Sermon for 5th of Easter Year A

Readings: Acts 7:55-60; 1Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

i

It may be tempting in today’s secular times to perform one’s Christian duties quietly, unobtrusively and without fuss, but the story of the death of St. Stephen reminds us that bigger things are at stake than a private hobby. The claims Christians make for Jesus Christ challenge the world’s foundations; if Jesus is who Christians claim him to be then the whole edifice of worldly principalities and powers is built on shaky foundations and is doomed to eventual collapse.

On the other hand, if Jesus is less than Christians say he is – if indeed he is only a failed revolutionary, a rabbinic scholar, a spiritual mystic, or religious ethicist – then the world can continue to turn on its axis unmoved. Jesus becomes a subject for devotees only.

In today’s readings we are confronted with some of the most challenging words ever attributed to the lips of Jesus: “I am the way, the truth and life, no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). In some respects we might feel it’s a pity Jesus or at least the gospel writers left us with such a momentous millstone around our necks. If Jesus had only been another rabbi, teacher, revolutionary or mystic we could have quietly taken or left him. And no one would be in our face about it.

But on the other hand, if that is all they had ever claimed for Jesus it is doubtful we would ever have heard of him at all.

Take Jesus to be who the gospel writers say he is and you have the foundation of a faith that challenges the world – with all the danger, effort and disputation that such a challenge involves. But take Jesus to be anything less and you are left with an anachronism – Jesus as the proto-socialist; Jesus the mystic guru; Jesus the first-century Che Guevara. Alternatively, Jesus is one of a line of failed Jewish messianic zealots, unless you take the leap of faith which the gospel writers take: He who has seen Jesus has seen the Father.

ii

St. Stephen made that leap of faith and paid the ultimate price. He understood that in accepting Jesus as the Son of Man who stands at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56) and proclaimed by Stephen to be his “Lord” who will any moment now “receive his spirit” that such a faith rewrites the course and meaning of human history. Stephen has brought this fate upon himself by re-telling the Jewish story, starting with Abraham and their repeated rejection of God’s prophets now culminating in the rejection of Jesus.

Stephen still calls Abraham “our father” but claims that Abraham’s true children are no longer to be determined by their blood but by sharing the same Spirit. This is an argument Paul will use himself later. But at this stage Paul is still Saul and a willing participant in the condemnation of Stephen.

This is why it is mentioned earlier in Acts 6:8 that Stephen was a man “full of God’s grace and power, [who] did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people” – thus being the living proof of his later defence before the Sanhedrin that God’s children are created by sharing the same Spirit rather than by sharing the same blood.

Stephen also demonstrates how to live and die like Christ. He offers up a prayer for the forgiveness of those who stone him, as Jesus had done on the cross.

iii

In *First Letter of Peter* we read the claim that God has now laid a new foundation stone in Zion. This symbolism is part of the radical re-telling of Israel’s story and the radically new direction Jesus has given to the world.

The Jews believed that the temple had been built upon the foundation stone which marked the very first piece of earth that God created when he made dry land first appear in Genesis 1:9. From this same stone of foundation, Jewish tradition claimed God had formed Adam, the first human. Upon this rock Abraham had offered to sacrifice Isaac his son, until a lamb had been miraculously provided by God. Upon this same site in later years still Solomon had built his temple upon this rock and there, in the holy of holies, was where God had his dwelling place on earth.

All of this rich symbolism is captured in the notion of Jesus becoming the new foundation stone which God has laid in Zion (1 Peter 2:6). But now the temple is built upon “the living Stone”, and those who believe are built into this new, global, spiritual temple as “living stones” (1 Peter 2:4).

It is as Stephen first proclaimed; the new children of Abraham are those defined not by blood or physical location such as the temple and the Promised Land, but by the Spirit.

This is why Stephen in his speech spent so much time dwelling on the patriarchs of old who had lived *before* Solomon’s temple. He is making the point that God was perfectly capable of managing affairs before the temple, God can equally manage now without it.

Stephen has been charged with “speaking against Moses, God and our sacred temple” (Acts 6:11, 13-14) for good reason.

Stephen refers to the Golden Calf which the Israelites had worshipped whilst Moses was on Sinai. He describes this as “made by their hands” (Acts 7:41) – a description he later uses of Solomon’s temple, quoting Solomon’s dedicatory prayer which we find in 1 Kings 8:27 when Stephen repeats Solomon’s words: “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men” (Acts 7:48).

Stephen sees the mobile tent of meeting which Moses had in the Exodus as the true precursor for the mobile, living temple of Jesus Christ and his Church. This implies that the temple of Solomon and its later rebuilds is rather more like the Golden Calf – an object of idolatry. No wonder they “were furious and gnashed their teeth” against Stephen when they heard this.

Jesus is the new foundation that God has laid in Zion because of the faith the Christians have found in the nature and person and work of Christ. The passage we read today from John’s gospel may be one of the more salient expressions of that faith, but it is a faith that is woven into the weft and warp of the New Testament.

Based upon who John declares Jesus to be from the opening words of his prologue: “The Word was with God and the Word was God…the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:2, 14), the words from the lips of Jesus in the upper room are entirely consistent: “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me…Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father “ (John 14:6, 9).

We have witnessed several attempts over the past 200 years to unpick the weft and warp of the New Testament through the so-called *Quest for the Historical Jesus* in an attempt to create a meaningful gap between what Jesus was really like and what he really said and the later and misguided Christian faith of the gospel writers. To date, none of these attempts have been satisfying or ultimately convincing.

There are still some devotees of this nineteenth and twentieth century belief that if we could remove the exclusive claims on which Christian faith is built, such as John 14:6, we would then be left with a Jesus more compatible with the tastes of neo-liberal Western culture. It is a well-intentioned attempt to make Jesus more generally palatable by taking away the sharpest elements of the biblical witness. But the experience so far has been that cutting the Jesus faith to fit the tastes of Western Modernism has not widened the acceptance of Jesus’ moral teachings, but has only served to sow seed that fails to produce any harvest.

Now as we enter the new age of twenty-first century Post-modernism, we are aware of a renewed freedom to tell the Christian story without feeling obliged to make it conform artificially to one particular cultural norm among many. Through globalisation and mass migration we are more aware than ever that Western Modernism is just one lens of many through which people may view the Christian faith.

Whilst that does not remove the gospel imperative to preach the Good News to all nations and to all cultures, including an increasingly imperilled Western neo-liberal culture, we are no longer obliged to eviscerate the gospel in the process.

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