

## Walking with Jesus and the impact it can have.....

### Acts 7:55-end and 1 Peter 2:2-10

A couple of weeks ago we looked at the Road to Emmaus and thought about how it spoke to us as a church about Worshipping God, Witnessing or telling others and a life walking with Jesus. Last week Bob spoke about the community of the early church and how they were marked by both fear and joy – reverence for God as well as the joy of knowing they were loved by God.

This week's passage from Acts appears to take us in a different direction as we see the persecution and stoning of Stephen. When we come to a passage like Acts 7 we remember the tough times that the early Christian disciples went through. However, we need to remember that this persecution still goes on. In our world today people are still persecuted and killed for living out their faith in Jesus. Persecution and opposition is still a real and living threat for those who walk in the way of Jesus.

In our readings from Peter and Acts today we see a reminder of what walking with Jesus might look like and the challenges that we face.

What does a life walking with Jesus look like?

- Living a life that is built on Jesus.....
- A life imitating Jesus
- Modelling and sowing seeds for others.

### Living a life that is built on Jesus.

The account of Stephen in the book of Acts only lasts for just over two chapters – we don't hear that much about him however because he was one of the first recorded disciples killed for his faith, we remember Stephen.

Looking back to Acts 6, we see the start of Stephen's story. Stephen is picked by the disciples to enable the remaining disciples to keep their focus upon "prayer and the ministry of God's word." (Acts 6:4) Stephen's initial role is to serve others in order to free up the disciples to concentrate on preaching and prayer.

Why is Stephen picked? We see that one of the descriptions of Stephen is that he is "a man full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit." Stephen is living a life that is walking in the ways of Jesus. We see soon that Stephen soon did more in

addition to helping the disciples out by serving at tables. Stephen went on (we see in Acts 6 v.8) to do “many great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.” That initial life of serving others will impact in ways we sometimes can not imagine.

Stephen faithfully serving and walking with Jesus in the ordinary things had a real impact on those who were around him. But it was not just the doing – Stephen lived a life that spoke about God too.

Acts 7:1-54 shows once Stephen is arrested, what he says to the people who arrest him. It is one of the longest talks recorded in the book of Acts but has important themes in it for the early church so it is important to read. We are not going to look at it in close detail today except to say that it describes to those who arrest Jesus how important it is to live a life built on relationship with God and not merely on a tradition of how we do things. Stephen shows those of the Sahedrin (the Jewish Council) how God through history (starting with Abraham and through to Moses and David) had wanted to have relationship with his people but instead the people made things a tradition and rejected the truth of some of those who spoke God’s truth to them.

In his walk with Jesus, Stephen wants to point the Jewish people back to the truth that God had been at work – wanted relationship with them and that they had missed who Jesus really was.

Peter writing in his letter of 1 Peter reminds the church that a life built on Jesus is important. In fact it’s truly foundational. He describes how in his death Jesus has become “a chosen and precious cornerstone.” We as living stones are called to build our lives, walking with Jesus as our firm foundation.

### **Imitating Jesus**

I find it interesting how since my children have grown, more and more people often say how they are like either Tamar or myself. Certain characteristics – either their looks, their mannerisms or the way they talk obviously make people think they resemble either of us. Sometimes we agree, others we look and have to think – are they really like that?

In the same way that we can imitate others, as Christians we are called to imitate – to be like Jesus.

That does not mean that we **are** Jesus but in the way that we behave, in the way we live our lives, people can see how our lives point to Jesus.

In Acts 6, when Stephen is arrested by the Sanhedrin we see that “all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” Stephen glowed of the presence of God – there was something distinctive about him.

Stephen in the way he behaves also imitates the sort of response that Jesus would take against opposition. We see that between Acts 6 and 7 Stephen faces much opposition. In Acts 6 “opposition arose... from members of the Synagogue” “false witnesses were produced” and then in our reading members of the Sanhedrin were “furious and gnashed their teeth” before dragging him out of the city and stoning him.

