

A couple of years ago I read a book which I found profoundly inspiring. Written by an American historian and sociologist, its title is 'The Rise of Christianity – How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries.' What a great title! The author proposes a set of theories as to why the early church grew so rapidly, spreading through the empire like a virus. One of the theories he proposes is that the persecution of the church, rather than snuffing out the fire of Christianity, actually fanned it into flame. The persecution the early church experienced resulted in many choosing to die rather than compromise their faith. They paid for their faith with their life. They became martyrs.

This idea that the early church grew in part because of the inspiration and example of the martyrs is not new. The second century church leader Tertullian famously said:

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. (Tertullian)

Unfortunately, when we hear the word 'martyr' we will most likely associate it with suicide bombers and planes crashing into the twin towers. This is a perversion of the term. To be martyred is to be put to death, or endure great suffering for a religious belief or conviction. Martyrdom is not suicide, but is the choosing of death over compromise. And martyrdom never, ever involves the taking of another's' life.

The word martyr comes from the Greek word 'martus', which is translated as either martyr or as witness. So when Jesus says in Acts 1:8 to the disciples, 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes one you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the world', the word translated as witness is the Greek word 'martus'. You will be my witness – you will be my martyrs.

To witness to Christ is to suffer for Christ, sometimes to the point of death.

Today we are exploring the life and death of the first Christian martyr – a man called Stephen. Luke introduces Stephen as one of the seven deacons who assist the apostles by providing Godly leadership to the rapidly growing church. He goes on to say:

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. (Acts 6:8)

Some members of the synagogue opposed Stephen and his message.

First they engaged him in passionate theological debate. But Stephen infuriated them with the depth of his knowledge and the beauty of his logic.

Next they got others to lie about him, to slander his name. They engaged in character assassination. But still Stephen continued.

Finally, they had Stephen seized and taken in chains to appear before Jerusalem's religious leaders.

There dual charges are laid against him: that Stephen blasphemes by saying that Jesus will destroy the temple and change the law handed down to Moses. The charges are false, in that the clear teaching of the apostles – the Christian faith that Stephen held to – taught that Jesus promised not to destroy the temple, but to replace it with his body. Nor did Jesus come to do away with the law, but to fulfill it with his life, death and resurrection.

And so the stage is set for a trial of sorts – more like a kangaroo court. Luke describes the scene:

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (Acts 6:15)

Stephen has a glow about him that is not of this world. Luke is at pains to describe this because he knows its biblical significance. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai having received the law from God we read this:

(The face of Moses) was radiant because he had spoken the Lord. (Exodus 34:29b)

Moses face radiated with the glow of God's favor. And so too did Stephen's. Luke understands that just as Moses reception of the law had God's approval, so too did Stephen's interpretation of it. Stephen's preaching and the preaching of the early church that in Jesus Christ the intent and purpose of the law was and is fulfilled was proved in part by the angelic face of Stephen.

Luke goes on:

Then the high priest asked him, 'Are these charges true?' To this he replied: 'Brothers and fathers, listen to me!' (Acts 7:1-2a)

Stephen has his day in court and he is not going to waste it. He then proceeds to make a speech in his defense, the longest speech we have recorded in Acts.

Remember that the basis of the charge against him is that he and the faith he professes is dismissive of the Old Testament law and customs. But Stephen's speech is full of allusions and references to the Old Testament. Far from dismissing the Old Testament, Stephen reinterprets it in the light of the coming of Jesus.

Abraham, Moses and David are all referred to.

Interpreting their stories, the key point of Stephen's speech is that God is not and cannot be imprisoned or contained by a building, even one as impressive as the temple in Jerusalem, but that God is always on the march and move and appears in surprising places and uses even more surprising people.

God cannot be contained. God is omnipresent – above all and through all.

Stephen concludes by quoting the prophet Isaiah:

The Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?' says the Lord. 'Or where will my resting place be?' (Acts 7:48-49)

Make no mistake – Stephen is challenging the temple cult – the understanding that God's residential address in the Holy of Holies at the heart of the temple. Instead he is saying that God is untamed and wild; unpredictable and free.

Stephen interprets the Old Testament to point out how far the religious leaders have moved from the truth of who God is, and how God has always revealed himself. But so far he's been pretty polite. But then he throws any caution to the wind and he man with an angelic face well and truly speaks his mind:

"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him. (Acts 7:51-52)

Them's fightin' words!

In being stiff-necked they the people are intolerably stubborn.

In having uncircumcised hearts and ears, the people are spiritually dead.

In resisting the Holy Spirit the people reject the truth.

Stephen, the one accused, becomes the accuser. And the charge he brings is as dramatic as it is offensive.

