

Acts 7.55-8.1
10th May 2020

When God's future infuses our present

I've rather given up looking at my diary during these unusual days. When I do, it feels like peering into a different world with so many events and meetings pencilled in for each day now cancelled.

Well, last week I did give it a glance and saw I was scheduled on Wednesday to lead the Free Church service in the Lady Chapel at St Alban's Abbey.

St Alban's has a wonderfully eclectic architectural style with bits of it being added and altered down the centuries. The Guinness Book of Records tells us it has the longest cathedral nave in England, partly constructed from the bricks of a Roman pagan temple – an excellent example of early ecumenical co-operation!

And, of course, it's named after that citizen of Verulamium who is honoured for his courage as Britain's first Christian Martyr. A young man who gave hospitality to a priest being hounded and persecuted by the Roman authorities. Alban swapped clothes with him and ended up dying in his place, giving his life in defence of the Christian faith that so inspired him.

The names of first martyrs often lingers. Alban of Hertfordshire and Stephen of Jerusalem.

For Stephen, whose name in Greek literally means 'crown', is honoured in the pages of the New Testament as the Church's first martyr and so it's through that prism of deep respect and honour that we heard part his story in the lectionary reading from Acts today.

Stephen's role in the early church started out as a pretty humble one. He was appointed a Deacon, one of seven in the Jerusalem church whose servant ministry it was to serve at table and look after the welfare of members of the congregation.

Yet he went on to do more than that. He ends up as something of a fiery preacher. His sermon is the longest recorded in Acts and in it he is deeply critical of any sort of faith that locks God up in a building such as the Temple. Those who took exception to his sermon felt he was blaspheming against God and insulting to Moses.

Stephen is obviously regarded as a threat and firebrand, endangering the religious status quo and so he is sentenced to death by the Sanhedrin – death by stoning.

Religion and violence at times, tragically, accompany each other.

Here in Amersham we remember folk such as William Tylesworth, John Scrivenor and Joan Norman, just three of the seven Lollards whose names are inscribed on the Amersham Martyrs Memorial – their only crime in 1511 and 1521 was to read the bible in Wycliffe's English translation and to refuse to believe that at Communion the bread and wine turned into the

actual body and blood of Christ. For that they were burned alive by fellow Christians.

Religion and violence, sometimes it results in a toxic and tragic mix – and when that happens I suspect we human beings break the heart of God.

Today in our service we have just had a hymn that has a place in my favourite top ten with the opening: *There's a wideness in God's mercy*, but it's the last verse that particularly chimes with me:

*But we make his love too narrow
by false limits of our own;
and we magnify his strictness
with a zeal he will not own.*

As we remember the courage and fortitude of Stephen this morning perhaps it is worth saying that all of this is a post-Easter narrative and that's why it's in these lectionary readings for this season reminding us of those early days after Easter Sunday.

Perhaps we might have thought that struggle should have been a pre-Easter phenomenon. Didn't we sing just a month ago: *The strife is o'er the battle done, Alleluia*. If so, doesn't Stephen's martyrdom, so soon on the heels of Resurrection Sunday slightly spoil the party?

Yet isn't this one of the strengths of the story told us by Luke in Acts? The truthfulness of it all and the honesty with which he describes events as they played out.

Maybe we would have expected a different unfolding.

After Good Friday there was resurrection and in the glow of this Judaism and Christianity came to a common understanding and never split. In the glow of resurrection, the new church at Corinth remained united, honoured their times of Communion and Paul felt no need to write to them about the true meaning of love. In the glow of resurrection persecution dwindled away and Stephen, Peter and Paul lived to see old bones and a long retirement.

Yet the reality was very different. In the glow of resurrection there was still misunderstanding, power struggles and fatal persecution.

And that surely is an important lesson for all of us to bear in mind. Christianity is not an insurance policy against the knocks of life. People we love still die young. Our own health can deteriorate overnight. The justice we long for in war torn countries seems nowhere in sight. A Pandemic sweeps the world and there is no escape for anyone.

Stephen is an example of someone who 'stayed with Jesus' through thick and thin and it's his faithfulness and openhearted forgiveness that shines out with integrity down through the intervening centuries. In so many ways Stephen lived in the spirit of resurrection and hope even as he experienced struggle, heartache and death.

Stephen seemed to gain great strength from his heavenly vision of God. It's as if something of the beauty and reality of that vision of tomorrow seeped in and flavoured his today.

I've no doubt that is the secret behind every self-sacrificing life. People who live for others are usually inspired by a story and set of values bigger than themselves.

Over these last weeks we've experienced the tireless devotion of key workers in hospitals and out in the community who have put themselves at real risk in order to serve their fellow men and women. And this weekend we are giving thanks for all who gave of themselves, some completely, in World War Two to preserve the freedom and future liberty of our nation.

Stephen 'saw' heaven and that seems to have enabled him to give his all in the service of Christ.

May we be inspired by the love and justice of God, and may something of God's future infuse our present as we seek to be Christ's disciples this week.

May it be so, in the name of the God who sustained the Lollards of Amersham, Alban of Hertfordshire and Stephen of Jerusalem. Amen.