



## Fifth Sunday after Easter

22<sup>nd</sup> May 2011

*Acts 7: 5 5-60, Psalm 31, 1 Peter 2: 11-25, John 14: 1-10*

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

For some of us, hearing the Bible readings in the King James Version can kindle a nostalgia, a reminder and a recalling of times past; for others, the readings become even more unfamiliar as the language requires even more translation than our usual New Revised Standard Version. Each has merit and each offers something to the other.

I wonder where you went as you were listening to that ancient language – a part of me connected with the fact that it's quite farcical, acting out, and I thought of Oberammergau and how there's an acting out of what's in the Bible. Another part of me trotted off with Monty Python, and thought 'If I was reading that I'd get *tho* many of *thothe* thingth, 'sayething unto thee' that you'd end up with this sort of stunningly camp gospel reading.

So the words, the language, can actually take us off in many directions. But it's the content - what the language seeks to express - that is what we really seek to understand. And if we are to apprehend the text as God's Word in the present, in our lives, then it will ask from each and all of us a new and immediate encounter; for the Word of God speaks to all, to those familiar and to those unfamiliar with the words of the text.

Today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the stoning of Stephen, is an iconic text in the formation of the Church and in the shaping of our faith. Stephen has been given the attribute of 'proto-martyr', a first model on which we should then seek to form ourselves, and our faith journey.

For most of the church's history the narrative of Stephen, and of other biblical persons and events, has been seen in a literal and historical context; and in that context they have served to illuminate some of their worth and some of the understanding within the text. At the same time, holding the text as historical and literal opens opportunities to readily discount or distort their true worth. In the case of today's text, the barbarous act of stoning to death overshadows the whole narrative. We actually recoil from the words of the text, we don't want to go there; it's like those movies when they really.... and then you cover your eyes, so too when we hear of someone being stoned to death we close our ears and go within somewhere else. Stephen ends up being sainted for his suffering, and suffering itself becomes a mark, an identity, of saintly behaviour.

But if we consider the text again, not seeking to understand it within the framework of an historical event, but rather to see what is illustrated in terms of process and movement, then we might glimpse some of our own wrestling along the path that takes us in Stephen's direction. There are several images that sit there in the text to create the setting of it:

*The presence of the Holy Spirit*

*Gazing into heaven*

*Seeing the Glory of God*

*Jesus standing at the right hand of God*

*The heavens opened*

*The Son of Man standing at the right hand of God*

When we pick up those images they evoke other narratives - 'Jacob's dream', 'The Baptism of Jesus', the spirit descending from the heavens like a dove, 'The Transfiguration' and other narratives.

Also when we listen to Stephen's dialogue:

*"Lord Jesus receive my spirit"*

*"Lord, do not hold this sin against them",*

we hear an echo of the words of Good Friday, the dialogue spoken from the Cross. That dialogue is the Word that enables us to enter the tomb, to enter the womb of resurrection.

Then by way of contrast, the action of stoning is distinctly different from the life-giving 'rolling the stone away' of Easter morning. In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles we have another opportunity to see the transformative processes of life, the movement of 'dying and rising' that draws us into the fullness of who we are, a movement that illuminates a martyrdom of self into the wholeness of one body.

So now let's look for references in the text that are creative or illustrative of this movement in relation to us in the present: Verse 55: *filled with the Holy Spirit* is placed in the text as a given, no explanation, it's there right at the beginning. And *filled with the Holy Spirit* is also a given for each of us, although often forgotten. When we get up in the morning and look in the mirror to do whatever we do in front of the mirror in the morning, do we see one who is *filled with the Holy Spirit*? And yet it is a given, if and when we seek to enliven that part of our being; it is a place within from which we can draw.

Verse 55 continues, *he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God*. Here is Stephen's starting point that initiates the unfolding of his martyrdom. It is the beginning of resurrection. Looking beyond the immediacy of our world enables us to discover an orientation toward the Divine. In very practical terms, looking beyond the smallness of life, a life that we know and love - our family, our country, our culture and even our faith - seeking an understanding from beyond ourselves enables us to participate and know ourselves as part of a bigger world. So too, looking beyond our sensate-driven ground of being - that knowing ourselves only by what our senses tell us - looking beyond that, toward the heaven of Divine one-ness opens us to a new and greater ground of being. We begin to glimpse that we are more than what our senses tell us and there is a bigger world than the one that we hold close to us.

In the following verse [V56] Stephen says *"I see the heavens opened"*, which identifies an appreciation of the reality of resurrection. The stone is rolled away - *"I see the heavens opened"* - the womb of Divine life becomes opened and the reality of martyrdom is given birth. The movements that these two verses illustrate are movements for us, to bring us very much into the picture of this narrative. Like the passion narrative they provide us with a path into a newness of life. No longer are we spectators of Stephen's story, for that story is our story and calls us into a truth that the narrative reveals.

As we begin to move in the direction of Stephen, seeking to live and create a reality that is not confined by the fear of death, then we too experience an onslaught of those living in the shadow of death. The world seemingly throws stones, as if to close the womb of life's fullness. "Buy more! Save more! Spend more! The one who dies with the most toys wins". These are the stones thrown by the world in a desperate attempt to fill the doorway that was opened when the stone was rolled away. These stones represent the destructive forces that can destroy us with fear, closing again the Tomb of life and un-creating the womb of resurrection.

The final two reference points given in the narrative serve to remind us of our Christ-likeness. They echo the words spoken from the Cross. *"Receive my spirit"* is the orientation of giving. *"Receive my spirit"* is not the

voice of sacrifice and nor is it the suicidal cry of some past martyr. It is the voice of giving; we embody this voice liturgically in the offertory, but it speaks of much more, a giving of ourselves into a new way of life.

This transformative voice is made evident in a generosity of spirit. Remember we are *filled with the Holy Spirit*; we can afford to be generous with that Spirit, for it fills us. It speaks of a giving of self into the oneness of all, into the Divine. Once again, it is the Word made flesh and the Word of resurrection, both of which call for the martyrdom of our self-centeredness.

Then to complete the narrative we hear “*do not hold this sin against them.*” – almost the same as ‘*Father forgive them for they know not what they do*’. Stephen gives no energy to that which is destructive of life; he is not side-tracked by the “them”. How often and how easy is it for us to be drawn into concerns that do not complement the journey that is our deepest desire. Before we know it we find ourselves throwing stones back at those who are stoning us.

Stephen offers us an icon through which to see the journey that is before us. The movement of martyrdom is the path to resurrection, a seeking fullness of life by seeking to move beyond the existence of everyday, a seeking to live beyond all that is contained by the fear of death, and a seeking to find integrity through the deepest knowing - that it is in our giving that we receive.

It is our journey that is contained in today’s text, and there is delightful encouragement for those who are still not yet ready for that journey. Those who were intent on destruction, intent on keeping life in its contained status quo, they “*laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul*”. A young man named Saul was not yet ready to roll the stone away, not yet ready to look beyond to seek the Divine. And yet in another revelation of life lived in the light of resurrection, we will hear that Saul becomes Paul. The one who today minded the coats of those stoning Stephen, will find and follow his calling into fullness of life. We’re there in that narrative; we may not be stone-throwers, but we may be minding the coats of those who throw. We might, like Stephen, be just about ready to look beyond death, to see the heavens open.

The narrative speaks to each and all of us. It offers us an opportunity to realise our truth when we know ourselves as *filled with the Holy Spirit*. That knowing is probably bigger than any of us can imagine: “*Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these.....*” Our calling is to be more than Christ-like.

The Lord be with you.  
Peter Humphris