

Persecution, Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2020.  
Acts 7:55-8:4, and John 14:1-14.

Ron is an Open Doors worker. He shares an experience from a number of years ago. ‘I was in the Far East. I had fallen into the hands of violent communist guerrillas. Some days I wasn’t sure if I would die. I saw awful things. One man was shot before my eyes, he took half a day to die and I couldn’t help him. I felt, that week, I had no future, and I wasn’t sure, if my faith would be up to the task of dying well. I was in despair – my capture had been a freak chance, and no one knew I was now captured. I thought I may well end up dead in this jungle, with my captors free. But one day, I saw a book – one of the troops were reading – and it had a picture. Pencil sketch of a painting by Francis Bacon – of a figure on a throne – a figure like a pope – his face drawn in a hideous scream, perhaps mocking the role of church... What struck me, was *‘he was sitting on the throne.’* I then thought, didn’t God also sit on a throne, like Revelation shows? And on God’s throne, nothing happens that he is not aware of, he remains ultimately in control and all could be seen from that throne...I and my situation could be seen. From that time I began to whisper ‘there is a throne...’ and old hymns and the occasions I’d sung them came back into mind, classic hymns, full of tremendous words of promise...my feelings began to change...

At All Saints we seek to have the persecuted church as part of the core business of our church community – part of our heart, what is important to us. Not just an interesting idea but something we care deeply about. That’s why twice a year, we have our monthly focus of our charitable giving focused on persecuted Christians, through giving to the work of Open Doors. We are, each week, praying individually or in our family prayers, for one of the countries where Christians find it hardest to express their faith – those countries are on the World Watch List. And while we may mention illustrations in sermons, and regularly include the persecuted as part of our Sunday intercessions, we also choose to focus two Sundays a year,

upon the persecuted. In this sermon we consider experience of persecution, reality in persecution, attitude in persecution, fruits of persecution.

Stephen is the first Christian martyr. Jerusalem at that point of Acts, is a pressure cooker, with the leaders growing in opposition and adding more and more anti-Christian pressure, until it finally explodes with the death of Stephen.

Persecution has been growing since the early months of the church. Initially it has been words, threats, then restrictions being placed. Increasing pressure. For many believers as I have learned, live in under such constant pressure, with laws or attitudes to be aware of, – actual incidences of deliberate or even emotional violence – are very rare. But in a good number of countries near the top of the World Watch List, violence – organized or spontaneous – can be a common part of the experience of choosing to follow Jesus. That's *the experience* of many Christians today.

Stephen had been asked to give his defence. In his closing words, he accuses the Sanhedrin, the same court who tried Jesus, of being "stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts" that they "resist" the Holy Spirit, that they have persecuted God's messengers, his prophets, and he says that they betrayed and murdered the Righteous One, Jesus. They are enraged. That's their reaction.

Stephen's reaction. Is it fear, anxiety? He remains calm. He is full of the Spirit Luke tells us. Here was a man – whose life was filled with the Spirit as a hand fills a glove – here was a man whose life was showing what it meant to be filled – that he could be filled – in such dangerous times and places. Stephen had been one of the 7 appointed to help with the food rations for the widows in the church. The apostles asked for 7 men who were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. Then in the weeks and months that followed, Stephen's ministry expanded, that he was someone who did signs and wonders, who spoke with great wisdom by the Spirit.

In that moment – we hear it twice told – he receives a vision, in his inner mind. It shows *the reality in this persecution*. He sees heaven open, he sees the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. He sees the glory of God and Jesus standing there. He sees around him the reaction of the Sanhedrin, he now sees the reaction of Heaven and Jesus.

When Jesus was on trial he was asked: “Are you the Messiah, the Son of God.” He said, ‘Yes, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Almighty and coming with the clouds of heaven.’ Stephen in the same place perhaps, certainly before the same people, makes the same claim for Jesus. He shares what he sees – the words of Jesus have come true. This is the only place in the NT outside of the Gospels where the title ‘Son of Man’ is used. Jesus used it often: Luke 9, The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day be raised.” Stephen sees as he faces suffering and danger, he sees the Son of Man – the ONE who suffered, who died and who was vindicated by resurrection. The Son of Man – a pattern to be followed by all Christians.

Last year, 2983 Christians, according to the research by Open Doors, were killed for their faith last year. On average that is 8 Christians per day died for their faith. At present, A staggering 260 million Christians in the top 50 countries on the World Watch List – face high or extreme levels of persecution for their faith: in the previous year, it was 245 million. Open Doors estimates that there are another 50 million Christians facing high levels of persecution in a further 23 countries outside the top 50. Ron, when he tells his story, said it wasn’t just the fact that there is God on the throne, which strengthened him, but also there is a Lamb who stood in the throne, the Son of Man at the right hand of God. Jesus was on the path that Ron was on, that Stephen was on. Jesus – Son of Man – knew what it meant to be surrounded by hostile crowds, he knew what it was like to be totally alone in his hour of greatest need, he

ever knew what it was like to feel abandoned by God. Jesus knew all that Stephen was going through, all that the persecuted go through. Stephen sees a vision not just of God Almighty, but of Jesus, a person who had gone through things much worse. He sees reality.

The Son of Man stands. People focus quite a lot on this. He stands as an act of welcome, and an image of Jesus acknowledging Stephen: ‘I tell you whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God.’ What an encouragement to Stephen to see this. God’s reaction to his faith, to what he has been sharing, in the midst of the hostile human reaction. He saw heaven and who was standing there...

The angry audience act quickly. Enough is enough. They decide to put him to death. They add the words about Jesus by Stephen to the words he had already used to rebuke them, they have no choice but to kill him for blasphemy. Dragged out of the city. Witnesses – following Jewish law requirements – place their cloaks at the foot of a young man called Saul. And the stoning begins. It is a terrible way to die.

