Stephen

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Preacher: Rev R.G.Mackay

[0:00] I'd like us now to turn back to the story of Stephen that we have in Acts, from Acts 6 to the end of chapter 7. I've picked out three verses, you will notice, that they might highlight for us the story of Stephen as we look at it this morning.

I imagine that the story of Stephen is well known to all of you here this morning. Certainly all of you who have been brought up in the church will have been asked the question from your very earliest days, who was the first Christian martyr?
And from your earliest days you have been able to answer, Stephen was the first Christian martyr.
Having read a summary of verses of the story of Stephen earlier this morning, you may just have noticed how brief is the reference to Stephen in the Bible.
We're really not told all that much about Stephen. He enters into the story in one chapter, and by the end of the following chapter, he is dead and gone.
Why is this brief story included? Well, I'm sure it is included because Stephen was the first Christian martyr.
[1:37] And we'll see something about that, I hope, before we're finished. But I think that the story is there because Stephen, as a true disciple of Jesus, is seen to fit in to God's great purposes for the world.

Stephen, I think we will see, has a most significant role to play. Brief and all as his appearance may be. That if one is a true disciple of Jesus, then God will use that life for his good purposes.
Let's see how it was with Stephen and see if it might be that way with ourselves. First of all, we need to come to some definition of what a true disciple of Jesus is.
And Jesus himself gives us that definition. If we read Luke chapter 14 and verse 27, Jesus says, And whosoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.
Jesus says a similar thing in Mark chapter 8 and verse 34. Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.
[3:19] Without these marks, you cannot be a disciple. So, for a working definition, we can say that a true disciple is someone who is with Jesus.

Someone who walks with Jesus Christ. And I think you will notice in the three verses that I've chosen to highlight the life of Stephen this morning, that in each of these verses, it is made dramatically clear that Stephen lives and walks and dies in the near presence of Jesus Christ.
That's the first thing about a disciple. He knows Jesus. He walks with Jesus. He follows Jesus each step of the way.
But the further thing about being a disciple is that a disciple is always willing to suffer for Jesus. A disciple is someone who takes up the cross.
Whosoever does not bear his cross, Jesus said, cannot be my disciple. A disciple is someone who takes up the cross. A disciple is someone so convinced of the blessing of walking with Jesus and following Jesus that no matter what it costs, even death itself, he will stick with Jesus.
[5:03] He will follow Jesus. And that was true of Stephen at every stage. First of all, he was a disciple in the world.

When we first of all meet Stephen, it's of course when he's chosen to be one of the deacons. And we're told in chapter 6 and at verse 5 that along with the other deacons, he was a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.
He was unambiguously a Christian. The church who knew Stephen well could see that he was a man who walked with Jesus, who lived near to Jesus.
And this is the way that that truth is described. He was full of the Holy Spirit. What the Holy Spirit said. How the Holy Spirit prompted.

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How the Holy Spirit led. That was the way that Stephen lived. However it was that he was affected by this world.
[6:19] However it was like all of us. That he had daily to make decisions that were to do with his experience as he lived in this world relating to all sorts of people.

Relating to all sorts of situations. Just like yourself and myself. The way he made his decisions. The way he chose one course of action.
And decided against another course of action. The attitude that he showed in his relationships with Christians and non-Christians. It was forever revealing.
That Stephen had the Holy Spirit of God living within him. And the world could see it. The church certainly could see it.
But we need to add to that. And that's why I chose chapter 6 and verse 8 for our first verse. And Stephen full of faith and power.
[7:20] The authorised version perhaps doesn't have the most literal translation here. It might be translated. Stephen full of God's grace.

There was always a graciousness.
In the manner of Stephen. Although he was full of the Holy Spirit. He was never bringing attention to himself. There was a graciousness or a gentleness.
In his attitude to others. In his dealings with others. Indeed the church had to say that he was full of God's grace. In the genuine, gentle, gracious, sensitive way that he dealt with other people.
That of course making him supremely qualified to be a deacon. Dealing with the widows and their need of physical and material help.
[8:27] In their worries and their anxieties and their burdens. What I want to get across here is. Here is Stephen a man full of the Spirit in the world.

