

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – First Sunday of Christmas – 26th December 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Our New Testament reading this morning is one that needs a bit of context round it. It's the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

We don't know much about Stephen. He was an early convert to Christianity, appointed with six others to run a food relief programme in order to free up time for the apostles to preach and teach. He was noted by the community as being 'of good standing, full of the Holy Spirit, wisdom and faith'. Stephen was also a radical, and outspoken. This led people to complain about him to the ruling council, the Sanhedrin, before whom he was falsely accused of blasphemy. His defence speech ends with a strong attack on his accusers and on the ruling body itself, pointing out that by putting Jesus to death they have shown themselves to be no better than their predecessors who persecuted the prophets. The result is that he infuriates his hearers and is condemned to death by stoning - the first person recorded as giving his life for his faith in Christ. As he dies, he prays for his killers that God will not hold their sin against them.

People have often wondered why this story is told on the day immediately following Christmas Day. The explanation usually given is one which the

playwright T S Eliot voiced in his play *Murder in the Cathedral* about the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket (which is in turn commemorated on 29th December).

Eliot's Becket, preaching on Christmas morning, reflects that the Christmas Day mass is at the same time a celebration of Jesus's birth and a re-enactment of his passion and death. He notes the paradox of it: 'For who in the world will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason?' Yet this is part of the Christian mystery. Just as we remember Christ coming among us in human flesh, we also remember how that flesh was broken. We are shown from the beginning not only Christ's own path of suffering, but also that pattern repeating itself in the lives of some of his followers down the ages. It's a reminder that we are all called to be martyrs, for 'martyr' simply means 'witness'. We are invited to tell the story afresh in each generation, even if it lands us in trouble.

That's the traditional explanation for the timing of the 'Feast of Stephen'. But in reflecting on it this week, and particularly on the pairing with Stephen's story of our Old Testament reading today from the Second Book of Chronicles, I found myself wondering whether there might not be another explanation - a more positive reason why we are given Stephen's story so soon after the birth of Christ. For there is a striking difference between the words spoken by Zechariah as he is stoned to death, 'May the Lord see and avenge', and the words spoken by Stephen, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'. And the difference is Christ.

It is Jesus – and his death – of which Stephen is reminded as the violence he has unleashed by his outspokenness rains down on him. 'Filled with the Spirit',

Stephen gazes into heaven and has a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And in that instant he remembers two of Jesus's sayings from the cross: 'Lord, into your hands I commend my spirit', and 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'.

The difference between the two responses is total. Zechariah's all too human response risks perpetuating a cycle of violence. Stephen's response, inspired by Jesus, breaks the cycle of violence. Breaking the cycle of violence is fundamental to the significance of Jesus's passion and death, and to the human behaviour which this extraordinary Gospel has inspired ever since.

I wonder if that's why Stephen's story is told on the next day. Because of the newness of the 'Father, forgive'. We are fast forwarded to the crucifixion, and thus to our redemption, on the second day of Jesus's life. We are shown how a transformation of human response is possible even in the midst of terrible suffering. How the love that was born at Christmas underpins that transformation – a love so radical that Jesus insists we must show it even to our enemies.

That's what makes the difference, every day of our lives. Can we bring ourselves to break cycles of violence – however large or small – when we find ourselves part of them? If we stop to think of Stephen, who stopped to think of Christ, might we in our turn, just possibly, become part of a chain of response for good? Might that be the reason Stephen's story is remembered right next to the birth of Christ? For his story *is* remembered. Stephen is the first, yet only the first, person who shows themselves capable of such reckless loving. Those who have shown it since are far too numerous to list, so I will just mention one.

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch woman interned at Ravensbrück for helping Jewish citizens escape the Nazis in her home town of Haarlem during the Second World War. Her book, *The Hiding Place*, tells the story of her experiences of internment, particularly the illness and death of her sister Betsie, the strength of her sister's Christian faith and a vision that she had of what reconciliation would be like after the War ended. After the War Corrie found herself putting her sister's vision into practice when she was asked to run a rehabilitation centre in the Netherlands, and later in Germany itself.

It was there, one day in 1946, that she was invited to give a talk and found herself face to face with one of the guards who had been particularly brutal to her sister. She writes:

It was at the church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man... He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, my sister Betsie's pain-blانched face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. 'How grateful I am for your message, Fraülein,' he said. ...

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often ... the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on his. When he tells us to love our enemies, he gives, along with the command, the love itself.

I think that's what happened to Stephen. And this week I found myself wondering whether, because it's so unbelievably difficult to do, that's why he is given a place of remembrance right next to the birthday of our Lord.

Maybe we should leave the last word to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose death at the age of 90 was announced this morning. A towering witness in this generation, who embodied the power of non-violent resistance. He wrote:

'Goodness is stronger than evil.
Love is stronger than hate.
Light is stronger than darkness.
Life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours through him who loved us.'

Amen.