

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Easter 5 (10 May)

Acts 7:55-end

It was inevitable that it had to happen. The euphoria of those early post-Easter days – with all the recorded successes in terms of recruits to the new faith that we have heard about in the past few weeks – had to come to a halt, however momentary it might prove to be. Today in our extract from Acts is no success story – instead, we have a graphic account of the murder of Stephen, regarded by history as the first martyr (the first, sadly, of what was to prove to be many).

But maybe it is? Maybe it is a success story, albeit one that has a complex and twisted pattern to it. Stephen's martyrdom was indeed that: a sacrificial moment, graphically illustrated, poignant in its nature and form. Here was glowing example of one who was to pay the ultimate human price for his faith, yet receive – in vivid illustration – a glorious invitation to the greater life. Here was the triumph of the Resurrection writ-large; and here was an indicator of what is to be through faith.

However, it was still cruel. And cruelty we so easily know is never far away from human existence. The contrast with the previous records in Acts, including Peter's amazing early successes, is sadly reminiscent of how real life is, and no doubt always will be; as humans we seem incapable of ever learning what the better way is, no matter how glaringly obvious it might be. Starvation, inequality, poverty, need, they all continue to exist in our world, a world that ironically it took a virus to momentarily level off – suddenly, now, we are all equal, but for all the wrong reasons.

To see today's biblical extract in context, you really need to read the whole of chapter 7, and by doing that you gain a better understanding of why the people surrounding Stephen were less-than-impressed. He had rather laid into them! His sermon (for want of a better word to describe verses 2-54) made clear where they had all gone wrong, and what they had to do to amend their thinking. As established and seemingly devout residents, the people were not easily pleased with his attack. Whether right or wrong, their displeasure was to provide dramatic end to this small chapter of early Christian history.

But look to the positive. Look to the opening words of today's extract. Here we see the crux of what we should really be focussing upon: the reality and wonder of God, and His interaction with one of His own. Amongst the arguments and tension of the day, Stephen is never deprived of what lie at the core of his being – he was on the pinnacle of great discovery, of great adventure, of great potential. He was on the edge of God's profound care and protection, and although the journey across that rubicon was to be less-than-brilliant, it was to be fulfilling – and that promise never appears to leave Stephen's thoughts.

Mind you, it must have been the 'final straw' for his audience! After 'banging on' for so long, they had heard enough. Interesting, though, that they never moved away, or simply ignored him, or even ridiculed or snubbed him. No, they stayed, fascinated no doubt by the teaching, curious to hear

the next comment, and hooked on the sheer drama. What is this person, controversial though he appears to be, what is he going to say next? Do we have a first-century "Donald Trump" here, mesmerising the people by what he might say next! But, enough is enough, and their hot-headed temperament ensured no more words. No more Stephen. Little did they know that those same words would triumph for eternity by their very actions. Despite trying to destroy the teaching, they enhanced its value by their behaviour. Stephen's death brought life to the teaching. "Acts 7" lived on! Its author made sure of that.

The magnetism of Stephen's teaching – just as it was in many early examples – gives a clue as to why we are here today, still reading it, still pondering upon it, still intrigued by it. The scriptures of the early Church provide that bedrock upon which 'gospel diamonds' were written and preserved. Thoughts, ideas, teachings, images – all continually bombarding society as those same stones thumped against Stephen's weakening body – and yet all steeped in the power not to kill, but to bring alive. To read these writings, and to attempt to live and breathe them is to find ourselves transported to the visionary level that Stephen experienced. The wonder of God - lying at the heart of it all - continues, we hope, to shine in each of us today.

And all that we have and are continues the sense of focus that Stephen shares with us: focus on the character and person of Christ. It is His being that transports us and those like today's victim into a different place, a different strand of life, a different comprehension of it all. We may not always agree with everything – we may not have agreed with Stephen at the time – but if open to the power that lay behind the reflective words, we hopefully want to do something more fulfilling than merely pick up stones to throw. Stones only build walls. Stones create barriers. The lives behind the stones are the greater value. The minds that direct those lives are what really matters, for it is those same minds that will bring outcome into the land. Outcome that hopefully does not destroy. Whilst images relating to the Cross of Christ underpin today's extract, it is to those of the more dominant Resurrection motif that we should turn, for it is in them that we see the greater good. To see, "the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God," must be of awesome value to our entire self. The fascination of God-triumphant to the last!

Fr. Ian