There was nothing abrasive in his manner. That would attract opposition from the world. But he did attract opposition.
But what we're told of Stephen makes it obvious. That Stephen by his manner. By what he did. By what he said. He in no way went out of his way to attract opposition.
Sometimes Christians are tempted to do that. They seem to go out of their way to get the backup of people who are not of the world.
Who are not of Christ. They're so determined to suck it to them. The faith that is theirs.
[9:32] Almost taking them by the lapels. And shaking them into a willingness to hear what Christ has to say. You don't really find that manner in the scriptures.

And you certainly don't find it in Stephen. Stephen was a man in the New Testament. Even in the short picture that's given of him.
Was a man like Christ himself. Gentle. Meek and mild. Able to stand up and to be strong.
And to resist when it became necessary. But never going out of his way to search out such a confrontational situation. But in his gentle Christlikeness.
He attracted opposition. And those who were not of Christ. Did not like his Christlikeness.
[10:35] And in this Stephen stands as an example. He stands as an example to all who would be true disciples. Because the Bible says in 2 Timothy 3 and 12.

All that will live godly in Christ Jesus. Shall suffer persecution. And is that not what Jesus is saying in the text that we quoted earlier.
Whosoever shall come after me. Let him deny himself and take up his cross. The symbol of persecuting suffering. The symbol of a willingness to go down even to death.
For Jesus sake. Whosoever will come after me. May expect. That there will be opposition. Stephen didn't go out looking for such opposition.
But such opposition came to him. As he lived for Christ. As he lived in the presence of Christ. As he showed more and more by the gracious gentleness of his holy living.
[11:45] That Christ was with him. That the Holy Spirit filled his life. That was an offence to the world. And so when the opposition came.

He didn't run away from it. As well as taking up the cross as a true disciple. He denied himself. And stood up for Christ.
But maybe you say to me. But things have changed now. And our society is a different society.
We do not have to expect opposition. We do not have to expect persecution. We do not really see open persecution against the church. In our day.

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Well maybe not. But I wonder why that is. Now again.
[12:50] From what we have learnt already. It would be wrong to encourage us. To go out looking for persecution. Or trying to encourage it. But we do have to ask ourselves.

When the Bible says. That he who will live godly in Christ Jesus. Shall suffer persecution. And if we know. Little or nothing of such persecution.
We do need to ask questions. Don't we? Has it to do with. The great symbol of our age.
Being the symbol of. Toleration. Whatever you do. However you live. There must be toleration.
And we must remember. That we are living in a pluralist society. And we must remember. That we have been educated in our schools. For many years now. In the ways of.
[13:48] Comparative religion. And we must see the significance. Of each religion. And has that.

Worldly attitude. Worldly attitude. Crept in upon us as Christians. And is it. Meaning that we are not living as true disciples.
Is that a difficulty for us. In these days. I know that one or two of you. And unfortunately I myself. Was not able to be at the.
Evangelical Alliance meeting. In Culloden Academy. Perhaps a month ago. When Clive Calver. Of the Evangelical Alliance. Was speaking. In the Bible. And I understand that. He said that it is.
So unlikely. That the church in Britain today. The way it lives. Will. No persecution. And then he went on to say. Something like this.
[14:48] You see. He said. Everything's accepted today. You can go along the street. And. Someone's going off to play squash.

Oh yes. You're going to play squash. I hope. It goes well with you. And you keep fit. Somebody else has taken an interest in. The Islam faith.
Oh yes. Oh how interesting. They didn't say anything against that. It's too dangerous. Someone else is going to a seance.
Someone else is going to a prayer meeting. Oh very good. Is that what suits you? Well that's fine. And in order to remain.
Cozy. And untroubled. Perhaps we Christians. Are going along with that. And we just witness.
[15:48] As if we were one religion. Amongst many. Oh. Come to us. We have many advantages. But. If you don't come. Perhaps we give the attitude.

That. It won't make all that much difference. But Clive Calver went on to say. If the Christian begins to witness. As the Bible witnesses.
And if the Christian begins to witness. Into this world. Where toleration is everything. And the Christian begins to say. What the Bible says. That Jesus Christ is the way.
The truth. And the life. No man comes to the Father. But by him. If the Christian begins to say. The way of the Bible is right. And all other ways are wrong.
If the Christian begins to say. What Jesus says. In the Sermon on the Mount. That there are only two ways. In this world.
[16:49] And that one way leads to heaven. And the other way leads to hell. To heaven. That one way leads to death.

