

St Stephen's Day

Jer 26: 1-9, 12-15

Acts 6:8- 72a, and 51-60

Matthew 23: 34 -39

There is something troubling having St Stephen's day follow on from Christmas Day, don't you think? To be reflecting on the stoning to death of a newly ordained deacon into the way of Jesus Christ immediately after singing about peace and goodwill to humankind, after about contemplating a nativity scene with light and love and shepherds in awe of a baby boy destined to become our saviour.

At least there is a respectful few days gap between Christmas and the appalling violence of the story of Herod's rage and infanticide of the killing of the holy innocents.

Coming back to the story of Stephen, it fills me with awe and dread in equal measure. Stephen was 'full of God's grace and power' and 'did great wonders and signs among the people'. When people argued with him, they 'could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.' These opening sentences from Acts that we heard this morning leave us in no doubt that Stephen was speaking with God's grace and power.

On Friday we celebrated the moment when God came among us, when we celebrated the incarnation, when we celebrated the act of love that is God, who was willing to meet us where we are. The God-with-us, Emmanuel, who we call Jesus, accompanies us in our pilgrimage through life on earth, enables us, if only we would pause from the busy-ness of our lives and the emotions that career inside our heads so often, to see and understand exactly what love looks like.

And in Stephen's story, we can see startlingly clearly how a life washed through and fully inhabited by that divine love was played out. Stephen was transformed by God's love and was able to incarnate that love in all he then said and did. I think I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of people I have met who give me that sense of being in the presence of one who really has been transformed by God's love and whose whole being is a powerful witness to me and to others of love and grace.

The common feature of such people seems to me to be that the Holy Spirit has shaped them, and continues to work and shape them. In Stephen's case, he was part of a new Christian community, radically different from almost any other faith community in existence, and the Holy Spirit was with them and was with Stephen.

Stephen spoke truth in love, never that easy to do, to people who were dead set against hearing it. They didn't want to hear the truth. They had invested so heavily in a different understanding, that it was too much for them to take in. I wonder if sometimes, when people hear a truth that they deep down know is correct, they have to bury and deny it if they are not willing to accept the evidence before their own eyes. And in so doing, their response is partly a rage against their own personal deceit. Whenever we feel such strong emotions we must guard against instinctively following them; are they due to our own deceit and internal dishonesty, or is it righteous anger which leads to action with God's blessing?

In Stephen's case, the people he argued with spread false rumours about him. He was brought in front of the council on charges of blasphemy. All in the Council who stared at him saw that 'his face was like the face of an angel'. And we all know that an angel is a faithful messenger of God's word to people... we therefore know that Stephen was standing before them and speaking truth in love.

The members of the Council and the people watching on could not bear to hear the truth, God's truth; they became enraged and were grinding their teeth. And as has happened since time began, when people don't want to hear the uncomfortable truth, they have to silence the source of the truth. The crowd turned in to a violent mob, they dragged Stephen out of the city and started to hurl stones at him. They were now a blood-thirsty mob intent on violence and murder.

And Stephen? How did he respond to their violence? Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven, seeing the glory of God and Jesus at God's right hand. Stephen starts praying and chooses to die in the same fashion as Christ. In his dying, he asks for forgiveness for those who are murdering him. 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.', he said. And he died having forgiven and loved those who could not cope with the truth of God's love and the incarnation of that love in our saviour Jesus Christ.

In our fractious world, where there are so many false stories and easy ways to spread them and for them to go viral, I think this story helps guide us. When we seem to be surrounded by people who see things differently from ourselves, or when people think we should not behave in a certain way, or don't care about all the things Jesus so passionately told us we must care about; the poor, the oppressed, the hungry and thirsty, the prisoner, we are to resist grinding our teeth, we are to resist responding with contempt or disdain. And, I don't know about you, but boy that can take a lot of prayer and self-discipline for me.

Stephen challenges us to be a messenger of love, that love whose birth we celebrated on Friday, the love that came down to save us, Emmanuel, God-with-us. With prayer, plenty of prayer, and the mutual constructive support of a loving Christian community, we too can look to living in the way of God's love. Can we risk living in the way of God's love? I truly hope so.