



This week we are thinking about the story of Stephen – the first Christian martyr. For a story to resonate with the listener it needs to be real, relating to life as we know it. We all know that this life is not perfect: we all experience struggle and hardship as well as joy and happiness. Stephen had great highs and dreadful lows: his life and his martyrdom can both challenge and encourage us.

1. What we can learn from Stephen's Life?

- **Chosen to organize an expanding society Acts 6: 1-7**
 - Thousands of both Greek and Hebraic Jews were becoming Christians through the Apostles' preaching but caring for the needs of such numbers was producing tensions between Greek and Hebraic Jews.
 - The disciples asked the people to choose seven men to organize the daily food distribution – note the democracy! They chose seven Jews (with Greek names) and the disciples graciously commissioned them.
 - Stephen was the first mentioned, 'a man full of wisdom, faith and the Holy Spirit'.
- **Performing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people Acts 6: 8-15**
 - As he managed a first century food bank, Stephen, 'full of grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people'. Unsurprisingly, he attracted opposition from the Jewish authorities who found they could not argue against his wisdom nor against the Spirit within him.
 - The authorities stirred up the elders and teachers of the law and Stephen was hauled up before the Sanhedrin (the Supreme Court) and accused him of blasphemy against Moses and God.
- **Boldly proclaiming the Truth about Jesus, knowing they would kill him Acts 7: 1-53**
 - Stephen's understanding of the scriptures is outstanding as he makes his defence before the Sanhedrin.
 - His teaching, misunderstood as 'blasphemy' against the temple and the law was that Jesus Himself was the fulfilment of both. But they hated what he had to say and dragged him into the street to be stoned.

Thought: can we see parallels from Stephen's life to help us pray for a united vision of the direction in which our church should be travelling for the next 2 years?

'Sovereign Lord, give us boldness and let us see wonderful deeds in your Name'. Acts 4:24;29-30

2. What can we learn from Stephen's death? Acts 7: 54- 60.

- **He shows us how to die well. Verses 54 – 56.**
 - As his enemies gnashed their teeth at him, Stephen looked up and saw Christ in heaven, standing at the right hand of God, ready to receive him: a vision confirming that Christ is alive.
 - All the hatred of the authorities and the agony of his stoning would not deflect him from his belief in his Salvation won by Christ's blood when on the cross and in the resurrection of His Saviour from the dead.
- **He shows us how to pray for ourselves. Verse 59.**
 - Because of his unshakeable belief in the resurrection, he can pray, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'.
 - Because he knew how deeply he was loved by the Lord, he could be confident of his own resurrection.
- **He shows us how to pray for our enemies. Verse 60.**
 - Even as he is dying, Stephen follows his Saviour's example and prays for those who hate him. 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'. Here is radical forgiveness in action.
 - It challenges us to the core to pray for God to forgive our enemies but forgiveness and being forgiven is one of the greatest gifts that we can give or receive.

Thoughts: Stephen reflects his Master as he dies, praying similar prayers for their forgiveness. The only difference is that Jesus addressed His prayers to the Father and Stephen addressed them to Jesus, calling Him 'Lord'.

Saul (who became St Paul) was standing by, guarding the cloaks of the witnesses (verse 58). He never forgot that experience and confesses it in shame in Acts 22:20. How much did that prayer of Stephen's influence him?

Alleluia, Alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!