

Sermon Easter 5 2020

Acts 7:55-60

The Greek word for witness” is “martyras;” which is where we get the English word, “martyr. Christian martyrs are Christians who gave up their life for their Christian beliefs. If you have ever visited Westminster Abbey you will know that “above the Abbey’s Great West door stand ten statues to modern day martyrs. The martyrs are drawn from every continent and many Christian denominations and represent all who have been oppressed or persecuted for their faith. Among them are victims of Nazism, communism and religious prejudice in the 20th century. They include civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr and St Oscar Romero, Archbishop in El Salvador, both of whom were assassinated; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, killed by the Nazis in 1945; and Wang Zhiming, a pastor killed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution”. (<https://www.westminster-abbey.org/about-the-abbey/history/modern-martyrs>)

“They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him” (Acts 7:58).

Stephen was stoned to death and became the first Christian Martyr in the early church? I would first like to look back to Acts 6 and give some context as to how Stephen got into this demise. Stephen himself a Hellenist (a foreign-born Jew who speaks Greek) lived in Jerusalem and become a Christian. Acts 6 tells us “the number of disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.” In response to this complaint, the apostles selected and ordained seven deacons, one of which was Stephen to oversee such practical matters. It meant that the apostles could focus on teaching and the deacons on fostering pastoral care. It is said in Acts 6, “Stephen full of grace and power did great wonders and signs among the people and his

talents for preaching were so great that those Hellenist Jews who disputed his teaching "could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke" (Acts 6:10). In other words, Stephens teachings were so great that those who were in debate with him were unable to prevail over him.

Stephen was put on trial and accused of blasphemy all because of his devotion to Jesus Christ. False witnesses claimed that he had said Jesus will destroy the temple and do away with the law of Moses. There was an outcry and the local population demanded that he be tried and sentenced. He was brought before the Sanhedrin (the supreme rabbinic court of ancient Israel) which met most days in the temple of Jerusalem, to face trumped-up charges of blasphemy. As Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin, he could not keep quiet. He launched into a tirade of accusations, accusing the people of Israel of idolatry and blasphemy. This did not go down well at all and "they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen" (Acts 7:54). It was a long and powerful speech and if you are interested in what Stephen said, it can be read in Acts 7, all 53 verses and I would encourage you to read it.

This brings us to today's bible reading Acts 55-60. Stephen had a vision which he shared with court. He saw "the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right of God". Jews in the days of Stephen believed that no one had the authority to stand at Gods right hand and this is the only time in scripture that Jesus is depicted as standing at God's right hand, sitting yes, standing no. The religious leaders can't believe Stephen has the audacity to tell them this. They are furious and can't bear to hear what Stephen is saying, so much so they cover their ears and shout out at Stephen. They don't want to hear any more, they turn into an angry mob, drag Stephen outside and begin hurling stones at

him. Even as the rocks are being hurled at Stephen, hitting his body, he prayed to God to forgive those who were hurting him, much as Jesus had done on the cross.

Stephen showed great mercy in asking the Lord not to hold this sin against them and God answers Stephen prayer.

A man named Saul stood by and watched the stoning, then as now to watch someone being murdered and do nothing about it, is as guilty as those doing the killing. Even though Saul who we later come to know as Paul was guilty of presiding over the killing of Stephen, God didn't hold it against him. In fact, it was instrumental in Saul's conversion to Paul on the road to Damascus. God can use us in our time of suffering but we may not always realise it. The Archbishop of Canterbury has recently said "life is tough at the moment but he is encouraging us to persist in prayer, prayer changes us and changes events". As Augustine said had Stephen not prayed, the Church would have never had the great Apostle Paul.

There is no doubt that life at the end for Stephen was tough, he suffered a tragic and horrific death. Stephen prayed even though he was being cruelly treated by those around him. He continued to hope even though all seemed to be lost. Stephen bore witness to God's love and trusted that love and care even at the moment of his death. Unlike Stephen, those modern-day martyrs already mentioned and thousands of others, it is most doubtful that we are going to suffer a similar fate because of our Christian beliefs. However, just as Stephen was a faithful witness to Jesus Christ, we as Christians are also called also to be a faithful witness to Jesus Christ whatever our circumstances.