Luke records Jesus speaking three times when he is crucified. Here Stephen echoes two of them. We see his *attitude in the persecution*. ‘Lord Jesus receive my spirit.’ ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’. Stephen did much of the ministry of Jesus when we think about the descriptions of it. He spoke wise words that could not be challenged, he did signs and wonders, and now his death echoes the Lord. Jesus committed his spirit to God, Stephen commits his to Jesus – evidence for the rapid emergence of how highly they viewed Jesus in the church from an early stage.

His words of forgiveness recall our Lord’s own words on the cross. Stephen’s words – surely this is an example of what Jesus shared in John 14, ‘whoever has faith in me will do what I have been doing.’ Like Jesus, he remained faithful despite hostility, and now loves his

enemies and prays for them, as his Lord did himself. Such a model to us. Stephen denounced the listeners – the Christian can denounce sin and disobedience to God in order to lead his hearers to repentance – as Stephen shows to have pastoral care for them, praying they would be forgiven, we are to love our neighbours friend anonymous or enemy. Calvin suggests that the two prayers – the first he commits his spirit to Jesus, shows his firmness of faith in such difficult times, and second his prayer for his enemies, he shows his love of neighbor. Calvin says: “Since the complete perfection of our religion lies in those two directions – to God to others – we have in the death of Stephen a rare example of a man dying in a godly and holy way.”

He dies. He is buried by grieving fellow Christians, while Saul is glad of his death. And there begins a great persecution. Great because before now the entire church is targeted. Before it was just the main leaders. Now Saul – at the centre of it – attacks the church – dragging off men and women to prison - equally members of the church, equally offensive to the persecutor.

Aijth Fernando is a Christian leader working for Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka – number 30 on the World Watch List. Writing on these words ‘I live in a land of turmoil and I am often concerned for what our children might think about our – my wife and mine – decision to stay and serve an evangelistic organisation here. Thus I have naturally wondered what these Christian children would have felt like as they fled their homes or saw their parents dragged off to prison. What happened to the victorious Christ and the power of his resurrection? Why does God remain inactive even dormant while they suffer.’ When I visited some Christians in Central Asia last year, one pastor was visibly still struggling with the memory of how the home group he was leading, was visited by the police and arrested and they were taken away all in the sight of his kids and how later he had to explain to his children why that happened... Stephan had the tremendous vision of the glory of heaven and Jesus standing – but he was not delivered...

Acts is more than a book about church growth. It reveals a deep theology about the theme of suffering as the book develops. God is not dormant as millions of Christians suffer today. He feels the pain – as Saul hears months later – ‘Saul, Saul, *why do you persecute me?*’ Not simply the Lord has suffered, he feels the pain as the first church was scattered and now as parts of his body are persecuted...

Acts shares a glimpse of the victory God is going to win out of this tragedy. Our reading ended at v3, look at v4. ‘Those who were scattered preached the word wherever they went.’ A writer said: ‘The people went as missionaries more than as refugees. When he writes scattered, he doesn’t use normal Greek word for it, rather he uses the word – diaspeiro – a word which means to scatter, as seed is scattered on the ground. Seed meant to bear **fruit**. ***Fruit in persecution***. Looking back Luke could see the great significance of the events around Stephen’s death. When Luke describes the first preaching of the gospel outside of Palestine, he says the ones who did it were those ‘who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen.’ He links – deliberately under the Spirit’s illumination – Stephen’s death and the following persecution with this important development in the church’s mission – the gospel moving out to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. It has been said, ‘persecution need not be a barrier to the spread of the church it can be the motor of it.’

A true story. There was a pastor imprisoned in the Middle East. The beatings he could take, the smell of vomit he could handle, the darkness of the cell did not disturb him. He found hard the rats that crawled around his cell. But the hardest were the voice and doubts in his mind – he started to call them by names. ‘It’s finished’ voice. The pastor saw no good for the gospel being served by him being where he was. Your ministry is finished. A second voice was ‘You’re excluded’. Somehow the doubts. He had not agreed to the government dictating to him when and how he should worship. Yet he knew of other pastors who had made a deal with the gov’t and were free. The doubt, was he really on God’s side, following God’s

way and plan. Maybe the others were right, he was outside God's will? Was he excluded or finished. The Pastor was interrogated by a policeman. The policeman was so impressed by the pastor, with someone who thought God was worthwhile to go to prison for. So the policemen got a NT read it, met Christ. Few months later. This policeman established a house church movement that grew rapidly. So rapidly that when the pastor was released, he was asked to provide discipleship training now for the new converts who numbered in their 100s, much more than his own church network. The authorities had closed a door on him. God had opened the door to and for the gospel and hundreds were reached. He was not excluded from God's plans. His ministry was not finished in prison.

Persecution: experience, reality in it, attitude within in, fruits of it. Stephen. Was not excluded. He was affirmed by a wonderful vision. He saw reality, of who was in control and truth. He saw a vision of the risen, ascended exalted Lord, who still carries the wounds upon his body. Our persecuted believers matter greatly to the Lord, they are part of the Body, they matter to us, as our close family connections matter to us. Stephan, he loved God and loved those around him, including his enemies til the end. His ministry *was* finished. He fell asleep. Yet what came from that death and persecution, changed tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands lives. And his example continues to inspire and help thousands through the ages.

Shall we pray: Sovereign God, we worship You  
and we acknowledge that You know all of those  
who suffer in Your name. We ask that You would make us ever mindful of  
our brothers and sisters around the world who need us to stand with  
them as they suffer in Your name. Teach us what it means  
to overcome by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of our testimony;  
we pray that we would not love our lives so much as to shrink from  
death. In your Son, the crucified, risen, ascended exalted One. Amen.