

Stephen seized – Acts 6:8-15 – Littlebourne Sunday 30 October 2022

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) – Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia – who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. ¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, 'We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.' ¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, 'This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.' ¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Last week we looked at the apostles appointing seven men full of the Holy Spirit to serve the widows with their daily food. Among them was Stephen. As Jonathan said last week, all the deacons had Greek names, and the complaint was among the Hellenic – Greek speaking and cultural Greek – Jewish widow being overlooked while the local widows go their rations. The twelve apostles were the ones focussed on teaching and healing and had delegated the task of waiting on tables to the deacons. Now we find one of these deacons doing what the apostles were doing! He is performing signs and wonders and he was teaching about Jesus. It's believed to be about three years after the crucifixion of Jesus and the church is now well established among only the Jews in Jerusalem and surrounding areas. The Gentiles had not yet been reached.

Let's look at debating which is called arguing when it's happening with some vehemence, but debating when it's done more calmly. Whichever way it is done, when people of opposite views talk to each other, and each side believes it is right, things can get heated. To reinforce the international nature of Jerusalem, we are told that there's a separate synagogue for "freedmen" who came from Egypt and Cyrene in what is now Libya, as well as Cilicia and Asia (both places in what is now Turkey). Why a meeting place for freedmen, men who were formerly slaves? A lot of Jews were captured by Pompey a hundred years earlier when he conquered Judea, and some would have been freed later. 100 years later the congregation would have been different and most would not have been freed slaves, but the name stuck. In Jerusalem there was the Temple, so why were there synagogues as well? The Temple was for special occasions mostly, while the synagogue was where locals would meet – no different from us having a cathedral and parish churches inside the Canterbury walls. The Jews from Alexandria in Egypt, and from Asia Minor would probably be Hellenic or Greek speaking Jews, as was Stephen himself. Stephen may have been a member of the synagogue along with Saul (who became Paul) who was a Cilician (Tarsus is in Cilicia). Paul may have been one of those defeated by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. What they argued about is not revealed, other than the truths which didn't fit in the narrative of these Jews: that Jesus would come again and the Temple would be destroyed. We still await the return of Jesus, but the Temple was indeed destroyed by the Romans in AD70. Looking ahead, Stephen's debating skills were very much based on Greek cultural norms: put forward your case stating the facts as you see them and then explain why your opponents' version of what these facts point to, or what conclusion can be brought from these facts, is wrong.

One of things we as human beings dislike is losing an argument. In the Alpha course, Nicky Gumbel said hardly anyone was led to Christ because they lost an argument, and so the course didn't encourage arguing, rather putting forward the facts and asking people what they felt and what they thought about what they heard, rather than accusing them of being wrong. Telling an atheist he is

wrong point blank isn't a valid argument as no facts are presented to substantiate that statement... the old adage is "let the facts speak for themselves", and if a person is unconvinced, move on without arguing. As we saw, when Jesus was speaking to the crowds or individuals, he was able to refute assertions made by those who opposed him simply by explaining facts of the matter often backed up by quoting the Scriptures, which all agreed were authoritative. Today most people do not regard the Bible as authoritative, but the Jews in Jerusalem did, so using Scripture – all Old Testament, usually through the words of the prophets and psalmists - to back up the reason Jesus came to earth, that he was the Messiah would be one way of infuriating people who didn't like what they heard and wanted to put their own interpretation on the Scriptures only to find they were unable to refute what Holy Spirit revealed to Stephen. You cannot argue with God, as Job's "comforters" found to their cost. The message of Gamaliel weeks earlier hadn't seeped through and was forgotten. But the same charge of blasphemy was the big one that upset so many Jews, envious of signs and wonders and being beaten in any argument. Today, the Jews do not accept that Jesus is God, nor do any other religions. Being beaten in an argument usually makes the loser look and feel stupid, and there is nothing worse than clever men being beaten in a debate being made to look foolish by those wiser than they are. We've seen Jesus make the so called learned men look foolish with the "have you not read" this or that in Scripture?

The Jews from this synagogue claimed Stephen was saying things that were blasphemous. The Christian claim that Jesus is God is blasphemous for Jews who believed then, and still do, that God is unique. The concept of the Trinity is blasphemous for Jews. The Christian claim that we are no longer bound by the Law of Moses insofar as it relates to things that are not moral, like making sacrifices for sin, would have offended Jews. Today however, Jews, no matter how orthodox and conservative they may be, do not slaughter oxen, sheep and doves on the feast days and for sins committed at other times. The scapegoat is no longer released at Yom Kippur into the streets of Jerusalem to carry the sins of the people into the wilderness outside the city. They are now on the same page as Christians in that physical way, but miles apart spiritually because they do not recognise that a final sacrifice has been made by Jesus, making sacrifices of animals unnecessary.

When Jesus said he was the Messiah (Mark 14:61-62 - *the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"* ⁶² *"I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*), the charge of blasphemy was self evident.

Just as the crowd was stirred up by the Jewish leaders when Jesus was seized, so also this happened when Stephen was seized. The twelve, with their numerous followers and people seeking healing, were more of a presence, which made it harder to whip up an antagonistic crowd, but it seems Stephen was on his own in the community of a hard line synagogue where its leaders could gather a crowd who supported them, rather than a crowd supporting Stephen. Remember the first time Jesus preached in the synagogue in Nazareth among those who knew him. Luke 4:4-30

⁴ *Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.* ¹⁵ *He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.* ¹⁶ *He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read,* ¹⁷ *and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:*

¹⁸ *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,* ¹⁹ *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* ²⁰ *Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on*

him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked. ²³ Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'" ²⁴ "Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. Jesus's time had not yet come, but he was about to be killed for telling the same thing that Stephen was saying.

We see the Sanhedrin is summoned again to make judgement. Just as with Jesus, false witnesses are gathered to make accusations against Stephen, who like Jesus would have been silent until it was his turn to speak... which we're going to look at next week. As almost a throwaway line – but there for a reason – the Sanhedrin were looking intently at Stephen who radiated something they could only describe as angelic. The expression on his face would have radiated peace, patience, and self-control. His words we'll look at next week matter of factly itemise what the Israelites did to all their prophets... just as Jesus did in Nazareth a few years earlier, and that infuriated the Sanhedrin and the crowd even more.