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:54-56)

The word translated as furious literally means their hearts were torn in two. They were enraged. In their anger, the crowd becomes a mob looking for blood. In stark contrast, Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, is serene and in the midst of the chaos around him has a vision of heaven and Jesus in glory.

But Stephen's vision of Jesus at the right hand of God is the last straw for the mob. For them was an uneducated Galilean – a man of no status. To elevate Jesus to divine status, as Stephen's vision does, was straight out blasphemous to a devout Jew. Even though under Roman rule they have no legal right, the enraged mob take Stephen outside and meet our rough justice in stoning him to death, as the sin of blasphemy requires. Luke records Stephen's last earthly moments:

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59-60)

In his death, Stephen follows the example of Jesus. First, he offers up his spirit. At his crucifixion Jesus offered his spirit to the Father. Stephen offers his spirit to Jesus. And like Jesus, Stephen pleads that those who kill him receive God's mercy despite their sin.

Stephen's death marks the beginning of a marked upsurge in persecution against the early church. All but the apostles are driven out of Jerusalem into the provinces of Judea and Samaria, and as we will discover in coming months, to the ends of the world.

What are we to make of this story? What relevance does it have for us?

In the end Stephen's story is one of remarkable courage as in the face of incredible opposition he stands his ground. Stephen does not give in; he chooses death over compromise.

There are two questions I want to address as we seek how we can apply lessons from Stephen's life to ours.

First, will we ever need to demonstrate the same level or type of courage as Stephen did?

Australia is known as the lucky country and for good reason. We live in a nation that enjoys remarkable peace and prosperity. We enjoy constitutionally enshrined religious freedoms. As such it would be easy to think that we don't need Stephen's measure of courage. That would be a fatal mistake. It would be a mistake because we are engaged in a fight to the death.

We called this series travelling through the Book of Acts Uprising! It is a carefully selected title. Jesus inaugurated a new kingdom, a new way of living in the world. With his resurrection he commissioned his disciples, including Stephen and you and me, to continue to preach this new kingdom – a kingdom marked by sacrificial love. This new kingdom contradicts and challenges and seeks to overturn the patterns of the world we live in. We live in a time and place where there is a massive clash of kingdoms, a cosmic battle between the forces of darkness and of light. And if we are to follow God, we cannot avoid being participants in this battle. We do not have the luxury of being spectators. What do I mean?

Every day we get to make choices on whether we will stand for truth of God or fall for any attractive lie.

For example, will we fall for the lie that we are defined by what we consume, possess or experience – or will we stand for the kingdom principle that we are defined by our relationship with God and relationships with each other?

Will we fall for the lie that the Creation we have been blessed with is ours to exploit without limits – or will we stand for the kingdom principle that humankind has the awesome privilege of caring for and stewarding God's Creation?

Will we fall for the lie that we are all free to choose to express our sexuality as we choose, when we choose and with whom we choose – or will we stand for the kingdom principle that sex is a gift of God that should be enjoyed within the clear boundaries he provides?

Will we fall for the lie that the poor deserve their lot and that all asylum seekers and refugees are potential terrorists – or will we stand for the kingdom principle that the gospel is good news to the poor and the displaced?

Will we fall for the tragic lie that human life is expendable – or will we stand for the fundamental kingdom principle that all human life, from the womb to the grave is sacred?

The fact is that in our comfortable complacency the Christian church is too often asleep at the wheel. God calls us to stand, to be counted, to live counter-culturally, to be salt and light and leaven and seasoning in our world.

Over century ago Mark Twain said this:

It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare. (Mark Twain)

In a world crying out for men and women with moral courage and conviction, the Apostle Paul says this:

Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. (1 Corinthians 6:13)

The second and last question I want to ask out of Stephen's story is this. Where and how do we access the level of courage that he had to stare death in the face the way he did?

Life is full of tests. Medical tests, drivers license tests, citizenship tests, and medical tests.

Like many of you, I have been subjected to my fair share of tests, especially when I was at school, university and Bible College. As many of you know, I am a recovering accountant. In my last semester of my accounting studies I faced my sternest test; a three hour exam for a subject called Accounting Theory. If that sounds mind-numbingly boring, it was! It was also notoriously difficult with a pass rate under 50%. People were bored into failure.

This was to be my last exam in my last semester before graduation. To pile on the pressure, six weeks later Sue and I were to be married. Even though I had not failed a subject all through Uni I developed a deep fear I would fail Accounting Theory. I had dreams and visions of coming back from our honeymoon to sit a Supplementary Exam. This was a dream I would have on and off for years later – even though in the end I passed fine.

Our Accounting Theory Exam was 'open book', that is, we could take any hand written notes we liked into the examination. I vividly remember one of my friends entering the exam hall with a two draw metal filing cabinet on a trolley – all full of meticulously filed notes. He failed.

