

FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

STUDY FOUR—FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

Acts 7.55-60

⁵⁵But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' ⁵⁷But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

Stephen was a deacon in the Jerusalem church. His story is found in Acts 6-7. He was a Jewish convert to the nascent faith of the risen Jesus. He was a brilliant theologian and public advocate and his capacity to carry out a public debate and draw attention to his arguments for his case was exceptional. He irritated many of his opponents and finally angered some very significant enemies. They brought a case against him. They alleged that he attacked the law of Moses and the Temple, two of the religio-political foundations of the Temple politics of his day. And he did this all in the name of Jesus.

In his defence he refuses to become defensive but outlines, through Israel's history and prophets, his positive case for Jesus as the consummation of Israel's revelation. In the process he attacks his accusers' unbelief and failure to keep covenant with God. He rejected their belief that the Temple was the focus of revelation of God's love. That came alone in Jesus. In all of this he stood in the line of Moses and the prophets and argued his case with great learning from the sources that Jewish held dear.

This where our little portion begins, with their angry and frustrated reaction. They have nothing against him that can stick.

Stephen seals his own fate with his visionary declaration. The church had witnessed Jesus' ascension but now Stephen witnesses to the true theological significance of that event that was originally confined to disciples.

That declaration of the public nature of the Lordship of Jesus is Spirit-inspired. The Spirit does not tell Stephen to do something new or wonderful. He does not reveal a program for navigating mission. In a hostile environment the Spirit reveals the 'really real'. Jesus stands in the position of authority at the centre of the glory of God. It is that vision with which the world must deal.

Now the 'really real' is public knowledge and highly charged and no longer a private, in-house matter. Jesus rules. The political and religious elites do like that affirmation. Religion is out of the private world and into the public. That is the Spirit's witness.

The confession, 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God!' is the death knell. This Jesus is now the exalted Lord who must be obeyed and to reject is perilous. This the core of the speech and the early church's witness.

Stephen is taken out by a lynch mob and stoned. For the political elite this is plausible deniability; it was out of their hands (remember Pilate).

In our western world only the insane or the gullible die for what they believe to be true. Or maybe a crazed fanatic. Not person who is sane, who can conduct a high-level public defence of his belief, who does not tote a gun, but asks that others be forgiven at the point of giving over his precious life to his Lord and God.

Other members of the early church would soon face the same dilemma. The excerpt should have taken in the next ominous line, "And Saul approved of their killing him." The Scourge stands by, waiting in the wings while the mob do his work. That very day the purge starts (8.1-3).

Question

Reflect on the question that lies behind this little excerpt from Acts; What is worth living and dying for?

In our polite, civil, mentally balanced religion do we believe to be true any longer that risen Lord rules? What might it mean for us to live with the uncomfortable Spirit in our midst?

What is the difference between crazed fanaticism and believing something to be true, true enough die for? Reflect on the fact that, across the world, our brothers and sisters face that question each day. We do not.

Reflect on the idea that the Gospel can very uncomfortable (a negative in our culture). What would a spirituality look like that helps us with this?

What is the core of our identity?

1 Peter 2.11-25

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. ¹²Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

¹³ For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. ¹⁵For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. ¹⁶As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. ¹⁷Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor.

¹⁸ Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. ¹⁹For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. ²⁰If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. ²¹For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

²² 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.'

²³When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness;

by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Oh dear, I am glad I am not preaching this coming week. What would I do with this passage? Here is the very worst of Christianity; theological support for slavery, the oppression of women (women and men are discussed in chapter 3) and the tyranny of the state. What more needs be said? Can we tear the page(s) out?

The trouble is that we are, quite properly, reading this text (and others like it) through the lens of recent Christian history, even up to the present day in some cases. Has the history of the use of the text created such a deadly cancerous growth that it might be better to lay it to rest? I thought seriously about that. Many of my friends have decided that is their course of action. Leave it to wither and die and, instead, turn to work for justice for slaves, domestic violence victims, and those oppressed by the tyranny of the state.

I am very tempted to follow their advice because the work they suggest is critical to neighbourly justice and love. It is a significant element of a Christian missional statement. But, foolishly perhaps, I want to try one last time to sight any flickering life that might be found here. To put this another way, we have interrogated this passage, it's time to see if it has enough life to interrogate us.

Peter wants to move his readers from a discussion of their wonderful gifted status as the people of God, and the vocation of divine purpose they now participate in. We studied that last week. He wants to move their thoughts now on to how to live this gift in the life they now live in a far corner of the mighty Roman Empire in the middle part of the first century CE. Status and calling has to be made to work in their life, in their time, in their society as it is.

So, verses 11-12 set the discussion up. They are beloved. That is the key term because it is God's designation of them as called in Christ. He is the beloved; they are the beloved. That is the 'really real' situation.

