

## SERMON

Acts 7:55-60 (8:1); [Romans 8:31b-34; Luke 22:66-69; Luke 23:34]

### 'The Martyrdom of St Stephen'

Pastor Fraser Pearce

One of the great chapters of the Bible is Romans chapter 8  
Where St Paul proclaims that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus  
Where he proclaims that we have a Spirit of adoption  
So that we are free to call to God as Abba! Father!  
Where he proclaims that the sufferings of the present time  
Are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed in us  
And where he proclaims that all things work together for good  
For those who love God

But today I want to start with a quote from the last part of Romans chapter 8  
That focuses our attention on Christ Jesus  
Not only on what he has done for us  
*But on what he is doing for us now*  
Hearing these words will help us in our meditation on today's reading from Acts  
So let's listen closely:

**If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.**

Romans 8:31b-34

#### ***Who indeed intercedes for us***

Who speaks up for us  
Who uses his status, his authority, his holiness, his life  
Not to belittle us or to shame us or to condemn us  
But to plead for us before the Father  
And to assure us that nothing in all creation  
Can separate us from the love of God that is in him, that is in Christ Jesus  
That is in the one who intercedes for us

Christ Jesus as *intercessor* was not, for St Paul, simply a nice image  
Or a pleasant and pious idea that he *imagined*  
It was something that he experienced first hand  
*From what he saw in the Christian community*  
And not from what he saw when he himself was a Christian  
But from what he saw when he was someone  
Who was far from faith in Christ  
Who stood by in approval of the murderous persecution  
Of the first martyr of the church, the deacon Stephen  
And that brings us to today's reading; the martyrdom of St Stephen

Today's reading from Acts is the culmination of two chapters of the book: 6 and 7  
That start with a conflict within the church  
Let's pause here and note this: the great witness of Stephen  
What we are about to hear about has its direct genesis in a conflict in the church  
We should keep this in mind when we are tempted to become despondent  
When we experience conflict in the church  
*What God can do with conflict, the ultimate good he can bring from it  
Goes beyond the human capacity to imagine*  
The conflict was evidently between different ethnic groups in the early church  
Between those who were from a Greek speaking background  
And those from an Aramaic speaking background  
And the (at least perceived) unfair treatment of the Greek-speaking widows  
In the daily distribution of food  
To deal with the problem seven men of good standing  
Who were full of the Spirit and wisdom were chosen  
To serve in the ministry of justice for the poor in the early church

One of these ministers, these deacons, was Stephen  
Who, as scripture says, was full of grace and power  
And who did wonders and signs among the people  
And who proclaimed God's word with power from the Spirit  
This led to opposition, it seems especially from the Greek-speaking Jews  
Which led to Stephen's arrest and his being brought before the council

It is at this sort of trial before the council  
That Stephen proclaims the work of God for his stiff-necked people  
That is: for his people so easily tempted into idolatry  
After recounting God's work for his people  
Beginning with Abraham, and on to the patriarchs and to Moses  
We get to the words that immediately precede today's reading:  
**'You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.'**  
Hard words to hear, and yet what human being could say  
That they are able in themselves to keep God's law in its fullness?  
It is after this that we hear the first words from today's reading:

**But filled with the Holy Spirit, [Stephen] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'**  
St Stephen sees the *heavens opened*  
This is something that we heard about first in the baptism of Jesus  
Where our Lord was proclaimed as the beloved Son of the Father

But now we see with Stephen that Jesus is a God's right hand  
The place of honour and power and authority  
This is something that our Lord himself has said would happen  
As we read in the account of Jesus' trial in Luke's gospel:

**When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes, gathered together, and they brought him to their council. They said, 'If you are the Messiah, tell us.' He replied, 'If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.'** - Luke 22:66-69

Notice one difference in detail, however

Jesus says that he will be *seated* at the right hand of God

And this is indeed what we confess in the Creed

***He is seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, from thence he will come to judge the living and the dead.***

But St Stephen sees Jesus *standing*: what's going on here?

One opinion is that Jesus is standing to bear witness to Stephen

That Stephen's words are true, that Stephen is a reliable witness

In this understanding the Lord *stands as an advocate for St Stephen*

That although Stephen is about to suffer death at the hands of mortal human beings

The Lord Jesus, who though he died, lives, stands before the Father

Pleading the cause of his servant, Stephen

It is Stephen's proclamation of Christ standing at God's right hand

That leads to the final, murderous opposition

**But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him.**

**Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.**

They covered their ears – they did not want to hear the proclamation of the gospel

And their deaf witness leads to murder, the martyrdom of St Stephen

And note who they lay their cloaks at the feet of: Saul

That is, the one who we will know as St Paul

The great witness of Christ to the nations

Now the reading reaches its climax

**While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.**

Notice first of all that St Stephen follows the example of his master

In his posture of prayer: he kneels. Jesus, in Luke's gospel

Is recorded as kneeling in prayer on the night before his death

Notice also the words that he prayed

St Stephen did not use God's name to curse and damn those who persecuted him

But, like his master, prayed for mercy for his persecutors

In a tradition given in Luke, we hear these words of Jesus from the cross

**Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'** Luke 23:34

St Stephen, like his master, in his death, intercedes before God

For the enemies of Christ and his church

His Christian witness is in intercessory prayer, for salvation, not condemnation

The very next verse after our reading are simple and loaded with significance

**And Saul approved of their killing him.**

St Stephen's martyrdom marks the beginning of Saul's persecution of the church

That takes him on the road to Damascus

That will lead to his encounter with the risen Christ

To his understanding that God proves his love for us in this

That while we were still sinners

Christ died for us

And that the one who died now lives

To intercede for us at the right hand of God

The witness of St Stephen in his intercession, in his death

Was a mark of the Spirit of Christ at work in the church

At work in the ministry of St Paul

And at work among us, who call out to God as Father

And who pray in Jesus' name

Dear Christian brothers and sisters

What a life of freedom we have

The freedom of knowing that Christ intercedes for us

That we can come before God our Father rightly trusting

That in Christ there is no condemnation

And that in Christ Jesus we can make use of the gift of holiness

As we intercede for others

As we pray for them

Not because they deserve it, *but because God has been gracious to us*

So that we may also be gracious with others

There are people who have hurt you, maybe even for your confession of Christ

You are free, we are free, not to be burned by anger or bitterness

Or the desire for vengeance

Like St Stephen, like our master the Lord Jesus

We are free to intercede, and to see the work of God transforming our world

And bringing light where there is darkness, hope where there is despair

Forgiveness where there is sin, and life where there is death

May God grant this for Jesus' sake. Amen.