

Stephen - Acts 6:8 - 8:3

Paul Gioia - 15/08/10

Reading: 6:1-10, 7:51-58

Background

- Peter started his sermon last week with the message "I could be wrong." Well I'm hear to tell you I probably am wrong.
- It's been a long time since I last read this passage (or any passage for that matter). Deliberately didn't read the usual commentaries. I wanted to see what new fresh observations I could make before slotting into the conventional wisdom of Intervarsity Press.
- Which means you're either going to get a sermon of personal subjective uninformed waffle, or a fresh view from the ridge where a nearly-52 year olds sits and ponders. Or maybe just sits.
- You'll also see someone struggling with their own cynicism, which is the flip side of a crusty, hard-earned sort of wisdom, I guess.

6:1-7 - Context

- **1** Ethnic issues - Grecian Jews were being ignored in daily food distribution. A subtle form of religious or racial favouritism? Maybe not even deliberate.
- Victims of their own success - too many bums on seats. Without some kind of oversight these kinds of problems can fall through the cracks. And obviously they were.
- **2-6** It's not right to neglect the word of God by waiting on tables. *Rpt v2.*
- Passed the responsibility for food distribution to a highly qualified group of men. Possibly the most over-qualified waiters in history, though I suspect they oversaw the waiting and didn't do that much themselves.
- "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly..." The question is, did the word spread because the Apostles had more time to devote to God's word, or because of the addition of the super-seven and the more equitable distribution of food. Probably both.
- The more I ponder about this passage the more I wonder - Were the Twelve saying it wasn't right to wait on tables because it was "less spiritual work" or because they just didn't have the time, or because they were no good at it? They seem to make a distinction between "prayer and the ministry of the word" and "waiting on tables", as if the latter did not involve prayer and ministering. It's clearly an important pastoral issue, and by choosing men of the calibre of Stephen it's clear they don't see the job as less spiritual or important. What do you think?
- **7** "...and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." It's one thing for the proletariat to be acting like swinging voters. But to have the leaders, the pillars of society, the ones who help maintain law, and order, and stability - it's unthinkable. Like Cheryl Kernot ditching the Democrats and going over to Labor.

6:8-15

- **8** "Stephen ... did great wonders and miraculous signs...". Remember, this is the head waiter guy. Maybe we're missing something on what it means to wait on people.
- **9-11** "... couldn't stand up to his wisdom" Professional jealousy sets in. To the point of libelling, smearing the competition and telling outright lies. Which means they'd qualify as staffers for Julia Gillard or Tony Abbott.

- **12-14** He's taken to the Sanhedrin - an assembly of Judges, historically a council in every city - in this context it's the supreme court of the Jewish nation. The false charges are repeated.
- **15** And through all of this, Stephen appears to have the face of an angel. Is this a picture of saintly innocence, like one of those Greek icons with the halo? We can certainly say he didn't appear to be angry, afraid or anxious - all the things I would be in the same situation.

7:1-50

- **1** So the high priest asks "Are these charges true?" As if he really didn't know? The whole thing is a stitch up. Trumped up charges with no more credibility our government and Opposition's commitment to a fair and just society.
- **2** To this he replies "Listen to me..." and gives the high priest and his mates a lesson in his own history. God appears to Abraham in Mesopotamia and said, go! So he goes to settle in Haran,...had no inheritance - just a promise that his descendants would eventually rule the land they were now living in. And then stuff happened, and more stuff happened.
- **4-50** And Stephen goes on, and on, and on. Like one of Chipper's old sermons. I used to love reading the bible when I was a kid. But whenever I came to this section I'd skip over it to the bit where people started getting stoned or killed again. It really is quite a boring bit of the story.
- So what was the point of stating what the high priest already knew better than anyone else. Was it to prove that Stephen had creds as well? Was it to lull them to sleep and escape while they all dozed off? Or was it for some other reason? Apparently these long monologues weren't unusual.

7:51-53

- **51-53** I think he was softening them up. Because after summarising a few thousand years of history he lets them have it between the eyes. Completely out of the blue. "You stiff-necked people..." *Read the rest.*
- Stephen might as well have selected a nice bunch of rocks himself and handed them around. He says a bunch of inflammatory stuff deliberately designed to shorten his life span and invalidate his superannuation if he'd had any.

