**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**May 10th - The 5th Sunday after Easter**

**‘Last Christmas…’ (Acts 7:55-60)**

*Dear Friends,*

*I hope you could join in some of the VE Day commemorations this last Friday, even if they weren’t able to be held in the way we’d originally envisaged them – at least the sun shone!*

*I mentioned in last week’s sermon that we’re trying to be more engaged with everyone in our services and other gatherings. I’m working on technology to enable - hopefully! – those of you who don’t have internet access to listen to our services via your home phone lines. I hope this’ll be in place for Sunday, May 17th.*

*In the meantime, a Church of England Freephone number has been set up particularly with those unable to join online church services during the period of restrictions, in mind. ‘Daily Hope’ offers hymns, prayers and reflections as well as full worship services, at the end of a telephone line. It’s available 24 hours a day on 0800 804 8044. Do call it, and pass the details on to anyone you know who’d particularly benefit from worship and prayers!*

*With love and prayers, and God bless.*



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Alleluia! Christ Is Risen! **He Is Risen indeed!
Alleluia!**

**The Collect for the 4th Sunday after Easter
(Common Worship)**

Risen Christ,
your wounds declare your love for the world
and the wonder of your risen life:
give us compassion and courage
to risk ourselves for those we serve,
to the glory of God the Father.
**Amen.**

**Abide with Me**

**Played by Deb Hubbard**

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

I need Thy presence every passing hour.
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies:
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!

**Gospel Reading: Acts 7:55-60 (New International Version)**

**Read by Phil Morris**

***The stoning of Stephen***

*55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.
56 ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’*

*57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

*59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep.*

**Sermon: ‘Last Christmas…’ - Rev. Tim Chambers**
I wonder what you were doing last Boxing Day?

At this moment when we’re physically separated from so many of our loved ones, it may be really hard for us to cast our minds back to a moment when we were perhaps together with grand*parents* or grand*children*, spending moments of joy, as we celebrated the birth of Jesus with those dearest to us.

For some of us – perhaps those more energetic, outdoorsy, or even needing to “clear our heads”, so to speak, after a little Christmas Day over-indulgence – Boxing Day might have been an opportunity for a good, brisk walk. Maybe out with your dog, if you have one, as we were with Ella.

*We* have the conundrum, too, of two sets of grandparents who both want to see Esther (and she, and Clare and I, of course love seeing them as well). So, whoever we *haven’t* spent Christmas Day with after church commitments are done, it’s *their* turn to visit or be visited on Boxing Day – this last year, *my* parents. Probably it’s the same juggling act each year for many of you as well.

And there’ll be those of us too, for whom the whole of this last Christmas season was really difficult, as we missed spending it with loved ones we’d lost, perhaps during 2019, perhaps over the Christmas season in previous years. When all around us appear to be having fun, grief and loss can be doubly hard.

But I wonder, too, other than perhaps belting out in a carol service that Good King Wenceslas headed forth in improbably deep, crisp and even snow, how many of us would have given a moment’s thought to the Saint whom the Church remembers on December 26th? The first Christian martyr, and subject of our reading, Stephen, whose feast day - as the carol reminds us - is on what we now all just seem to know as Boxing Day.

It’s a very strange juxtaposition, isn’t it, that on the day directly after we celebrate with great joy the coming to earth of the infant Jesus - Emmanuel, God with us – we commemorate the first person who gave up his life for *his* faith, in that same Jesus Christ? It’s almost as if someone has pressed the fast forward button on Christianity – straight from the very first moments of God’s son who forsook heaven for *earth*, to the welcoming to *heaven* of the first man who, in the name of Jesus, forsook the earth for a place with his Lord in heaven.

Even if, as Anglicans, we may not venerate the Saints in the same way as the Roman Catholic Church, I hope we’d agree that, in the lives of those who have lived - and often died - following Christ *so* closely that they are remembered in this way, there’s much to be learned for our own walk with Jesus. So, what’s St. Stephen’s Day doing, right next to Christmas Day, where wise and holy minds must at some point in church history have *chosen* to commemorate him? Why *there*?

To me, there’s something in the account of Stephen’s death, and also in his life, that mirrors the life and death of Jesus in such a way that placing the two side-by-side speaks to us particularly powerfully. Let’s look not only at today’s reading but also at some of the earlier chapters of the book of Acts, to see what this is.

The account of the stoning of Stephen is an extraordinary contrast between the maelstrom of sudden and furious violence on the part of the religious authorities, and the remarkable serenity in the midst of this, of Stephen himself.

