

Stephen: Saint and Martyr

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 18 May 2014, by David Gill. Readings for the fifth Sunday of Easter were Acts 7:55-60, 1 Peter 2:2-10 and St John 14:1-14

This is not the Macquarie Street Uniting Church. It is not the John Calvin or the John Knox or even the John Wesley Uniting Church. It bears the name of Christianity's first martyr.

Any church that takes upon itself the name of a saint is making what Sir Humphrey Appleby would have called a courageous decision. It is not just adding a couple of words to a street address. The choice of such a name means – *should* mean! -- the congregation in question is going to take that saint and what he or she represents with special seriousness.

Which brings us to Stephen.

We don't think very often about Stephen. In part, that's because his day in the Christian calendar is December 26th, when we're all too hung over from Christmas to think about anyone. In part, it is because the story of our patron saint seems pretty straightforward. You will find it in chapters six and seven of the Acts of the Apostles, culminating in the first passage we heard read this morning.

The post-Easter Church was off and running. There had been some tension between its Hellenist (that is, Greek-speaking) and Hebrew elements over food distribution to the poor, so Stephen and six others were appointed to sort things out. Our namesake, according to Acts, was a man "full of grace and power".

He was also full of strong convictions. And he was not shy about airing them, to the point where some decided to cook up blasphemy charges against him. "He never stops saying things against the temple and the law," they complained. "He says Jesus is changing the customs that Moses handed on to us".

The evidence suggests that he was not saying any such thing. What had gotten under their skin were his attacks on the corruption of religious authorities, and his suggestion that his contemporaries were no better than their ancestors who had rejected the prophets.

Stephen's response to these allegations turned the crowd into a lynch mob. They dragged him away and stoned him to death. His last words were a prayer

for the forgiveness of those responsible. So he met the same fate as Jesus of Nazareth, for much the same reason, with the same words on his lips.

It sounds straightforward enough. In fact, there is more going on here than meets the eye.

Did you notice who is lurking in the crowd? A young man named Saul, who approved the killing, indeed some think he may have organised it. Soon, on a journey to Damascus, that young man would undergo a dramatic conversion. His life would do a 180-degree turnabout. As Paul of Tarsus, or as we know him Saint Paul, he would become one of the all-time-great leaders and teachers of the Jesus movement. In that capacity he would argue, successfully as it turned out, for an inclusive understanding of the gospel, stressing its transcendence over Jewish custom and law and its embrace of the wider gentile world as well.

So the drama involving Stephen has to be read as a prelude to the subsequent U-turn of Saul. What Stephen collided with, the way of thinking that held young Saul in its murderous grip, was the kind of religion that Paul of Tarsus very soon would spend his transformed life opposing.

So what was it that killed Stephen? What had enraged that crowd to do what it did? Easy: the Jews attacked Stephen, right? Judaism is to blame, right? Well actually no. Like so much of the stuff we picked up in Sunday School that answer is not only simplistic; it is dangerous and defamatory to boot.

For consider, at this point in its young history the Jesus movement had not firmed up its identity over against Judaism. Christianity was pretty much a reform movement *within* Judaism. Its leader was a Jew. Its scriptures, rituals and customs were Jewish. Most Christians as well as most of their critics were Jews.

What killed Stephen was not Judaism, but a particular way of being religious. He had been talking to the crowd, reminding them of Israel's history and God's faithfulness, saying his hearers were failing to respond. But his words collided with the streak in human nature that just did not want to know. The mob rushed, screaming, to dispose of convictions it found disturbing and offensive.

Stephen's critics had their faith, of course. No argument about that. But it was a destructive kind of faith: strong on hating, weak on loving; good at condemning, bad at understanding; eager to judge, reluctant to embrace; knowing everything, ready to think afresh about nothing. They were religious,

right enough, but with the kind of religion that slams doors, builds walls, breaks communications, writes people off -- and sometimes kills.

Loveless hate-driven religiosity was what destroyed Stephen. Two millennia later, loveless hate-driven religiosity still wreaks havoc among us, dividing communities and destroying lives. You will find it lurking under every religious banner. Not as the majority of believers of any faith, thank God, but within usually small, always dangerous minorities. We all have them: Buddhism has such minorities in Sri Lanka, Hinduism in India, Judaism in Israel, Islam in a number of places. And Christianity?

Yes we have them too. In many places. No need for Christians to point the finger at other religions to identify what killed Stephen. We need only remember our own history. And look to our own present.

Which brings us to St Stephen's, Sydney, in the year of our Lord 2014. What should we look for in a congregation that, many years ago, had the courage to take for itself the name of the Church's first martyr? Four things.

First, in such a congregation we should expect to find people striving to hold, explore and grow ever more deeply into the faith and commitment of its patron saint. We're not here to be curators of a religious museum. As today's second reading reminded us, we are here as part of ...

... a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

We don't seek to be ecclesiastical eccentrics. We don't aspire to a label: "progressive" or "evangelical", "liberal" or "conservative". We want to be, simply, a congregation whose worship and witness echoes the historic faith of the church catholic, as it is articulated for us so well in the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Second, we should expect to find a church of St Stephen alert to contemporary manifestations of the evil that made him its victim. More than other congregations, this one has reason to be on guard against loveless, hate-driven religiosity – in whatever form it may appear, but especially when it may be camouflaged under the sign of the cross.

In this happy ecumenical era Christians have learned to be reticent about airing our differences with one another. Too reticent, perhaps. Silence in the face of a

serious misrepresentation of the gospel, by one extremist group or another, can be mistaken for assent. Mainstream churches may have become a little too shy about articulating what we believe and why, over against the angry, distorted versions of our faith that sometimes get far too much air time.

But take care. Remember Jesus' story about the Pharisee in the temple? The guy who prayed "God, I'm so glad I'm not like that sinner over there"? Religious smugness over against others never wins us friends. And it doesn't impress God one bit.

Third, and more positively, a church dedicated to St Stephen will strive to be a living example of Christ-centred inclusiveness. From the way we receive strangers at the front door to the way we deal with occasional differences in our own ranks, we will try to model the comprehensiveness God's love and the generosity of grace.

We won't always get it right – St Stephen's people are human too! -- but we'll keep trying. We will continue reminding ourselves and anyone who cares to listen that, in this fellowship, *all* are welcome, *all* are respected, *all* have a place. Differences of race, age, wealth or poverty, gender, nationality, sexual preference, politics, personality – all those labels the world loves to slap on human beings – are simply irrelevant.

That vision won't stop at the church door. We will contribute whatever we can to making such inclusiveness and tolerance hallmarks of life in our city, our nation, our world.

Finally, the members of a congregation of St Stephen will never forget that the biggest battles in this struggle must take place within themselves.

The demonic forces behind those death-dealing stones – the lack of love, the unwillingness to understand, the eagerness to judge, the readiness to hate, the empty religiosity -- are not just out there, in some other person, some other church, some other religious community. The demons are here, within each of us. And here, within each of us, is where they must be recognised and fought.

The front line in this struggle cuts not between one religion and another, one church and another, one person and another. The front line cuts right through each and every human heart, yours and mine included.

May you have clarity to know your demons, courage to tackle them, strength to overcome them. And may you know, through it all, the mercy and companionship of Christ our living Lord.

Stephen, saint and martyr, pray for us.

*