

Text: Acts 6.5-8.1
St Stephen's

Oct 21, 2007
Sun AM

Stephen the Martyr

In the Anglican Communion we **name churches after biblical saints**. We do this often in naming children. My third son is Peter Latimer Chapman, named after one of the reformation martyrs. My third daughter is Susannah Stanway Chapman, named after Bp Stanway who started Trinity Seminary and disciple me. Mom's and Dads have hopes for their kids when they pick a namesake. We hope that our children will live into the character of the people we have named them after.

We do that **to give us something to live up to**. This church was **named after St Stephen**, the first Christian martyr. We have a bronze statue of him in the garden. We have a **carved statue** of him at the gate in our modesty wall separating the choir from the congregation. In the carved statue he is **holding the stones** used to kill him. **Stained glass window** in the Laura Robertson room... Today we look at his story in Acts 6-8. I want to **ask you a question** as we look at his story... **What does it mean that Stephen is our namesake?**

Remember that at this time, **the gospel was all over Jerusalem, but not beyond it**. Thousands of people had come to believe in Jesus, but no one outside of Jerusalem had yet heard of his resurrection and the good news that sins could be forgiven and people could be filled with the Holy Spirit. And you remember that some serious persecution had started. Last week I talked about how **Satan was pushing back**, through his ever-the-same strategies of moral compromise, distraction, and persecution. The denominational authorities were cracking down. Hard. So **the Gospel was stuck**.

That's where we pick up **Stephen's story**. Stephen was one of the seven men picked in Acts 6 to expand the ministry of the church. These men are the **first deacons**, we believe. You remember from last week that they were picked to **handle the food ministry** to the many widows

in the church, so that the Apostles could focus on prayer and the ministry of teaching and preaching the Bible.

Stephen was involved in several ministries, and became a great teacher.

What kind of man was Stephen? 5 Marks of his life and ministry.

1. Stephen Was Filled by the Lord

There is a word that repeats itself in Acts 6.5 & 8 that characterizes Stephen - the word is "**full**"....

Acts 6:5 *They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit...*

Acts 6:8 *Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.*

He is...

full of **faith** Vs 6

full of **the Holy Spirit**

full of **God's grace** Vs 8

full of **God's power**

What a great **combination**. This is a guy that is **overflowing**; He is chock full of God, stuffed full, fully alive. Have you ever known people like that?

There are **too many people today who are empty, vacant – a void**. Emptiness like that can eat away at you from inside. It will make you restless and crazy. You will **try everything to fill the emptiness** and the **loneliness**. People will latch onto any crazy thing to fill themselves up. It's drugs or sex or money or career or lurching from one thing to another. And it can get bad.

Stephen is a man who is full... of Jesus Christ. He **treasured** that fullness, asked for it, prayed for it.

I love having as the namesake of our church somebody who is full of Jesus Christ. **Do you think maybe that the Lord Jesus has a special word for us** in making St. Stephen our namesake, **a special reminder, a special promise...** That he wants us to be **full** of Him, of faith in him, of his Spirit, of his grace, of his power?

If you and I are going to be of real use to God in a world that is rapidly getting darker and emptier, **get under that fountain of grace** every day and stay there... "Lord Jesus, fill me up..."

2. Stephen Was Called by the Lord

In the three chapters of Acts 6-8 we get a picture of Stephen's ministry... **It's quite a ministry career.**

He's not doing any ministry at all but then the opportunity comes to **help in the kitchen** with the food ministry to the widows, and he **says yes.**

And then an opportunity came to do some ministry with people who **suffering** terrible bondage, either to illness or to sickness or to demonic possession or something like that and Stephen **says yes** again. And they began to get healed and freed. Remarkable. God really began to use him.

All of a sudden here comes another opportunity. Here's the **synagogue of the freed men** and it's a tough assignment, but he **jumps right in.**

And then comes the trial and the opportunity to speak to all the religious leaders of Israel. Again Stephen's **ready, always available.**

To the small and the great, to those far away and close at hand, to the crushed and to the proud Stephen goes, always holding out the grace of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

Do you think maybe that the Lord Jesus has a special word for us in making St Stephen our namesake? That he wants us to be available to Him, **ready** to step through any door, answer any call, carrying the good news of Jesus to the world in word and in deed?

We need people who **hold their whole life in open hands...** "Use me, Lord... Send me Lord" You may find yourself over your head, but Christ will use you in extraordinary ways. **Register for 301**

Stephen Believed Jesus Was Savior of All

Stephen's defense is a **long history lesson**, sweeping through the lives of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David... and then they take him out and stone him!! It wasn't that boring!