But look at the way that Stephen responds. As opposition arises – Stephen speaks “wisdom the spirit gave him.” Stephen is speaking the truth given to him by God – Jesus was often good at speaking truth in a situation. This is not always popular but some (and in line with what God is saying to us) are called to speak that truth. Stephen does not answer those who arrest him until he is asked if it is truth - he remains calm amidst that opposition. Even when the opposition are nashing their teeth against him, Stephen focuses upon God and the vision he has of heaven opening.

Finally, at the point of stoning how do we see Stephen respond. We see in Acts 7:59 that Stephen prays “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” and then “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Stephen is not pretending to be Jesus but the words that he uses are similar to that of Jesus on the cross – he is reflecting what Jesus would do in that situation. He wants the people to know that he has prayed for God to not hold the sin against them - he has forgiven them and wants God to.

A few years ago people used to wear bands on their wrists with the letters WWJD – it reminded them to ask the question What would Jesus do in order that in their lives, they could consider what Jesus’ response would be.

Peter in his letter describes this church as a “royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession.” Once we have given our lives to Jesus we are called to respond with lives of reverence and service recognising that we are God’s special possession and to use our lives to worship and serve him. In doing that we are to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into this wonderful light.” As we reflect Jesus in our lives, as we live our lives in response to what God has done for us, we are demonstrating to others the

way in which God can call us out of darkness into light – there is a different way.

Peter reminds us that “you are the people of God” and to reflect the mercy and love that was shown to us. We can do this by imitating and living lives that reflect Jesus.

In doing this we are beginning to model a different way for others.

### **3. Model and sowing seeds for others.**

Peter in his letter is asking that early church to reflect something to those around them that demonstrates a different way. At the beginning of 1 Peter 2 he urges them to “rid themselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.” Peter encourages people to build lives on Jesus as others “stumble because they disobey the message.” As disciples we are called to model something to those around – something of the kingdom of God which demonstrates God through us.

As we do that we are often unaware of the impact that this can have.

Often when we read the passage from Acts 7 that we have this morning we often focus on the difficult way that Stephen died – of the implications for us of opposition. As I was looking at this passage in preparing for what to say, I was struck by verse 58. “The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.” Saul was part of the proceedings that happened that day. He would witness those moments of stoning. He may have even heard what Stephen said to the Sanhedrin before. I cannot help but feel that this event would have had an effect on Saul.

Stephen would never have seen what difference his life and this event had on Saul. Saul, who two chapters later encounters Jesus and has a transformation. I wonder if, after the transformation of Saul, as he became Paul and the growth of the early church took off, he looked back and thought about what Stephen had modelled to him – how he lived this life which modelled something different.

We are never to know what impact the small things we do can have on those around us. When people stop and see our response to God’s love – it can make them think about the reasons behind what we do. We can never be aware of what impact, living lives that imitate Jesus may have. Often it comes back to the parable of the sower, where Jesus talks about sowing seeds. We sow the

seeds and leave God to cause the growth for that thought or idea we shared. Modelling lives that resemble or imitate Jesus demonstrates to others what God is about and his amazing love. It is a key part of walking with Jesus.

So as we come to a close this morning, let us reflect on what the model of Stephen's life can teach us about walking with Jesus. Let us think about Stephen, his relationship with God and his understanding in order that we can grow deeper as disciples.

Stephen shows us how life as disciples should be built on Jesus, trying to imitate and reflect Jesus in our lives. In doing this we model the kingdom and the way of Jesus to others, that makes them think about Jesus for themselves and in doing plants seeds for them.

Who can you model Jesus to this week, over a phone call, in praying for them. Who do we need to pray for God to grow those seeds that we have planted?

Let us pray....

Father we thank you for the example that Stephen was to us.

Thank you that his life was built on firm foundations, that he had relationship with you and was prepared to reflect that in the life that he lived. Thank you that through him seeds would be sown for others to come to know you.

As we pause this morning we name before you someone who we have had the opportunity or would like the opportunity to plant a seed with.

Father help us to live lives that walk with Jesus, that reflect your love and help others come to know you.

Amen.