

Easter 5
10/5/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31
John 14:1-14

The witness of Stephen

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

The *Acts of the Apostles* is volume two of Luke's history of the life of Jesus and the infant church. We call volume one a gospel, a royal proclamation of good news, but in terms of how Luke began each of his books, he was intending to publish under the genre of history. The giveaway for this assertion is the introductions. He addresses his books to Theophilus. Historians of the day commonly addressed their books to a noble patron. Was Theophilus a real noble patron? Difficult to know. The name means 'lover of God'. Now, that could be any of us who love God. Maybe that was his intention – address his history to all of us who love God. Hold onto that thought. Keep in mind that Luke, indeed all Scripture, is addressed to us.

Keep in mind also that historians of the day wrote more along the lines of a modern historical novel than what we require of academic historians of today. This is significant in *Acts* because Luke includes many speeches and sermons delivered by lots of different church leaders, all of whom seem to have the same speech writer. We do not so much get inside the minds of Peter or Paul or Stephan than we get inside the mind of Luke. That is not a bad mind to explore. It does not contradict the minds of the saints we find in their letters.

In *Acts* Luke tells of Stephen. In literary terms alone this account is a master stroke. It marks a watershed in the life of the church at a number of different levels. Stephen wins a number of gold medals – he is the first deacon, the first non-apostolic evangelist and apologist, and, tragically, the first martyr.

It is of his martyrdom that we read this morning. It comes at the end of two chapters about Stephen – his appointment to serve as deacon, his words and works driven by the power of the Holy Spirit, his confrontation with an antagonistic synagogue, his arrest, his very long defence speech (which is not included in our three year lectionary, probably due to its length), culminating in the frenzied attack that killed him.

Reading Luke's account it is not unreasonable to imagine that as he remembered Stephen's story, he was also remembering Jesus' story. He includes some tell tail parallels. To secure an arrest false witnesses testified against Stephen – the same ploy used against Jesus. As Stephen died, he prayed for his attackers, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' Jesus prayed from the cross, 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.' In no way is the death of Jesus equated with the death of Stephen, or any other martyr. Nevertheless, the church has held its martyrs in the highest regard. Their deaths are regarded as a supreme witness to the gospel of Christ. Indeed, the root word in Greek for 'witness' is 'martyr'.

So, what led to this savage death? What had Stephen been saying that so enraged people? He recited parts of Israel's history pointing up the times of opposition to the leadership God had given them, especially ways in which Moses had struggled to maintain political control during the exodus. Then he related the account of the building of the temple in Jerusalem, a house for a God who needs no house built by humans. He reminded his opponents of the ancestors who persecuted the prophets and capped the whole speech off saying that they had not kept the law ordained by angels. The antagonists got so incensed they covered their ears and shouted, 'la la la'. OK, Luke doesn't add the 'la la la' bit, but he might well have done. Luke likes fine detail. He remembered that stoning someone to death was hot work and he had the executioners take off their coats and lay them at the feet of the young man, Saul. This has to be one of the great segues in literature. This is why the story of Stephen is the watershed of *Acts*. As Stephen exits the main stage, Saul, who will become known as Paul slips quietly from prompt right. Paul will hold centre stage for the next 20 chapters interrupted by brief accounts of other missionaries like Philip and Peter.

At the scene of Stephen's martyrdom, the young man minding the coats heard the prayer, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' St Augustine wrote, 'If Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have had Paul.'

Well, thank God the church has Paul, but Luke would certainly want us to thank God that the church has Stephen.

Thankful for what? Thankful for the order of deacons. Many branches of the church have orders of deacons and deaconesses. The Uniting Church went through a season of examination as we came to a more settled understanding of place of the order of deacons in our polity. In the deaconate established according to *Acts* the church is reminded that the language of the gospel is not confined to the spoken word but is told in acts of service that imitate the life of Jesus whose hand of care was extended very particularly to the poor, the oppressed, the sick and disabled.

The church can be thankful for the fulness of Stephen's long-winded defence at his trial in which he reminds his detractors of the history of Israel's propensity to reject leadership given them by God and to accuse factions of his generation of doing the same thing. What the church can go on to be thankful for is Luke's reminder to the Christian church through the ages, that this propensity to do violence to God's leading did not stop with the birth of the church. Our capacity to crucify and stone all over again has not gone away.

In this time of crisis we might remember Stephen's determination to do and say what was right in the face of his own death, as we watch television accounts of men and women attending to the well being and health care of others, and do so in fear of their own wellbeing, in fear of their own lives.
