

It may be a fairly well known tale, but I still think, as we look at the whole question of how we handle our faith, it bears re-telling.

Once upon a time there was a very devout priest who lived in a very small town. One day, a hurricane came to the town and flooded the surrounding areas. It rained continuously and furiously, driving everyone away to seek for shelter. The priest walked out, and from the front door prayed to God to rescue him from the storm.

As he prayed, a man on his humble horse-drawn cart pulled up. "Hop on, Father. You can ride with me to safety." The priest thanked the man, but passed on the ride. "Don't worry son, I am in God's hands, He will save me."

The man continued his route in the pouring rain, leaving the priest behind. As the rain continued, the waters started to rise. The priest climbed up to the bell tower, and from there prayed to God to rescue him from the storm. As he prayed, a few people on a small boat approached the bell tower. "Hop on, Father. We still have room for one more."

The priest thanked them, and again passed on the ride. "Don't worry. I am in God's hands, He will save me "

Night fell over the little flooded town, and the storm continued its relentless attack. The winds were strong, and the waters rose even further. The wet, cold and scared priest climbed on the roof of the bell tower and held on to the tip - now the only thing visible of what was once the town.

The priest once again, in disbelief and desperation, called out to God and prayed for salvation. A floodlight blinded his eyes, and the priest heard a helicopter humming softly over the sound of thundering clouds. A man on a loud haler spoke to the priest. "Don't move! We'll throw you a rope so we can lift you out of the water!"

The priest denied fellow human assistance once more. "Leave me be. I am in God's hands, He will save me by divine intervention."

The priest drowned, holding on tight to the cross at the top of the roof on the bell tower. He ascended, and faced God for judgement. Bitter and angry, he spat out. "I believed in you! All my life I've been spreading your word, and suffered for you. And in my moment of greatest need, you didn't help me! I don't understand!" God simply replied: "I sent you a horse-drawn cart, a boat, and a helicopter – what more did you want?"

Silly, predictable, but actually a real message for us all. When we call out for help how good are we at recognising what God is doing for us, what God is sending to help us.

I'm going to focus this morning on that reading we heard from the Acts of the Apostles. The passage we heard was relatively short but for two characters in it, it is massively significant. Those characters are of course Stephen, the story is mainly around how Stephen became the first Christian martyr, and a man called Saul, as this is the first time we meet this incredible man.

To understand what is going on we actually need to go back to chapters 6 and the rest of 7. After all our reading started with, 'When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this', and what I'm sure some of you must have been thinking is, 'heard what?'

The story of Stephen starts with the 12 apostles having a problem. As the number of disciples was increasing the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. Now you can imagine can't you that if they

were't careful then the 12 could have ended up spending a huge amount of time having to deal with issues like this in their new church and they were very concerned that if they got drawn into this they would not have time to give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. So they chose 7 people who were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom to deal with these matters on their behalf. And the first of those seven who was named is Stephen, described as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

So you would think from that Stephen would have been very busy dealing with, shall we say, management issues, but within a couple of verses we hear about Stephen doing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Yes he may have an organisation role, but that does not stop him spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. However we very quickly hear that opposition arose, 'from members of the Synagogue of the Freed Men (as it was called) - Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia.' And these people started to argue with Stephen, but they clearly came a poor second.

So, and isn't this rather familiar, they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law, and they produced false witnesses who testified, "this fellow never stop speaking about this holy place and against the law. But we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." And now Stephen was in trouble.

And so Stephen preached to the Sanhedrin, who were the supreme Jewish legislative and judicial council in ancient Israel, consisting of 71 leading elders and scholars, explaining how everything that happened in the scriptures, our Old Testament, led up to Jesus the Messiah. And then it sounds like Stephen did exactly what Jesus had done to those two disciples on the road to Emmaus when Jesus explained to those men everything that they had seen, through what the prophets had said would happen. Now Stephen talks about Abraham. Stephen talks about Jacob and the patriarchs, and how they became jealous of Joseph and they sold him as a slave. He talked about the famine in Egypt. He then went on to Moses and explained Moses' background, what had happened to Moses and how Moses then led the people of Israel to the edge of the promised land. He then went on to David who he said enjoyed God's favour and asked that he might provide the dwelling place for the God of Jacob, but then Stephen explained it was Solomon who built the house for him.

