

Stephen Chosen to Serve

Our gathering reflection

Jesus said, "Anyone who receives you, receives me, and anyone who receives me, receives the Father who sent me."

In the presence of the God who receives us with open arms, who loves us unconditionally, and who bids us do the same to one another. We worship God this day.

Join now with a prayer:

Lord God of a new morning, and of all my days and nights, I come to praise you in sound and silence, in story and song with my voice and heart eager to know you and to move a little closer to you.

Humbly, reverently I bow before you, for you are the source of all goodness and truth. I pray for all who have gathered this day, in homes and churches, as the people of Christ's church, as we come to think about life. My own life, the life of the world around me, its meaning, its purpose, its end and to reflect on the mystery of all things interwoven with my life. I come searching for the root of the world's peace, for the courage that will help me face each day and for the truth that will set me free.

I thank you for the great network of people beside whom I live and work – family and friends, neighbours and colleagues, who share life's journey and help me along life's way. I bless Jesus for those whose understanding and insight has awakened my faith and brought me into the life of the church. Receive my worship I pray, draw me into the hidden love at the heart of all things, but most wonderfully seen in the face of you Lord Christ, who has taught me to make my pray in your name and in the word you taught your disciples long ago, as I now say:

Our Father Amen.

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Today our Scripture reading is from the New Testament book of Acts 6:1-14 and we read from the Message translation by Eugene Peterson.

### **The Word of God Prospered**

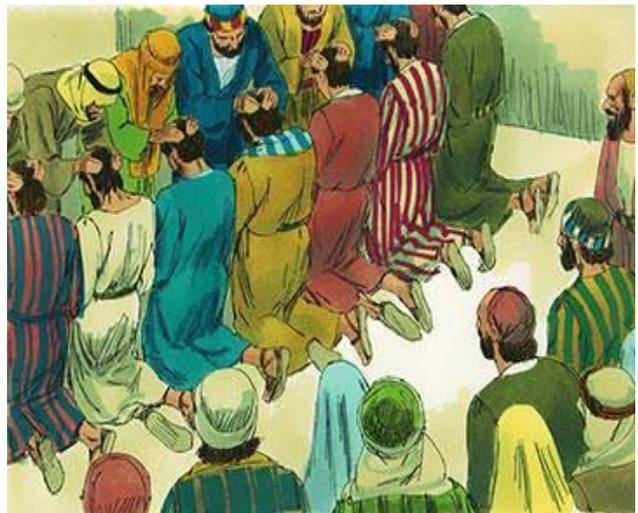
During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers - "Hellenists" - toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being discriminated against in the daily food lines. So the Twelve called a meeting of the disciples.

They said, "It wouldn't be right for us to abandon our responsibilities for preaching and teaching the Word of God to help with the care of the poor. So, friends, choose seven men from among you whom everyone trusts, men full of the Holy Spirit and good sense, and we'll assign them this task. Meanwhile, we'll stick to our assigned tasks of prayer and speaking God's Word."

The congregation thought this was a great idea. They went ahead and chose - Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas, a convert from Antioch.

Then they presented them to the apostles. Praying, the apostles laid on hands and commissioned them for their task.

The Word of God prospered. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased dramatically. Not least, a great many priests submitted themselves to the faith.



Stephen, brimming with God's grace and energy, was doing wonderful things among the people, unmistakable signs that God was among them. But then some men from the meeting place whose membership was made up of freed slaves, Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and some others from Cilicia and Asia, went up against him trying to argue him down. But they were no match for his wisdom and spirit when he spoke.

So in secret they bribed men to lie: "We heard him cursing Moses and God."

That stirred up the people, the religious leaders, and religion scholars. They grabbed Stephen and took him before the High Council. They put forward their bribed witnesses to testify: "This man talks nonstop against this Holy Place and God's Law. We even heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth would tear this place down and throw out all the customs Moses gave us."

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A Deacon and an Apologist

A couple of Sunday's back, our service reflected on the change of Jesus followers from being "disciples" to becoming "apostles," people "sent out" into the world to do what they have been "discipled" to do. I mentioned that we would take a journey into the life of the early church in the next few months and discovered what happened to who and by whom.

What we know about the first apostles, these followers of Jesus, is that they were Jewish. After the birth of the church, the early believers in Jerusalem faithfully practised doctrine, fellowship, communion and prayer and the church was increasing numerically, thriving in the wake of Pentecost. These believers were Jewish Christians and were understood to be a sect of Judaism. The gospel of Jesus Christ quickly spread beyond Israel and Gentiles started to become followers of "The Way" – that is, they became disciples of Jesus Christ. However, a growing membership doesn't guarantee harmony and success created a tense situation. A power struggle was in the making because at that point in time the Jewish Christians had all of the power and leadership positions. At first the early Christians followed Jewish traditions such as the Ten Commandments and religious practices. Those in power often ignore those with little or no power and sadly such was the case in the early church. The very demonstration of love shown in the sharing of resources by the wealthy to alleviate the poverty of the less fortunate was the point at which Satan tried to gain a foothold for it was in the distribution of food aid that the Grecian Jews complained that their widows were being overlooked

in the daily distribution of charity in preference for the Jewish Christians in the community. A flag was dropped and a foul was called. What was the church leadership going to do to rectify this injustice?

