

Don't Repeat the Mistakes of History

Acts 6:7-8:1

We're going to read about the trial and lynch-mob killing of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. It's this event, and the persecution that follows, that pushes the disciples and the gospel, out of the city and into the world.

An Ordinary Hero

From what we know of Stephen before his trial, he was a good man. But being good is not the same as being inspiring. What makes Stephen inspiring is the way his life ends: he is brave and courageous on trial, he entrusts himself to God, and he forgives those who wrong him. He became an example to the thousands of Christians who would lose their lives in the years to come. But he can also be an inspiration to us.

But how did this good man end up in the trouble he did?

Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew. Through his teaching about Jesus he encountered opposition from within his community. You may experience the same. When his opponents were unable to win the argument, they smeared him and used the law against him.

In making his defense Stephen talks of 4 epochs of history, and shows that God is not limited to the Temple, and that Israel has a track record of resisting those God sends to save them.

A God Without Borders

Stephen shows from the life of Abraham that God was God in Mesopotamia; from the life of Joseph and Moses that he was God in Egypt. And from the calling of Moses at the burning bush that he was God in Midian, and that wherever God is, is holy. From the building of the temple, Stephen shows that no building can hope to contain God.

Don't Close Your Ears

Stephen shows how the people of Israel and her leaders have a track record of opposing and resisting those whom God sends to save them. They did this with Joseph and Moses, and now they have done it with Jesus.

This enrages the mob, and they cover their ears and stone Stephen to death. The lesson for us is that we don't want to join them. No one should want to cover their ears and turn away from the one whom God has sent to rescue them: Jesus.

But how come Stephen was able to combine a steely courage with a graciousness of spirit?

The Inspiration for Heroes

Stephen has been inspired by the Bible. But more than that there are echoes between his death and Jesus's death. It is Jesus grace and love for Stephen that has filled his heart. This is what gives him courage and the ability to forgive. It is at the cross that we will find the boldness and unflinching commitment we need when we face trials, and where we will find what we need to love our enemies.

As he dies, Stephen sees Jesus standing, ready to welcome him into his presence, a man transformed by Jesus grace. May the same be true for us.