

A Violent story

Acts 7:54-8:1

We live in a violent world. It has always been so, and maybe always will be so until the Kingdom of God comes. We are perhaps more conscious of it in some ways than former generations, because the violence which was once reported to us long after the event, and censored by the natural repulsion of journalists, is now thrown at us in all its horror within minutes, sometimes, on our TV screens. We have all got different reactions - but there are many, I know, who find they can take no more - and watching the news becomes almost impossible for them. The alternative is to become so inured to violence that it ceases to mean anything. And that would be the worst crime of all.

So it is with some apology that I ask you to think about a very violent story - the one we hear in our New Testament Reading - the execution of Stephen - as far as we know the first person to die because of their faith in Christ. And it was a cruel death. I read years ago that execution by stoning involved throwing the victim down from a cliff, and then hurling boulders after him. But more recent scholarship suggests that such a method did not come into fashion until about 100 years after Stephen's death. We have to imagine them all being on level ground, and simply hurling stones at Stephen until he died. It is appalling to imagine. It is brutish and uncivilised. But it happened, and Luke chooses to record it, presumably for our benefit.

Let me ask you to consider the people involved. The people executing Stephen were the Sanhedrin - senior religious leaders. How can we update it? - the Bishop's Council, General Synod - something like that. And they are acting in total rage. As far as we can see from the text they did not organise a trial. They had no right to execute Stephen any more than they had had the right to execute Jesus - they had had to enlist the help of the Roman authorities for that. Here they are acting in blind rage, illegally. Why? Well read the rest of Acts 7, and see that Stephen had been saying to them. I will comment on that when we come to look at Stephen himself. They find what he said blasphemous - and they therefore covered their ears lest they should hear any more of it. So here is violence that is out of control. I think we saw a little of this a few years back with the reaction to Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses - the Muslim extremist reaction was very much akin to what we have been reading about. So we are not just talking about something historical, something that couldn't happen now. It has happened, almost. Rushdie has had to be guarded for years, and in fact was badly injured in an attack, because men not so different from the Council members in our lesson are living in our society today. One of the expressions we use when someone is outraged is to say 'they are beside themselves' - in other words, they are not in charge of themselves, they are out of control. The risks of that are fearful. But it can happen to any of us, given the right provocation. They stand as an awful warning of how even something as potentially good as religion can turn into something evil and destructive.

Then we have Stephen. We heard that as his opponents were screaming their fury at him, he was in a trance, having a vision of Jesus in glory. And adding fuel to the fire, he shares that vision with them. If you do as I suggested and read his speech earlier in Chapter 7, you will find it is quite a contrast to the speeches of Peter, for example. Peter always appears to hold out the possibility of his former Jewish colleagues seeing the truth.

Stephen simply goes through Jewish history, pointing out in no uncertain terms how they have consistently failed to heed God's messengers. He calls them murderers and traitors. Stephen's speech is not a defence of his position, it is an attack on theirs. He was courting trouble, and the result was not actually surprising. Stephen, an outside observer might comment, brought it on himself. He needn't have been so tactless and antagonistic. But this was something waiting to happen. It wasn't possible for Jews and Christians to co-exist in Jerusalem without a confrontation coming about eventually. On both sides, feelings were running high.

Stephen then was also a man with passionate feelings. We know that he was one of the men appointed to be deacons - to do the practical caring of the Christian community for those in need. So in spite of his sharp tongue, he must have been a loving and caring man. He is described as being "full of the Holy Spirit" - which is a real compliment in New Testament language. He was a truly holy man. So a real lover of Jesus, a real carer for others, a man held in high respect is nonetheless able to be tactless, and to allow his passionate faith to be self-destructive. It is a reminder that no-one is so holy that they can sail through life without trouble. There is sometimes a theory around - usually unspoken, that if we are Christian enough, then everyone will like/respect/trust us. And equally there is another myth that if we are Christian enough, we will be able to find just the right words, and never upset people. Those things are myths, and Stephen reminds us of that fact. You can't disagree with someone's deeply held convictions without upsetting them. You can't always be liked. You can't always find the right words. But before we leave Stephen, let's just note his words as he dies. Luke significantly reports two sayings - "Lord Jesus receive my Spirit". Doesn't that remind you of Jesus' own words on the cross? 'Into your hands I commend my spirit'. Stephen is made in Luke's telling of the story to die a very Christ-like death, and he says very Christ-like words. Because the other statement reported is this: "Lord! Do not remember this sin against them!". Again, we hear the echo of Jesus "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." This is all very deliberate on Luke's part as he tells the story. The Church has to continue the work of Christ, to be his body in the world. And as John reports Jesus as saying, they must expect no better treatment than Jesus himself received. And again there is the question for us. Do we actually expect something rather better? I think we do. I am not sure on what basis we are entitled to think like that.

And then intriguingly, Luke tells us that the executioners laid their coats at the feet of a young man called Saul. So one of the witnesses of this awful brutality is a highly intelligent young rabbi from Tarsus. We know he shared the vindictiveness of the Council against Christians from the fact that he was sent later to Damascus to find out who was clinging to this terrible new belief. After Stephen's murder, the believers were scattered, so the need to root them out from a wider area became an issue. Christian history is littered with stories of people who have found faith because they had observed how Christians behaved under persecution. And although Paul later makes no reference to this incident, I think we are entitled to suggest that watching the way Stephen died may have contributed to his questioning of his own intolerance of Christians, which Luke describes as "kicking against the goads" when he also has a vision of Jesus, on the road to Damascus.

Stephen has his own feast day in the church's calendar, but because it is the day after Christmas, maybe we usually get a bit insulated from what happened to him. We have other things in mind. In our violent world, where there are victims of prejudice and violence by the score, it is helpful to be reminded of him. And in hearing that story, maybe we can recognise ourselves in the characters in it. There is in many of us a blind rage which is tapped from

time to time, when our vulnerabilities are touched. We may lash out for all sorts of reasons. So we need to see what that can lead to. Maybe too there is an element of Stephen in us - a passionate believer who therefore sometimes is hard to handle by others. We have seen the truth, how can people be so stupid not to see it also? We want to shake them by the throat as Stephen did in his speech. Pray God there is also that other part of Stephen in us - the caring, holy nature which loves God whatever the cost. And let there be also a recognition of the Saul in us. We stand by as violence is perpetrated; we consent to people's death, by action or inaction. May we have the humility to learn from the things we do which one day may make us ashamed. In his past was this guilty incident, where he stood by and let it happen. For Saul re-assessing what happened on that day was part of the process which made him the great Christian leader he later came to be. We all make mistakes. But we can all learn through them.