



Acts 7.55-8.1
John 14.1-14
14th May 2017

The Collision of Opposites...

Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.

In the days before we had children, and being newly arrived in Hertfordshire, we did the tourist thing and spent an afternoon at the Abbey in St Albans.

We learnt how this Cathedral Church with the longest nave in England was part constructed from the bricks of a Roman pagan temple – an excellent example of early ecumenical co-operation!

We learnt how this mish-mash of an Abbey has a Victorian frontage at the West End which is totally out of character with the rest of the building.

We learnt too that today St Alban's Abbey is a thriving Parish Church with around four hundred gathering for its Sunday Eucharist week by week.

And, of course, we also heard about that citizen of Verulamium whose name was eventually adopted by this city in honour of his courage as Britain's first Christian Martyr. A young man who gave hospitality to a priest who was being hounded and persecuted by the Roman authorities. Alban swapped clothes with him and ended up dying in his place, giving his life in defence of the Christian faith that so inspired him.

The names of first martyrs often linger. Alban of Hertfordshire and Stephen of Jerusalem.

For Stephen, whose name in Greek literally means 'crown', is honoured in the pages of the New Testament as the Church's first martyr and so it's through that prism of deep respect and honour that we hear his story in the lectionary reading from Acts today.

Stephen's role in the early church started out as a pretty humble one. He was appointed a Deacon, one of seven in the Jerusalem church whose servant ministry it was to serve at table and look after the welfare of members of the congregation.

Yet he went on to do more than that. He ends up as something of a fiery preacher. His sermon is the longest one recorded in Acts and in it he is deeply critical of any sort of faith that locks God up in a building like the Temple. Those who took exception to his sermon felt he was blasphemous against God and insulting towards Moses.

Stephen is obviously regarded as a threat and firebrand endangering the religious status quo and so he is sentenced to death by the Sanhedrin – death by stoning.

Now, just to say those words is chilling.

It surely begs the question: Was it really ever

right to stone people?

And I guess that for us the answer is self-evident.

Yet the book we call Holy and bring into church week by week, on occasions, advocates this method of capital punishment.

Leviticus 24 says that he who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death by the congregation stoning him.

And then in Deuteronomy 22 the instructions on how to treat a woman caught in adultery were straight forward – she is to be stoned.

And that's interesting. Because in John 8 we have something of a test case. Jesus is at the Temple and some religious officials roll up with an adulterous woman. It's an ugly scene in every respect. These officials quote Deuteronomy 22 at Jesus and his answer is: Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.

Now it was the custom that the first person accusing the woman would throw her to the ground, and the second accuser would throw the first stone.

Hearing Jesus' words: Let him who is without sin throw first – no one picked up a stone and one by one, John says, everyone dwindled away until only Jesus and the woman was left. Jesus said to her: Look, no one condemns you, neither do I – go and sin no more.

In that one instance we are taught never to lift verses out of scripture and just take them always in a literal way. That's not how Jesus read his bible, and we shouldn't read it that way either.

Jesus knew Deuteronomy 22 yet he did not apply it. He still calls adultery a sin but rather than stone the one whose life and relationships are in tatters he offers her second chance grace.

I have come to the conclusion that some things in the bible say far more about those who wrote them than about God.

And I don't believe there is one God in the Old Testament and another in the New. We believe in a God of love, not a God of stoning.

Religion and violence at times, tragically, accompany each other.

The Jewish scriptures sometimes viewed a battle won or a new city captured as the work of God – yet maybe it was just the fact that the victors always seem to be the ones who write history.

My Church History lecturer at College used to say of the Christian Crusades when knights with red crosses on their tunics slaughtered hundreds of Muslims to regain Jerusalem, that, in his words: it wasn't the Church's finest hour.

So maybe on a Sunday such as this we ought to remember William Tylesworth, John Scrivenor and Joan Norman, just three of the seven Lollards whose names are inscribed upon the Amersham Martyrs Memorial – their only crime in 1511 and 1521 was to read the bible in Wycliffe's English translation and to refuse to believe that at Communion the bread and wine turned into the actual body and blood of Christ. For that they were burned alive by fellow Christians.

