

## Acts 6.1-15

As we have travelled together during the past few days, there have been a number of common threads, among which I would name the reality of heaven and earth touching each other through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the possibility of meeting God in the face of Christ and through him in the faces of others, and the importance of our holding together the central Christian themes of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. All are important for our understanding of mission in the life of the Church.

As we turn to the writings of Luke I take as my starting point a comment by David Ford, an Irish Anglican who is Professor of Divinity in Cambridge, England. David wrote 'Christian mission is offering the hospitality of the face of Christ'. That is a sentence that I find both intriguing and allusive: it opens lots of doors in my mind. Of course it links to the image of 'face' that we have already encountered but it also introduces a different theme – hospitality – which lies at the heart of Luke's understanding about the practice of mission. There are a wealth of incidents in both Luke and Acts which indicate the high priority that Luke gave to the importance of hospitality – the great feast, Dives and Lazarus, Zacchaeus, even the parable of the Prodigal Son. Indeed as the final prayer we will use today suggests, it could be said that it was Jesus' readiness to offer hospitality to some unlikely recipients which infuriated the establishment and substantially contributed to his death. That I think is Luke's view. In Acts we encounter many occasions where the offering and receiving of hospitality leads to mission and the growth of the Church: think, as one example, of Paul staying with Lydia and the Christian faith leaping from Asia to Europe, and from Jews to Gentiles as a result.

In Luke's writings one of the most powerful illustrations of the spiritual power of hospitality is Jesus' encounter with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They press Jesus to stay with them, as Lydia will later press Paul. 'Stay with us for it is towards evening'. And it is through the act of hospitality and Jesus' blessing of the bread they gift him that they are able to recognise the Risen Lord in their midst. That picture on the screen, the depiction of Emmaus by the Chinese artist He Qi, is one of my favourite examples of biblical art from the global church. In the light of what I am going to say today it is intriguing that one telling detail is that the Christ figure is wearing a deacon's stole.

I was very torn whether to choose the account of Emmaus for this final study: in the end I opted for another which also tackles the importance of hospitality though I am sure that Emmaus has coloured what I will be saying. I am exploring Acts 6.1-15, the story of Stephen, partly because it seems to me to speak about a different kind of hospitality, the hospitality that is sometimes more difficult to offer and receive – not the one off generosity to a sudden stranger, but the need to forge ongoing hospitality towards those different from us among whom we live our everyday and Christian lives.

Stephen has been a favourite New Testament figure of mine ever since I was fortunate enough to study at the Dominican Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. The full name of that venerable institution is L'Ecole Biblique et Archeologique Francaise de St Etienne for it is built on the traditional site of Etienne's—Stephen's—martyrdom. In most of the Christian world Stephen is almost a forgotten figure—perhaps partly because he is unfortunate enough to have his feastday on 26 December when many people are recovering from the excesses of the day before. All too often the only way we remember St Stephen's Day is that 'Good King Wenceslaus looked out' on it. But not so at L'Ecole Biblique—for St Stephen's Day was our patronal festival, and we celebrated it in style, with the cook working overtime. No sooner had he finished serving fifty 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. It was the gastronomic highlight of our year. Ever since, Stephen has intrigued me—though I sometimes now wonder whether he was a particularly appropriate figure to be the patron saint of my Dominican teachers. 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 this with his life.

Who or what was Stephen? The account of his appointment along with the other six in Acts is one of those moments when there is probably more to the story than at first meets the eye. Because the verb *diakoneo* and the noun *diakonia* meaning 'serve/service' is used to describe their activity I am going to refer to Stephen and the others as 'deacons', though I

am aware that there is a debate about whether they can be considered 'deacons' in the formal church, and certainly Anglican, understanding of the word. On the surface the ostensible reason for their selection 'to serve at tables'. This is the most literal translation of the Greek words *diakoneo trapezais* though tellingly, many English translations conceal this concrete meaning by phrases such as 'assist in the distribution, 'handle finances' (*GNB*). The problem was that as the community in Jerusalem had grown to include a number of 'Hellenists'—followers of Jesus, almost certainly Jewish by origin, but probably from a Greek-speaking diaspora background—the distribution of the common resources was perceived as inequitable, with the Greek-speaking widows losing out. The generously hospitable spirit which had originally characterised the life of the Christian community was gradually being eroded. But as so often (and familiar to anyone who has worked or lived in a residential institution!), a dispute focussed on food acts as a catalyst for more deeply felt problems and divisions. Quite probably the divisions between the two groups extended to considerably more than food. It may well also be that significant theological differences between them were beginning to arise.

At any rate what we then hear is that Stephen and his fellow 'deacons' not only engaged in the welfare work for which they had been appointed, but also, at least in Stephen's and Philip's case, exercised preaching and healing ministries, doing the very jobs that the apostles/twelve considered their own. Indeed it may be that Stephen was the first to preach the Gospel to groups well beyond the original circle of the Jerusalem Church. Something important and new is happening here and the Holy Spirit is creatively to the fore; notice how Luke signals this by referring to the Spirit three times in Acts 6, verses 3, 5, 10.

