may crown our resolution and keep us true.

His vision is of Jesus standing at the right hand of God in glory. It signifies God's acceptance and encouragement. The early Church Fathers saw that fact that Jesus was standing as significant. For example Ambrose wrote:

"Jesus stood as a helpmate; he stood as if anxious to help Stephen, his athlete, in the struggle. He stood as though ready to crown his martyr. Let him then stand for you that you may not fear him sitting, for he sits when he judges."<sup>2</sup>

What we see in Stephen's ministry is not only a man full of God's grace and power but a bold and capable debater. He was brought before the Sanhedrin because of his effectiveness in debating for Christianity. Stephen was not going along with the general opinion. He had a truth to proclaim and he was determined to make it known. At first it was preaching, then with significant opposition he engaged successfully in debate with those who spoke against him. Finally on trial, he defended himself and preached to the highest court of the land.

Stephen was not going along to get along. But that is too often what we do in the Church. We don't want to offend so we soft pedal the gospel. Now the gospel is offensive to the proud and rebellious. It says you can't make it yourself. If your song is "I did it my way" you will not like the gospel which says your way does not work and ends in judgement and failure. Only Jesus is the Way – go his way and he will save you. Yes there is offense in the gospel – we should not add more to it by our poor behaviour or misrepresentation of it. But nor should we dilute it to be the same as the world's view. We do have a message which the world does not know and we must proclaim it faithfully.

My question to you is: Are we to be a thermometer or thermostat? Do you know the difference?

A thermometer simply tells you the temperature of its environment. If you have a thermometer in your living room, it tells you what the air temperature is. It does not affect the room temperature it just reports on it. But maybe you have a thermostat on your heat pump. That is very different. A thermostat controls the heat pump to bring the room temperature to the desired value. A thermometer is controlled by its environment; the thermostat tries to control the temperature of the environment – that is to change it.

Are you simply reporting the temperature of the culture or are you trying to change it?

It is a deception to think we should agree with our non-Christian culture. Stephen shows us that. Jesus tells us that. We hear it for example in the Sermon on the Mount:

**Matthew 5:11-17** <sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. <sup>13</sup> "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. <sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand,

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<sup>2</sup> Ambrose Letter 59

and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

He likens us to salt and to light. The salt is to affect its surroundings – otherwise he says it is useless. A light is to be set up so it shines not hidden away out of sight.

Or take his parable of the Kingdom in Matthew 13:33 "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." The yeast represents the Kingdom of heaven and it is to change the dough, to spread through it and cause it all to rise. The kingdom is intended to change the world.

The Church can change society: It changed Roman society – here are two instances:

- In the ancient world unwanted children were exposed (that is left outside to die) on a gigantic scale with impunity. Many exposed children died, but many were taken by speculators who raised them to be slaves or prostitutes. The effect of Christianity was to stop the trade in exposed children and greatly increase the sense of the seriousness of the crime. <sup>3</sup>
- Tim Keller writes that Greek and Roman societies saw no value in an unmarried woman, and therefore it was illegal for a widow to go more than two years without remarrying. Christianity did not force widows to marry but on the contrary supported them financially and allowed widows to maintain their husband's estate. Christians did not believe in cohabitation. If a Christian man wanted to live with a woman, the church required marriage, and this gave women legal rights and far greater security. Jesus' teachings on divorce and Paul's advocacy of monogamy began the process of elevating the status of women so that Christian women tended to enjoy greater security and equality than did women in surrounding cultures. <sup>4</sup>

We might take the example of the effect of the English Evangelical Revival on the morals and injustices of English society in the 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They worked for the abolition of slavery, established Sierra Leone as a refuge for freed slaves, established mission societies including CMS, they worked to ban bull-fighting and bear-baiting and established the SPCA, they worked on prison reform, established Sunday schools to provide basic literacy for working children. They worked to protect children from exploitation, provided care for the insane, established a ten-hour day for factory workers, and outlawed employing young boys as chimney sweeps. The list goes on and on.

This was the church acting as thermostat not thermometer! This was the church challenging society and not being afraid to say society has got it wrong.

Stephen debated vigorously for the gospel in his time at the cost of his life. We too need to have resolution and be confident that Jesus is praying for us as well and applauding when we stand for him. May Stephen's vision crown our resolution and keep us true to the gospel and obedience to God in his various callings on us. Be a good thermostat – but do pray that God would adjust your setting to his purposes!

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<sup>3</sup> Lecky, W.E.H., 1920, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, Longman's Green & Co., London.

<sup>4</sup> Keller, T., 2008, *The Reason for God – Belief in an Age of Scepticism*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, p249