

## Acts 6:8-81a: Stephen

Two weeks ago we had the situation where the Hellenists widows were not being treated the same as the Jewish widows and so seven men, full of the Holy Spirit were put in charge of distributing the food bank produce. All seven were non-Jewish but all were Spirit filled.

Stephen was known as a man full of God's grace and power, and he performed great wonders and signs among the people. This got the attention of the Synagogue leaders. And the Synagogue in question was the one established in Jerusalem for folk who had been slaves of Romans but had somehow gained their liberty.

In arguing with Stephen they kept losing because Stephen was gifted with wisdom from the Holy Spirit. How else could they trap him? By false witnesses!

And their charges were serious. *"This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."* (6v13-14). But the thing that really riled them was this - *they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.* (v15)

The High Priest is now involved in the arguments and accusations and he directly asks Stephen to defend himself and we have Stephen's defence statement in full.

He highlighted four key aspects of Jewish history, beginning with Abraham. How he was called out of Mesopotamia and how God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. Then came the covenant of circumcision and three generations later, the birth of the Patriarchs.

Second, Stephen highlighted Joseph's role. Despite being sold into slavery, God was with him and was the means for provision during years of famine. Through the time in Egypt, the Israelites grew in number.

Third, Moses. He became the means of salvation for the Israelites from the tyranny of Egypt. He was the means of the ten commandments, despite the people rebelling, and he was the means by which the tabernacle - the tent of the presence - was established.

Then, fourthly, almost in passing, were the periods of exile and the Temple being established by Solomon, rather than David.

God spoke to Abraham before being in the chosen land

God was with Joseph in Egypt

God spoke to Moses through a bush that was burning but not consumed

God's favour was with David, Solomon and the Israelites even though they were in exile.

But after all this history come the sweeping words of Isaiah (66v1-2) *This is what the Lord says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the Lord.*

Stephen ends the quote short and makes the stunning accusation - *"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!"*

But they would have been fully aware that Isa 66v2 continues: *These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.*

But Stephen had been seeking to establish the fact that, as the writer to Hebrews would later put it: *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.* Heb1v1-2

This is what made the Priests and Elders of the Sanhedrin so angry - their authority was being undermined. Jesus, whom they had sanctioned should be killed, was at the centre of this debacle.

And, to make matters worse, Stephen had the appearance of being an angel. Enough! Stone him. So Stephen became the first Christian martyr: *But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."* v55

Jesus predicted that after his ascension he would sit at Father's right hand side (Luke 22v69) and this fact is stated numerous in the letters (Col 3v1, Heb 12v2). But notice - Jesus stands to receive Stephen. Can you imagine Jesus saying "Look Father, here is the first martyr. It was worth my dying so others might follow".

And notice the similarity to Jesus' crucifixion with the statements *Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* v59-60

But now we come to that great theological question: So what?

Well, about 100years later Tertullian observed that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church". This has been true for the past 2,000years.

In 1960 there were around 90m evangelicals. Now there are over 600m, according to the World Evangelical Alliance. Examples for growth include Latin America - 50,000 in early 1900's to more than 100 million.

Similarly in Sub-Saharan Africa 5.4m has become 500m in 100years. And in 1960, Nepal had only 30 known Christians, but now there are 1.4m believers in the country.

"This growth," Bishop Efraim Tendero adds, "is despite persecution and struggle."

We are here today because of the martyrdom of Cranmer, Latimer, and Ridley in Oxford in 1555. They stood for Biblical truth.

Organisations like Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Voice of the Martyrs provide current information which we can use for prayer.

But I want to close with the thing that has challenged me most - Stephen was so full of the Holy Spirit that he had the appearance of being an angel. He spoke with wisdom and followed Jesus' footsteps even in death.

So here are three rhetoric questions: What do other see when they look at me? What do they hear when I speak? And How closely does my life reflect Christ?

That's why the service began with Paul's words to the Galatians:

*Gal 5v22-26 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*

**Mike Stanbrook**