

Easter + 4 (Fifth) 0800 & 0945 at St Peter's Henleaze.

Acts 7^{v 55-60} the stoning of Stephen

John 14^{v 1-14} Jesus identifies Himself with the Father

(nb also 1 Peter 2^{v 2-10} "a royal Priesthood" Salvation  Sanctification)

If we think the church is unpopular today, the earliest one was more so - at least we don't get stoned for being openly Christian! No one took offense seeing us come to church this morning. And all that Stephen had done was to be chosen by the Twelve to be one of seven 'deacons' to assist the twelve - to free the twelve to pray and preach. Then Stephen had been unable to keep quiet about the Good News first by 'signs and wonders' and then in Words. Eventually discontents among the early Christians dragged him in front of the High Priest etc. The ever increasingly eloquent Stephen speaks the whole truth explaining Jesus in the light of the Old Testament and eventually accuses the current Jewish leaders of continuing the tradition of resisting the Holy Spirit by persecuting the prophets, not keeping the Torah (maybe by the letter but not in the Spirit of . . .) and being responsible for the execution of Jesus making clear that Jesus was the promised Messiah. All this was one quick way to make yourself **V** unpopular. Today he would have been thrown to the media wolves and discredited for any old trumped up story - never to be seen again on the political/public 'stage'. Two thousand years ago they were less subtle and Stephen was stoned (to death).

So what was so terrible as to get him stoned? What would be so terrible today to get us treated similarly? The key is in today's Gospel Jesus reiterates what he has said in ch 8 in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus challenges us to the same choice - either He is mad, bad or **God**. That we are here, says **we choose** the last option. And thanks to a lot of history in our country, we enjoy the freedom of being free to believe as we think is right for us. A freedom that is worth defending, but it comes with responsibilities (as well as some rights). The first responsibility is that of being active (assertive) not passive. The Good News is too big to be silent. We are called to **preach the Gospel always and to use words when we have to** as attributed to St Francis! So we are not called to 'gob off' everywhere and anywhere but to a life style that may include speaking out when prompted by the Holy Spirit.

If by the birth, life and death of Jesus we are 'saved'; then by our life style, we are 'sanctified' = made holy. We need **both**. Had we had the epistle set for today (1 Peter 2^{v 2-10}) we would have been reminded that we are to be a royal priesthood - that is **all** of us. We are all called to be servants one of another, for that is what priest hood is all about. In the well-known story at the last supper in St John's gospel Jesus washes the feet of his twelve (?eleven) faithful followers not vice versa.

As I understand today's Gospel that is the consequence of the closing verses¹² *Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these,*

because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

So in faith in Jesus we can do what He did - a bias to the poor etc. In this day and age that is probably more than any other aspect of his ministry that we are continuing to get wrong. We have the NHS doing much of the healing, schools to educate (at least in this country). But we continue to have a bias to the rich.

To quote St Francis again

Where there is charity (love) and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor vexation. Where there is poverty and joy, there is neither greed nor avarice. Where there is peace and meditation, there is neither anxiety nor doubt.

The Counsels of the Holy Father St. Francis, Admonition 27

That says it all for me. In practical terms - sanctification is choosing God's life style