Then we may suffer persecution. then we may be told that we are being intolerant as Stephen was being told and then things may be different you see to be a Christian there is always a choice to be made there is a choice to be made between Christ and his way and the world and its way there is a choice to be made between the narrow way which speaks of being focused and being determined and therefore knowing many difficulties and constraints and there is the broad way the way of toleration where anything goes and each person's opinion is respected and we keep quiet against it but it's the broad way that leads to distraction
Stephen you see was a true disciple in the world he had chosen the narrow way he had chosen Christ the only way and it attracted opposition are we making clear in our witness that in choosing Christ we have chosen the only way to everlasting life the only way that can save our eternal souls but then we also see that Stephen was a disciple of the word you may very well wonder what is the point of the Bible including this long and it seems difficult defense that Stephen gives this long summary of the history of the Old Testament that he includes in his defense but I want you to notice again that this long defense is preceded by another indication of Stephen being in the presence of Jesus chapter 6 and verse 15 let's notice and all that sat in the council all that were about to hear this defense from Stephen looking steadfastly on him saw his face as it had been the face of an

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angel saw his face presumably seemingly shining the council that was making out that they were standing up for the ways of Moses whose face had also shone when he was in the presence of God away back in the wilderness that's the sort of shining that was now in the face of Stephen the people even his opposition recognized it it was like the face of an angel the angels who are always in the presence of God who are heavenly beings and so surely the Holy Spirit is telling us that being in Jesus presence walking with Christ as a true disciple standing for Christ against opposition goes hand in hand with knowing the Bible with believing the Bible with using the arguments of the Bible to convince us and to maintain us in the ways of Christ that's what this defense is about it's a defense that proves that it's from God's word that Stephen has been led in the ways of God and in the ways of Christ and it's by maintaining
God's word and preaching God's word and staying in line with God's word that Stephen continues to walk in the ways of Christ so that God gives the sign of his face shining so that the people would know that the knowledge of the word goes hand in hand with walking with Christ and that's the way it was for Stephen now we haven't time to go into the defense in great detail but it's worth going through on your own at home it's worth dividing into four and seeing what Stephen has to say about Abraham then Joseph then Moses and then much more briefly David the opposition against Stephen you see was saying that he was against the temple and Stephen is showing from the Old Testament scriptures that God had never been contained in a particular building that God went out he went to Araf the Chaldees to meet with Abraham he went down to Egypt with Joseph he met with Moses in the desert of Midian and said this is holy ground and even when he responded to David and said that a house could be built but not by David but by his son Solomon Stephen associates that with the words of Isaiah that say so clear that God is not contained in a temple made with ham he's far greater than this world and the place that is truly holy the place of true blessing is not a particular building but is the place where individuals like Moses like Abraham like Joseph like David are in a real relationship with God believing him trusting him obeying him that's where
[23:45] God's dwelling place is in the hearts of his people that's the argument and when it comes to the law as Stephen says to them again look through your Old Testament scriptures go especially to the age of Moses when the law was first given and he is saying to that council of Jewish men you will see that your fathers disobeyed the law from earliest times the Old Testament is full of your ancestors who persecuted the prophets and now the great prophet that was promised the just one you have persecuted him in line with your ancestors in Old Testament time so what Stephen is saying is this it's the person who is committed to Jesus Christ as the mediator of the presence and the law of God that's the person who is in line with

