

ACTS 7:54–8:3

The Stoning of Stephen

⁵⁴ What Stephen said was a blow right to the heart. When they heard it, they gnashed their teeth against him. ⁵⁵ He, however, was filled with the holy spirit, and looked steadily up into heaven. There he saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at God's right hand.

⁵⁶ 'Look!' he said. 'I can see heaven opened, and the son of man standing at God's right hand!'

⁵⁷ But they yelled at him at the tops of their voices, blocked their ears and made a concerted dash at him. ⁵⁸ They bundled him out of the city and stoned him. The witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ So they stoned Stephen.

'Lord Jesus,' he cried out, 'receive my spirit.'

⁶⁰ Then he knelt down, and shouted at the top of his voice, 'Lord, don't let this sin stand against them.'

Once he had said this, he fell asleep.

^{8:1} Now Saul was giving his consent to Stephen's death.

That very day a great persecution was started against the church in Jerusalem. Everyone except the apostles was scattered through the lands of Judaea and Samaria. ² Devout men buried Stephen, and made a great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was doing great damage to the church by going from one house to another, dragging off men and women and throwing them into prison.

Francis Thompson was a strange and powerful English poet of the early twenti-

eth century. He was a believing Christian, but his life had been sad and difficult in a number of ways. Yet in the middle of his personal suffering he discovered a strange truth, which he put into memorable verse. At the very moment when all seems most bleak, just then the presence of Jesus Christ, and of his angels, can be so real and powerful that it is as though some of the scenes from the **gospels** are coming true before your very eyes. Since Thompson lived in London, that is where he places his remarkable vision:

But (when so sad thou canst not
sadder)

Cry;—and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder,
Pitched betwixt heaven and Charing

Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my
daughter,

Cry—clinging Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water,
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

This goes, in my mind, with the reflection that sometimes in the Bible when angels appear it is precisely to people who are beside themselves with grief, like Mary at the tomb of Jesus in [John 20](#). This isn't a reason, of course, for seeking out misery. But it may help a little bit in understanding what is going on in this dramatic passage, the story of the first Christian martyrdom.

What is a ‘martyr’? As is now widely known, the word technically means ‘witness’. A ‘martyr’ is someone who gives evidence. Why then do we call people who die for their **faith** ‘martyrs’? Well, at one level at least, because in being prepared to die for their faith they are showing that they, at least, reckon that this faith is not just a set of ideas, not merely a nice religious glow, but the very living truth itself, worth more than one’s own life. That is no doubt true.

But in this story, and in several others like it, there are other levels of ‘witness’ as well, which we ought to ponder.

First, there is the extraordinary statement which Stephen makes as the members of the court are grinding their teeth in fury at the offensive things he’s said. Suddenly—though we have been prepared for this, perhaps, by Luke’s statement in **6:15** that his face looked like that of an angel—he seems to have a vision.

‘Look!’ he shouts out. They can’t, of course, since nobody else can see what he has suddenly seen. ‘I can see **heaven** opened!’ That doesn’t mean, by the way, that he could see, far off up in the sky, a small door through which a distant place called ‘heaven’ might just about be visible. Visions like this are more like what happens when you’ve been standing on a mountain in thick cloud, hardly able to see the person walking six feet ahead of you, and suddenly a great wind sweeps away the cloud and you can see not only

your companions, not only the crags and peaks all around, but far away, down in the valley, the streams and trees and villages in the afternoon sun. All those things had been there all the time, but you can only see them when the mist lifts. That’s what it seems to have been like for Elisha and his servant when the Lord opened their eyes and they discovered themselves surrounded by horses and chariots of fire (**2 Kings 6:17**). That is what it was like, I believe, with Stephen. *There was the heavenly court, suddenly superimposed upon the earthly one.* Instead of the **high priest** and his fellow judges, there was the scene such as we find in **Daniel 7**, with the Ancient of Days, the God of glory himself, sitting in judgment, and with the **son of man**, not (as in Daniel) ‘coming’ towards him to be seated, but *standing* before him to act as advocate in the court. The human judges might be condemning Stephen to death, but the heavenly court was finding in his favour. Perhaps, indeed, a long memory of that double scene, etched on an impressionable young mind, may lie behind **1 Corinthians 2:8** and **Colossians 2:14–15**.