The apostles recognised that with growing number of believers, the task of distribution simply required more supervision than they could give and action had to be taken. They of course did not wish to be diverted from their priorities of prayer and ministry of the Word, so the apostles said, "Select from among you, seven men whom we may put in charge of this task." (Acts 6:3) We read that those chosen all bore Greek names as though the Jewish Christians said in a generous act of peace-making, "You think your widows are being neglected; then choose Grecian men to distribute the food."

Stephen's name appears first on the list of the first deacons. His outstanding character had already gained him recognition as a leader with Spirit-given wisdom and he was chosen to take care of the temporal problems of the Church in Palestine. Nothing is said of how he fulfilled his office; but it is taken for granted he did a fine job, being able to lead the other six to handle the affairs so that no split occurred in the ranks. He was also able unite the two potential factions to face the common enemy who would soon break upon them with great fury. Like Stephen, we are called to be peacemakers so that the members of our fellowship may live together in unity.

However, what we are told of Stephen is that he did quite a lot of other work as a Christian, "over and beyond his call to duty in the office of deacon. He was a "witness." All Christians have been called to be witnesses. "You shall be my witnesses," said Jesus, and the book of Acts tells the story of some of the witnesses. The duty of a witness is to tell what he knows, "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

Stephen was not only a witness he was an apologist. The term apologetic comes from the Greek word *apologia* which means a speech in defence. Apologetics is a theological discipline devoted to the defence of the divine origin and authority of Christianity. Peter, in his 1st letter, (3:15) said we should always be ready to give an answer (*apologia*) to everyone asking a reason for the hope within us.

In the days of the early church, Stephen was a serious student of the O.T and he was not content merely to tell what he knew, but he got into active discussion with those who did not agree with him, as we find in Acts 6:9, some of those who belong to the synagogue of the Freedmen, those who had been taken captive, perhaps by Pompey, and later they or their children had been set free. They were the Cyrenians and Alexandrians who came from Africa, as well as those from Cilicia and (proconsular) Asia, who arose and disputed with Stephen. All of the Freedmen were not Jews but Hellenists like Stephen and this stirred him deeply. We are not told the exact story but we can get the thread of it, as it seems they charged Stephen, with speaking "blasphemous words against Moses and God," and "against this holy place and the law" (Acts 6:11,13). So had Stephen and if so where did he get such an idea?

If we study the teachings of Jesus, we soon discover where Stephen got his peculiar notions. Jesus denied the hereditary view of religion that said: because our father is Abraham, we are God's children. But Jesus said, in order to be Abraham's children, you must have the vital faith that Abraham had (cf. John 8:39). Jesus denied the legalistic view of the Law. Remember when the Pharisees asked, "Why don't your disciples wash their hands before eating?" (cf. Mark 7:1-5). They were referring to ritual washing and not to sanitation. The disciples might have just washed their

hands, but if it had not been done according to the correct ritual, they would still be "unclean." Jesus went on to point out that "there is nothing outside a person which by going into them can defile them; but the things which come out of a person are what defile them" We know Jesus challenged the righteousness of the Pharisees, for example, their attitude toward the Sabbath, stating as a principle that "the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Jesus on several occasions deliberately broke the Sabbath like the time in the home of a ruler of the Pharisees where there was a man who had dropsy. Jesus had been invited there to dine, it was the Sabbath. He asked, "Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath, or not?" (Luke 14:3). Healing was seen as work, and work was forbidden by the Sabbath commandment. Jesus deliberately forced the problem into the open, and then proceeded to heal the man. We also know Jesus denied the view that worship was either limited to a particular place, when he conversed with the Samaritan woman.

Some have said Stephen may have been one of the Seventy Jesus sent out. So Stephen may have known Jesus and he had begun to think, and the more he thought the more he realized the implications of Jesus' teachings. Law was a matter of the spirit and intent of the heart, and not mere ritual. Worship was a matter of spirit and truth, not geography. If we carry these principles to their logical conclusion, the Law can be replaced by the Spirit of God in the heart, and the Temple can be replaced by spiritual fellowship between redeemed humanity and our Saviour God.

To the Jewish Christian, brought up to think of the Law and the Temple were essential elements in Jewish religion and so the Jewish Church in Acts had much difficulty at this point, and for many years the Church seemed about to be torn into two churches, Jewish and Gentile. We know that Peter got into the struggle as did James the Lord's brother, and Paul.

