

St Paul's Dorking Small Groups

October 23 2005

Whose Church is it anyway? Called by the Lord Jesus

Matthew 16.21-28

Acts 6.8-15

Word : Key points from Sunday's sermon

In our Matthew passage, Our Lord makes it clear that he must of necessity go to Jerusalem, suffer and die at the hands of the religious establishment and then on the third day be raised to life. Later in the passage, he challenges his disciples (which includes us) that if we are to follow him faithfully, then we too must deny ourselves and lay down our lives for him. He reminds us of the futility of holding on to this temporary life at the expense of our eternal welfare and that it is to him that we are accountable. We then consider Stephen in the light of Our Lord's teaching and note

1. What a witness!
 - (a) Note how Stephen was prepared for the great test that follows. He was "a man full of the spirit and wisdom" (verse 3) and "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (verse 5) as well as "a man full of God's Grace and Power" (verse 8).
 - (b) We note that the focus of his witness was "Jesus of Nazareth" (verse 14) and that he appears to have been testifying to the fact that the person and the work of Christ was the fulfilment of the Old Testament law and meant that the temple was no longer necessary because the Lord Jesus Himself was the means of access to God.
 - (c) We notice too that Stephen's witness seems to have been adorned and not disfigured or destroyed by his personal character and conduct and also that this witness was conducted in ordinary everyday life (note the words "among the people" in verse 8). Paul was later to say to Timothy that he must "watch your life and doctrine closely" (1 Timothy 4.16). Notice too that his very face radiated his spirit filled life (and that he was being closely watched) (verse 15) just as we are more closely watched than perhaps we realised. Notice too that humility was at the heart of Stephen's character as evidenced by his willingness to be amongst those who took on an apparently obscure menial task to release the apostles for prayer and the ministry of the word with amazing results (verse 7) and yet God's used this apparently ordinary man to be an extraordinary witness. What an encouragement for us!
2. What a warning!

- (a) A warning that even or especially amongst the religious establishment, the message of the Cross can often be very unpopular. Notice too how Peter's reaction in Matthew 16 (verse 22) reminds us of the capacity of all of us to resist the message of Christ Crucified and note the extremely strong reaction of Our Lord in verse 23. Note too that very much the same people at whose hands The Lord Jesus suffered were those who persecuted and killed Stephen. We must never forget that approximately once every three minutes a Christian somewhere is martyred for their faith (remember that the word for witness in the Greek is "marturos" from which we get the word martyr). Remember too how many in this country have laid down their lives for the Gospel (for example Tyndale, Latimer and Ridley, to name but three) and consider how political correctness and legislation (actual and proposed – such as the Religious Hatred Bill) mean that persecution is not so far away from us as we might be inclined to think.
 - (b) Notice how what begins as an attempt at irrational argument descends into the irrational and demonic (verses 11, 12 and 13) and of course ultimately Acts 7.54 and following). We must never forget who is behind this (John 8.44).
 - (c) Note that Stephen sums this up in Acts 7.51 "You always resist the Holy Spirit" and yet note that the Holy Spirit is still in control and calling the shots (see for example as Duncan wisely pointed out to me, his accuser's hand was stayed long enough for Stephen's tour de force in Acts 7)
 - (d) Notice too a number of ways in which the Holy Spirit affirmed and validated the truth of Stephen's testimony (Acts 6.8, 10 and 15).
3. What a welcome!
- (a) Stephen had begun a relationship with The Lord Jesus so that he was able to pray (Acts 7.59). Note the two promises made by Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2.38 "Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"). And now something very special happens.....
 - (b) At 7.55 Stephen full of the Holy Spirit looks up to Heaven and sees the Glory of God and Jesus at the Right Hand of God. Note that Stephen is enabled by the Holy Spirit to see into Heaven. In the words of the Te Deum Jesus has "opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers" and Jesus is seated at the Right Hand of God to symbolise that his work is finished (Hebrews 1.3).
 - (c) However here, he is standing! This has intrigued commentators and at least two possible explanations (neither of which contradicts

the other) is that just as Stephen had confessed Jesus before man so now Jesus confessed Stephen before God. Note that even as a courageous martyr Stephen still required the Lord Jesus' advocacy because Jesus alone is the means to access to God for even the best of us. Probably it is also fair to see Jesus as standing to welcome Stephen, just as by God's Grace, he will welcome us.

- (d) Notice too that his last words are addressed to the Lord Jesus (verses 59 and 60) echoing the words of the Lord Jesus to His Heavenly Father on the Cross (see Luke 23.34 and Luke 23.46) but now Stephen speaks to the Lord Jesus directly.
- (e) Stephen then "fell asleep". A lovely expression of somebody dying in Christ, even in the most violent and horrible of circumstances.
- (f) At first it seemed that the prayer of verse 60 had been of no effect (chapter 8.1-3) and yet verse 4 and following shows a different story culminating of course in the conversation of Saul in the following chapter. Paul never forgot the part he played in the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 22.20). A great encouragement to us to keep going and to persevere in following the Lord Jesus even when we feel that we are not being much use to anyone!

The witness questions to discuss :-

1. (a) Consider the crucial importance of the Holy Spirit in Stephen's life and death and notice too on whom the Holy Spirit is focused (John 15.26)
 - (b) In what sense is the Word of God the work of the Holy Spirit –
 - (i) in the writing of the Gospels (John 14.26)?
 - (ii) in the Epistles (John 16.13)?
2. Consider further what lessons we can learn from Stephen – in what way does his humility echo that of Our Lord? (John 13.1-17)
3. What might we be doing to support persecuted Christians?
4. What trends do we see in this country which might lead to more open persecution?
5. Have we ourselves experienced some maybe subtle forms of persecution?
6. Do I subtly water down the Gospel in my witness so as to avoid confrontation?

7. What is the significance of the references to Moses? (John 1.17) And the significance of Stephen's face shining like an angel (Acts 6.15) – see Exodus 34.29-35).
8. Have we known occasions when our testimony has been affirmed in a special way?
9. In what ways might our verbal testimony be spoilt by our personal character or conduct?
10. Acts 6.10 seems to be a clear fulfilment of the promise of Our Lord in Matthew 10.19-20.
 - (a) Have we experienced situations like this where we have been spontaneously given words to say in a position of unexpected pressure?
 - (b) Consider the context of this promise and the dangers of misapplying it.
11. What can we learn about our own life and death from what Stephen says in Acts 7.56, 59 and 60)?
12. Consider the abiding principle which should be behind the whole of our conduct, i.e. 1 John 2.6 – what would Jesus do? And see also our future prospect – 1. John 3.2).

In conclusion, may I take this opportunity on behalf of Mary and myself to thank everyone very much indeed for all your kindness to us and to thank Paul for his extremely generous words to me yesterday. I would also like to pay particular tribute to Pat who has been (and I am sure by God's Grace will continue to be) a cheerful encouraging and tolerant colleague!

May I also thank Paul and all my Ministry colleagues at St Paul's for the privilege of serving with them in the Ministry of the Gospel and to say how thankful I am that this is by God's Grace in some sense going to continue!