

Stoning of Stephen – Littlebourne 13 November 2022

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' ⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Last week we heard Stephen outline the reasons why the Scriptures all pointed to Jesus and that the Israelites were a stubborn stiff-necked people who constantly turned away from God and turned away from the prophets who spoke the Word of God. The last straw was in verses 51-53 where Stephen accuses the Sanhedrin and the crowd of onlookers.

⁵¹ 'You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: you always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him – ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.'

At this point the Sanhedrin were furious. Their integrity and standing were attacked, and their guilt exposed again as it was by Peter in Chapter 3. As was mentioned a fortnight ago, Stephen didn't seem to have a crowd of supporters with him when he was seized and brought before the Sanhedrin... unlike the crowd with the apostles when they were arrested... a crowd who knew the miracles were from God and couldn't be refuted. But this crowd was hostile, having brought false witnesses to testify against Stephen in order to discredit him.

Speaking the truth has always been dangerous when there are so many people who don't want to hear the truth. Truth often exposes hypocrisy, selfishness, greed, ideological errors, self-righteous pomposity, lies and wishful thinking – all manner of reasons why men prefer darkness to light. We live in a world where truth is unwelcome in many areas of life. The old oath to swear to the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth is seen as inapplicable and for old-fashioned fuddy-duddies who refuse to accept new realities based on wishful thinking, half-truths, plain lies and avoidance of actual realities. Nothing has changed in human nature for thousands of years. Today when "science is settled" and the received so-called wisdom of the few brooks no criticism, truth has become flexible and relative... so much so that the meaning of the word is being lost – as in "your truth" is not "my truth" as if there can be two or more kinds of truth for the same reality. Two thousand years ago, the received wisdom of the Jewish religious elite was that they were the custodians of truth in matters of law and interpretation of Scripture. The fact that there were at least two camps (there were other small sects as well) – the Pharisees and the Sadducees didn't matter because both parties agreed on the Law of Moses and that the Scriptures were authoritative, even if their authority was only 100% in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, while the other books were somewhat less authoritative. Stephen exposed them to his knowledge of the Scriptures which pointed to the continual disobedience of the Israelites and how they turned away time and time again from the men of God who revealed the truth to them. Jesus revealed the truth to them, and they didn't like what they heard. Because of the signs and wonders and numbers of followers, the Sanhedrin had to get the Romans involved to execute Jesus. The hostile crowd at his show trial wanting him crucified were prevented from carrying out the sentence without Roman

approval in case it backfired, and the Temple authorities were blamed for an illegal act resulting in the followers of Jesus causing trouble. With Peter and the apostles, the crowd wasn't hostile and so the Sanhedrin were powerless to inflict the punishment they wanted to silence the apostles. As ever when there is a threat to authority, silencing any critic is the easy option rather than justifying the reasons for silencing critics. With Stephen, the crowd was hostile, and Stephen was not too well known in Jerusalem for there to be any large-scale disturbances if he was killed without Roman permission. As we saw with Pilate, who may well have still been around – or at least someone equally cynical in his place – the Romans wanted a quiet life and criminality, so far as it didn't affect the raising of taxes or Roman citizens or cause a threat to Roman rule, would have a blind eye turned. The Roman occupiers had a low opinion of subject peoples, especially those with such weird customs as the Jews, the only people with one god, who was unseen and whose name was so holy it could not be spoken out loud (which is why we don't know how to pronounce "Yahweh") or even know what it really means!

Stephen's response to the furious Sanhedrin, who this time didn't have the calming influence of Gamaliel, was to infuriate them further by telling them that he could "*see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*" Despite the Scriptures revealing that men were spoken to by angels, that men had visions of heaven (Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel), these stiff-necked know-it-all teachers of the Law refused to accept that anyone who they did not recognise as a prophet could see heaven or the son of man (Proverbs 30:4 "*Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? **What is his name, and what is the name of his son? Surely you know***" and Ezekiel 1:1 "*In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, **the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.***") Stephen is referring to Scripture as well as revealing what he is seeing. This enrages the crowd who seize him and drag him outside the city to stone him. One man against a crowd with covered-up ears refusing to listen is going to be overwhelmed. God could have intervened, but as we see throughout the history of the world, God very rarely intervenes when sinful men carry out their sinful acts.

Luke then includes an aside to the narrative to introduce a young man named Saul, whose conversion comes in chapter 9. Why are people laying their coats (other translations have "garments" and the King James "clothes" while the Greek has "himatia" which means 'clothing' but usually outer garment, like a cloak or coat) at his feet? The most probable answer is that people took off their heavier clothing before a stoning and that Saul was a trusted person to look after these more valuable items of clothing as he wasn't doing any of the stoning himself. As is mentioned in verse 1 of chapter 8, Saul approved of the execution... he was present but not involved (to use the phrase used by someone attending a remembrance service for dead terrorists). Getting others to do your dirty work so that technically your own hands are clean is a very Pharisaic position, and Saul was a Pharisee. Other commentators have speculated that the Hellenistic Jews were more likely to strip off to do heavy work... Greeks exercised naked and all their sporting activities were done naked. Heaving stones to kill someone involves picking up heavy rocks, and quite a lot of them as well, so the stoners would be sweating in the heat of the day, and not wanting to wear outer garments, or possibly none at all. The congregation of the synagogue of the Freedmen were mainly Hellenistic Jews from the Greek-speaking parts of the world – Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia – as was Saul, who came from Tarsus in Cilicia.

The last verses echo what Jesus said as he was dying on the cross. Luke 23:46 "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*" and Luke 23:34 "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*".

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Luke ends this chapter with Stephen falling asleep, and the picture is of him not screaming out with pain as would be normal for anyone being stoned, but simply passing away quietly to be with his Lord, Jesus.

This was the first martyr – which means “witness” rather than a witness who has been killed – of the Church.

What is this passage saying to us today?

It tells us that however learned and truthful you are, a crowd of angry people will not listen nor behave rationally. Crowds of demonstrators shouting slogans have closed minds and no amount of reasonable argument will have an impact on them. Today the closed mindset found in mobs operates on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, within institutions and businesses pandering to what is deemed “acceptable” to those in charge. Facts and opinions must be silenced when they counter what these people believe are the only acceptable facts and opinions that should be allowed to be aired. The Christian values which have been accepted for the last 2,000 years are now found to be unacceptable by probably the majority of people in this country. Increasingly the “you cannot say that” section of society celebrating the cancel culture wants to silence Christians who speak out against, for example, abortion, euthanasia, mutilation of children, promiscuity, and censorship. Worse still they want all Christian teaching and worship removed from schools and higher educational establishments, as they deem it “offensive”, and it might pollute the minds of young people being brainwashed by their own wrongheaded views. The truth has always been offensive to those who prefer darkness to light.

We have the Lord Jesus on our side. As always, the battle belongs to the Lord and so we must stand up for Jesus and rejoice that he is with us whatever happens. Stephen accepted Jesus as Lord and was killed for telling others that road to salvation is through Jesus Christ. Today many are still being persecuted and killed for standing up for Jesus. Let's pray.