

Remember that Jesus had been in the Temple just a few weeks before; he'd been crucified and risen again, just a few weeks ago. The people who did this and were still looking for Jesus' body are sitting in front of Stephen. In the past few weeks thousands of Jews have joined the Jesus followers; the people of the new life. Stephen is answering charges against him but his speech is basically a reminder of Israel's history and pointing the finger back at those accusing him. They become the ones on trial.

The focus is all on Stephen

1. The narrative that Stephen gives us – it's a selective history lesson. Every Jewish child knew the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and Moses. It's not a story of God's people remaining loyal and faithful; it's a story of the people rejecting the leaders that God gave them; of refusing to obey
2. The response of the Sanhedrin
3. The final words and actions of Stephen

So Stephen begins with Abraham as the Father of the Jewish nation in v.2-8, but note how even in these early verses, Stephen is reminding the people that it is God directing, God sending, God promising, God speaking, and God going with Abraham. This is God's work, calling a people and giving them a land. And then he goes on to talk about Joseph v.9-16 – the key thing he mentions, though, is the rejection of Joseph. Joseph was rejected by his brothers and sold into slavery, but God used him to become the Prime Minister under Pharaoh, ruler of all Egypt. When his brothers needed food, the man they had to go to was the man they had been jealous of and so had rejected. Fortunately for them he was gracious to them and gave them what they needed. Maybe some in the audience could see what where this was going. Sounds a bit like Jesus doesn't it? From v.20 -42 Stephen talks about Moses. Remember, last week one of the accusations was that Stephen was speaking against Moses. Moses towers above most others in the minds of the Jews. He was given the law; the whole ceremonial sacrificial system is set up under his leadership; he led the people out of Egypt. So Stephen gives us a selective history of Moses .

He starts in v.20 by stating that Moses was raised up by God, and trained in such a way that he became exactly the right leader for God's people. The new king, or Pharaoh, as the Egyptians called them, began to oppress the Hebrew people. Part of the deal was that male Hebrew children were to be killed off, to stop the population growing. But, even though Moses' parents had to abandon him because of this law, he was rescued by none other than Pharaoh's daughter, and brought up as her son. As a result, he was educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians, which was already legendary in Old Testament times. God, in other words, had planned for Moses to be just the man he needed for what he had in mind.

Then in v.23 from where our passage was read by Jenny, Stephen describes the incident early on where Moses became the rejected rescuer. This theme of rejecting God's person becomes stronger as Stephen goes on. Realizing his own ancestry, that he is a Jew, and despite his upbringing in Pharaoh's court, Moses set about trying to make things better for his people. It was a disastrous failure, he kills an Egyptian and is snubbed by his fellow Jews. But that's not what Stephen is drawing attention to. Rather, he highlights the fact that here was this man, sent by God to deliver the people, being rejected by the very people he was supposed to be rescuing. In v.27 the Hebrew man says, "Who made you a ruler or a judge over us?"

But then something very special happens. From v.30 Moses was the one to whom, and through whom "the God of glory", the God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob, revealed himself in a fresh way. So in v.30 God appears to Moses in a burning bush, a bush that is burning but not getting consumed. God speaks to him and God gives the command to Moses to go back to Egypt to set his people free.

Why has Stephen put this in his speech? He doesn't mention lots of key incidents in Moses' life. Part of the point here, as always in the early Christian explanation before fellow Jews, is that the God they have come to know in and through Jesus is not a different God from the one made known to their ancestors, but precisely the same one doing precisely the same thing, that is, rescuing his people in fulfilment of his ancient promises. And now God is addressing Moses who is a long way from the people who he is supposed to be rescuing. God is meeting with Moses. In a temple? No. But the place they are meeting, in the middle of nowhere, is "holy ground". Something very special is happening here.

At this point, then, has Stephen said anything bad about Moses. Remember last week the accusation was that Stephen was speaking against Moses and changing the customs that had been handed down. What is Stephen doing? He is reminding the Sanhedrin of a story that they should have been very familiar with. He has so far showed that God prepared and equipped Moses and then now he was calling him in this moment of the burning bush. This moment would transform everything. It was like heaven and earth coming together as God spoke to Moses with the bush there. At this stage there was no temple, but this place where God was was holy ground. This was a special place where God is revealing his intention to fulfil his promise that Stephen mentions back in v.7 – God was going to save his people through Moses.

Then from v.35 -49 the ante builds up. Stephen says that not only did the Israelite people reject Moses as they travelled through the desert but they rebelled against God. v.39 says .

