

Sermon Easter 5

*And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
Acts 7:59*

Stephen was the first person recorded being put to death for their faith in the crucified and risen Christ. He is often called the first martyr. The word martyr means witness, and so someone who witnesses their faith to the death. Many were to follow.

Stephen's death described in the Book of Acts was at a time of stress in the very early church in Jerusalem. It was tension between Christian believers who had come from Judaism in the Holy Land and other Christians who came from a Greek speaking Jewish background. These were called Hellenists, and they were from all over the Mediterranean world.

The Hellenists had adopted some Greek ways, gave their children Greek names - like Stephen - often dressed in the Greek or Roman style, and had their own synagogue in the holy city. They had been using a Greek translation of the Bible, called the Septuagint for about 200 years by the time of Stephen and they worshipped in Greek too. They gave their synagogue the name: The "Synagogue of Freedmen."

The local Jews, especially those in Judea saw themselves as the real children of Abraham.

They used only the Hebrew language when they worshipped in their synagogues and temple. Their language was Aramaic, which was related to Hebrew. They kept the customs of dress and life style.

The Judean Jews saw the Hellenists as syncretistic - mixing the Jewish faith and customs with those of the Greek world. They were, in fact not properly Jewish.

As the Christian faith spread, new believers came both from among the local Jews and from the Hellenists. But the old attitudes carried over in the new community. It looks as if the converts from local Judaism were less than generous to the Hellenists.

So the Hellenists complained that in the daily distribution of food to the needy members of the church, the Hellenists were being ignored in favour of the locals.

It's great that we have in our New Testament a record of the mistakes and imperfections and character flaws of the early apostles and other followers of Jesus and the church too. This shows us that they like us were imperfect followers of the Risen one.

It also shows us that there never was a golden time when the christian church lived in peace and harmony. There was never a perfect church to harken back to.

The Apostles saw enough truth in the complaint from the Hellenists to act swiftly. They called a meeting and asked the community to choose suitable persons to take care of social welfare matters. Seven men were chosen, and with prayer and the laying on of hands, these were ordained - set apart.

Among them was Stephen, a man "*full of grace and wisdom.*" It is no coincidence that Stephen is a Greek name. As are the names of the other deacons. The young church was trying hard to put right any wrongs that may have been done to the Hellenist Christians.

The brief story of Stephen unfolds quickly in the Book of Acts. He was an effective preacher. His outspoken oratory in the cause of the risen Christ Jesus got up the noses of his old associates in Liberty Chapel.

It was bad enough that he had converted; gone over to the Christian sect. But those heretics had now appointed Stephen to a respected office. That he was doing an outstanding job increased their anger.

These trouble makers from Liberty Chapel, swallowed their pride and past sour relationships with the conservative Jews, and went off to the temple authorities and laid complaints. They claimed that Stephen was slandering the holy Jewish faith.

He was brought before the court for judgement.

Stephen did not waver.

You are a stiff-necked people, unconverted in your ears and heart, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Were there any prophets at all who your ancestors did not persecute? They killed those who proclaim the coming of the Righteous Leader [Jesus] whom you have betrayed and murdered.

In many ways Stephen's words were mirroring the words of Jesus, and indeed the prophets before him.

Stephen was dragged out of the city and stoned to death - which was the punishment for blasphemy. Then comes the most remarkable bit. As he was dying he echoes the words of Jesus:

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

His last words were merciful, like that of Jesus on the cross.

"Lord Jesus, do not hold this sin against them."

If practising what we preach, is the test of authentic faith, then the man we know as the first Christian martyr lived and died in acting on what he believed.

It is easy to set out with enthusiasm, to talk the talk. But as time goes on, things do not get any easier. To be able to finish what we started, to fulfil what we promised, that is what living an authentic Christian life is about.

None of us listening will be put the ultimate test of dying for our faith in the Risen Lord, or even know whether we would be able to keep the faith. But the quality that is required in our current situation is the same - perseverance, and a little courage.

In this time of Covid 19 Lockdown, a time of very real fear that many of us of contracting the disease, and the serious consequences that may follow. These things may understandably discourage us.

Again it is easy to talk the talk, but walk the walk in our situation is to **persevere** - to keep the Faith. At home, many of us by ourselves, let's keep to our regular practices of prayer, worship and Scripture reading and in so doing nourish our spirits in the faith of Christ.

As Stephen died for Christ, so may we live for him. Amen