They had **charged him with speaking against the temple**. Above all for the Jews, the Temple was **the place of God's presence**, a guarantee that He loved them above all the other people of the earth.

Stephen responds like this... look at **Abraham and Joseph and Moses**: They leave their countries, they travel, they journey, they didn't stay in one place. Abraham wandered. Joseph went to Egypt. Moses came out of Egypt back into the Sinai Desert then back into Egypt, then all through the desert and **not one of them ever set foot in the promised land**.

God was with them in every place, in every country, in every desert, on every journey.

The conclusion is clear...

"the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says:

*" 'Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.*

What kind of house will you build for me?

Acts 7:48-49 (NIV)

Stephen goes back through the whole history of Israel and says in effect, **wake up, guys**. The God you worship is **a big God**. He's **not just your God**. This is the God Who made heaven and earth. This is the king of all kings, the Lord of all lords.

His plan includes the whole world – every nation, every heart, every life. That's our calling... that's our mission. We are not just here for us. We are here for people who are lost and looking.

Stephen Believed Jesus was Lord

They had also charged Stephen with disregarding **God's Law**. Stephen responds to the charge that it is God's people who have disobeyed God's law from generation to generation to generation...

Acts 7:39 *"But our fathers **refused to obey him**. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.*

These religious leaders would turn to Stephen and say, "**Our** Fathers, our Fathers, our Fathers... and Stephen would turn right around and say, **Your** fathers rebelled against Moses, your fathers ran Joseph off to Egypt, your fathers would not obey the Word of God. When the Word of God came through the prophets of God, the reaction of **your** fathers, so to speak, was to run them out of town. Then he gets around to the punch line

Acts 7:51-52 *"You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: **You always resist the Holy Spirit!** Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?"*

Well, you understand why Stephen had such a **short ministry career**.

No something happens right here. You might second-guess Stephen's words. Why was he so blunt. Why so tough? If we could have just gotten him a PR consultant, we could have wordsmithed it a bit and gotten Stephen a few more decades of ministry.

And when we sense that **the Lord calling us to a tough place** or a tough decision, don't we tend to do just that – smooth it over, put it off?

But here is the deal. Stephen was quite clear that **what he was saying was true**. And that **Jesus had wanted him to be quite blunt** about it. And Stephen was determined to follow Jesus, obey Jesus, be led by the Spirit of Jesus, no matter.

No matter. Wherever. Whenever. Whatever. Even if you are way over your head. That's what our namesake did. He just put it out there.

It infuriated them.

Stephen Saw the Lord

"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

And that did it.

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

Acts 7:56-58 (NIV)

The **final nail in the coffin** was Stephan saying he saw Jesus at the right hand of God. "**Look**", he says. "**Look**". Heaven is open! The sacrifice has been offered. Look at his hands. Look at the scars. There he is, risen from the dead. Lord over all the earth. Savior of every tribe and tongue and people and nation. Look at him, looking at us. Look at him standing for us, ready to welcome us home.

Max Lucado tells the story of young Matthew Huffman. *He was the six-year-old son of missionaries in Salvador, Brazil. One morning he began to complain of fever. As his temperature went up, he began losing his eyesight. His mother and father put him in the car and raced him to the hospital.*

As they were driving and he was lying on his mother's lap, he did something his parents will never forget. He extended his hand in the air. His mother took it and he pulled it away. He extended it again. She again took it and he, again, pulled it back and reached into the air. Confused, the mother asked her son, "What are you reaching for, Matthew?"

"I'm reaching for Jesus' hand," he answered. And with those words he closed his eyes and slid into a coma from which he never would awaken. He died two days later, a victim of bacterial meningitis.

Look, Stephen says. Look.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

Acts 7:59-8:1 (NIV)

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria... Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

Acts 8:1, 4(NIV)

That is how the Gospel got out of Jerusalem. That is how the **blockade was broken.** This is where we meet Saul for the first time, soon to become the Apostle Paul. He never could forget Stephen's face, Stephen's words, Stephen's final prayer. Stephen was praying for Paul.

You might think Stephen's life was too short, and his words too blunt. But you would be wrong. **Stephen's life goes on.** Of that we are sure. And his **witness speaks today**, to people like us. Stephen was a great man, whose life and death opened a great door.

What was **his secret?** He was a man who **always wanted more of Jesus**, who **lived looking to Jesus**, to the last days of his life, - he never lost sight of Jesus and Jesus never lost sight of Stephen. and **who was available** to Jesus... No matter - be the job small or large, safe or dangerous, an 'easy do' or a dangerous mission. "My utmost for his highest".