

Facing up to hostility and opposition

Don Cormack, missionary and author, wrote a history of the church in Cambodia, which interestingly only really began in the 1920's. Do you know what he called the book?

Killing Fields, Living Fields.

It is an unusual title but of course it ties in with the reports of literally fields of dead bodies and the unforgettable film entitled, 'The killing Fields' – I still am moved to tears every time I see that film. Fields filled with some of the 2 million executed by Pol Pot's maniacal and murderous regime.

Don Cormack writes of the story of the Christian church – decimated by the revolution. How it seems the full force of Satanic anger, hell's fury was meted out on Christians. It is a harrowing read. He records how Christians, for example, were taken from their homes tied to a post, their livers removed with a knife and fried and eaten in front of them by their captors as they died. That was evil wasn't it? There is no other word for it – pure evil.

Why do I begin with this? Well, we must never forget that there are Christians around the world even today, even now being persecuted – shunned by their families, excluded from anything but the most basic of jobs, imprisoned, tortured and even killed.

Our passage for today is quite a solemn one but the thing about the bible is that it is realistic. Again for example, I hear this week that in kyrgyzstan I would have to have permission from the government to do what I am doing today – preaching and teaching the bible. The freedoms we take for granted were not and are not universal and though we are not facing persecution let us not forget some of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who are. But I think there is plenty in this passage for us and for our context, something even in the midst of solemnity that will challenge and thrill our hearts.

Turn with me in your bibles to the passages read for us Acts 6: 8 p. 1098

Acts 6:8-10 ⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)--Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, ¹⁰ but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

We were introduced to Stephen last week. Remember 7 men were chosen to be, well the Greek word is *diakonien* which is translated in verse 2 as wait on tables or it could be translated to serve and it is the word we derive deacon from. He was one of

the first deacons of the church who were charged with administering the churches welfare.

Stephen is a remarkable Christian. The Lord's hand is strong upon him such that he is described as full of grace – which means unmerited kindness and the Lord's strengthening and enabling but also full of the Lord's power to do miraculaous signs. So in these days it is not just the apostles who are able to do miracles. Stephen walked close to the Lord. I can think of one of my friends in particular whom when I read of Stephen comes to mind. He is just close to the Lord. We too can be close to the Lord, it is not reserved for the few.

Wonderful things are happening in Jerusalem in those day. The church's expanding rapidly – people are hungry for good bible teaching, prayer, worship, fellowship, it seems they can't help but share their faith and care for the needy amongst them.

But as we have seen before, blessing and hardship can come hand in hand. Folks from the religious establishment are not happy. They are so caught up in their own view of things that they are missing what God is doing before their very eyes. I find that scary. We can be so caught up in something we think right that we miss what God is doing.

They engage with Stephen in debate vs 9 but the Lord has given him wisdom to answer vs 10 and so the establishment resort to more Machiavellian

methods vs 11 raising up false witnesses and by vs 12 he is taken in front of the Sanhedrin.

Did Stephen think of his Lord being there, of the Apostles being there and there was he. Following in their stead – counted worthy enough by the religious establishment of being persecuted for Jesus sake.

But here is the rub - the church is enjoying huge popular support

Acts 5:12-14 ¹² *The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.* ¹³ *No-one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.* ¹⁴ *Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.*

What is going on? It would seem that though a great deal of people were interested when it came to the bit they were not willing to stand up and be counted. They were silent sympathisers.

Silent Sympathisers

Interested. Enjoying the debates and discussions and sermons in the temple. marvelled at what God was doing amongst the early church. Enjoyed the worship and maybe the studies in homes. They were sympathetic and yet uncommitted. And because they

were uncommitted, though they benefited from the atmosphere of the early church, they were not receiving the reality of God involved directly in their lives. Forgiving, changing, helping, using. And they left Stephen unsupported. They left him to hang out and dry.

There is a great deal of difference, isn't there, from being on the football pitch and watching from the sidelines?

Here is the hard question that I think Stephen asks us this morning. Do you believe? Are you a sympathiser or a believer? Are you on the pitch or the sidelines? Do you believe enough to stand up and be counted? In your workplace? Amongst your family (which can be the hardest place)? Amongst your friends? In your politics? In your spending? In your life decisions? In the use of your time?