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, directly echoes the death of Christ himself on the cross in this contrast between mob and victim, and in how he appeals to heaven in his final moments. But whereas Jesus, in Luke chapter 23, calls out, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”, Stephen is clear that it is *through* *Christ* that his access to his Father in heaven - *our* Father in heaven - lies: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” he declares.

It’s because of this, that Stephen is murdered - his insistence, blasphemous in the eyes of the Jewish religious authorities, that he sees Jesus in his place at the right hand of God, and that it’s through the person and intercession of him, Jesus, that he, Stephen – and we - are able to approach our Father in Heaven.

As an aside, and a local snippet too, apparently Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who was burned at the stake as a heretic under the Catholic Queen Mary in 1556, repeated these last words of Stephen as the flames lapped around him!

It’s striking, though, that the first follower of Christ to die for his beliefs, is not some centre-stage, charismatic firebrand preacher of the Gospel or worker of miraculous healings, let alone one of the twelve disciples who lived alongside Jesus in the three years of his ministry. Stephen is a deacon, *diakonos* in the original Greek of the New Testament, meaning someone who executes the commands of another, a servant. We first meet him in Acts chapter 6, when he is chosen as one of seven men who are to be responsible, amongst all the followers of Jesus, for the care of the vulnerable; for ministry to widows; and for the distribution of food to the starving.

Stephen is a back-room boy, if you like, serving God and His people behind the scenes – and in this, he’s an encouragement to us all. God doesn’t just choose those who love the limelight to be those who have the greatest impact in His name; He can use each and every one of us for His purposes, no matter who we are, to bring about the coming of His Kingdom here on earth in many and varied ways.

But when we come across Stephen on this first occasion, there’s also something else of central significance that Luke (the writer not only of the Gospel that bears his name, but also of the Book of Acts) tells us about Stephen. Luke writes that, when the disciples selected these men to be deacons, they first chose “Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.”

The things that mark out Stephen are - first - the depth of his faith in Jesus Christ, and - second - the way in which the presence of the Holy Spirit *in* him, and acting *through* him, radiates the presence of God to those around. These two things are what make him stand out amongst all of the assembled followers of Jesus as worthy of the responsibility given to him, and what also mark him out to the religious powers bent on stamping out this new and what was - to them - blasphemous, faith, as someone dangerous to their authority.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ, for all its joys and blessings, is not some sort of golden ticket, Willy Wonka-style, to a rose-tinted life where everything comes easily to us, and all of our interactions with others are sweetness and light. Whilst we have it relatively easy in a country that for centuries was a core part of Christendom, and where we have the protections of freedom of speech and of belief, there are many states in the world where to be a Christian is not only illegal, but where it can resort in imprisonment, torture and even death.

The story of Asia Bibi, the Pakistani woman who spent eight years on death row, convicted of blasphemy on trumped-up charges, before finally being released in 2018, is just one of the many that take place in large parts of the world, but without ever hitting the headlines in the same way. Let’s always keep in our daily prayers, the Christian men, women and children around the world who, like Stephen, and like Asia Bibi, even today risk all for their faith.

But, returning to Stephen himself, whilst his martyrdom is – especially to modern sensibilities - violent and disturbing, I’d like to suggest to you that there are three elements to this story that are profoundly encouraging to us all.

I’ve spoken frequently about Stephen’s “martyrdom” in what I’ve said this morning. The word “martyr” in contemporary usage has acquired a great deal of baggage over recent years from multiple contexts, much of which is very unhelpful. But the original meaning of the Greek word from which we get our word “martyr”, is ‘witness’. A witness; someone giving evidence; evidence of the difference that a faith in Jesus Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, can make to our lives.

Stephen’s ‘witness’ takes three forms – forms that echo the words of St. Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians, in the Scripture so familiar to us all from countless weddings.

First, Stephen’s witness is one of FAITH. In the face of the brutality of his persecutors, he remains steadfast in his belief in Jesus Christ; that he is the Son of God; and that it is through him that we can be reconciled to our loving Creator God.

Second, Stephen’s witness is one of HOPE. The certain hope of eternal life through the presence of Jesus, standing before God the father and pleading for us, despite all that we do in our lives. The Easter hope that, through Christ’s death on the cross and resurrection, conquers sin and death, and reunites us with our Heavenly Father.

And, third, Stephen’s witness is one of LOVE. Even as he “falls asleep”, as Luke euphemistically puts it, under the barrage of stones, Stephen – echoing the words of Jesus on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” – prays for his murderers. “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”, he gasps. “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you”, Christ commanded his followers in the Sermon on the Mount. Stephen, falling to his knees and crying out to the Lord, does precisely that.

