

Sunday 10th May, 5th of Easter.

Alongside the scripture from John's Gospel we are reminded today of the Story of Stephen in Acts.

After Pentecost the church is growing rapidly. The Apostles are preaching and teaching, signs wonders and miracles occur and inevitably practical problems of organisation occur. The Apostles don't want to be distracted with all that, so they choose seven men, filled with wisdom and the holy spirit and commission them to the work of deacons – practical service.

Stephen is one, but his service doesn't prevent him also doing signs and wonders and speaking of the faith with great passion, and he rubs up the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Acts chapter 6) and they plot against him having him arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin.

Now eventually Stephen is stoned, but the account of his arrest, false trial, false accusations, and stoning mirror Jesus own suffering. Even his words mirror Jesus crucifixion asking God to forgive those who are stoning him.

As stories go – it's not quite the one to put on a poster advertising the Christian faith. Follow Jesus, you too can suffer and die. Not an easy sell.

Jesus never hid from the disciples that anyone that wishes to follow him must "take up their cross". The way Jesus leads is not away from suffering and into some holy blessed state, not in this world it's not. The way of Jesus is actually towards the suffering and needs of the world.

Jesus disciples had different expectations, at least they did to begin with. Their understanding and perspective had to change.

Remember Thomas who wants to know the way to God the Father. The way to God isn't a method, secret knowledge, or a formula. It's Jesus – belief in him.

Philip wants to be shown God the Father, as if Jesus could draw back the clouds and give them a vision of God in heaven. The answer again, is Jesus. He is "in" the Father, the Father is "in" him. When you know Jesus, you know the Father.

Bit by bit their understanding changes and their expectation changes.

I love a good heist movie. I love a thriller with a twist at the end I didn't see coming. You think you know what the story is, the storyteller has given you one perspective...suddenly, (sleight of hand) with new insight you see it a different way. Think of classic movies like The Sting or the remake of The Thomas Crown Affair.

Feel free to send me your recommendations!

There has always been the temptation (or the mistake) of making the church, the Christian Life, Faith something other than the direct challenge of following Jesus. When that happens, Jesus finds a way of exposing the real story and showing things in a different light.

The temptation to be a holy huddle and have nothing to do with the world.

The temptation to be reluctantly engaged with the world, but spending most of our time in the holy huddle because the world is dangerous and not holy!

Jesus was fully in the world, so he expects his church to be.

It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a church in the world.

And it's not just the Church – the disciples were the same. Their expectation of the Messiah and how faith works had to change and Jesus sets about revealing to them the bigger picture, the full story.

Like Stephen, we are to grow into a likeness of Christ, fully engaged with the world and fully engaged in God. It's not either or, or some of one and some of the other but all of both.

John's Gospel speaks of Jesus as the Word made flesh. He came fully into the world, experiencing all of it. It's true the world did not recognise him, but he didn't withdraw from the world but embraced it even to the extent of his suffering and death. Following Jesus is to walk the same pathway – fully in the world, but with a different view of it and the future.

There's a line in a morning prayer we use on Wednesday's that says

grant that, as he came to share our human nature,
so we may be partakers of his divine glory;

In the story of Stephen we see someone who is sharing Jesus glory, he looks, acts, sounds and responds just as Jesus did.

God the Son came fully to the world to be like us.
He experienced the world fully like us.
He had a care and concern for the sick, the poor and the outcast and identified with them.
He would invite us to share the Father's love for the world.

Jesus was also In the Father and the Father was in him, he was filled with the Spirit and the invitation is for us to have that experience too, as Stephen clearly did.

Not to float off to some higher plane or become so heavenly minded we are no earthly use...but to know who we are IN HIM, and to experience all his fullness to such a degree it changes our view of the world and of suffering.

Our relationship to God becomes so full and close that we have the mind of Jesus – thus what we ask in His name he will do because it's what he would do.

What an aspiration! To be caught up in the abundant life of Jesus and be IN HIM, even as we engage with the world as fully as Jesus did.

I close today with this quote from the Celtic Daily Prayer book for May 6th. (see below)

The key is in the sentence "we live the life that has taken root deep within us"

Life "In Christ".

shouldering much of the weight. It is the wrong time for recriminations – gently we should ease one another's burdens.

May 6

PSALM 139:12 ISAIAH 30:20–21 TITUS 1:15–16

KEEP YOUR OPTIONS OPEN WHEN THERE IS NO PROBLEM, BUT DIG IN WHEN YOU MUST CHOOSE

Too often the Christians are hiding out in their mission citadels peering out, cautiously preparing to run out quickly and lasso some poor passer-by, claim them for God and haul them back into the safety of the citadel. This is called making a difference in the world ...? What happened to the promise that 'greater is He who is in you than he that is in the world?'

We are not asked to live a blinkered or protected existence in a safe, ivory-towered environment. We are sent to walk confidently with a pure heart into the world of people and culture

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and pain and pressure. It need not contaminate us, if only we live the life that has taken root deep inside of us. God wants to plant us in places where we can make a difference and be His presence – not in any self-conscious way.

There may be times when we need to speak out, opt out, explain our beliefs are different from those around us – but we should not provoke confrontations or become defensive. These times, when they happen, may lead to miracles or to persecution – or both.

May 7

PSALM 119:71, 113–117 ISAIAH 50:4–5 ROMANS 5:3–5