With this understanding, we can see how Stephen would be the person to step out in faith as an advocate of the teachings of Jesus. He was a powerful reasoner and persuasive communicator. Stephen's speech is the first apologetic sermon and just as Jesus had run into serious difficulty and opposition, so did Stephen. In retaliation for their humiliating inability to refute Stephen's arguments, the elders stirred up the people against Stephen, set up false witnesses, arrested him and brought him before the Sanhedrin. The charges against him included blasphemy against Moses and against God and were serious enough to warrant a formal trial. False witnesses were brought in as had been done in the trial of Jesus. When they had finished, Stephen was given the opportunity of speaking on his own behalf. The seventh chapter of Acts is usually referred to as "Stephen's defence." Strictly speaking, it is not a defence of Stephen so much as it is a defence of his teaching. He is defending Christianity and defending the larger view presented by Jesus. Stephen does not mention himself. He does not mention the charges made against him. He stays with the central issue, the view of Scripture versus the legalistic. In Stephen we find a servant to the Church as a deacon but also a faithful and loyal apologist to the faith he found in Jesus as his Lord and Saviour as one sent out to tell the good news of Christ's redeeming love and grace. May the Lord Jesus give us the heart of Stephen to serve him faithfully in our lives as apostles today.

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Join now with this prayer;

Heavenly Father, I approach your throne of grace, and bring my prayers to Jesus, my Lord, who became Incarnate and came down to earth from heaven to embrace the pain and sorrows of our sinful world, for the cause of truth.

Holy Spirit, since the time of the Apostles you have inspired the Church to commission certain members to assist in a special way in the pastoral mission of Christ. Today I pray that you would bless all who are deacons and all other ordained and non-ordained ministries that those who serve in them may be humble and faith-inspired in their service. I pray, Lord, that you fill their hearts with compassion, their minds with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, their hearts with zeal and a deep desire for the salvation of souls. I pray that their families are supportive, understanding and willing to all that they do as they serve your Church Jesus, wherever and whenever the needs arises.

I pray for the many churches in our land and around the world especially in this time as new ways are sought and used to be the Body of Christ to all people. I pray for my congregation and those that are seeking ministers, thanking you for the people we have sharing their ministries right now. Help me to know my ministry and gifts that I can bring to you and I witness for you Jesus.

I pray for all who hold authority over people as political or religious leaders, that they may exercise their power with justice and for the common good. I bring to you our Queen and her family, the parliaments of our land, all MPs and MSPs, local councillors and leaders, and I ask you would give to them your wisdom and counsel as they govern and lead with truth and integrity.

I pray for those who use violence to silence their opponents and I pray for grace to witness to your truth with constancy and faith, to bear the cost of following your righteous ways.

I pray for those for whom the joy is overshadowed by pain, grief or failure. Those who have lost employment, uncertain of the future. Those who are homeless and refugees in our midst having fled the terrors of their own home lands seeking safety and a new life. I bring those who have been ill and suffering, with illness and disease asking Lord for your healing to be with them, thanking you for medical professionals and scientists who are working to bring an end to this pandemic we all are experiencing at the moment. I hold to you those who have died and their loved ones as they grieve in this time. I pray for those who died tragically in Glasgow on Friday and the families affected by this terrible event.

Lord, I remember all who have gone before me looking for the vision of your heavenly glory, thanking you for all they have done to be apostles and witnesses to your glory and Word. Lord, be with me and my family and friends in the days and weeks to come and receive my prayers to the glory of the Father and the Holy Spirit with whom you reign Lord Jesus, in heaven above now and always. Amen.

**A hymn** to reflect upon today entitled "*All hail the power of Jesus name*" written by Edward Perronet (1726-1792) often sung to either two tunes. It is the two refrains that differ ever so slight. The first tune is "*Miles Lane*" where the refrain is on the *left*. *If sung to the* second tune "*Diadem*" we repeat the second line in each verse and then use refrain to the *right*. You may know one or the other or both versions.

All hail the power of Jesus' name!  
Let angels prostrate fall.  
Bring forth the royal diadem  
*to crown him, crown him, crown him,  
crown him Lord of all!*

All hail the power of Jesus' name!  
Let angels prostrate fall  
*Let angels prostrate fall*  
Bring forth the royal diadem,  
*and crown him,  
crown him, crown him, crown him  
and crown him Lord of all!*

Crown him you martyrs of your God  
Who from his alter call;  
Praise him whose path of pain you trod  
*Refrain*

O seed of Israel's chosen race  
Ye ransomed from the fall,  
Hail him who saves you by his grace,  
*Refrain*

Sinners, whose love can ne'er forget  
The wormwood and the gall;  
Go spread your trophies at his feet,  
*Refrain*

Let every tongue and every tribe  
responsive to his call,  
to him all majesty ascribe,  
*Refrain*

Oh, that with yonder sacred throng  
we at his feet may fall!  
join the everlasting song.  
*Refrain*

### **A blessing**

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me and Jesus – Go now and may God in Christ Jesus, quench your thirst for love, satisfy your need to be known, assure you that you are indeed an apostle of welcome, as you go to proclaim this peace in God's name. Amen.