

## **‘Stephen – the unsung Key Worker’**

Acts 7.55 – 8.1

Sermon for Easter 5 by Mark Pilgrim

Unsung heroes are very much part of our consciousness now, as the virus pandemic makes us acutely aware that thousands of ordinary people are putting their own health and lives at risk - and the health and lives of their loved ones – just by going about the jobs they had before Coronavirus was ever a ‘thing’ to be concerned about. Every Thursday evening at 8pm, generally from the safety and security of our drives and porches, we clap and applaud NHS and key workers for their service and bravery. Walking the streets of our neighbourhood, we can come across ‘Thank you’ notices placed on gates and walls in gratitude for the vital continuing service of postal workers and recycling and bin collecting workers. Sometimes the pavements are newly decorated with chalk messages of thanks for NHS and other workers. Around the clock there are people working in the emergency services and meeting our constant desire for electricity, gas and water. Without them, the way we live – our society – would grind to a halt. So, among the many things that we should be remembering and not letting go of as the lockdown eases and the way we do things opens up with new possibilities, is remembering to sing – to appreciate, thank and reward – those key workers who, for a host of different reasons, have all too often been taken for granted, neglected and remained ‘unsung’.

Today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles is the third of three scenes telling the story of another relatively unsung ‘key worker – the first recorded martyr for Christ – Stephen. What do we know about Stephen? Remarkably little. What we do know, starting in Acts chapter 6, is that the Greek-speaking Christians among the first Christians in Jerusalem were feeling pushed out and neglected during the daily distribution of food by the more dominant Hebrew speakers. So, says Luke, the Twelve disciples invited the community to choose seven good people to serve the community’s practical needs, leaving the leadership free to continue to focus on prayer and ‘to serving the word’ – studying scripture and preaching. Stephen is the first to be named – and he is carefully described by Luke as ‘a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit’.

Scene 2 sees Stephen, ‘full of grace and power’ doing ‘great wonders and signs among the people’. The scene develops to Stephen being accused of blaspheming against Moses and God. This leads to Stephen being arraigned before Jerusalem’s High Priest. There he delivers a thorough exposition of Jesus’ part in God’s salvation plan, which Christians view both Moses and the Law as having a pivotal place in – but with a different outcome to that envisaged by the Jewish authorities.

In Scene 3 of Stephen’s story his passionate explanation of God’s revelation in Moses and Jesus is rejected. He quickly becomes Christianity’s first recorded martyr, stoned to death by a lynch mob with the future apostle Paul – significantly, as we shall see at the end, looking on approvingly.

An indication of just how significant for Christian discipleship the first Christians took Stephen to be is the Church’s choice of when to commemorate his faith and death. Do you know when St Stephen’s Day is? It’s 26<sup>th</sup> December – the day after Christmas Day. Commemorating Stephen on this day is intended to remind all Christians that, with the joy and the privilege of acknowledging God’s incarnation in Jesus, comes the privilege and responsibility of witnessing to that incarnation in faith...even to the point of death. Just about the only reminder of the existence of St Stephen’s Day in our present Christian culture are the lustily sung words: ‘Good King Wenceslas looked out, on the feast of Stephen’. But the significance of St Stephen’s Day is quickly obliterated by the reference to the snow being ‘deep and crisp and even’. The carol immediately transports us in our fantasies to a North European winter scene...and to a Boxing Day dominated, for many, by department store sales and the opportunity to buy yet more goods from workers who are probably sick to the back teeth of hearing cash tills ringing.

‘What’s special about Stephen?’ we might ask. ‘How and why did he get to become the first Christian martyr, commemorated, so significantly on 26<sup>th</sup> December, the day after the Feast of Christ’s Incarnation?’ The answer to ‘What’s so special?’ is ‘Very little’. In a sense, by plucking Stephen out from almost nowhere and giving him no history or background of knowing or traveling with Jesus in the flesh, Stephen probably stands, in Luke’s mind, for ‘Everyman’ – or, to be better and not sexist in the use of language, for ‘every disciple’. Each and every Christian is, like Stephen, called to trust unflinchingly in God’s salvation worked in Jesus. Stephen’s journey from anonymous Christian to first martyr is very quick indeed. He starts as an unsung key worker, commissioned to serve at table and undertake thoroughly practical, unglamorous tasks. But, in a meteoric rise in significance and importance, he soon finds himself speaking passionately in favour of Jesus and Christianity, in a way which leads to his speedy, untimely and unjust death.

The Bible Study Helen and Simon Collins hosted last Wednesday evening found us thinking about how willing those of us living comfortably in this part of Bristol would be to staying similarly loyal to Christ and proclaiming Christian faith even if a gun was put to our heads. Our answer was that, in the face of such a threat, we would hope and pray God would equip us with the strength to endure and be faithful through and beyond death.

Doesn’t Luke imagine just such a process happening for Stephen as he writes the Acts of the Apostles? The whole of Acts, for Luke, is an outworking of the prophecy Peter refers to from Joel in his first sermon on at Pentecost. Peter quotes Joel’s expectation that God will pour out his Spirit on ALL flesh, on ALL people, regardless of gender or status...on young and old, men and women, slaves and free. Stephen, who Luke describes in Chapter 6 as ‘full of grace and power’ and ‘having the face of an angel’, and, in our passage in Chapter 7, as being ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ is the embodiment of just this faithful discipleship. And it is an embodiment, Luke is saying, which is available to all – including all of us.

Furthermore, it is an embodiment, Luke says, which all should seek to experience and embrace, no matter their current distance or estrangement from God. To ram this point home, look how Luke constructs the finale of Stephen’s unjust martyrdom. The lynch mob ‘laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul’ ‘and Saul approved of their killing him’. Could Saul who later came to be the apostle Paul have been further from God at that moment when accountability for Stephen’s death was laid at his feet? Probably not. And yet, Luke is at pains to say, God took this sinner and equipped and strengthened him to become a martyr for Christ in his own right.

I have my own little story of being equipped and strengthened by God to tell. There’s a small Anglican Benedictine monastery called Mucknell Abbey I go to for single day or longer Retreats. On 24th January this year I was there, praying quietly on my own in the wonderful chapel, when I found myself what I can only describe as ‘being given’ a short prayer. At the time I didn’t know how or why these words came into my head – but they did, loud and clear: I prayed – out of nowhere ‘Lord, give me strength for the struggle ahead’. 8 simple words ‘Lord, give me strength for the struggle ahead’. ‘What on earth was this struggle ahead?’ I thought. I could think of a couple of quite big decisions and choices of path coming up – but nothing that equated to ‘a struggle’. With the arrival of the virus pandemic, it’s fairly clear to me this is the struggle I didn’t know I needed strength for was. By inviting me to turn to God for strength, was God equipping me for this struggle in some mysterious way? Only time will tell.

Meanwhile I invite everyone to take heart and inspiration from the story and example of Stephen – an unsung but vitally significant key worker in the unveiling of God’s kingdom after Jesus’ resurrection. As the first Christian martyr Stephen reveals that God’s grace and power, God’s Spirit equipping ordinary, practical people to say and do things of outstanding, extraordinary witness to God revealed in Christ is available to us all...to you and to me.

Like Stephen, may we be Christ’s unsung key workers in our turn.