Stephen – Faithful to the End.

Acts 7:51-end.

Holy Communion.

Emmanuel Youtube.

Sunday August 30th 2020

I wonder, do you ever watch the kind of tv series where they begin each episode by reminding you of what has gone before? They call it the ‘back story’, I believe, and it can be very helpful both in reminding us of what we saw earlier but may have forgotten, and also in filling us in on what we have missed out on if we have missed an episode. Well, today’s sermon is a bit like that because Acts 6 and Acts 7 really form parts one and two of the story of Stephen. Jo and I were away last week, but I have since watched Precious’ sermon thanks to the wonders of Youtube and in a sense what I have to say today is a kind of ‘Part 2’ of what was begun last week.

First of all I want to take you right back to the beginning of chapter 6. There this group of (kind of) junior leaders was appointed – deacons, they called them, and Stephen was one of them. Notice that the elders didn’t ask for volunteers, they didn’t have an election, they were appointed by the church. It doesn’t say so in the text, but I’m sure it was done after prayer, and probably fasting too, and notice, they weren’t appointed for their practical abilities (they were being appointed principally for practical tasks), but because they were, (and I quote)

 *known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.*

Now Stephen is the first named among that group of seven, and look how he is described:

 *a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.*

Now last week Precious described how all this angered the Jewish authorities so that Stephen was arrested and dragged before the council, the Sanhedrin. I want to point out here simply how that council had not learned its lesson. As Precious said last week, they had done exactly the same with Jesus. They had condemned him to death, manoeuvred the Roman authorities into carrying out their dirty work for them, and had thought that was the end of the matter. To their extreme surprise Jesus had risen and transformed his followers from a band of timid cowards into a group of bold ambassadors, ready to give up everything for him and his amazing message. Over the past month or two here in the Emmanuel Group we’ve seen how again and again, though threatened and bullied by the authorities, the apostles refused to stop proclaiming this message, and yet still they just don’t get it. Again they think they can squash this thing simply by murdering one of its outspoken members. When will they ever learn? Or perhaps, when will **WE** ever learn? Do we really ‘get it’ in terms of where God is leading us?

I was so pleased that last week Precious pointed out the many parallels between how Stephen was treated and accused and how Jesus suffered in the same way. I had intended to draw the same parallels, and I will come back to that at the end.

Chapter 7 of Acts is a very long chapter and this morning we have only picked it up at verse 51. The rest of the chapter gives us a marked difference from how Jesus was treated in th Stephen was actually given an opportunity to speak in his defence. The question is put by the High Priest in verse 1:

 *“Are these charges true?”*

That gives Stephen his opportunity and he grabs it with both hands, giving a complete potted history of the failings of the Jewish people down the centuries ever since the time of Abraham. Two points here. Firstly, are we as good at recognising opportunities to talk about our message and then at grabbing them? (I don’t think I am), and secondly, do we have the background history to our faith as firmly fixed in our minds as Stephen clearly did, and can we use scripture as readily as he could? Now I know it’s true as it has often been said that no-one was ever argued into the Kingdom, it’s the Holy Spirit who convicts people and turns them to repentance, but nevertheless, we do need to have a sound knowledge of the scriptures and what they teach us. That’s why we have Bible readings and sermons in Church, and why too, it’s imperative that we should all be reading passages of Scripture every day, and best with one of the many Bible helps that are available to us these days. Remember, Stephen, like Jesus, only had more or less what we would call the Old Testament, but chapter 7 of Acts really demonstrates to us that Stephen had the Scriptures deep within his soul; we would say perhaps, they had become part of his very dna.

This morning we picked up the story at verse 51. Stephen has finished his history lesson and now gets up close and personal. As with Peter and John back in Acts 2, we might expect Stephen to say things to try to mollify the council and save his skin, but no. For Stephen, getting this vital message across is far more important that simply saving his earthly life. Let me remind you:

 *“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!*

 *Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—*

 *you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”*

Now that final verse is really a red rag to a bull. These are people who pride themselves on knowledge of the Law (capital ‘L’) and keeping it to the last detail, and here is this man, himself in the dock, accusing **THEM** of not keeping it. No wonder that they grind their teeth! This is a most extreme moment for Stephen, and his fate is probably now sealed, but again, as Precious stressed last week, he knows he’s not alone. He looks up and has a vision of the glory of God and of Jesus standing there. So ardent is he, so determined to get his message across whatever the cost, that he actually tells them about what he sees:

 *“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”*

Well, that’s it. He’s dragged out and stoned to death. Stephen dies as the very first Christian martyr, the first of so many thousands down the centuries since and even to this day in some countries. But notice his final words. I said I would come back to the many similarities with Jesus’ own trial and death and here is the final one. Are you familiar with the last sayings of Jesus as he hung on the cross (there were seven of them)? Now look at the final verses of our passage today:

 *While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”*

 *Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.*

I normally end my sermons with a ‘so what’? What has all this to do with us? Today, however, I shall just leave it at that. There have been many pointers for us along the way and I would simply encourage us all to ponder further, not just on what we have seen today, but on what we have learned throughout this series on the early chapters of Acts. This is the last in the series, so just take some time to reflect. I’ve learned a lot to help me on my Christian journey, I hope you have too.