

## 31<sup>st</sup> December 2017 – St Stephen's Day

### Joint Service of Holy Communion at St Stephen's

Revd Patrick Senior

Here we are, as a United Benefice to celebrate the patronal festival of St Stephen. We have in the window the graphic portrayal of his death, but we mustn't lose sight that, before his death, Stephen was a disciple of Jesus who was given a servant task of caring for the distribution of food – a simple task he humbly performed along with others chosen to help. Stephen the Servant was willing to serve.

Also, it is New Year's Eve today, and perhaps some of us are thinking about New Year's Resolutions. Well, I have something for you to think about – which we'll come back to once we have explored Stephen's life.

From the first part of the reading this morning we learn that Stephen wasn't only a servant, but was also used by God (v8) – as he was full of grace and power – “did great wonders and miraculous signs”.

Some might think he was getting above his position, but when God finds a servant-hearted person, God can take them further than they imagine. Humble-hearted people can grow faster in the things of God than those who claim to have arrived. The process of discipleship begins with humbling ourselves before God – recognising that our salvation isn't our own, but God's gift to us. God is looking for humble-hearted people who are willing to grow.

I think Stephen must have had a deeper spiritual life than we can read about in the Acts of the Apostles. For Stephen to be chosen, he must have caught the eye of the '12' and been amongst those who had been converted at Pentecost. He was most likely of Greek heritage, and so able to serve the wider community of new Christians. But also we can gather he must have been – prayerful and spiritual as well as humble. For how else would his ministry grow beyond serving to being used by God for miracles?

Just like a marathon runner doesn't run a marathon on the first day, nor does our spiritual life start by being used by God to perform miracles from day one.

Start humble and grow.

Start open heartedly and seek growth/development.

We heard the final verses of Chapter 7 read today from verse 48 – but what about verses 1-47? Well if you read it you will discover Stephen is able to give a detailed description of salvation through the Old Testament, starting with Abraham and ending with Moses at the burning bush.

All that Stephen said was correct and true, but those who heard it didn't want to be told by this young Christian –

The religious leaders didn't have humble hearts.

The establishment didn't have open minds for God to do a new thing.

So the establishment accused Stephen of blasphemy and condemned him to stoning to death – hence our window depiction of his death.

But, in the window is Stephen's view of heaven as he prays forgiveness – only someone close to God could make this prayer in these circumstances.

So as we approach 2018, what of us? We are the established Church. Many of us have been part of this congregation for many a decade. Are we like those who condemned Stephen? - stuck in our time warp of faith limited in our understanding and willingness to grow? Those who condemned Stephen had years of history and understanding and yet when truth was presented, they rejected it.

Are we willing to start spiritual training to run a spiritual marathon?  
Are we humble, like Stephen, willing to serve, but also growing spiritually in awareness of God, devoted to studying scripture and making time to encounter God in prayer?

By the way, Moses was minding his own business when he encountered God in the burning bush in the desert. The disciples were watching and waiting in prayer before Pentecost fire fell on them and wind blew away the cobwebs.

So 2018 – I declare to be a year of Spiritual Growth – a year of personal prayer – a year of increased devotion to Bible reading.

Both St Peter's and St Stephen's need to grow numerically (add new members), but also we need to grow spiritually and I believe it is in the spiritual growth that we will become attractive to others to join us. As our faith grows and shines, so others will want to engage with our lives and church life.

Now John and I can't force you to grow spiritually, but John and I are looking for willing hearts – humble-minded people who are hungry to grow, to develop spiritual lives.

2018 – Year of Discipleship - a year of seeking new experiences of God, a year of growing devotion to Jesus and experiencing God among us.

Just as a marathon runner starts slow with short runs and builds up stamina, so we must also create milestones to create goals of development. Maybe you're new in church, or maybe you've been here for many a decade – it all starts with willingness of spirit, to humbly pray – “Lord, I want to grow”

”Lord, I want to go further in faith”

“Lord, I want to encounter you in my life”

Whatever your prayer, God is ready and willing to take us on a journey. I'm praying that we will end 2018 as different people – spiritually and as a Church. That between us, we will grow and encounter faith in each other. So that 2018 will be a year of faith encounters and growing opportunities.

This can happen individually in our homes and collectively in church or groups. Maybe it's time to:-

prioritise Lent group discussions

or download an app onto your phone to read the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles

or start each day with a Psalm

or end the day on your knees by your bed giving thanks to God for his grace.

After Easter we hope to run an Alpha course – a Christian basics course. It's been widely successful around the world and it's time we embraced it too. Start praying now about growth, about Alpha – and over the coming weeks, learn more about it, offer to help run it, be willing to help promote it, to provide catering for it.

2018 – a year of discipleship and growth for me, for you, for us, as congregations that in 12 months time, we would be renewed people, aware of God with us in new ways.

When we celebrate St Stephen's Day next year, we will think back – this is where it all began. This is when I realised I had potential to grow, to serve, to develop.

Being a Christian isn't a static place – like a pot plant – we can become pot bound. Well, 2018 is the year we all get re-potted.

- Spread our spiritual roots
- Grow closer to the light
- Get fertilised and have a growth spurt
- Get pruned and grow new branches

2018 is a year of discipleship and growth and it all begins with 'me' – 'you' – 'us'

Just before Christmas I finished a book on prayer and one of the final stories in it was about a man who was used mightily by God as a preacher, as a miracle worker, as a prophet whose daily prayer was to draw a circle around himself and pray – 'Lord, may revival come and let it begin in this circle'

This man wanted to see change, but knew it had to start with himself – and he was humble enough to pray for himself before he prayed for others, or did any ministry.

So can we all be willing to daily draw a circle around ourselves and say: 'Lord may revival come and let it begin in this circle'

For if we do, we might be like Stephen and see (v56) "heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand side of God"

Change, growth, renewal, discipleship – 2018's going to be a great year – "let revival begin with us, today"