Have you seen the advert for the Daily Mail? The constant refrain is 'We stand for...'. People know what the Daily Mail stands for. People often do not know what Christians stand for or believe because so many of us act as though we are on the sidelines. Not all of us but many of us.

You may not be locked up, flogged or what have you but when you tell folks what we believe, what we learned on Sundays, what we do with our time we may well be ridiculed – if not to your face then behind your back. You may be seen as intellectually

feeble or emotionally weak needing Christianity as a crutch or a square because your language is moderated, your behaviour tempered, your morals and ethics seen as from a by-gone age.

There are many who would like to receive the benefits of Christianity. Who feel it has answers but who fear the risks. Because though there is much to receive there is also a cost. Though it is free to accept Christ. As he himself says we also must 'take up our cross and follow him'. The cross of selflessness, other centredness, humility, being seen simple, weak, a square....

Tough isn't it? Yet thrilling!

Because in having this discussion we are acknowledging there is a God. He is real and active and can be known and part of our lives.

Where do you feel in your commitment to Christ this morning? 80, 90 100% committed good or need to commit or re-fresh or renew at the beginning of this new year? If so do it now while you sense the Spirit prompting.

Because of course - Evil triumphs when good men and women do nothing.

There is something else here though that I feel is quite timely

Deceptiveness of the opposers thinking

In 5:35 we encounter Gamaliel

Acts 5:36-39 ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. ³⁷ After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸ Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

It sounds fair doesn't it? But when you stop and think it is the most condescending unconsidered notion out.

'Oh, we've seen this sort of thing before. Small time revolutionaries and bandits. They come to nothing but if it is of God, and I doubt it, then it will prosper.'

This chap, one of the leading intellectuals of his time, according to the documents from that time has not investigated the facts.

Let's update that. It is exactly the same today. Oh, Jesus Christ, unfortunate chap. Said some good things and stood for some good things like Ghandi or Che Geuvara, the Argentinian doctor who gave up his profession and homeland to fight for freedom for the oppressed along with Fedel Castro.

What nonsense. None of these men claimed to be God. None of them claimed that they would die and raise from the dead. Jesus was either mad, mistaken or who he claimed to be. The Son of God.

I don't know if you saw Richard Dawkins programme last week on the root of all evil. In order to discredit faith does he engage with the great intellectual minds of our time no – he turns to the veritable lunatic fringe.

The irony of the matter is that he is as fundamentalist about his atheism as many of the fundamentalists he berates. In addition the theory of evolution and belief in it is at least as mythological as some would say Genesis chapter one is. It is a theory and takes faith in the presuppositions that under gird it. I would argue that science is therefore not neutral but a faith stand point – faith that there is no God and science explains it away.

But listen to Dawkins and the like. Understand where they are coming from. I am reading Bill Bryson's 'A Brief History of nearly everything' at the moment. He is clearly an atheist but is a fascinating read and if anything, as he describes the utter vastness of space I am led to wonder and praise of the God who created it, which I am sure would infuriate the author. Their argumentation is not always as sound as it seems.

Finally, we might ask of the passage in Acts. Where is God in it all? Jesus, Stephen's new found saviour?

Grace to the faithful

This was Stephen's cross. Dying in a similar vain to his master. Unjustly and cruelly. But different in this manner. Whilst Jesus received desolation on the cross Stephen looks up and receives comfort in his dying moments. He received grace to cope with what he had to bear. He was even granted a glimpse of his saviour

Acts 7:56 ⁵⁶ *"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*

And he is given grace to forgive

Acts 7:59-60 ⁵⁹ *While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* ⁶⁰ *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.*

No wonder the descriptions of him up till now were of a man of remarkable faith. He walked close to Jesus and Jesus was close to him.

Let me ask you this. Do you fear dying? I have to confess I do not look forward to it. Will it be painful? Will I be afraid? Passages like this though give me

hope. That in the midst even of pain and that which seems wrong – Jesus granted strength and help.

I have said it many times and will say it again. No wonder Paul could say, 'I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength'. Chapter 8 verse 1 tells us he saw Stephen die. He was there not as Paul the Christian Apostle but as his pre-Christian self -Saul the Pharisee who was in part responsible for the death of Stephen.

We can do all things through Christ who gives us strength. Live the lives he calls us to, face opposition and hardship and at the last die well in the strength he gives and the hope of life with him beyond the grave.