God had given them instructions in how to worship him, but they chose to worship other Gods. Even when God had told them to worship him in the Tabernacle, the special meeting place, the people did that but continued to also worship pagan gods – we see this in their worship of the calf statue; and then in v. 43 the worship of these gods Molek and Rephan.

Then in v.46 Stephen reminds them that David had asked God if he could build a temple and then Solomon had built it. But Stephen quotes from Isaiah 66:1,2 in v. 49,50 – God says “heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool – God made this world and rules over it – What kind of house can you build for me. Has not my hand made all these things on earth?’

Stephen has now turned the tables completely on those who are accusing him. You say that I am speaking against the temple and against Moses. Well look at your history. You guys, in fact, are following in the footsteps of your rebellious ancestors. You have made this temple an idol; you think you can contain God in this Temple and somehow control him!! The Most High doesn't live in shrines like this. Heaven is His throne and earth his footstool. The entire universe could not contain God since he made it in the first place. What God wanted instead was to come into his world as a human being, to come as the Righteous one to rescue his people. But like their ancestors, the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day had refused to accept Jesus as their appointed deliverer and had preferred their own religious system. Moses and all the prophets would unite with Stephen in condemning them.

And so we have these strong words from Stephen in v.51-53 – READ. He doesn't hold back does he? They are in fact the ones who stand condemned. It isn't just that they rejected God's Messiah, Jesus, the Righteous One, and handed him over to be killed. Stephen is going further than Peter now. He says you acted just like your rebellious ancestors. Stephen stand with the prophets in condemning them.

So what is their response? Yes, we've rebelled, what should we do? No. They are absolutely furious. How dare Stephen speak to us like this. Note the contrast with Acts 2:37 – after Peter's sermon where he condemned the people for crucifying Jesus – their response – “What shall we do?” And Peter says, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.” Turn around from going your way and go God's way. But there is none of this here – they take Stephen out and stone him to death – just like their ancestors had done with the prophets and they themselves had done with Jesus.

As we finish the story today you might have noticed that I titled the sermon, “The Holy Spirit in Stephen”. In chap 7 Luke only mentions the words of the Sanhedrin once, in v.1, when they ask a question. But we have all the words of Stephen recorded. And in this last scene, with all the fury and hate that is directed towards Stephen Luke draws us to focus on Stephen. Look at v.55, But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. In this earthly courtroom surrounded but the screaming hate-filled men, this blurs into insignificance as the holy Spirit shows Stephen the heavenly court room. And then is Jesus standing next to the Father. Jesus is defending Stephen ; and he's welcoming Stephen home. THIS IS THE REALITY. What an amazing God we have. He is standing with us; he is

waiting for us to come home; he loves us; nothing can separate us from him; he stands before the Father to defend those who have repented and acknowledged Jesus as the only one who has died and risen again that we might be saved and enjoy relationship with God forever.

I was thinking about church buildings this week. It's great to have a building that we can meet in, have our Preschool in. But ultimately, what's God most interested in – it's us, we who are his people are his temple. In 1 Cor 3:16 – Paul says, “Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's spirit lives in you? And then again in 2 Cor 6:16 – “We are the temple of the living God.” I was thinking about all the amazing cathedrals that were built. Some of the European ones took 30,40, 70 , even 100 years to build. Thousands of working hours, huge amounts of money – and for what purpose? To build a house for God. What does Stephen say here? God does not live in buildings; God lives in people , we are his temple. And that's why I want to spend my energy and the money God's entrusted me with to growing God's temple – people. God's people who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

We can look at Stephen and say what a great guy, what a faithful man. Yes, that is true. But what this also says to us more importantly is what a Great God that Stephen worshipped and followed. He knew he was safe with Jesus, in fact Jesus was waiting for him. What an assurance for us! We can trust the God who was waiting for Stephen. God did not stop Stephen from being killed. He could have. He was bringing him home. And we have this record of how we too can respond to our enemies as Stephen prays in v.60 – “Lord don't hold this sin against them” and how we can respond when facing death, “Lord Jesus receive my spirit. I love the last sentence here, “when he had said this, Stephen fell asleep.” There is this battered bloodied body lying here on the ground but Luke doesn't draw our attention to that. Was Stephen afraid as he faced death? Perhaps there was some. But he had his eyes on his Lord and Saviour. He died peacefully, he fell asleep and woke to be with his Lord

Next week – a guest speaker, Rob Colacino, talking about heaven

“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously - no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption.”