

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter | 3 May 2026 | 8:30 Holy Communion

This Sunday as we continue our celebration of Easter and the power of the resurrection, we share with Stephen his vision of the risen Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Humanity in heaven, in the unmediated presence of God. In context of the Acts of the Apostles this shows that the early Christians were right and the religious establishment of the day wrong. Opposition breaks loose.

We know that Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew and was appointed a Deacon – one of seven – to take care of the widows in the early church in Jerusalem. There had been complaints from the Greek-speaking Christian community, the Hellenists, that the Greek-speaking widows were not being looked after well in comparison with those who were described as Hebrews, and who would in their daily lives have spoken Aramaic.

Out of the seven deacons Stephen was pre-eminent. He was full of 'grace and power'. He did 'great wonders and signs among the people'. He was 'full of the Spirit and of wisdom'. A remarkable, charismatic man, one who stood out among many big personalities in the early church.

Yet Stephen's brilliance provoked fierce antagonism. Opposition came from members of the Jerusalem synagogue, those Jews who had lived throughout the Greek world and had retired back to Jerusalem. Stephen may have been an outstanding preacher for the cause of Christ but first they argued against him, they began to smear his name around the city; then, they seized him and brought him in front of the religious establishment. They even provided false witnesses to make sure of a prosecution.

Not more than 18 months after Jesus' resurrection, Stephen's speech is one of the great passages of the New Testament.

Stephen presents what you might call 'pure Christianity'. It is the way of worship which God wishes for all his people. God does not dwell in a house made with human hands - the great figures of the Old Testament never imagined that God would be imprisoned in the Temple as he became. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, then David and Solomon – for them never was God's presence linked to one particular place. The God of the Old Testament was the living God – he was always on the move, travelling with his people, calling them to fresh adventures, directing them as they travelled. He was the 'pilgrim God' and his people were a 'pilgrim people'.

It was this God to which the Israelites were unfaithful. They had neglected his Law by rejecting the prophets who had been sent to them just as they rejected Moses in the wilderness. The present generation of Israel's leaders were no better. 'You stiff-necked generation' Stephen cried out. Not exactly the best way to address the high court of Judaism! They too were stubborn because they, like their ancestors, resisted the work of the Holy Spirit and the rest of the story we know.

So, what of us? How can we relate to Stephen? Isn't his position in Christian history as the very first martyr, one which is beyond us as we try to apply his life to our own lives? No, I don't think so. As I finish, three take-aways.

First, we are reminded of the mystery of God's grace and the power of the resurrection in hopeless situations. An outstanding disciple and a tragic death, yet the beginning and creation of something new. Before Stephen's martyrdom the church was growing but centred around Jerusalem. Stephen's death unleashed a persecution of the church and many disciples fled into Judea and into Samaria. They took with them the Gospel and so the mission of the church into the wider world began.

If there was one thing that triggered Stephen's violent death, it was his criticism of the Jewish Temple. His death is a vivid illustration of the mysterious working of God's grace even through human wickedness. Not least, standing by was a young man called Saul. It was through the mystery of grace that he encountered the risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus not many months later. It may be Christians had fled to Damascus precisely because of Stephen's martyrdom – it was a pivotal point in the spread of Christianity throughout the world.

May we know the mystery of the grace of God through Jesus Christ at work through the difficulties of our own lives so that his kingdom may grow around us.

But also, second, we have a reminder of the nature of the God whom we worship this morning. He is the God who travels with his people, who travels with us in the time of the resurrection as he did with the patriarchs and with Stephen himself. Each step along the way of our lives into each new situation, into the unknown and the new.

For our nation this morning, the future looks bleak and is a frightening place. The knife crime against members of the Jewish community last week in Golders Green highlights the increasing incidents of antisemitic acts that we are experiencing in our country, the worst for many decades. The Jewish community amongst us lives in fear today. As the church we must stand in solidarity with them - against all forms of antisemitism and all forms of hatred – racism, islamophobia as well as antisemitism - not just in our own nation but throughout the world.

God understands the feeling of fear we may have about the future. He does not take away the things about which we may be afraid but travelling with us he gives us the strength and courage to face them, and he can give us the experience of peace. May the church in this nation be a place where we resist all forms of discrimination and violence against people and communities, and be a partner in creating communities of justice, peace, and righteousness.

Third, Stephen's martyrdom asks of each one of us how far are we prepared to go in following Christ? We may say, well that's a pointless question because we are in a completely different situation! We might think that we are never likely to experience the hatred and violence that Stephen did? I am not sure we can any longer say this with certainty as we become an ever more divided society.

We can debate this. But notice that Stephen's death imitates the death of Jesus. In his death Jesus absorbed the wickedness of the world, so did Stephen. When Stephen prays, 'Lord Jesus receive my spirit', so he echoes Jesus' words from the cross. Likewise, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'. As Jesus knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane, so Stephen knelt when he prayed.

Each of us are called to enter into the death and resurrection of Christ that is symbolised by baptism: for Stephen it was a literal entering but for us we enter into Christ's death and resurrection daily by the way we live and give up our lives for others and for God.

Most of all, let us with Stephen, and like Jesus before him, share in that vision of the glory of God and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. The Creeds tell us that the risen and ascended Jesus *sits* at the right hand of God. Stephen's vision is of the Christ, the one who represents the whole of humanity, who stands, welcoming his first martyr. The heavens opening reveal the destiny of all who follow Christ into his death. This is our destiny, as it was that of Stephen. Christ stands to welcome each of us into the presence of God, this day, and every day of our lives.

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