An extraordinary witness of faith, hope and love, through the power of the Holy Spirit working in him. The same power that is available to each and every one of us today, should *we* choose to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit. The power that has the capacity to transform *our* lives, such that we too might radiate the same faith, hope and love that Stephen extended even to those who killed him.

The power that, perhaps especially at a time like this, when we face immense challenges as we continue in lockdown, and speculate as to how we will come out the other side, has the ability to transform not just my life; not just your life; not just our lives; but the lives of every man, woman and child on this planet. The power to heal, physically and emotionally; the power to restore broken relationships and homes; the power to bring justice, peace, and equity to our fractured society, within countries and between countries.

The power that, through the witness of one Holy-Spirit filled believer, could in time change the man who held the cloaks of Stephen’s murderers - Saul, the arch-persecutor of every single member of the early church. The power that could turn around so utterly the life of this sworn opponent of Jesus and all his followers, that - as St. Paul - this same man, re-named, would be the single greatest and most influential follower of Christ who has ever lived.

The power to transform *you*.

So, this coming December, whatever you find yourself doing on the day we commemorate Stephen - however we may, by then, be permitted to celebrate! - pause. Remember him, our first Christian martyr, and be encouraged at the impact each and every one of you can have, if you invite the Holy Spirit into your life; if you allow him to do his transforming work in you; and if, through him, you witness to the extraordinary Good News of faith, hope and love that are to be found in Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray, Amen.

**Intercessions**

**Led by Richard Marquiss**
Let us pray.

Dear Father God, we bring our prayers and praises to you today at a time of great turmoil and confusion, at a time when so much of life seems difficult and frightening, and so many things that we normally rely on are called into serious question. And so, Lord, please be with us today and keep us strong and steadfast when we might otherwise feel weak and helpless. Help us to feel grateful for the many wonderful things around us. To be grateful for the faithful return of spring with all its beauty. To be grateful for living in a country which cares so much for our health and welfare. To be grateful for our family and friends, even if some of them have to be seen at a distance. To be grateful for the love and support of the church family.

Lord, in your mercy,
**hear our prayers.**

Lord, we specially ask you to be with those who are ill, those who feel lonely and isolated, those in hospitals and care home and those who look after them, and those who have lost loved ones. In a few seconds of silence let us name any who we may know before God....

We pray for those who live in countries already blighted by poverty, warfare and natural disasters, and by poor public services. Send down a sense of consolation, and the blessings of your love and grace upon all those in special need today, Lord. Give them hope and - eventually perhaps - the ability to rebuild their lives in the promises of the risen Christ.

Lord in your mercy,
**hear our prayer.**

Lord, we pray for your church, here in the Cranmer Group, and throughout the world, as it continues to proclaim the Gospel, but now in such difficult times. We look forward to the day when our churches reopen and we can meet again in person as your people. Until then, Lord, keep us strong, keep us faithful, and let us always remember who we are, and who you are.

Lord in your mercy,
**hear our prayer.**

We ask all these things in Jesus' name.
**Amen**

 **The Lord’s Prayer**As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**The Collect for the 4th Sunday after Easter
(Book of Common Prayer)**

O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
**Amen**

**To God Be The Glory
Recorded remotely by the Choral Scholars of St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, in their homes, and edited together.**

To God be the glory, great things he has done!
So loved he the world that he gave us his Son,
who yielded his life an atonement for sin,
and opened the life-gate that all may go in:

*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the earth hear his voice!
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son;
And give him the glory - great things he has done!*

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood!
To every believer the promise of God!
The vilest offender who truly believes,
that moment from Jesus forgiveness receives:

*Chorus*

Great things he has taught us, great things he has done,
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;
but purer, and higher, and greater will be
our wonder, our rapture, when Jesus we see:

*Chorus*

And continuing what we introduced last week, at this stage I’m suggesting you might like to try out another more contemporary worship song. This week, it’s ‘King of Kings’, by Hillsong Worship. The fourth verse of the song declares the following:

*“And the Church of Christ was born,
Then the Spirit lit the flame;
Now this gospel truth of old
Shall not kneel, shall not faint”*

I think this has a wonderful resonance with the Spirit-filled courage that St. Stephen demonstrates as he’s united with Christ and the Father in heaven.

You can listen to it (with the lyrics in the film itself) at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Of5IcFWiEpg>

Once again, I hope you enjoy it!

**A Closing Blessing**

The God of peace,
who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,
that great shepherd of the sheep,
make you perfect in every good work to do his will,
working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you always.
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**