

NT: Acts 7:55-60

NT: I Peter 2:2-10

Gp: John 14:1-14

It is a miracle that I am standing here today. I am originally from Lancashire and was brought up a Roman Catholic. That means that, from an early age, religious lessons were all about the 40 martyrs, especially the Lancashire Martyrs, many of whom had lived locally to where I was from.

In primary school, our 4 houses were Arrowsmith, Almond, Rigby and Southworth, named after local men, priests, who had sacrificed their lives for the gospel during the English Reformation and the persecution of Catholics. No detail of their agonising torture and death was spared us little ones. To the extent that I thought all Catholics had to become martyrs and I definitely wasn't sure that I wanted to carry on going to church if that was going to be the outcome! Perhaps I should say, at this point, that I didn't become a member of the Church of England simply to avoid being hanged, drawn and quartered!

The miracle is the grace of God which leads us according to his will and sustains us with his strength to face whatever may be in store for us.

Today's readings could be described as a game of two halves. The first half being the demands of faith, demands with terrifying consequences which require a faith beyond simply human strength. We start with the account of the stoning and death of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. It is an indication that the crucifixion was perhaps not an isolated event for those willing to stand against the religious authorities of the day and who claimed Christ as the Messiah, the Son of God.

Stephen had stood before the High Priest and, starting with the story of Abraham, had relayed the journey of the chosen people which had brought them eventually to Christ. He did not mince his words to the authorities in their refusal to believe what was before them: *You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.'*

So his stoning for supposed blasphemy was inevitable. Note who was present and supportive of this outrage, we'll come back to him.

The second half of our readings contains one of the most used passages of the gospel, chosen for so many funerals as a source of comfort and hope. *'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.'*

When all is done, when this life is finished, we hold this belief that all will be well, that we will reside in the house of God, that the bond with our Saviour will be everlasting. Jesus knew that the journey ahead for so many would be difficult and testing before they could arrive in the Father's house and so he set out the road map, the guidance of how to get there: *I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*

In the stoning of Stephen, we saw a young man, Saul, supporting the witnesses. This Saul who initially went about persecuting Christians and trying to stamp out this new religion. This Saul who became Paul on the road to Damascus, whose subsequent life is a startling example of the power of the grace of God. A life completely turned around, the energy previously used to deny Christianity was now in overdrive preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, Redeemer and Lord.

Paul, who feared no one, who had to be rescued on several occasions before he too was stoned to death, Paul who never hesitated to tell it as he saw it. Don't think that he was perfect. His attitude to women needed some work and he once preached for so long that a young man fell asleep and slipped through a window so that he had to be revived. But Paul is a shining example of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in one person, if that person is open completely to the will of God.

I suspect that our Christian journey lies somewhere in the middle between martyrdom and forceful evangelism. That doesn't mean that our faith is mediocre though echoing the prayer of the father of the possessed son is a good thing. *I do have faith. Help the little faith I have.*

Each one of us is called to play a unique role in the kingdom of God. Just as a tapestry requires every single thread to make a complete picture so our calling is needed the kingdom to be fulfilled for the greater glory of God and the transformation of humanity to God's original plan.

The richness of God's creation is reflected in each one of us and with hearts open to the Holy Spirit we will live with joy and certainty, fulfilling our vocation, though we may never know truly in this world what that might be. We never know the seeds we sow and only rarely see the outcome of our prayers or the impact we have for good on the lives of others. We simply go on in good faith, sustained by the word and sacraments of God, supported by each other and strengthened by God's grace at times when the way becomes difficult and painful. Doing that, you never know where you might end up.

You could be a persecutor of Christians who turns out to be one of the greatest advocates of Christianity. Or you may be a five year old Roman Catholic who decides that religion is too scary to go on with who turns out as a woman to be a priest in the Church of England preaching the gospel of Christ with faith and hope.

Echoing the prayer of Paul: *Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.*

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