

Sermon – The Stoning of Stephen. Acts 6:8 – 8:3. 5th May, 2008.

Rev. Bruce Stanley

www.waitara.anglican.asn.au

- The scene is a courtroom.
- The place where Jesus once stood. Where Jesus was tried, convicted and led out to be crucified.
- Peter and John stood in this same place after healing a cripple. They were told to stop speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus.
- The apostles stood here as well, around a year ago, after performing miracles in Jesus' name. They were flogged and then told to stop speaking about Jesus.

And now Stephen stands here, because he taught the same things Jesus taught.

Stephen had done miracles in the name of Jesus. He spoke in the Synagogues, the Jewish temples, teaching people that Jesus was the Messiah, the promised saviour from God. The Synagogue would be *packed* with people and there would be Stephen, arguing with the greatest Jewish Old Testament scholars.

Saul (later to be known as the Apostle Paul) was most likely there. But these experts in the Scriptures, verse 10, *“could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.”* Stephen spoke from the Scriptures the way Jesus did – with authority and wisdom.

And so they made up some charges of blasphemy against him –

“He spoke against the temple of God”, “he’s changing the customs and teachings of Moses”.

And they bring him before the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin is the highest religious courtroom in the land. And this court chamber is just inside the Temple entrance. Stephen is led to the centre of this circular room.

The High Priest of the Sanhedrin sits in the centre of a long curving bench on one side of the room.

He’s wearing his turban, a tunic, and a jewelled breast-plate. On one side of him are 70 judges – who hold both religious and political power. These guys ARE the Sanhedrin. At each end of the bench, a scribe sits ready to take down every word that is spoken.

On the other side of this circular room is another long curved bench. Facing the Sanhedrin judges are the lawyers, the teachers, the court servants and future candidates for the Sanhedrin. Saul was one of them.

Stephen stands alone in the middle. The Sanhedrin on one side, the lawyers and teachers on the other.

The charges are read out – “Blasphemy against God”, “Blasphemy against Moses”. “Blasphemy against the Temple”. False witnesses come forward saying: *“This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law!”*

The High Priest asks Stephen “Are these charges true?”

Now, Stephen has a chance, finally, to defend himself.

With a face like the face of an angel, Stephen is about to defend himself to the very men who crucified his Lord Jesus 8 years ago. And what is his defence?

He addresses the whole courtroom and says:

Listen to the history of Israel. YOUR history. From Abraham to Moses to Jesus. God chose you as his people, Israel. And no matter what you did, God looked after you, cared for you, and protected you. But again and again, you rejected him.

God chose Joseph as a leader. And his own brothers sold him into slavery. Yet through Joseph, God saved you.

God chose Moses as a leader for his people and his own people rejected him as well. Yet through Moses, God saved you.

Again and again God raised up prophets and leaders and you, his own people, rejected them. Finally, God sent his son, Jesus of Nazareth.

Then, as Stephen looks around the courtroom, he says his closing argument:

READ 7:51-52.

In other words, Stephen says to the Sanhedrin – **“YOU killed God’s Messiah!”**

The Sanhedrin are furious – only a step away from killing him right there and then.

And then... they notice Stephen is looking up at the ceiling. And Stephen shouts out –
v56 *“Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”*

That did it. That was the last straw for the Sanhedrin. They cover their ears and yell and scream “blasphemy” (e.g.), and the whole crowd jump out of their seats and rush at him. Chaos breaks out. There was no time for legal proceedings. This man was a blasphemer. He deserved to die right now. They grab him and they drag him outside to stone him.

Now, if it were a normal stoning, it would have to have been approved by the government. And he would have been taken out by the people who witnessed against him. When they were 5 metres from the place of stoning, he would have been asked to “confess” so he could still have a share in the future kingdom of God. 2 metres from the place, the criminal would be stripped. The witnesses would also take off their outer garments. Then the criminal would be tied by his hands and feet and pushed face first by the first witness into a big hole in the ground – a drop of nearly 3 ½ metres (about 11 feet). If he died from that, that was it. If he was still alive, the second witness would drop a stone on his heart. If that doesn’t kill him, then all the witnesses would stone him to death.

