

Sunday 12th July 2020 Vicky Macarthur

Stephen was the first person murdered because of his belief in Jesus Christ — what we refer to as a martyr. There have been many, many more martyrs through the years, including people today who are killed because they believe in Jesus. It was sobering to see that some of the Christians who contributed to the Amazing Grace hymn from the service on the 28th June had their faces blurred out presumably because they would be in danger if they were open about their faith. There is some debate about the actual number of Christian martyrs killed worldwide every year. Some say it is as high as 100,000. But as John Allen, a catholic reporter, says "The truth is two thirds of the 2.3 billion Christians in the world today live... in dangerous neighbourhoods. They are often poor. They often belong to ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities. And they are often at risk. And ultimately I think making that point is more important than being precise about the death toll."

Last week we heard that while the apostles were persecuted, the church continued to grow and grow! Seven men, or deacons, were chosen to better organise the sharing of food etc and one was Stephen. The scriptures say he was full of faith, the Holy Spirit, and power. He also did wonders and signs among the people.

Then a group of people started to argue with Stephen.

These enemies of Stephen were so angry! And they couldn't seem to "beat" him when he spoke and preached about Jesus. So, they made up lies about him and persuaded people to falsely testify against him and brought him before the Sanhedrin, the council and tribunal for the Jewish people. There he was asked if the charges were true.

What followed is one of the most concise retellings of the entire salvation story of God with God's people. In just a few short paragraphs Stephen perfectly encompassed the Old Testament for the high priest without notes completely from memory!

This is the longest speech in the book of Acts which is why we took pity on our reader this week and summarise some of it!

- His accusers said that Stephen taught against the Jews, but Stephen talked about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and showed his respect for the law of Moses.
- His accusers said that he was blaspheming Moses, but Stephen outlined how the law was handed down through Moses and that God told Moses that a prophet (Jesus) would be sent from among the Jews. Instead of accepting this, God's people had repeatedly rejected both Moses and God.
- His accusers said that Stephen taught against the temple, but he reminded them that before Solomon built the temple there was the tabernacle. God could never be contained in a house made with human hands. Why would the God who inhabits heaven as His throne and who has the earth as His footstool need a temple?

At the same time that he gives his defence, he indicts Israel for the execution of the Messiah, and he also presents Jesus as Messiah. By the time he is done with his defence, they are on trial; he has accused them of blasphemy.

After hearing these words, the Sanhedrin became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. While they began to torment him, he looked up and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing along the right side, and he declared this triumphantly to the people. But instead of listening, instead of looking up to see what he could see, they covered their own ears and with a loud shout rushed

forward to grab him and take him out of the city where he was stoned to death. It reveals something about the desperation of the Sanhedrin that Stephen's death was illegal. We can see from John 18:31 Pilate said about Jesus, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." And the Sanhedrin replied, "But we have no right to execute anyone,". It is a failure of leadership to resort to lying and illegality to advance your own agenda. Professor Barbara Kellerman of Harvard University describes 7 types of bad leader. Among the seven are: leaders who are rigid, stiff, or unyielding; unwilling to adapt to new ideas or changing ideas. Leaders who are corrupt, lie, cheat or steal, putting their self-interest ahead of public interest and leaders who are evil, who commit atrocities.

Why did Stephen's speech get such a different reception from Peter's?

In chapter 2 Peter spoke to a great crowd of Jews from every nation. They had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot (sha-vo-o-t), the "Feast of Weeks." Shavuot was one of the "temple feasts" when devout Jews were supposed to travel, if possible, to the Temple in Jerusalem to commemorate Moses' receiving of the Law from God on Mount Sinai. Greek-speaking Jews referred to it as Pentecost. After Peter's speech the bible says about 3000 were added to their number.

Peter's first speech led to mass conversions whereas Stephen's led to his death. Why?

In contrast to Peter's speech in Act 2, Stephen spoke before the Sanhedrin. As Stephen told them, they were stiff-necked or stubborn; they could not bow their heads in acknowledgment that they were wrong, deliberately ignoring evidence and good reasoning. Their religion was all about rules and regulations, traditions, and ceremonies. Whilst they made an outward show of their faith, they had not allowed it to change them inwardly. This is what Stephen means when he accuses them of having uncircumcised hearts and ears. They had no humility or compassion so that when they heard God's truth, they did not respond to it.

They also saw Jesus as dangerous, not just spiritually but also politically.

John 11:48, NIV: "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."

Territories conquered by the Roman Empire could govern themselves as long as they submitted to Roman authority. There had been several instances where Jewish rebellion had been met with a devastating Roman counter. They were correct that a Jewish man or men leading an open revolt would bring ruin to the Jewish people. But this was also convenient for their own purposes. They were just as concerned about their own loss of status in the power structure. They had lied to get Jesus crucified, and then unjustly arrested and imprisoned the disciples, but the problem just wasn't going away! They needed to stamp this out. They must have been tearing their hair out. The elders, teachers and leaders would also have been present at Peter's speech, but we can see in Acts 4:21 that they were worried about how the crowds would react to them intervening.

They had their own agenda and a closed heart and mind. Contrast this to Acts 2: 37 "when the people heard this, they were cut to the heart".

However last week we heard that Peter was also brought before the Sanhedrin, and just like Stephen, confronted them with their guilt. But he wasn't killed. One brave man, a Pharisee called Gamaliel, spoke up in that case and persuaded them not to put him to death. The voice of one wise and godly man made the difference. I'm sure you have heard the quote in its various forms and attributions "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men should do nothing." On the day Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin, perhaps there was no one.