However, they live work and breathe in an historical, social and political context that paints another picture of reality. There they are aliens and exiles. I lived for many years in another country which required me to carry, wherever I went, a pass titled ALIEN. Nothing said it more. I did not belong. My home was elsewhere; even, at least officially, I was not welcome. That is the picture Peter is painting. The Christian's calling, loyalty and desires belong elsewhere. The desires of the soul, the inner life, are the risen Lord and his calling, the desires of the flesh are the forces that turn people in on themselves, away from the neighbour and away from God.

Their task was to continue to live honourable and exemplary lives. That was the single greatest witness to the core of their being in Jesus.

We see a little of their world, in that they were maligned as evil-doers. That can be seen from Roman authors who saw them superstitious and full of vices and worse. We see today what the stress of undeserved and unrestricted slander can do to people when they receive abuse of every vile kind. That was common for Christians in the Roman Empire. It was their context. The only tool they had was their behaviour in loving the neighbour. That was their hope and tool of mission so that when God came to rule that may be of blessing to some. Note, there is no romantic note here or guarantee of a quiet life; just the quiet confidence that God will come to restore his world.

What might it mean to conduct oneself honourably before one's fellow participants in Roman society? Peter now turns to that and starts with the largest element of Roman life, all-pervasive government, then moves to the greatest economic underpinning force of slavery. In 3.1-7 he moves on to households where most other activities are conducted. He is covering the whole Roman society of politics, economics and societal interaction.

Peter is saying to us, his present readers, don't do me the disservice of thinking that I am addressing you as though you are the only ones that matter. What matters is how you live a Christ life in your politics and your economics and your perilous societal interactions. I am addressing Roman society. (I said that, of course, and I hope you can see the point.)

Furthermore, he continues, for those who think you can just lift my words here and turn them into some kind of command that you can check off your list for being good, think again. This is work, daily growth.

Peter then states his topic: Be subject to every human for the Lord's sake. I have chosen this translation because the NRSV disguises the offensive word 'be subject' and I have omitted the word institutions which does not appear in the Greek text.

Obviously, be subject cannot mean simply obey. That would be absurd (and it is ruled out by Ephesians 5.21). This little phrase signifies a fundamental aspect of the Christian life. It is the voluntary subordination of oneself to others, putting the interests and welfare of others above one's own, preferring to give rather than receive, to serve rather than to be served. During Lent we studied Philippians 2.1-11. Remember the words, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..."

The opposite is selfish ambition or conceit, the desire to assert ourselves above others attempting to exploit others for our own self-aggrandisement.

This is an attempt to articulate a crucified Christ ethic in an Empire that obsessed over power and control and order and used military force to that end. It is not revolutionary in the sense of armed rebellion, but a tiny movement made up of free men and women who have thrown off the shackles of fear and work for goodness and rightness in all relationships. The only person feared is God.

The same ethic applies to slaves. There is much known now about slavery in the Roman empire and it is important not to confuse it with colonial slavery in America and the Caribbean for instance. But it was still slavery and harshness was part of the use of power. The system would not be changed by slave revolts. The results were obvious. That was not the way injustice would be resolved. So, once again, it is free people who, under suffering, redefine the situation because they have redefined themselves in Christ.

If you want to see this worked out in a more personal way read Philemon very carefully for Paul's development of these ideas.

Peter finishes this section with a theological reflection on Isaiah 53. His point is plain. Christ's suffering proved redemptive, setting others free and bringing healing. All Christian life comes back to this point of reference. That may be our biggest challenge. There are no dot points we can follow, just the crucified Christ and work out day by day how to do it.

Peter's ethic and Paul's has come under criticism from moderns for not tackling the injustice and cruelty of slavery. It is true there is no criticism of slavery in the New Testament. There are many reasons for this not the least they knew of no other way of ordering society. But the authors of the New Testament did not accept the Roman order as a virtuous expression of the Divine will. They regarded it as a sign of the Fall thus they show ambivalence towards it. Humans needed order and government should provide that and, if they punished evil and rewarded good, that was a bonus. They had no way of challenging and changing the system any more that Uyghurs do today. They would undermine it by living differently in a pattern created by their crucified Lord. Change Who defines who human beings are and change human relationships into the pattern of Christ; this became their goal.

We live in a democratic society with much more freedom to express our views and act for change. For that we need to be grateful. I certainly am. However, the old problems are still there in the political, economic and social realms of our life; the desire of many to assert themselves at the expense of others and attempt to exploit others for their own self-aggrandisement. Some governments support such activities. Thankfully, others don't but we still need careful monitoring by regulating agencies. We now have access to a much wider range of options. That is worth a study in its own right, especially for people who want to pursue Christ's mission.

Question

Is it even possible to live our life in our world with an ethic of the crucified Christ? We need to talk about this much more than we do.

