

Preaching Notes

Topic: Christ With Us

Scripture: Acts 7:54-60

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Date: 3rd May 2026

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Stoning of Stephen

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Introduction

I believe that Luke, the author of the book of Acts, intended that Theophilus and his community (recipient) would be;

- Reminded that following Jesus comes with a cost.
- Encouraged to remain faithful to Christ when tried and tested, no matter the cost.

I am reminded of the subscription business models of our time where you are encouraged to sign up to their product for a trial period before payment kicks in a month or so later. You are given a chance to experience the full capability of the product for a specified period of time before they send a reminder for payment of the full cost.

In a similar way, Theophilus and his community are exploring and enjoying their new life in Christ and also being made aware that challenges will come yet not to cower in fear because Jesus will strengthen them to face their challenge.

On July 21 1944, a poem was written about freedom. It was divided into four sections; Discipline, Action, Suffering and Death. I will focus on the last two: Suffering and Death.

Suffering

Wondrous transformation! You strong and active hands
are tied now. Powerless, alone, you see the end of your action.
Still, you take a deep breath and lay you struggle for justice,
quietly and in faith, into a mightier hand.
Just for one blissful moment, you tasted the sweetness of freedom,
then you handed it over to God, that he might make it whole.

Death

Come now, highest moment on the road to freedom eternal,
Death, put down the ponderous chains and demolish the walls
of our mortal bodies, the walls of our blinded souls,
that we might finally see what mortals have kept us from seeing.
Freedom, how long we have sought you through discipline, action and
suffering.
Dying, now we behold your face in the countenance of God.

This journal entry of a poem was written under the shadow of almost certain execution by the Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed by the Nazi militia for conspiring to kill Hitler.

I have wondered what it must be like for martyrs. To know you are about to pay the ultimate price for the faith you have in Christ. In this story we are looking at today we surely have a unique glimpse into the first martyr. In our context in NZ, facing certain death because of your faith seems far-fetched yet there exists other forms of persecution; social cost, career excommunication, social media trolling, etc.

I want to make some observations from this story:

In Stephen we meet the calibre of people the apostles led. At times I imagine the new community to be desperate, gullible and outcasts of the Jewish community. But Stephen is far from all that. He is incredibly informed about Jewish history, persuasive speaker and debater and passionately committed to Christ. He was one who served tables.

The charges Stephen faces re blasphemy against God, Moses and the temple, are similar charges that Jesus faced. It is presumed that the high priest who presided over Stephen's case was Caiaphas, the same one who presided over Jesus. It appears that even after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the religious leaders were not changed, they were still as dangerous, if not more lethal, if you crossed their paths post the resurrection of Christ. It wasn't safe at all for the new community to carry on with their teachings.

It is noteworthy that Stephen did not plead for his life. Imagine that. He came down hard on the Jews for not paying attention to their history. In particular, that God is not contained in a temple therefore they should not idolize the temple and their ancestors had a habit of killing the ones who God sent to save them.

When heaven entered the fray, it was not to save Stephen but to prepare Him to die for his faith. Let that sink. I imagine when the super hero finally meets the real super hero, they make a joint strike force that will take away the baddies but no, here the super hero prepares the 'junior hero' to pass on from earthly life to eternal life to be with him. Astonishing!

Stephen's words are eerily similar to Jesus' words on the cross re 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit to you' and 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'.

Where to from here?

There is a lot we can get into, but I want to stay on that last observation. Some say that in Stephen we hear an echo of Jesus. Was Jesus telling Stephen what to pray? Or Was Stephen at the cross when Jesus died, and having heard what Jesus said, Stephen now recites what he heard? My sense is that in Stephen's story we see a pattern: as Christ follows The Father (I only do what I see the Father do), The Father is with Him to the very end, including the Cross. Similarly, as we follow Christ, Christ is with us, just as the Father was with him, at every moment of our lives including the times of trial.

Whatever unique situations we'll face challenging our faith and commitment to God, Christ will be with us. That He comes to us to strengthen us to face what we need to face, is a game-changing dynamic to living out our faith humbly yet courageously. It is not about how you can muster strength and courage, but it is about how He comes to us to strengthen us. Whatever you'll face, be on the look out to detect his presence and guidance. At times He comes in to save and at times He comes in to give you strength to push into the wind.

That's the message for today.