

HYMNS: 154 – “How great thou art” 172 – “Sing for God’s glory that colours the dawn of creation” 238 – “Lord, bring the day to pass” 129 “ The Lord is King ”

Acts 6: 8 – 7:60

This week, we have read the whole of the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. If we were in Church, we would only have read a little bit of it, but during lockdown, without the constraints on time, it seemed worth reading the whole story.

Life was very busy for the twelve disciples in the aftermath of Jesus resurrection and the day of Pentecost. Because they were so busy, they appointed seven assistants whose function was to help with the finances and the fair distribution of food. Stephen was one of those seven, a man full of faith, we’re told. But Stephen was also a powerful and challenging preacher. Soon, and inevitably, his preaching came to the attention of the Jewish leaders. They hauled him off to court.

Stephen, as his defence, preached to them (and we read his sermon) The thing that seals Stephen’s fate is the unflinching honesty of his speech when he is dragged before the Council. He gives a long summary of the religious history of Israel, which climaxes with his conclusion that the religious leaders of the nation have always missed the point of what God wanted and opposed and killed the true prophets who saw and announced what God was doing, and that they have done it again with Jesus. It is worth emphasising that those stoning Stephen were not hooligans or Roman soldiers but the leaders in the synagogue, elders and priests. As Matt Skinner notes, “they are important people who possess a lot of leverage in religious discourse; political discourse, Too”

We know that throughout the history of Christianity, there have been martyrs – people who were killed for standing up for love. Across the ages the example of those who have been brave enough to stand up for their faith has challenged and inspired the Church.

Our modern world has had its martyrs as well. Some are celebrated and remembered by millions: courageous witnesses to the truth and the gospel such as Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Archbishop Oscar Romero. Others, of course, have been killed for their beliefs or are still being killed or persecuted for their faith but are remembered only by a few.

Our world today is so very different from that of the early Christians. People have already booked holidays in space; satellites are able to beam back pictures from all around the globe; computers have revolutionized the way we work. Communication has never been easier. Here in the wealthy West, we are unlikely ever to be martyred. What we do have in common with the early

Church is trying to live the Christian life in a world which is awash with competing worldviews and religions. For a while, the Christian worldview dominated, certainly the Western world. It was the only worldview that people grew up knowing. All of that has changed and I think that it is good that it has changed, I am not sure that the alliance between the state and Christianity was a healthy one for the Christian faith. When Christianity was allied to power, it made it all but impossible for it to hold the powerful to account and to speak the truth about the priority of love. Today, we, like the early Christians, must find ways of sharing the good news with a world which isn't hugely ready to listen.

Stephen, as he was stoned to death, lived out a message of love and forgiveness, as he prayed for those who were killing him and offered his life to God and we see that in all of that, he followed Jesus – who always proclaimed that love is the ultimate priority, lived out that love, and offered his life to God. It is unlikely that any of us will be asked to die for our faith, but we are called to live for it.

This is the start of Christian Aid week. Christian Aid works on our behalf amongst some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. If we think of the ways in which Covid 19 has impacted our lives, we can scarcely begin to imagine how it will impact on those places where there is not enough to eat or drink – let alone no access to hospitals and medical care! Christian Aid works with people who are living on the extreme edge of Climate Change. So it is time for us to live our faith, to think through our decisions and actions and to speak out against injustice, to campaign against poverty, to proclaim that love must always be the priority. It is time for us to live our faith, to think through our decisions and actions, and to hear the voices of those who call to us from the depths of poverty and ask us to change our ways.