Don't Repeat the Mistakes of History
Acts 6:7-8:1

Today we come to what some would argue is one of *the* major turning points in the book of Acts, but I'm not sure you'd guess that from the outside.

You see, in writing Acts, Luke is telling us how the Christian faith came to spread from Jerusalem all the way round to Rome, pretty much against all the odds. But so far, the disciples have not set foot outside Jerusalem. But after what we're going to read about today, all that is going to change.

And what we're going to read is the trial and lynch-mob killing of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. But ironically, it's this event, and the wave of persecution that follows, that pushes the disciples and the good news of Jesus, out of the city and into the world.

Read: Acts 6:7-7:3; 7:8-9; v20a; 7:34-5; 7:45b-8:1

So we're going to look at Stephen, the man himself. Then we're going to look at what he says in his defense, and then finally, we're going to look at what it was that inspired him.

An Ordinary Hero
Now just think for a moment about the kind of stories, the biographies, the kind of people that inspire you. It's rarely the guy born with a silver spoon in his mouth, is it? There's nothing much inspiring about a person born with everything going for him or her, and them achieving what everyone might have predicted they'd achieve. Instead, we tend to be inspired by people who conquer some adversity, don't we? We admire people who stick to their convictions, when everyone else is selling out. We admire the person who forgives those who have hurt them, rather than be eaten up by bitterness. We find inspiring, tales of self-sacrifice for others or for a greater cause. We read about the life of someone who achieved against all odds, and it does something to us. And we think, I'd like to be more like that person.

And so it's not hard to see how Stephen is a heroic figure. If you remember from a couple of weeks ago, he was one of the seven men who were chosen by the church to ensure that the Greek-speaking widows in the church were being cared for. So we know from the selection process for that role, that Stephen had a good reputation in his community, that he was full of the Spirit and wise with it. So he's a good man, he has people's confidence, he's the kind of guy that oozes a right kind of spirituality, plus he has a heart for the poor.

Now, those factors alone, whilst they would have made him the kind of guy you'd like to have round for dinner, are not especially heroic, are they? Good, but not necessarily inspiring. What makes Stephen stand out is the way his life ends. You see, he is hauled before the same court that so recently condemned Jesus and had the apostles flogged, but he doesn't flinch; instead he is brave and courageous on trial. He is dragged to his death by an angry mob – but there is no pleading for his life – rather he entrusts himself to God. And as he is stoned, he doesn't curse his enemies, he forgives them. And so Stephen, this good, ordinary man, became a hero and an example to the thousands of Christians who would lose their lives in the years to come, and still do.

But he can also be an inspiration to us who live in more peaceful times. I mean which of us would not rather be like Stephen, with his face shining like an angel in the face of personal attack, than like his rabid accusers, gnashing their teeth like wild animals? And which of us wouldn't want to combine his moral courage with this sense of graciousness for which he was clearly known?

But before we get there, ask yourself, how did this good man end up in the trouble he did?

Well, *Stephen* is a Greek name, so it's likely that he was a Greek-speaking Jew himself. And he was clearly having an impact in his community beyond just helping poor widows. V8: 'And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.' And along with that, he was obviously telling people about Jesus.

So he's causing something of a stir in his own community, so much so that he begins to encounter opposition from within his community – very likely from his own synagogue: v9, 'Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia [basically, the Synagogue of Greek-speaking Jews], rose up and disputed with Stephen.'

So Stephen is facing opposition from his own people for his faith in Jesus. And some of you may know what that feels like: either your friends at school or college, or family or colleagues - your community, your people - may give you a hard time for what you think and say about Jesus.

You see, these Greek-speaking Jews, were strongly pro-Jewish. They are like those American or Russian Jews who return to Israel now, and who are some of Israel's staunchest defenders. These guys have left their homelands to return to Israel and the temple. So they don't take kindly to anything they interpret as a threat to that, just as people today don't like it when the gospel seems to challenge cultural norms.

Now, all the time Stephen was just caring for the poor, there wasn't any trouble, but when he starts spreading the gospel in word as well as deed, the trouble starts. And often that's the way it is, isn't it? People may be happy with the benefits of the Christian faith – education, care for the poor and the dying, but they want that faith kept private – and when you begin to share the reason why you're doing the works you're doing, you can expect the sparks to fly.

But these guys have met their match in this good man. V10: 'But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.' So when argument fails, they smear him, twist his words, and resort to law to try and silence him. And whilst people still use such tactics, for Stephen their charge was deadly serious. V11, "we have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God", v13, "This man never ceases to speak against this holy place [the temple] and the law… that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."