God's word the Bible and faith in Jesus Christ stand or fall together you can't say that you're a believer in Jesus and disbelieve the Bible because Jesus is the keystone to the whole of scripture he is the fulfiller of all scripture Old Testament and New Testament it stands or falls in Jesus Christ so the true disciple is the disciple who walks with Jesus through the word through the Bible through learning what Jesus reveals in the Bible through believing and obeying what Jesus says in the Bible let me try and apply that before we move on to the last point the devil as he was doing with that Jewish council still tries to make a division between
Christ and the Bible the devil is very clever the way he did it in the Jewish council so that Stephen had to defend is not the way that he may do it today perhaps he is doing it this way today perhaps he is encouraging you to be at peace in your heart this morning because you say and you mean it that you believe the Bible that you believe that the Bible is the truth but at the same time you know in your heart that you have not bowed down to Jesus as your Savior and your Lord you know that you are not a true disciple you know that you have not given yourself even if it means death to Jesus only and you're comforting yourself by saying that I believe the
Bible it can't be so bad because I believe the Bible and the Bible itself is saying that the two don't go together that the two believe in the Bible but not trusting your soul to Jesus these two things let me say it again the two things of believing the Bible but not entrusting your soul to Jesus Christ these two things are the most offensive contradiction to God the whole purpose of the Bible is to prove the necessity of trusting in Jesus and to show that Jesus is ever ready to receive whosoever will come to him the whole purpose of the Bible is to show you and to show me that we are undone that we are fit only for outer darkness in our sin without the salvation that is in

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Jesus Christ that is the whole purpose of the Bible if you say that you believe God's word do you not see the particular danger you're in this morning if you would be ushered into God's presence just now to the throne of judgment and you would say to almighty God that you have believed his word from the cradle that you have refused to put your trust in Jesus Christ said do you not understand that the woes that would be against you are like the woes that Jesus said would be against Bethsaida and Chorazin much greater than the woes against Sodom because they knew and they would not believe oh will you not see the
[30:00] Christ of Stephen standing here today will you not think of the beautiful work that he did in Stephen and that he can do in you and that he can do in me and will you not give yourself to him because he'll take you all he'll take you all and do notice as we finish that Stephen was also a disciple and today and when it came to Stephen's death Jesus was there that's why I chose chapter 7 and verse 55 because it really sums up the death of

Stephen have you noticed that although we know in our minds that Stephen was stoned when we read the story we're not really so inclined to think of the dreadful suffering that must have been the suffering of Stephen when he died we are much more inclined when we read the story to think of the blessing that Stephen's death was to him we're much more inclined to think of how Stephen was so conscious of the presence of Jesus how we saw Jesus standing was it that he was given a vision of Jesus standing up ready to receive Stephen in a few moments but whatever it's all so encouraging and Stephen seems to be so full of faith that he is able to be like Christ right down to death so that he speaks words seeking forgiveness to his accusers that are so reminiscent of the words of
Jesus himself what's this telling us of a true disciple yes it's telling us that a true disciple is one who takes up the cross and denies self and follows Jesus and yes before we do that and here I'm talking to every one of us including myself whether we're Christians or not this morning because of course for the Christian as well the life is a constant life of taking up the cross denying self and following Jesus and there are difficulties and there are sacrifices to be made but it is true as it was for Stephen that before we do it there's the test and there's the challenge and it seems so difficult and it seems so painful and it seems we're going to have to grit our teeth and get through it somehow but when it actually happens when we actually make some progress in the life of self denial by God's grace and even if we were to go down to a martyr's death by God's grace it won't seem so bad after all and it doesn't seem so bad after all the suffering is not taken away but it's not a case of just gritting the teeth and getting through it we find that it's a life that is suffused with the love of
Christ it's an experience at each step of the way when we truly go the way of the true disciple it's the experience of having Christ with us and of Christ being all and in all even unto death God and the disciple that goes that way will be used by God on the outside to our own flesh it seems a tragedy but to God and to faith it's quite different the great apostle Paul was at the death of Stephen and Paul tells us later what part that played in his own spiritual progress the
Christians were scattered through the death of Stephen and the persecution it began and God was putting in place through this true disciple the next stage for the gospel to spread from the Jews to Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the world you see except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die it abideth alone but if it die it brings match fruit so a true disciple is one who will follow Jesus and to die now just give that one last thought we've all got to die wouldn't it be a sensible thing to make a decision this morning about how we're going to die we can't avoid it we can't avoid the sufferings of death if that's in the cup of
[36:04] God's providence for us but if we're going to die for Christ Christ will be with us and all will be well with our souls you and I have an opportunity this morning to face our death and to nail it once and for all by your decision this morning it may be decided whether you will die for Christ or not whether you will die well or not give your life to

Christ now and die well then Amen

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