7:54-60

- **54** "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him..." Like a hateful mob of rednecks reminiscent of the Deep South. Except these men are not ignorant farmers.
- **55-56** And, as if that wasn't enough to inflame the situation past the point of any return, he says "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." I'm trying to think what might be as equally offensive to a Christian. All I can think of is that joke that ends "Hey Peter, I can see my house from up here..." There are some things you just don't joke about.
- I'm trying to accept at face value that he was not deliberately being offensive for the sake of it. But within that Jewish context it is hard to imagine a worse blasphemy. The believed in one, and only one, God. To Jewish ears Stephen as advocating polytheism. (Christians came up with the Trinity to deal with that one.)
- **57-58** You think I'm exaggerating? "At this they covered their ears, yelling at the top of their voices - not listening, not listening, not listening. They dragged him out of the city and began to stone him."
- What is it like to be stoned? One rock at a time. The first one probably misses, or glances off you. You're not dodging, so pretty soon a great boondy connects with your skull and you're in pain, incredible pain. Then another and the pain doubles. And another. And then at some point you're concussed and not properly aware of your surroundings. Every rock

after that barely hurts. Your time is up. You can hardly be surprised at this outcome. What were you thinking?

- **59-60** And at the last possible moment, before you lose the capacity to put two words together you are magnanimous in death. "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Just like Jesus. And he died. Just like Jesus. Except he didn't rise again. He stayed dead.

8:1-3

- So what was the outcome? It precipitated great persecution. Christians went into hiding. And the church mourned deeply for Stephen. Imagine all those people he sat with while waiting at tables, all those stories that poured out. Imagine how loved he was.
- But there's a back story - while everyone is getting ready for the stoning a young try-hard collects their shirts and coats so they could get a decent job and work up a sweat. (I keep thinking about a certain scene in the Life of Brian.)
- Who was that young man? What was he doing there? His name was Saul, and he gave approval to Stephen's death. He aided and abetted a murder, though he wouldn't have seen it that way. From then on Saul began to destroy the church, dragging believers to prison. How much blood must he have had on his hands by the time he hit the road to Damascus? That's for someone else to ponder.

Discussion

- If I am brutally honest, I don't have as much sympathy towards Stephen as I thought I would. Of course, it was shocking that he died in that way. He told the truth. He was willing to die for his beliefs. But I find myself bordering on the blasphemous thought that, to some extent, he asked for it, that he wasn't just a victim. Even Jesus was less provocative before the high priest. Was it really necessary to provoke those blind, arrogant and bigoted men?
- Maybe Stephen was just a player in an ugly and violent drama that was unstoppable. Christians exercising their calling and in so doing challenging the authorities and the very structures of society?
- But did his face *really* shine like an angel or has someone written that in to almost deify him and justify his actions?
- I was always taught his was a noble, righteous act - martyrs are heroes. But I feel uncomfortable by the manner of his death.
- Some might argue that Stephen's death precipitated a series of actions that ultimately resulted in Saul's conversion. But at what cost? The lives of so many people, just so we could grow the church? Is that how God works? The end justifies the means? I don't think so. And maybe Saul was going to travel down that road anyway.
- I thought maybe now's the time to get some help. Exactly *why* did the priests turn into exploding tomatoes? So I finally picked up a commentary. Here's a sample of what I read:
 - Until now, the disciples had behaved themselves relatively well, good Jews who went to the Temple every Saturday, a little eccentric in their beliefs but otherwise harmless.
 - The Temple was at the centre of religious and cultural life for the Jews.
 - When Stephen and his other Greek-speaking mates came on the scene, they talked about minimising the role of the temple and about a new form of worship that didn't need buildings, and priests, and church fetes, and so on. Stephen's speech repeatedly describes how God went with Abraham across different lands. Stephen was challenging a fundamental pillar of Jewish life.
 - Stephen was being deliberately provocative and radical. He was already in trouble, but he deliberately escalated the situation that resulted in his own death.
 - It wasn't a lynch mob that killed Stephen - it was a legal killing as a consequence of his blasphemy.
- Here's what I didn't read:

- An adequate explanation of why he provoked the mob, and whether his death was really necessary, especially within the context of the violence and persecution that was precipitated by his behaviour.
- Almost every reference I Googled on Stephen's stoning saw his story as a victory for Stephen and for the church. Martyrdom is good.
- And yet I feel very uncomfortable about the circumstances of his death. I am clearly missing something.
- Where else have I seen that kind of behaviour?
 - I'm thinking of the desperate acts of rock throwers and suicide bomber when they feel there is no other course to take, no other option that will make a difference. I shudder at this comparison, but my mind keeps getting drawn to it.
 - I'm also thinking of fundamentalism and the use of martyrdom as a way of provoking social change and achieving immortality.
- These are involuntary and uncomfortable comparisons for me. So I looked back, and pondered again on the recent events since Jesus' death and resurrection.
 - Acts 1 - The disciples regroup and replace that traitor Judas with Matthias from a shortlist of two by a throw of dice.
 - Acts 2 - The Spirit descends on God's disciples and they speak in tongues - real tongues! Peter interprets what people are seeing as a fulfilment of Scripture about God's coming and salvation through Jesus, and three thousand people were baptised that day. Everyone shared everything.
 - Acts 3 - Peter heals a guy who was crippled for forty years and again points to Jesus and calls for repentance. You get the feeling something big is happening.
 - Acts 4 - Peter and John get taken up before the Sanhedrin. The establishment are worried. Really worried. These guys are just fishermen. They're nobodies. They're released and go back to their communities and the sharing continues - to the point Joseph sells his retirement block and gives them the funds. Things are getting serious when property's involved.
 - Acts 5 - Speaking of property, Ananias and Saphira get in on the act and sell their own dream block, but! - they keep back part of the money and they're both dead by the end of the day.
 - The Apostles go on to heal people left right and centre. It's a shambles. It's chaos. People are not playing by the rules any more. The high priest, the lawmakers, the Sadducees are really worried. So they put Peter and John in jail. But then an angel of God breaks them out and they go to preach in the temple. So the rulers beat them and whip them, but Peter and John just go on preaching the word.
- That's the context by the time you get to Stephen. They were on a roll. They were changing the whole fabric of Jewish society in Jerusalem. There was a revolution going on. A revolution with no spears, no swords; their only weapons were words. Like Fight Club but without the fighting. Or the bombs. Maybe that was a bad comparison.
- Those early Christians were precipitating a new world order. I don't think that's putting it too strongly. And I think Stephen knew exactly what he was doing. He was part of that revolution. I think he intended to die.

Conclusions

So that's the end. It's an unresolved and untidy end. So what's the positive, uplifting message I'm supposed to leave you with?

- If you're used to reading the Bible a lot, then not reading the Bible for a while can be a really good idea. (Somehow I don't think this is really a problem at MHCC.) Sometimes the conventional wisdom and security our favourite commentaries can be a straightjacket and we get locked into certain ways of thinking. The problem is, using our own faculties rather

than just someone else's can lead us into dangerous territory. And if we have baggage we're not aware of, we can get into a bit of a pickle. But I like a bit of pickle. :-)

- The thing is, we believe this stuff we read is true; that it really happened! So it has to bear scrutiny, not just from wise others but using our own brains and heart. Otherwise the minute we hear something that challenges our beliefs we risk becoming like those priests running around with their fingers in their ears shouting "I'm right you're wrong. I'm right you're wrong." And really that's a response that comes from fear, not from certainty. It's at the heart of what fundamentalists are - insecure.
- Back to Stephen, I think I understand a little better why he did what he did. But it doesn't tell me what I really want to know: *should* Stephen have done what he did?
- Does this say something about me rather than the text? Have I heard so many stories of suicide bombers that I see everything through that lens of violence and shattered lives? And the way the priests and Sadducees did the fingers in their ears routine - who does that remind you of? Remember that guy from Denmark who got a fatwa for a libellous cartoon about Mohammed? Have I become so afraid of or sensitised to fundamentalist extremists that it prevents me from seeing the main point of the text? Am I being unfair to Stephen and reading something that's not there? I said I was probably wrong.

So I finish the sermon with a question: does Stephen's action serve as a role model for us 2000 years later? What do you think?