

## Sermon Archive 584

Sunday 3 May, 2026

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

On the Martyrdom of Stephen

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



**Introduction:** In the community of glad hearts, who was Stephen?

Last week we let ourselves be inspired by how the early Christian community had glad and generous hearts to the point that they were able to sell all they had and distribute proceeds to those in need. It was a lovely picture. The hard reality behind the picture, though, was that working out who was in need was tricky - or at least time consuming. In the chapters between the glad hearts last week and what features in today's reading, we learn that discussions about identifying need highlighted old divisions that maybe ought not to have been allowed into the new community. The divisions were about culture and race. It was felt that too much support was being channelled to the Hebrew widows, while the Greek widows were being neglected - a good old Jew and Gentile, inside / outside division.

In order to save the apostles from distraction from the teaching to which the community was devoted - or maybe to save them from having to take sides in old battles for which they had little energy, a group of *managers* was appointed. Among them was Stephen - whose name is Greek, so one presumes was from the "outsiders" - so was likely to be held in suspicion by any hardcore Hebrew authority - the Sanhedrin, for example. If perhaps he were to speak to the Sanhedrin about how Israel had often misunderstood the breadth of God's concern for the outsiders, and how Israel had often killed the prophets it should have revered, part of the reaction might have flowed from "who does this Gentile think he is?" Maybe . . . Stephen certainly delivered just such a speech. You can read it in Acts 6.

No one knows much about Stephen, but art often portrays him as a young man - no beard, no bulk. On the front of the order of service are three depictions, all presenting him as young. One, by Carlo Crivelli (Fifteenth Century Italian) has him looking a bit sad, a bit soft, with his traditional symbols of stones and a martyr's palm branch. One by Luis Morales (Sixteenth Century Spaniard), has him looking gaunt and miserable, while seeing a tiny Jesus in the sky. The third, by Rodolfo Bernadelli (Nineteenth Century Brazil) looks like Bernadelli just wanted to sculpt a naked young man - any excuse!

Which version of Stephen, you might wonder, best captures the Stephen of the scriptures? Well, let's hear the story.

**The Bible Lesson:** Acts 7: 54 - 8:1a

### **The Four Times of Stephen**

#### **Stephen's Time for the Community to be sad**

Matthew Shepard was 21 years old and HIV positive when offered a ride home from a night club in Laramie, Wyoming. The driver of the car pulled over in a remote area, next to a fence. Matthew was severely beaten (pistol whipped), tied to the fence, and left there to die. He died in hospital six days later. Investigations revealed his attack to have been motivated by homophobia. The rainbow community in Wyoming and in many other places took time to weep for him, to hold vigils. Communities that care (and identify) take time to be sad.

When he was 37 years old, Alex Pretti, an Intensive Care nurse, came to the aid of someone who had been knocked to the ground by government agents in Minneapolis. He was shot and killed by the same agents. Within hours of his death, 100 Minnesotans assembled at the very site. Communities that care and identify take time to be sad.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was 39 years old when he was hanged by NAZI authorities in a prison in Flossenbürg, Germany. He was a Luthern minister who preached - he was an academic theologian who taught in universities. When news of his death spread, his family mourned first, then his colleagues, then those who had read his books, then the wider church. With one of their number extinguished, it was time for the community to be sad.

In the Gallery of Knox Church, Ōtautahi, there is a Roll of Honour - a list of names of many young men who were killed. Would it not have been better if their lives had been longer? The presence of the piece of "brass bearing names" reveals a community taking time to be sad.

And Stephen? The first thing we can do in response to Stephen, is to acknowledge that he is one of **us** - **we** are his community; and so we are those who, in that identification, should take time to be sad for him. We ask, had he lived, what might he have done? Had he lived, where would life have taken him? Had he lived, what gifts might he have shared with the world, what happiness or satisfaction would he have found? These are the questions that spin around any truncated life. The first part of our response to Stephen is for our community to take time to be sad. ***Dear God; thank you for Stephen. We mourn his death. Hear our prayer.***

#### **Stephen's Time for the Community to engage with what needs to change**

Stephen was the first member of the Christian community to be killed simply because he was a Christian. The community learns quickly that while Jesus has not gone away, neither has the violence that met him. Didn't he once say [John 15:20] "Slaves are not greater than their master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you." The community within that reality is going to have to learn how to apply the ridiculous advice of turning the other cheek, to remain meek, to be silent before the ridiculous stupidity that cannot listen, yet demonstrate the risen power that prevails over it all.

I wouldn't necessarily say that our mourning for Stephen should activate our anger. But it must present us with the fact that evil continues to do in the world what it always has done - and as Stephen dies in every age, we need to mount a Christ-grounded opposition. To the force that says lies are powerful, we need to show the truth that sets us free. To the force that uses violence, we need to insist on the ways of peace. To the force that promises scorched-earth obliteration, we need to point to God's flowers growing in the cracks in the ground. To the force that says "Jesus died", we need to say "Au contraire, my friend; he lives".

To the communities that mourned their own, who'd died "just because", there comes the challenge to serve the new creation. As the murder continues, so must the struggle - **towards** the new creation. The community that cares takes time to engage with what needs to change.

### **Stephen's Time for the Community to ponder resurrection**

It has been noted that some of the gospel writers, as they describe the death of Jesus, feature the phrase "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Matthew and Mark both have Jesus' last utterance described awfully as just "a loud cry". No words, just a cry. Luke has darkness engulfing the world in which this death occurs.

The next death in the community is the death of Stephen who's full of the Spirit, and shouting out that he sees God, and knows Christ is waiting for him. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" he says. This is such a different death. It's almost as if some great thing has happened in between the two. Have I used the expression lately "He is risen; risen indeed"?

To the community that remembers Stephen comes the challenge to embrace the mystery that made the difference. The community of Stephen (indeed the community of faith in Christ) takes time to ponder resurrection - a new world that flows from Easter.

### **Stephen's Time for the Community to believe in wonders**

On the edge of the story of Stephen is a man called Saul. At this stage, we know nothing of his background. All that we know is that he sees the murder, and thinks that it is a positive thing. Do you believe in murder? Saul does. He does nothing in the narrative other than stand there, taking care of the coats of those who do throw the stones. But inside that head of his is a belief winning the struggle to subdue the other belief "thou shalt not kill". Who know what is going on in the **heart**? - but it all translates in this moment to a feeling of rightness. I am comfortable with your death . . .

Later, in the mind of Saul will form the confession: "I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God". On a personal note, I suspect that Paul took a **long** time to deal with the sorts of things he saw, and approved of, from the first chapter in which Stephen is stoned. At this moment, though, in the Time of Stephen, we find a person who is part of the violent world's problem - approving of death.

Saul will, of course, become Paul the apostle, who will be a critical force in spreading the gospel, laying foundations for the New Testament, a skilled and brilliant (though severely flawed) character in the sharing of the story of Jesus with the world.

For us, what does this mean? It means that part of the Time of Stephen, is the entering into the story of someone for whom all things will change - in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, as if at a last trumpet . . .

People who receive the story of Stephen, will ponder the wonder of the distance between Saul and Paul - the wonder of what resurrection does in the thinking and acting of one who "falls under the Jesus spell". God has plans for this death-approving man (mind and heart), and the community that cares takes time to believe in this wonder.

-ooOoo-

Those were the four times of Stephen. Community taking time to be sad, time to engage with what needs to change, time to ponder the mysterious power of resurrection, time to see what resurrection does in the hearts and minds of those who are being led out from the hatred - into the new creation.

Before our prayers, we keep a moment of quiet.

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