The point of being a ‘martyr’, then, a ‘witness’, is not just that giving one’s life to death provides striking confirmation of one’s faith (when facing death, what’s the point in being a hypocrite?). It may be much more: that the point at which a person stands at the very threshold of heaven and earth, still in earth but called

to give up their life for the faith, is the point where they may for a moment be in a position where they can, as it were, see both dimensions of reality, and speak about the normally hidden one to the people who cannot yet see it for themselves. This, again, from Luke's point of view, is itself part of the meaning of the whole scene. The **Temple** was supposed to be the place where heaven and earth met. Stephen is demonstrating that heaven and earth in fact come together in Jesus and his followers 🗡️.

Clearly not all 'martyrs' in the normal sense have given that kind of testimony. But equally clearly, not only in the case of Stephen, but also in several others through the violent history that has followed the preaching of the gospel down the years, there have been many who seem to have been given that kind of sight of things normally unseen, and who have been allowed to speak of them in their dying moments. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer called out something similar as he was being burned at the stake outside the gate of Balliol College, Oxford.

But there is something else to which Stephen is a 'witness'. There had been many 'martyrs' during the last few centuries of Jewish history before the time of Jesus. About 200 years before Jesus' day, a pagan king from Syria took over Jerusalem, desecrated the Temple, and forced many Jews to renounce their **law**,

their ancestral way of life, and even to eat pork, which was of course forbidden in the law. The aim was obvious: get them to renounce their national charter, and they will be easier to govern, less likely to rebel. But many Jews resisted, and there are vivid accounts of how they met their deaths. We are told, in particular, what they said. One after another (the most striking account is in 2 Maccabees 7) they not only bear witness to their own faith, particularly in the **resurrection** they believe they will enjoy on the last day; they also threaten their torturer with dire punishments to come. 'Do not think', says one, 'that God has forsaken our people. Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!' That is utterly typical of many Jewish stories of people being tortured and killed for their belief and way of life.

And the extraordinary thing is that, even though the earliest Christians were all first-century Jews to whom that kind of response would have been normal and expected, none of them, going to their death, say anything like that at all. Stephen has just laid a pretty ferocious charge against the Jewish leaders in his speech. But when it comes to his own death, he shouts out a prayer at the top of his voice, as rocks are flying at him and his body is being smashed and crushed, asking God not to hold this sin against them. That is every bit as remarkable as the vision of the open heaven and the son

of man standing as counsel for the defence. It is the up-ending of a great and noble tradition. If we knew nothing about Christianity except the fact that its martyrs called down blessing and **forgiveness**, rather than cursing and judgment, on their torturers and executioners, we would have a central, though no doubt puzzling, insight into the whole business 🗡️.

There is of course only one explanation. They really had learned something from **Jesus**, who made loving one's enemies a central, non-negotiable part of his teaching (not, as so often in would-be 'Christian' society, something one might think about from time to time but not try very hard to put into practice). On the cross **Jesus** himself prayed that those nailing him up might be forgiven (**Luke 23:34**).

There is much else worth pondering in the death of Stephen—not least the fact that, from early on in church history, the event has been commemorated on the day after Christmas Day, reminding us that Christmas is not simply about a nice little baby surrounded by friendly animals, but the sudden arrival of the new **life** of heaven within an inhospitable and downright dangerous world. But one thing more is worth noticing. As **Jesus'** followers are marked out and hunted down, scattered across the surrounding countryside, the young man called Saul,

who had been a principal witness to Stephen's death, goes off to seize as many as he can. When you're doing that kind of thing, you only arrest people who are likely to be a problem, people who are full members of, and possibly also potential leaders in, the movement. It is striking, here and elsewhere, that this number regularly, from the very beginning of the movement, included not only men but also women.