Now Luke is clear that these guys are 'false witnesses' (v13). And yet, Stephen must have been saying something about the law and the temple and Jesus that provoked them in some way. So what was it? Well, most likely he was simply echoing what Jesus had said before him: that it was in Jesus that the Temple and the Law find their ultimate meaning, that Jesus had meet all the requirements of the Law for us, that he had not come to do away with the law, but to fulfill it, and that now we can encounter God through him. That the law and temple were the shadows, but Jesus was the real thing.

But whilst Stephen echoed all that positively, his accusers just heard a cry to arms.

And so the High Priest asks him, 7:1, "Are these things so?" And in making his defence, Stephen picks out 4 major time periods of God's dealings with his people. And as he does so, he does something very clever. For each epoch, Stephen weaves in two lines of argument. The first one is that God has never been limited to one place, i.e. the Temple, and the second one is that rather than it being him who resists God's law, it's the people of Israel, and in particular her leaders, who have a track record of resisting God and those God sends to save them.

A God Without Borders

Now, ironically, given that he's been accused of wanting to dump most of the Old Testament, it is straight to the Old Testament that Stephen turns. And he's been accused of blaspheming God, so he opens by saying, v2, "Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory…" not the way you'd expect a blasphemer to speak is it?… "the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham." So right from the off, Stephen is saying, 'hey, listen, Abraham is *our* father, I'm one of you, I'm a Jew too, and I'm here precisely because of God's promises to Abraham, and to us, his descendants.'

And God appeared to Abraham, where? In Israel? In Jerusalem? At the Temple? No. V2, "In Mesopotamia". So God is God in a foreign land, even the land of Israel's enemies. And He starts the whole story of the people of Israel, not here in Jerusalem, but hundreds of miles away. And having called Abraham, v8, God 'gave him the covenant of circumcision.' Ok, so long before there was a holy place, a temple, Stephen is saying, God had called and chosen a holy people.

But then he moves on to the second epoch, and it's the story of Abraham's great-grandson, Joseph. And Joseph ends up as a slave, where? In Egypt. And Egypt becomes the place where God protects Joseph and blesses him, and through him provides for the people of Israel during a famine. And in just 7 verses Stephen manages to mention the name Egypt no less than six times. And his point is, that God is God in Egypt, not just Jerusalem.

But then he moves on to the third epoch, and it's Moses, and the Exodus from Egypt. And Stephen gives more space over to Moses than any of the others, because it's Moses who Stephen has been accused of wanting to do away with. So he's showing them, 'hey, far from being opposed to Moses, I'm the one on his side'.

And Moses was born in Egypt, and years later, when God calls Moses to deliver his people from slavery, God meets with him in the desert of Midian, hundreds of miles from Jerusalem. And when God appears to him in the burning bush, he says to Moses,

v33, “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

Now, do you remember the charge against Stephen? Verse 13, “this man never ceases to speak words against this *holy place*.” Well Stephen is saying, ‘look, centuries before a temple was even conceived of, in the middle of a desert, it’s holy ground, because wherever God is, is holy.’

But the fourth and final epoch Stephen reminds the council of, is the period of David and Solomon and the building of the temple. And his point here is not that they were wrong to build the temple, but that neither David, nor Solomon ever imagined that God could be contained or confined to a house. It’s like trying to catch a tornado in an eggcup. And in support he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, v49-50: “heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?”

And so Stephen’s criticism is not against the temple itself, but against how the religious leaders viewed it. You see, the mistake that they made, and it’s a mistake people still make, is that they tried to box God in. In essence, they wanted to contain God, and dictate the terms. That it is here, in the temple, and here alone, that God may be found. And Stephen knows that God is way wider than that. He knows, as Isaiah had said, that God has made everything, so how can something man-made contain him? He dwarfs the heavens and the earth, so how can he live in a house? And far from being confined to the Temple in Jerusalem, or any other so-called holy place or spiritual formulae that we can come up with, he’s at work everywhere – in Mesopotamia and Egypt and the Midian desert, anywhere where people call upon his name.

But if the first strand of Stephen’s defense is that God is present everywhere, the second is that it’s the religious leaders who stand in a long-line of those who have resisted God and his word and those he has sent to save them.

Don’t Close Your Ears

Now, the American philosopher George Santayana famously said, ‘those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.’ In other words, unless we learn from history, we are doomed to repeat its mistakes. And isn’t that true for us as individuals and our own mistakes, as well as for nations? That wisdom comes from learning from your mistakes. And Stephen, wants his listeners, and Luke wants you and me, his readers, to learn from the mistakes of history.