Religion and violence, sometimes it results in a toxic and tragic mix – and when that happens I suspect we human beings break the heart of God.

A hymn in my favourite top ten has the opening line: There's a wideness in God's mercy,
but it's the last verse that particularly chimes with me:
But we make his love too narrow
by false limits of our own;
and we magnify his strictness
with a zeal he will not own.

Now, as we remember the courage and fortitude of Stephen this morning perhaps it is worth saying that all of this is a post-Easter narrative and that's why it's in these lectionary readings for this season reminding us of those early days after Easter Sunday.

Perhaps we might have thought that struggle should have been a pre-Easter phenomenon. Didn't we sing just five Sundays ago: The strife is o'er the battle done, Alleluia. If so, doesn't Stephen's martyrdom so soon on the heels of Resurrection Sunday slightly spoil the party?

Yet isn't this one of the strengths of the story told us by Luke in Acts? The truthfulness of it all and the honesty with which he describes events as they played out.

Maybe we would have expected a different unfolding.

After Good Friday there was resurrection and in the glow of this Judaism and Christianity came to a common understanding and never split. In the glow of resurrection, the new church at Corinth remained united, honoured their times of Communion and Paul felt no need to write to them about the true meaning of love. In the glow of resurrection persecution dwindled away and Stephen, Peter and Paul lived to see old bones and a long retirement.

Yet the reality was very different. In the glow of resurrection there was still misunderstanding, power struggles and fatal persecution.

And that surely is an important lesson for all of us to bear in mind. Christianity is not an insurance policy against the knocks of life. People we love still die young. Our own health can deteriorate overnight. The justice we long for in Syria seems nowhere in sight.

Stephen is an example of a person of faith. Yet he is condemned to death by stoning by a council who were probably over reaching their authority. His message was distorted and misrepresented. Yet we honour this disciple of Jesus, because just like his master, Stephen forgives those who do him violence and he died trusting in the love of God.

Stephen is an example of someone who 'stayed with Jesus' through thick and thin and it's his faithfulness and openhearted forgiveness that shines out with integrity down through the intervening centuries. In so many ways Stephen lived in the spirit of resurrection and hope even as he experienced, struggle, heartache and death.

Of course today's passage would have been an inspiration to its original readers, many of whom would still be living out lives of faith in the context of Roman persecution.

But this week as I've been reflecting on the passage I've been drawn not so much to the theme of martyrdom but disillusionment.

The idea that after the resurrection it was still a struggle for the Early Church – so much so that Stephen even lost his life standing up for what he believed.

How, I wonder, do we view disillusionment?

We attain our dream job only to find it isn't as fulfilling as we had hoped.

We've got married and given our all to bringing up a family only to be left with an empty nest.

We've just appointed a new vicar or priest in our church and his sermons just don't do it for us anymore – heaven forbid!!

We voted this way or that in a General Election or Referendum hoping for good things yet everything seems just like it was before.

And slowly, as we go through life we feel we have to work harder at being optimistic.

Richard Rohr, a modern day Christian teacher, has a super book that addresses these issues called: *Falling Upwards*. In his Introduction he gives us the gist of what he wants to say with this one sentence: We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right.

Rohr thinks that making mistakes, living with struggle and falling over isn't the last word – actually this American Franciscan urges us to embrace even the tragedy in life not as evidence of the absence of God but a time to encounter God differently. He ceases to be the Father Christmas God who grants all our prayer requests as we would like and becomes, instead, the God of Love who travels with us in the pain and loneliness, the God of Life who helps us see things differently, and the God of Hope who pushes us on to write a new page in the story of our lives.

That process, he says with more than a little irony, is about *Falling Upwards* – hence the title of his book.

And here's one of my favourite lines: Life, as the biblical tradition makes clear, is both loss and renewal, death and resurrection, chaos and healing at the same time; life seems to be a collision of opposites.

So in this season of Easter we hear today the story of martyrdom as both Cross and Resurrection remain our constant themes as we, like Stephen, put our trust in the God who stays alongside us – and when struggles come, as they surely will, this God helps us Fall Upwards.

May it be so in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 12th May 2017