

You Shall Be My Martyrs

Acts 6:8 - 7:60

This is a passage whose time has come: two thoughts before we get into this message. Firstly that bible translators are much more conservative than I would be and as such we lose what was meant in the original text: e.g. 2 Corinthians 9:6 God love a cheerful (Greek: hilarion) so should be God love a hilarious giver!! & Acts 1:8 You shall be my witnesses (Greek: Martus) so should be 'you shall be my martyrs!' A world of difference so might say! When we are prepared to lay down our lives for Jesus then things happen: Paul say: For me to live is Christ, to die is gain & I no longer live but Christ Jesus lives in me!! Secondly if we see ourselves as the Church then we end up restricted and inward: if we are truly the Body of Christ then we will be radically welcoming and embracing of all. We ignore the message of Acts 7 at our peril.

After the coming of the Holy Spirit and the counter-attack of Satan (whose overthrow Luke celebrates in 6:7), the Church is almost ready to initiate its worldwide mission. So far it has been composed only of Jews and restricted to Jerusalem. Now however the Holy Spirit is about to thrust His people out into the wider world. Five men laid the foundations for the gentile mission: 2 remarkable men not destined to remain deacons: Stephen the martyr and Philip the Evangelist & 2 remarkable conversions Saul the Pharisee and Cornelius the Centurion, not forgetting the part that Peter plays in the later.

Stephen-first! His preaching aroused strenuous Jewish opposition, but in His carefully reasoned defence before the Sanhedrin Stephen will emphasize the freedom of the Living God to go where He pleases and to call His people to go forward too. Although he failed to

convince the council and was stoned to death, His martyrdom seems to have had a profound influence on Saul of Tarsus; it also led to the scattering of the disciples throughout Judea and Samaria and as far as Antioch where the worldwide mission was launched.

When God sees His people settling He finds another way of working out His purposes: God raises up a Stephen. He was destined not to be a deacon for the rest of His life. 6:3 says he and the others were full of the Spirit and wisdom, 6:5 "a man full of faith and of Holy Spirit", and then in 6:8a "a man full of God's Grace and power". Campbell Morgan describes Stephen as 'sweetness and strength merged into one personality' (the two go together). He had a gracious Christ-like character. He we see that every believer can minister as Jesus did: 2:32 Jesus did Signs and wonders, 2:43 & 5:12 the Apostles did them, now through the laying on of hands Stephen does them (v8).

The religious will always react to a work of God and chapter seven is the litany of that reaction: theology, then slander, and then violence. They did not object to his social work: care of widows, but to his preaching! Our deeds are important but our words profoundly express the reality at the core of our soul. Initially they tried to argue with him but could not stand against his wisdom. Jesus had promised as much in Luke 21:15! They weren't converted but no doubt the Spirit was quietly convicting people like Saul, Gamaliel & Nicodemus....

Thwarted in open debate they moved to a smear campaign: when arguments fail, mud has often seemed an excellent substitute. Then they seized him and brought him before the Sanhedrin. Serious theological debate leads to a personal campaign of lies then they

resort to legal or quasi-legal action to rid themselves of an adversary by force.

There follows in Chapter seven the Bible Study of a lifetime given by Stephen!!! Fifty-three verses cover the defence, which is more a testimony, and summary of God's dealing with Israel. In response to the charges Stephen is saying there is no need any more for the Temple because Jesus is the Temple or the Law because Jesus fulfils the Law. It is a subtle and skilful presentation of the gospel where he draws lessons from the Old Testament, which they seemed to have never learned or even noticed. Far from being blasphemous, as the Sanhedrin claimed, he actually honoured God's word. In essence his message was: People not Buildings, Scripture not tradition. The temple was to be prized not because of its architectural magnificence but because God had put His name there and met His people. (Psalm 27:4). It was a false conclusion that God so identified with it that it would be protected from destruction. Stephen pointed out that the great figures of the OT never imagined God was imprisoned in a building!!

Firstly Abraham and Patriarchs emphasized the divine initiative: God who appeared, spoke, sent, promised, punished and rescued. Ur, Harran, Canaan, Egypt, Canaan. God directing every stage of their pilgrimage. Secondly Joseph and the Egyptian exile. Mesopotamia had been the surprising context for God's appearance to Abraham, now Egypt is the surprising scene of God's dealing with Joseph. EGYPT is mentioned 6 times in 7 verses. Are you getting the point Sanhedrin?? Thirdly Moses, the Exodus and the wilderness: in the longest part of his message he traces the life and ministry of Moses through its Egyptian, Midianite and wilderness periods and shows that in each period and place God was with him. Holy Ground at the Burning Bush was 'far more wonderful than the holy of holies', for

God is nowhere said to have appeared in the inner sanctuary in Jerusalem as He did in the Burning bush. Chrysotom wrote: God is everywhere present, and that, the Holy Place is there wherever God may be'. Finally he turns to David, Solomon and the monarchy: the Temple or Tabernacle should never be regarded in any literal sense as God's home (v48) as Paul would reiterate to the Athenians in 17:24. Solomon understood that too: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built". (1 Kings 8:27).

In none of these periods was God's presence limited to a particular place. On the contrary the God of the OT was the Living God, a God on the move and on the march, who was always calling His people out to fresh adventures and always accompanying and directing them as they went. It is not hard to grasp Stephen's thesis: a single thread runs right through the first part of his defence. It is that the God of Israel is a Pilgrim God who is not restricted to any one place. It is evident from scripture that God's presence cannot be localised, and that no building can confine him or inhibit his activity.

Wow: then he moves swiftly to the law. Stephen claims to be more biblical than they are!! The OT he said placed more emphasis on the law than the temple. But not he but they, like their fathers have shown scant regard for the law. The Accused becomes the accuser! Moses had a divine vocation (v20-22), call (31-32) and appointment (35) living words from God (38) but they failed to recognise Him (25) pushed him aside (27) rejected his leadership (35) and refused to obey him (39ff): and it was the same with the Prophets!!

You Stiff Necked people he calls them highlighting three sins:

1. Sinning against the Holy Spirit (51) resisting Him, rejecting His appeals.

2. Sinning against the Messiah (52) your father's persecuted/killed the prophets, now you have done the same to the Messiah.
3. Sinning against the Law (53): you were specially privileged to receive it but have not obeyed it!!

The result was a death full of Christ. As they reacted furiously and gnashed their teeth Stephen had a vision of the Glory of God: Look I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. As they stoned him he said: Lord Jesus receive my Spirit. Finally as he went to Glory the first Christian Martyr he said: Lord do not hold this sin against them. Stephen who had been confessing Christ before men now sees Christ confessing His servant before God! Luke record of the death is unexpectedly beautiful and peaceful for so brutal a death. You shall be my Martyrs said Jesus (Acts 1:8) ultimately teaching us that our old lives need to die if we are to live for Jesus.

But Luke's main concern in telling us about this first Christian Martyr is because he/it played a vital role in the conversion of Saul and the development of worldwide Christian Mission both through what he said and his death.

Change is always painful to us all, especially when it affects our cherished buildings and customs and we should not seek change merely for the sake of change. Yet true Christian Discipleship is being open to change, to the breeze or even mighty wind of the Spirit. It knows that God has bound Himself to His Church (promising He will never leave it) and to His Word (promising that it will never pass away). But Gods Church means people not buildings, and God's word means scripture not traditions. So long as these essentials are preserved, the buildings and traditions can if

necessary go. We must never allow them to imprison the Living God or impede His Mission on Planet Earth.

Pastor David

July 15th 2012.