But as we'll see, the very different outcome between Peter and Stephen's speeches in Acts do not show that one was a success while the other ended in failure.

When to stay silent and when to speak

Would it have been better for Stephen to have stayed silent? What would Jesus do?

When Jesus was brought before his accusers before his crucifixion he was 'like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before his shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth'.

Actually, he did speak but only in relation to his authority. He told the Jews he was going to be sitting at the Father's right hand on the throne of authority. He confirmed to Pilate that he was the King of the Jews, a king being the ultimate position of authority. And he later cleared up any misconceptions for Pilate when he explained that the only reason Pilate had any authority to do anything was because God gave it to him. Other than that, he spoke very little and particularly when brought before Herod. If Jesus had spoken to Herod or performed a miracle at Herod's command, Jesus would have been obeying Herod, thus showing Herod had authority over Jesus. Sometimes silence shows our power more than anything else will.

Ecclesiastes 3:7 tells us that there is a time to keep silent and a time to speak. But when? How?

1 Peter 3:15 instructs us to "give an answer to those who ask," to do it with gentleness and respect, and to keep a clear conscience.

And what do we speak of? We are to speak truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and put away falsehood (Ephesians 4:25). We are to speak the truth in Christ and not lie (Romans 9:1).

Just as Paul asked the church in Ephesus to pray for his boldness (Ephesians 6:19), so we should ask that that whenever (we) speak, words may be given (us) so that (we) will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.

Naturally, when we are not opening our mouths, we are more inclined to open our ears – whether toward others or toward God. We are forced into self-reflection and obedience in our silence, which will only further our ability to listen to the Spirit.

Silence is best in moments of anger. When we are angry, there's a high likelihood that our words will not be produced by the Holy Spirit. James 1:19 instructs us: "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger."

Ultimately, refraining from speaking in certain situations means we are practicing self-control. Maintaining our composure can be challenging! We are to seek wisdom in controlling our tongue, for when we control it, we are ultimately walking by the Spirit. And we know that self-control, a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), is a discipline that is blessed.

Good from evil

Stephen's long speech to the Council finally pushed them over the edge. In a fit of anger, they stoned Stephen to death. But it was not the end. Standing over the execution was Saul, who that day intensified his efforts to persecute, arrest, and kill followers of Christ. I wonder to what extent the event of Stephen's death fuelled Saul, which in turn set him on a path that would forever change his (and our) life. Would Paul's story have been so dramatic if he, when Saul, had not so passionately persecuted God's children? Would his transformation have been so widely known so quickly if he had not been the terror-striking Saul-persecutor-of-Christians? Would he have followed Jesus as

aggressively if he had not as equally aggressively persecuted Jesus' followers? Imagine if Richard Dawkins announced he had become a Christian! It would probably be front page news!

Stephen's death undoubtedly affected Saul. That is why Luke tells us Paul was there giving approval to his death. Ch8v1. Saul could not escape the witness of Stephen. It troubled his conscience. The Holy Spirit goaded Saul with the martyr's triumphant death. By this means the persecutor in chief was prepared for his Damascus road experience.

After the Stoning of Stephen followers of Christ began to leave Jerusalem to escape further persecution. The good news of Christ began to spread because, wherever they went, they told others about Christ (Acts 8:1-4).

In the developing argument of the Book of Acts, the sermon and the stoning of Stephen is very significant. It is a transition point, as we can see, marking the end of one era and the beginning of another. It is the end of the "Jerusalem phase" and the beginning of the "Samaritan phase." Soon, with the conversion of Saul, the gospel will spread to the "remotest part of the earth." The death of one man, had a significant impact on the growth of Christianity.

We have seen for ourselves recently how the death of one man can have a profound effect even on a global scale. The death of George Floyd in America has resulted in wave after wave of protests, debate, and reflection not only in the US but across the world. At a service following his death, George's brother said, "He's going to change the world."

In the same way that the death of Stephen Lawrence in this country changed the definition of a racist attack and led to fundamental improvements in homicide investigations. It led to new discipline procedures in the police and even brought about the abolition of the double jeopardy rule that prevented people from being tried for the same crime twice, across the US, policing guidelines are being torn up and task forces are forming to address reform. In Britain, there are demands for statues honouring the authors of colonialism to be torn down. In France, chokeholds used by arresting officers are now banned. George Floyd's face peers out from murals in Kenya, the West Bank and from a preserved section of the Berlin Wall. Barely known outside his own circle, George Floyd has suddenly become the most famous man in the world. But he will never know of his fame or of the change he is bringing about.

Stephen's death changed the whole world. It fitted into God's plan. I'm not suggesting it was part of God's plan, but God was able to bring about good from the evil done that day by the Sanhedrin.

We do not always have the privilege of knowing how the events of our own lives shape the larger events God puts into motion. But all of the things we say or do, or don't say or do matter. We matter. Our lives matter.

While we may never be called upon to speak before the powers like Stephen, we can never forget the power of speech as a daily practice of faith. We testify in ordinary ways in our everyday lives. Loving our neighbours, serving and helping others. We are called to love our enemies, and sometimes how we exercise our faith in front of our enemies will say more than what we do with those we love. Our lives, like Stephen's, testify to what we see and what we experience in Jesus Christ, primarily His love.