But then Stephen started to get into deep water with the Sanhedrin. And it's worth me reading the next bit to you from Chapter 7 verse 47 onwards, and towards the end of Stephen's sermon.

But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

"However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

"Heaven is my throne,

and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me?

says the Lord.

Or where will my resting place be?

Has not my hand made all these things?'

"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even

killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

And that was how our reading then started, when the members of the Sanhedrin heard this. Do you know there are times when I read this story and I think to myself, “Was this a good move by Stephen? Was he right to be so blunt with the judicial authorities? Was it a sensible thing to do to alienate these people so much that they stoned him to death?” And the answer to all those questions is clearly yes. Why do I say that?

Because if it hadn't been the right thing to do would Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, have looked up to heaven and seen the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God? Here was a man of immense faith who through the power of the Holy Spirit was told, this is what you, Stephen, must do and he did it knowing that's if he did as he was told he would be OK. Yes he died but that doesn't stop him being OK.

Our reading from John's gospel this morning is one that I speak on a lot at funerals because it is the most comforting passage that exists for us as Christians. “Do not let your heart be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my father's house are many rooms; If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

You may think Stephen was being very impetuous. You may think he was winding up the Sanhedrin just for the sake of it but the point is that is what God was telling him to do. If he had stopped and spoken to God and said, is this really a good idea? I wonder how God would have responded. I rather think it would have been with words along the lines of, trust me, Stephen, you'll be fine.

It is highly unlikely that God will ever call us to do anything like what he called Stephen to do but he had a purpose in what he called Stephen to do and he also has a purpose in what he calls us to do. Stephen is mentioned just twice more in the New Testament.

Shortly after this passage in Chapter 11 we are told, “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia Cyprus and Antioch telling the message. “

The second mention of what happened to Stephen is towards the end of the Acts of the Apostles when Paul is speaking to a crowd in Jerusalem after he's been on his missionary journeys and it is one of the times when Paul is, in effect, giving his testimony of his conversion and he talks to the crowd about how he was in Jerusalem praying, and he heard the Lord speaking to him. And the Lord told him to leave Jerusalem because, “they will not accept your testimony about me.” And this is what Paul said in response to that.

“Lord, I replied, these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him. Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’

So what happened to Stephen had clearly had a profound effect on this young man called Saul, who held the coats, we are told of those who stoned Stephen and, we are told, approved of their killing him.

As a result of what happened to Stephen, because Stephen did what God told him to do, the persecution of that embryonic Christian Church started and many of the followers ran and they ran all over the place.

But because of this there were now followers of Jesus in many different places so when Paul went on his journeys, after his conversion on the road to Damascus and Saul became Paul, there were already followers of Jesus in many of those places. Yes, almost certainly, they were hiding, but when Paul arrived they would come out of hiding to join him. And so this development of what became the Christian Church throughout the world started because a man called Stephen had a strong enough faith. I wonder how strong our faith is?

These early Christians gave everything to establish that early church; are we prepared to even go some of the way that they went? Next week at our annual parochial church meeting in Fowlmere I'm going to be developing this theme as we look at one part of one of Paul's missionary journeys, this time to the church in Athens, and then we'll be using that challenge to really think about where we are going as a church, what do we want to achieve in the next couple of years, what can we give to meet those goals, but that's all for next week.

I want to finish today by going back to John's gospel and that man Thomas, and the question he asked Jesus because Jesus said to his disciples, "You know the way to the place where I am going". In response to this Thomas said to him, "Lord we don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way?" And Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me you would know my father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

As we consider this amazing man Stephen today let us remember that Stephen knew God through his son Jesus Christ and let us focus on doing the same. Amen.