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Sermon

Saint Stephen

Acts 6:1-16; Matthew 23:27-36

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This church is named after Stephan. Stephan was a member of the early church in Jerusalem. He was the first martyr for Christ, dying somewhere between 33 and 37AD.

The Gospel reading tells of Jesus predicting such persecution. Jesus told the Pharisees that they are just like their forebears who had killed the prophets. He called them white-washed tombs. It was the custom in the month before Passover, to whitewash graves and grave sites so that Passover pilgrims would not accidentally step on a grave or touch a tomb and so be made ritually impure. Under the Law of Moses, to touch a dead body made one unclean. By extension, touching a tomb or grave would also make one unclean. If they were impure they would not be able to partake in the Passover feast. The whitewash would ensure that the tombs were clearly seen and identified.

White and fresh on the outside but corrupt inside - Jesus makes the point that in their scrupulous following of regulations the Pharisees appeared clean and virtuous, yet inside they were intent on destroying him.

We need to understand that he has been locked in conflict with them for some time. There has been argument, accusation, plotting, attempts to trap him and a constant undercurrent of malign hostility. This reading is from a time very close to the crucifixion. So it makes sense when he says, "Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" [Mt 23:32-33] They have had their opportunity to recognize and follow him. There is a point when the measure of sin is full and the decision is made. So he warns them of being hell-bound.

Folks, I don't enjoy the idea of there being a hell. But this is the third time in four weeks we have heard Jesus warn of it. He seems certain of it and really concerned about it. Some people today want to say there is no hell – that all are saved – however, that does not appear to be the message of Jesus. So be careful of what you believe. It is not about what you are comfortable with. The question is, "What is the truth?" Does an alternate source have more authority, more certainty, more veracity than Jesus?

Jesus continued by promising to send Israel messengers but prophesied that they would reject them too.

Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the

blood of Zechariah son of Barakiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.¹

Here Jesus foretold what would happen to Stephen, most of the Apostles and many others unnamed in the Bible. It was not a surprise. Even today, there are many who are being killed for their Christian faith in the world. Just read the Barnabas Magazine to see the breadth and depth of the persecution against our sisters and brothers in Christ.

This church has been named after Stephen. In what way is Stephen an inspiring example for us? To answer that, we need to look at Stephen's character and to see where his strengths came from.

The record of Stephen starts with an argument in the church between Hebrew and Greek believers. The Hebrew Jewish believers were locals brought up in Israel, speaking Hebrew and Aramaic and now followers of Christ. The Grecian Jewish believers were Jews who had grown up in Greek culture. They complained that the daily food distribution for needy widows was overlooking their people.

The Apostles asked the people to choose some men to take on this responsibility. The qualification? These workers should be full of the Spirit and wisdom. Would that have been your first idea of the necessary qualification? It is important that the work of the body of Christ is done in a Christ-like manner and in the strength of Christ – so we should at least start with Christians in these roles.

Two of the seven chosen stand out in the events that follow: Philip and Stephen. Both go on to have powerful ministries.

Some verses later in we are told that Stephen was "a man full of God's grace and power [who] did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people."² Where did this wisdom come from? It was from the presence of the Holy Spirit within him. Wisdom is a gift of the Spirit³ and is also seen in Jesus. John said Jesus was full of grace and truth.⁴ In fact there is a lot in this description of Stephen which is like Jesus here: wisdom, grace and the power to do miracles.

As he developed in his ministry, Stephen became a powerful preacher and then an apologist, defending the faith against those who would reject or attack it. Here too, he had great ability: Those who tried to debate with him "... could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke."⁵

Notice the reference to the Spirit – not his own spirit but the Holy Spirit. When we hear "they could not stand up against the Spirit by whom he spoke," it brings to mind Jesus' statement, "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say"⁶

Stephen was so effective in debate that the men of the synagogue resorted to false witnesses to accuse him. So he was tried for blasphemy and stoned to death. The account of his death reads,

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. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 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.⁷

What have we seen? Wisdom, faith, grace, courage, miracle-working powers. And in each mention of these things, the Holy Spirit is obviously associated. Stephen was: full of the Spirit and wisdom, full of faith and of

¹ Matthew 23:34-36

² Verse 8

³ 1 Cor 12:8

⁴ John 1:14

⁵ Acts 6:9-10

⁶ Luke 12:11-12

⁷ Acts 7:55-56, 59-60

the Holy Spirit, full of God's grace and power, doing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. He had unanswerable wisdom in the Spirit.

What do we learn from Stephen? Isn't the lesson that our Christian life and ministry needs to be full of the Spirit? Stephen was an ordinary Christian who was appointed to give out food – a soup kitchen manager. But he quickly moved into miracles and preaching.

All of us can pray for others, talk to people, help them. We might be serving in the kitchen and so have a significant conversation with someone who is in trouble by something. You might be talking over morning tea and find that someone has a physical problem – you can offer to pray for them. Maybe you're at work and a colleague asks you a question which shows they have watched you and wondered about your faith. Maybe you are volunteering in the Op Shop and a person comes in weighed down by fears. Opportunities come. We are equipped by the Holy Spirit to minister to people – but we do have to make a move so that he can work through us.

We all need to be filled and continually refilled with the Spirit of God. That is what the sail of our logo signifies: Full of the Spirit - the wind or breath of God. As the boat is propelled by the wind, so we are empowered by the Spirit of God. Without wind, a sailing boat is dead in the water. Without the Spirit we lack the power and abilities God intends us to have as we live in and extend his kingdom.

A life without the Holy Spirit is the abnormal Christian life. We are supposed to be full of the Holy Spirit. If you know that you aren't – please seek him; make it your focus; pursue the release of the Spirit in your life to equip you to be the man or woman Christ calls you to be. That comes by seeking him and asking people to pray for us to be filled with the Spirit.

The Bible tells us we are led to know Christ by the Holy Spirit and then we are given the gift of the Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit means he is free to work and equip us. Luke tells of the disciples being filled with the Spirit on multiple occasions. We can come back to him often and ask for more of his Spirit. The Spirit of God is gracious and loving. There is nothing to be afraid of and much to be grateful for. I encourage you to press in and receive more from God.

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