

RENEWED IN THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST: STEPHEN THE SERVANT MARTYR.

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The Feast of Stephen

There are some saints who seem to have as hard a time of it in death as in life. Take poor St. Stephen: not only was he the first martyr, but he has the continuing misfortune to have his feast fall on the 26th December. The result is that by and large people only remember that Good King Wenceslaus looked out upon it.

That however was not the case in the place where I did my biblical studies: for I had the good fortune to study in Jerusalem at the very place where according to tradition Stephen met his martyrdom. It was called 'the Ecole Biblique', a place where learned French Dominicans who had dedicated their lives to the study of the history and geography of the Holy Land lived and taught. I am grateful to this day for the many insights they gave me. At the Ecole Biblique we celebrated St. Stephen's Day in style, with the cook working overtime. No sooner had he finished serving 50 or more hungry people on Christmas Day, than he had to turn his hand to producing an even more sumptuous repast in honour of our patron saint, St. Stephen. It was the gastronomic highlight of our year.

Ever since those days the figure of Stephen has been one that has intrigued me, even though I sometimes now wonder whether Stephen was a particularly appropriate patron saint for my Dominicans. They were dedicated to the archaeological and historical study of Jerusalem, because it was a holy city, Stephen, on the other hand, was more than a little critical of such things as temples and holy places and paid for it with his life.

Why is it that Stephen is commemorated on December 26? Well, I think I know or can guess the answer - and as you

read on perhaps you will too...and you may find it helpful to have the Acts of the Apostles chapters 6 and 7 open in front of you.

Stephen. the first deacon?

Who and what exactly was Stephen? He is called a 'Hellenist' probably meaning that he was a Jew whose family lived in the Greek Diaspora away from Palestine. Traditionally he has been regarded as one of the first 'deacons', though Luke doesn't actually use the word 'διάκονος' to describe Stephen in this passage. He does however use words that come from the same Greek stem, 'διακονία' and 'διακονέω', to describe what Stephen was commissioned to do, namely wait at tables. Luke sometimes seems to sit astride a fairly uneasy fence: he is keen on order and hierarchy, on things done properly, with the apostles firmly in command and all other forms of ministry deriving from them. So he would like to fit Stephen into a nice unified pattern of ministry, a 'deacon' appointed by and subject to, the apostles. Yet Luke is also honest enough to let us see that this wasn't altogether how it was in the early church: it was all much more messy, and disorganised, and there was about as much bickering around as any spirit of unity.

In fact it must have been a really good bicker that led to Stephen's commissioning, because the split between the Hellenists and Hebraists may have been focused on food but was actually about something much deeper - the differing attitudes to the temple held by the two parties. So often an apparently trivial matter can act as a catalyst for more deep-seated feelings.

Luke is probably intending to suggest to us that Stephen was a deacon - yet he then makes it clear that Stephen notably didn't only deal with the domestic details like deacons were supposed to. Rather he also spent his time preaching and

doing signs and wonders - doing the very jobs that the apostles considered their own - only rather more effectively!

A radical saint?

Stephen then seems to have extended the boundaries of his job as a 'deacon', and perhaps he may provide a useful role model for those, particularly women, who would also like to extend the boundaries of the roles that the church allots to them. His story suggests the possibility of using the structures of the church responsibly yet creatively to develop a ministry that is apostolic as well as that traditionally allotted to a deacon. In some sense Stephen might even be described as subversive, but if this is so then for people to be subversive like Stephen is very important - for it seems clear that he was the first to preach the gospel to groups well beyond the small inner circle of the Jerusalem Church.

Yet to be subversive is also dangerous: not only can you offend those outside the Christian community, but you risk courting unpopularity from those within. Luke betrays a certain embarrassed reticence as regards the apostolic lack of support for Stephen in his eventual predicament: I really do doubt if Stephen was particularly *persona grata* to Peter or James.

There is also another hazard in subversion: it can sometimes turn into destruction, not least of the soul of the individual concerned. Bitterness and anger can become a self-consuming fire.

But the ultimate pattern for Stephen's subversiveness is none other than Christ himself. One cannot sound much more subversive of the ordering of traditional society than the words of Jesus: 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them: and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you....Let your leader be one who serves: which is the greater, one who sits at table or one who serves?'

Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves....'(Luke 22 25-2,) . And once again words from the same Greek stem as 'diakonos' (translated as 'serve') appear, in fact three times in this passage. In other words the model for those who would seek to exercise a Christian ministry that does not totally conform to the expected norms is no longer merely Stephen, but Christ himself.