But that didn’t happen to Stephen. The government wasn’t advised. They just jumped up, dragged him out, threw him into the pit, the witnesses put their clothes at the feet of Saul, who agreed with all that was happening, and they all began to stone him.

He wasn’t tied and thrown head first – which would have probably knocked him out or killed him. No. **He stands on his feet, turns around and looks up at his accusers** and they begin to hurl the stones at him. He says *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”*.

THEN, he falls on his knees, and prays, just as Jesus did on the cross as *he* faced *his* accusers : v60: *“Lord do not hold this sin against them.”* Then he fell asleep.

One minute he was witnessing to the Lord Jesus in a courtroom full of Jews. A few minutes later he was dragged out by an angry mob, thrown in a pit and stoned to death.

WE ARE WITNESSS

Today, ***we*** are witnesses of Jesus.

And the courtroom is our world – our homes, our workplace, our parliament.

And the benches in our courtroom are filled with lawyers and teachers and religious people, with Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, atheists and agnostics, scientists and philosophers, family, work friends, and neighbours.

And **this** is where we stand – in the middle of the courtroom. And we are called to stand here and preach Jesus. We don’t stand alone. We don’t speak with our own words. We stand and speak with

the power of the Holy Spirit. And when we do speak, there will often be a cost. But the question today for us is this: will we be prepared to speak **despite** the cost? **Despite** the opposition? **Despite** the consequences? **Despite** the resistance to the Holy Spirit?

III – A few years ago, a Scripture teacher in Sydney, who was often ridiculed by some of the students for his beliefs, was one day attacked by them. They broke his arm and several of his ribs. Now, fair enough if he didn't want to go back there, right? He came back to the school the very next week in bandages and went on speaking about Jesus. What was the result? Well, maybe the students respected him for it. But more importantly, he didn't stop doing what God had called him to do – he didn't stop **speaking** about Jesus.

Think about the **consequences** of Stephen's speech. First, Stephen dies. Then, 8:1 – *“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”*

The church was attacked! But what happened to the Christians? But where did they go? To Judea and Samaria.

Remember Acts 1:8 – Jesus said to his disciples – *“you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

Even through this stoning, God's was fulfilling his plan. His disciples were being sent out! This wasn't the end of the church. These men who killed Stephen, and then dragged off Christians into prison, were not **killing** the church of Jesus, they were **launching** the church! Now the gospel message will be heard in Judea and Samaria, and before long, at the ends of the earth.

I wonder if Stephen thought of the consequences his speech would have had against the whole church. I wonder if he realised how many Christians would be arrested, imprisoned, flogged and killed, because of what he had said to the Sanhedrin. I wonder – if he had known the consequences, would he have said *“I think I'd be better off with a low key approach here. I won't tell them all that bad stuff about how they killed the Messiah. I'll just get to know them all really well, and one by one win them over with my Christian life and angelic face.”*

We can choose to do God's will, and stand up in the courtroom of our world and confess Jesus and tell people the gospel at every opportunity, despite the consequences. **OR** we can choose to be quiet, or water it down, and make it more acceptable and easy going to people. But if we do that, we cannot join in the words of the Lord's Prayer, when we pray: “Your kingdom come, your will be done”. If God's will is to be done, his people need to witness.

God doesn't call us to make *friends* of every nation. He calls us to make *disciples* of every nation. That means telling people the truth. That means never shying away from explaining the saving news of Jesus whenever we have the opportunity. That means sometimes we *do* make enemies. Not all the time, but sometimes it happens.

Why is this so important? As we read this passage today, I want us to realise that Stephen was not on trial by the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was on trial by God. The Sanhedrin was hearing the gospel and **THEY** were on trial over the way they received it.

Our **world, YOUR** world, is on trial before God. And only those who trust in the name of Jesus will be saved. Our world needs to hear the gospel so they can have the opportunity to respond. Sometimes it's **easy** to share that message. Sometimes it's **hard**. Sometimes we make friends, sometimes we make enemies.

God asks one thing of us – speak with the truth about Jesus – and let God's will be done – whatever the consequences may be. Because HE is in control when we speak.