The New Testament does not offer political, economic or social solutions. It calls restored, free people to live as the crucified Christ. What would a spirituality look like that would support that idea?

What is the missiological significance of the ethic?

Given our greater access to political and economic power how can we live the freedom in Christ for the good of all?

John 14.1-14

¹⁴Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going. ⁵Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' ⁶Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

⁸ Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' ⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me

because of the works themselves. ¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

A person's last words are treasured by friends and families. In John's Gospel we now turn to Jesus' last words and we will read them in church up until Pentecost. He wants his disciples to know that his leaving them and even the crucifixion is not cause for despair. There will be suffering and grief in the short term, but a whole new adventure will open before them, living as witnesses to the abiding presence of Jesus in the life of the Spirit.

We use this passage in the funeral services because of the future references in the text and that can mask what this last testament of Jesus is about. Jesus is speaking primarily about the present. The reference to the future is put hope into the present. The present for him is the path to the cross. The present for the disciples is one of confusion, alarm, and failing trust in Jesus' promises; who wants to be associated with a doomed man.

This interpretation of John 14 makes this passage a great study for missional spirituality. In our day many Christians have lost confidence in the promises as they have become embodied in institutional Christianity, and feel confusion and alarm as their known world of inherited western Christianity erodes before their eyes. Jesus spoke to his disciples in a different situation but one in which there seemed no hope.

Why shouldn't their hearts be troubled? I think Jesus takes three approaches to answer the question or giving reasons as to why he can call them to face the future without him present, yet without anxiety and living lives of trust.

The first answer is found in verses 1-6. The basis of the answer is the metaphor of the Father's house. This is common in John and, unfortunately for all the sermons I have heard preached at funerals, does not refer to a geographical location in heaven (which John does not mention). It is a picture of the closeness of the indwelling of the Son and the Father from the beginning. It is relational, a place of intimacy and safety. His cross, resurrection and ascension is the preparation for their life in that intimacy. He will, when all is done, bring them home. He has told them the way he will tread toward that goal (chapter 13). It is his way home and they cannot follow him on it. At least, not yet.

Thomas has not yet comprehended the way of the cross and Jesus' words puzzle him. It is then that Jesus offers another 'I am' saying. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Someone has described these words as the high point of Johannine theology. The coming of the Word made flesh has changed everything but most especially the relationship between God and humanity. In the encounter with the crucified Jesus the Father reveals his own way of salvation, its truth and the abundant life that flows from it.

Note:

These words of Jesus, that open us up to the intimacy of the Father, have been weaponised by some Christians to bludgeon theological opponents into submission and exclude others. They have been made the cornerstone of Christian triumphalism. It is obvious from the ancient context that was not their intention. However, we do need to raise a BIG QUESTION about religions and I will do that in another study. We need to theologically explore how we

can praise and rejoice in the creator's incarnation in Jesus for the salvation of the creation and not use it to destroy others.

The second answer is found in verses 8-11. From his request it is clear that Philip has not yet quite grasped the meaning of the Word made flesh. The intimacy of the Father and Son in life and purpose is revealed in Philip's Lord. The answer that Jesus gives to Philip is critical to the mission on which he sends them. It is that they must trust as revealing the truth. It is not a speculation but a way that leads to life. It is this that is our 'home' even in the present, life in the Father and the Son.

The third answer is in verses 12-14. He tells them that you will continue my work which are God's works. Sharing in Jesus' works then, is sharing in the revealing of God to the world. That is their sole purpose as it was Jesus'.

To that end prayer will be their one means. In prayer the disciples enter into the relationship of Father and Son so that they can share in the witness to the revealing of God's love for the world in Jesus. Given the way this verse has been abused notice that the promise is made in the context of the disciples' mission to witness. They will need all the life they can draw on. That is promised to them.

Question

Record how this portion of the last testament of Jesus has helped you or not, as the case maybe. What remains unanswered? How has it helped? Write them down. Sit with them in prayer. Do you have a place to talk about them?

Once again in our journey we find Jesus as the central figure in discussions about our mission and spirituality. If Jesus is the touchstone, the life, the goal, how will that shape our mission and our spiritual life?

God promises us that if we use the one simple means of prayer then the life of God opens up to us. How can we make this a central part of our spiritual lives?

BIG QUESTION; POLITICS

Politics and economics are critical parts of our cultural context in which the good news comes to others. Christianity, like Islam for instance, has a political history and carries political baggage, but, unlike Islam, has no formulated political theory. The central claim of Christians that Jesus is Lord is politically charged and thus has a public claim. Jesus cannot be privatised. Because we have no common agreement about what this means in our world, where religious involvement is discouraged and disparaged, we need to talk about how we live with Jesus as our Lord and the Lord of the creation in a democratic society, in which we have every right (even an obligation) to participate.

Colin Dundon

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