In the end, those who passed the exam – passed the test – were not the ones who had the best notes or filing systems or even prayed hardest. Passing the test did not depend on what happened in the three hours in that drafty exam hall so much as passing depended on what happened in the four months before. Attending lectures and tutorials, reading barely comprehensible text books, memorizing theories and case studies - these was the path to passing the test.

Stephen did not pass the test because of some sudden discovery of courage and character in the moment of trial.

Stephen passed the test because courage and character had been formed long before.

Remember the description of Stephen that Luke gave us right at the start:

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power... (Acts 6:8a)

This description of Stephen is one that Luke offers not once, but three times.

Stephen's Godly character commended him as a person suitable to serve as a deacon. And Stephen's Godly character was the firm foundation on which he was able to stand when the storm of his trial came.

What does it mean to be a man or woman full of God's grace and power?

Grace is the underserved, unmerited favor of God.

Grace is the experience of God's mercy, forgiveness and love.

Grace comes from knowing Jesus Christ – by having our eyes fixed firmly on him. At the end of his trial Stephen has a vision of Jesus enthroned in heaven. But all through his trial, and indeed his life as a follower of Jesus, Stephen has resolutely fixed his eyes on Jesus and so when the test comes, full of God's grace, Stephen stands firm.

Power comes from being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Stephen was baptized by, immersed in and filled with the Holy Spirit. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he was filled with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

Full of God's grace and power, Stephen chose death over compromise.

Sue and I lived in Adelaide for 20 years. It's an easy city to travel around – beautifully laid out. If you ever got caught in a traffic jam, there was no shortage of short-cuts and alternative routes you could take to get home. Just duck down a side street, a few lefts and rights later and you would be on your way again.

When we moved to the Gold Coast we thought it would be the same – that there was always a short-cut out of a jam. But on the Gold Coast, choose a side street and a few lefts and rights later and more than likely you will be at a dead end in from the a river or canal.

We live in a world that craves short cuts.

We fall for the promise of losing 10 kilograms in 10 days.

We are allured by the dream of securing our financial future in 10 weeks.

Some of us are hoping against hope that sometime in the next ten years the Wallabies will actually win the Tri-Nations.

This obsession with short-cuts spills into the spiritual life. But there are no short-cuts on the road to the sort of Godly Character that was Stephen's foundation in the time of his trial.

Spiritual short cuts only lead to spiritual dead ends.

The road less traveled – the only road worth traveling – is the road where Jesus is our reference point and the Holy Spirit is our fuel.

Grace comes from fixing our eyes on Jesus.

Power comes from being filled again and again and again with the Holy Spirit.

Filled with God's grace and power we take on the character of Jesus – we become like the one we follow.

A man of character in peace is a man of courage in war. (Sir James Glover)

The courage we need to face the trials and storms of life comes only as we too are filled with God's grace and power – as our character is formed into the image of Jesus.

CS Lewis says of courage that comes from strongly formed character:

Courage is not just one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point. (CS Lewis)

In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews we are offered a roll-call of heroes who demonstrated enormous faith and courage in the face of incredible adversity. We are told that those named and unnamed were tortured, stoned, flogged, imprisoned, ridiculed, mistreated, stabbed and even cut in two. Yet by God's grace and in God's power they pressed on. The writer goes on in chapter 12 to offer us this challenge:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

Just as Stephen fixed his eyes on Jesus, we are challenged to do the same.

Just as Stephen made Jesus his only reference point, we are encouraged to do the same.

Our reference point – our North Star is Jesus crucified and risen.

As the stones rained down on him, as the mob called for his life – Stephen saw beyond his suffering a vision of Jesus – the crucified and risen one who embraced the agony of the cross for the incomparable joy that lay beyond it.

Many of us are facing our own tests and trials.

For some of us our physical health, or the health of someone we love, is marred by uncertainty or even a bleak medical diagnosis.

Some of us are in midst of marriage conflict and we wonder if it is worth battling for our relationship.

Some of us are wondering where the next mortgage payment will come from, or job, or even house to live in.

Tests and trials come in all shapes and forms.

But the key to overcoming them is the same for us as it was for Stephen; we overcome as we fix our eyes on Jesus and as we are filled with his grace and the Holy Spirit's power.

Right at the end of his account of Stephen's death, Luke gives us this telling observation:

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. (Acts 8:1a)

Saul, the great persecutor of the church who one day would be Paul the great missionary of the same church was there looking on as Stephen breathed his last. Decades later Paul wrote his last letter to the church in Rome. After a lifetime of suffering for his faith, of being threatened with death, he writes these words:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? (Romans 8:35)

All these things and more Paul had endured. The answer to his question is emphatic:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (Romans 8:37)