

## **A Reflection on Acts 7:55-60 The stoning of Stephen ~ from Revd Andrew Haines**

The gospel reading for this Sunday is the opening verses of John 14, centred on Jesus' powerful words, 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life'. We used this passage a few days ago at the funeral of my father-in-law, so I am not going to dwell on it again, but reflect instead on the Epistle reading from Acts 7. The stoning of Stephen is a horrific incident, but one which is pivotal in the growth and spread of the early Christian church.

Stephen was not one of the original disciples, but was one of a group of men chosen by the early church, after the first Pentecost, to act as an administrator as the church grew rapidly. However, he proved far more than someone just concerned with practicalities, and gained a reputation as a powerful preacher and miracle-worker. Naturally, this came to the attention of the Jewish religious authorities, especially as a number of its own priesthood defected to become followers of Jesus. A conspiracy was soon stirred up against him, and he was arrested on trumped-up charge of blasphemy, just as Jesus had been not so very long before.

The bulk of Acts 7 consists of his words of defence before the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin. It is a powerful sermon covering the way God dealt with His chosen people in the thousand or more years from the time of Abraham to King Solomon. It ends with the accusation that these leaders, who are accusing him, are in fact themselves the guilty ones. They are complicit in conspiring against and crucifying the One to whom the whole of the Old Testament points. Inevitably, this causes outrage and anger among the leaders and the crowd. They can no longer bear to listen to Stephen, but try to drown him out with their own noise. Stephen himself seems unaware of the hubbub because his focus and attention are solely on the risen and glorified Jesus, whom he sees in a vision.

The outcome is barbaric. Stephen is dragged out of the city and stoned to death on a piece of rocky wasteland beside the road. The horror is compounded by the illegality of the action. Since the Roman invasion and occupation of the land in 63BC, the administration of justice had been in their hands. The 'ruling' Jewish authorities really had very little secular power, and certainly had no authority to make decisions concerning life or death. These were the people who regarded themselves as the upholders of God's law, and now they were in breach of it in the most flagrant way. They were consumed by an irrational fury while their victim remains serene in faith and forgiveness, as Jesus was on the cross.

The site of Stephen's martyrdom is not known for sure, but there is a strong possibility that it was on the same piece of ground where many people believe Jesus to have been crucified. A large and impressive church commemorating him stands nearby. But the site of the event is not the important thing, but rather what it signifies. In the background of this story lurks an angry young man named Saul, who will soon have his world, and his world-view, turned upside down. But there is a wider effect as well. The death of Stephen triggered a great wave of vicious persecution against the early Christians. Their world was so shaken that many of them had no alternative but to take flight. It seems, however, that instead of lying low in fear, they proudly proclaimed their faith in Jesus wherever they went. An attempt to destroy faith caused it instead to spread and to grow.

Out of something appalling, God was at work bringing about something good. And that, I think, is the lesson for us today. I am not talking about people being martyrs to Covid-19, but through this terrible situation, where many securities and certainties have been shaken, God is still working to bring something good. We hear much talk of 'getting back to normal', and I think it is wrong. We should be seeking a new normality – a kinder, gentler and more considerate world. Maybe as we experience and practice neighbour-love more effectively, we will also experience a deeper love for the God who loves us and has given his all for us.