In the image of Christ

But can you really separate the two? One of the intriguing features of Luke's presentation of the passion of Stephen is that again and again resonances of the passion of Christ appear. Both commit up their spirit, both pray for their persecutors to be forgiven. And the charge brought by false witnesses against Stephen - that he never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law - is almost verbatim the accusation with which Jesus himself is arraigned in Mark and Matthew, though fascinatingly not in Luke. It is as though Luke is saying that the clash of God's love and forgiveness and passion for justice with the self-seeking and enmity of the world which had been seen in such a sharp focus in the suffering and death of Christ, is now being given a new prism through which it is refracted in the person of Stephen. The injunction to disciples to be imitators of Christ is not just a pious metaphor, but has become a matter of life - and death.

I use the language of sight and vision quite deliberately, for I have long been intrigued by the final words of chapter 6; 'And gazing at Stephen all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel' (Acts 6:15) Surely a very curious thing for such a hostile group to see. Somehow it must belong together with the report that Stephen himself, as he was being stoned, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God. It seems that the word 'gaze' is a particular favourite of St. Luke: for other than Luke it only appears twice in the New

Testament in Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians. And Luke likes to use the word to describe situations where the normal boundaries between heaven and earth are breached, and humanity and divinity become strangely intermingled.

The more one studies the Acts of the Apostles, the more one realises how extraordinarily rich the book is in resonances from the Old Testament and the life of Christ: I am sure that Stephen's angelic face is intended to recall for us both the transfiguration of the face of Christ on the mountain, and through that lead us back towards the famous Old Testament story of the shining light on Moses' face seen by the Israelites after he had talked with God. (Exodus 34:29-35). And if Moses and Christ are indeed the model it has some very important things to say to us about the work and ministry of Stephen.

Reflecting the presence of God

Why was it that Moses' 'face shone'? It happened because the Israelites had committed the great sin of the golden calf and God had wanted to destroy them: Moses pleaded for his people, taking on an angry God, even at the threat of his own life. He won a reprieve but then there came the question as to whether God could remain present with such a sinful people: would they not be consumed since humanity cannot easily see God and live. Once again Moses pleads their cause - and the shining on his face as he comes down the mountain is the answer. He has so lost himself in his concern for those to whom he ministers that he is now the answer to his own prayer and has become the means by which God is enabled to be present with them.

So with Stephen: in his shining face we experience a ministry in which God is present, a life in which with unveiled face he has gazed upon and begun to reflect the glory of the Lord. The vision of God which he has seen and will see has

already begun to renew and transform him into the likeness of Moses and Christ, into a figure who loses himself that he may be refashioned to share in the suffering of the Son of Man. Surely an awesome model for all of us: and yet it is true that unless our glimpse of the vision of God can begin to change us and through us the world it is a vision too dangerous for us to behold.

There is a certain irony, in view of the current debates about the priesthood and whether women can really 'represent' Christ, in the fact that it is Stephen, a mere deacon, who is presented in the New Testament as the truest reflection of the likeness of Christ. Yet that is clearly how it is.

The face of God

Several strands help to shape my Christian beliefs and spirituality: but increasingly a core theme for me is that of the face God, a face not merely to be seen in a mystical vision, but which we ourselves must seek to reflect and which is elusively present in so many of the human faces that we encounter. And if like Stephen we begin to reflect something of God, we may begin to be amazed by its power to transform not only our own lives, but also those of others.

Perhaps the words with which Jesus greeted Paul on the Damascus Road suggest something of this: for Paul, who had never met the earthly Jesus in his lifetime, was questioned: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute ME?' - and at that moment he must suddenly have realised that in slaying Stephen he, Paul, had shared in the slaying of Christ himself. So somehow Stephen's identification with Christ has become complete, and because it is so Paul is converted and through him ultimately the Gentile world: a deacon has died and so many others will have life.

The face of my neighbour

But perhaps, just perhaps, the most important conversion that Stephen effects is not of the Gentiles, but of the Church itself. Why was it that Stephen and the others were chosen? Because, said the apostles 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.' (Acts 6:2) Don't you think that Luke was wryly aware of those earlier words of Jesus: 'Which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am with you as one who serves.' Don't you think that he was telling us that once again Peter was putting his foot in it, once again those apostles had something to learn, something that Stephen and the other deacons had to teach them. Somehow the heavens that Stephen sees open as he dies lead the way to the open heaven that Peter glimpses in his vision at Joppa as he has to fight to overcome his traditional prejudices and meet with Gentiles. One of those, who could not serve tables, has now become hungry, and as a result of his hunger finally shares food, eats and drinks, not only with Christ, but also with Cornelius and the family of a Roman soldier.

Is it then only as the church learns about humanity and service that it can share the vision of God and become truly apostolic?

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