You see Stephen, first subtly and then not so subtly, turns the table on his accusers and shows them that the people of God, and especially her leaders, have a track record of resisting God. First up are the patriarchs, the founding fathers of Israel, the heads of the 12 tribes, the brothers of Joseph. And Stephen says of them, v9, “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him.” So we have Israel’s leaders opposing and rejecting the one whom God had raised up to rescue them.

Then next up are the Israelites in slavery in Egypt. Moses comes to the rescue of a Hebrew being abused by an Egyptian, and Stephen says of Moses, v25, “he supposed

that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand." And later when he intervenes to try and reconcile two quarreling Hebrews, Stephen says, v27, "But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us.'" And so Moses flees to the Midian desert, where God meets with him, and calls him and sends him back to rescue and redeem his people from slavery. So, as Stephen says in v35, "This Moses, whom they rejected… *this man* God sent as both ruler and redeemer." And the subtext there is, look, Jesus isn't the first ruler and redeemer who Israel has rejected. They missed their redeemer, and so have you.

But before Stephen drives it all home, he reminds them, that it was Moses, v37, "who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.'" So far from it being Stephen who is rejecting Moses, it's these leaders who have done that, in rejecting Jesus, the very one Moses foretold.

And so Stephen turns from accused to accuser as he brings it all to a close and says, v51-2, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered."

And so Jesus stands as the last and greatest of those whom God has sent to rescue and redeem his people, but who his people and their leaders have rejected.

And it's that charge that so enrages the mob. And Luke tells us that they covered their ears, and dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death. And the lesson there for us, the lesson Stephen wanted them to learn, and the lesson Luke wants us to learn, is that you don't want to join them, do you? I don't think any of us would want to join the line of those who have covered their ears and turned away from the one whom God has sent to rescue us.

But as we close, let's come back to Stephen, this ordinary hero, this man who manages to combine these characteristics that we so admire: a care for the poor, mixed with a commitment to the truth. A graciousness evident to others, but a steely courage in the face of hatred. Displaying forgiveness and trust, rather than bitterness and despair in the face of violence. In Luke's words in v8, Stephen was 'full of grace and power', or as one old preacher put it, full of sweetness and strength. Well, where did that come from? Because we could do with that kind of combination in our day couldn't we? All of us, I reckon, could do with that rare combination of conviction and moral courage, mingled with grace and sweetness of character.

The Inspiration for Heroes

Well, the first thing we could say is that Stephen drew his inspiration from the Bible. This care for the poor, this responsiveness to the voice of God's Spirit, this resilience in the face of opposition, this understanding of God's desire to rescue his people, even when they turned their backs on Him, was nothing new. It wasn't something Stephen or anyone else had invented, he got it all from reading the Bible. And so it's as we soak ourselves, and marinade our souls, in God's word, that we take on more of the character of God himself – the God of grace and mercy *and* of truth.

But there's something else here as well. Just consider how Stephen dies. He is dragged outside the city. As he is stoned he calls out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (v59), as he dies he prays, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Now does any of that sound familiar? Think of another Man, Jesus, who was led, carrying his cross, outside the city walls, to die excluded and cut off, from the people. Who as he was nailed to the cross prayed "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). And who, as he died, cried out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:46).

You see, Stephen was full of grace, because he knew the grace and the love of Jesus for himself. His heart had been filled with the love of Christ for him – and that gave him the courage to face his accusers, because he knew that whatever others thought or said of him, the Son of God loved him and had died for him. And it gave him the strength to forgive others, because he knew the depths that Jesus had gone to, to forgive him.

And as he had surveyed the story of God's dealings with his people, he realized that however obstinate and hard-hearted the people were, however many times they rejected God and his plans, God in his never-ending, never-giving up love, kept on coming back to them. Because he is a God of grace who rescues and redeems people like us, who don't deserve it.

And this is where the boldness comes from that you and I need to face down injustice. This is where the unflinching commitment comes from when we go through the trials that we will all face in life. This is where love for enemies and forgiveness for those who mistreat us comes from. From the same place Stephen found it: the cross of Jesus.

But as we finish, as Stephen is about to die, the Lord grants him a look into heaven: v56, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." Standing? All other references to Jesus in glory have him sitting at the right hand of God. Why standing? Well, what do you do when someone you love and respect comes in the room? Don't you stand and greet them? And the Son of God rises to welcome into his presence this very ordinary man Stephen. A man whose life has been transformed by Jesus' grace and power.

May the same be true for us.