In some ways Stephen might be described as subversive, but if this is so then it is important for people to be subversive— although like Stephen they can, at times, find such a situation very uncomfortable to be in.

Being subversive can also be 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 regarding the apostolic lack of support for Stephen in his eventual

predicament: I really do wonder how popular was this character who rocked the boat so forcefully.

Yet 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 ascribed to Jesus in Luke 22:25-7:

Among the gentiles it is the kings who lord it over them, and those who have the authority over them are given the title Benefactor. With you this must not happen. No; the greatest among you must behave as if he were the youngest, the leader as if he were the one who serves. For who is the greater: the one at table or the one who serves (tables)? The one at table, surely? Yet here I am among you as one who serves (tables)!

The word 'serve' in Luke here is once again the Greek verb *diakoneo* used for the ministry of Stephen and the other deacons in Acts. For the moment I simply point out that these verses from Luke suggest that the ultimate model for people who seek to exercise a ministry that does not conform to expected norms is not simply Stephen, but ultimately Christ himself.

But note how closely the picture of Stephen in Acts reflects that of Christ. One of the features of Luke-Acts is the way that the story of Jesus in the Gospel is presented as a pattern or model for the lives (and perhaps even deaths) of his followers in Acts. It is through his followers' willingness to 'imitate' him that Christ continues to be made present to the world. This is nowhere more dramatically presented than in the account of Stephen. In Luke's recounting of his death resonances of the passion of Christ appear. Several of these are well known. 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 some of the Gospels. 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 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, for Luke, not just a pious metaphor, but has become a matter of life—and death.

However there is one more link between Christ and Stephen that is often overlooked. It occurs in the final sentence of Acts 6. 'The members of the Sanhedrin all looked intently at Stephen, and his face appeared to them like the face of an angel.' The Greek word translated here 'look intently', is a special word for Luke and he seems to reserve it for 'purple moments', times when the normal boundaries between earth and heaven are breached, and humanity glimpses, for a brief moment, something beyond itself. So, for instance, it is used to describe the congregation in the synagogue in Nazareth as they await the gracious and Spirit-filled words uttered by Jesus, or when the apostles gaze intently into heaven at the moment of Jesus' ascension. Therefore, to find this verb here in the story of Stephen is a clue to the importance of what is happening. In effect, like Jesus before him, Stephen is here being transfigured, with the divine glory shining through his human body—becoming quite literally an icon of Christ. And just as Christ's transfiguration led on to his crucifixion so too, Stephen's transfiguration is the direct precursor of his own death—at which point he in turn 'gazed into heaven' – same verb again —seeing the glory of God. No other character in the New Testament (other than Jesus himself) is transfigured in this way. I find it intriguing that it should be Stephen, a mere 'deacon', who is presented in the New Testament as the truest reflection of the likeness of Christ.

I must at least touch on the way Stephen resonates not only with the Gospel account of Jesus, but also with several Old Testament incidents linked to the life of Moses. For Luke presents to us the story of the early Church in Acts as the third act of a three part drama, in which the first act is the Old Testament, and the second and central act is the life of Christ. And it is not really possible to grasp either the meaning of Christ's life or the early Church without reference back to the Old Testament. As the mysterious stranger encountered on the road to Emmaus suggested to his companions, it is necessary to understand 'Moses and all the prophets' before eyes can be opened and the light of the resurrection begin to dawn. I believe quite strongly that one of Luke's contributions to the life of our Church today is his emphasis on the importance of taking seriously history and memory: we need to reflect on our past as part of our journey in to the future.

So the link between Stephen's transfiguration and that of Jesus ultimately leads 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. I believe that the reason Moses' face shone on that

occasion is that he has been pleading so hard with God both to preserve and to be present with his people that he has lost himself in his concern for the people. As a result he has now become the answer to his own prayer: the means by which the glory of God is enabled to be present with them. So it is 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 on and begun to reflect the glory of the Lord. The vision of Christ Stephen 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 and glory of the Son of Man.

No longer is the glory of God confined to the Temple or even to the Holy Land; as Stephen's own speech will make clear. Luke is implying that 'glory' has finally disappeared from the temple. Jerusalem, the city where God was (and perhaps still is!) crucified by the desires and aspirations and passionately held beliefs of men and women is no longer privileged by special presence. It is time for the followers of Jesus to begin to carry out the further stages of the angelic commission given at Jesus' ascension. The seeds sown by the death of this martyr need to be spread far and wide by and to the four winds of the earth. I come back to the point I made in Monday's Bible study: that the transfiguration of Christ will not be complete until the whole of humanity, and indeed the world, has shared in the illumination and renewal that is wrought by the incarnation of Christ. The face that is transfigured on the mountain-top needs to take shape in and redefine the sad, happy, joyful, poor, holy, mean, cruel, longing faces of God's human creation.

And of this process the transfigured form of Stephen, follower of Christ in the ministry of *diakonia*, 'service' is the first-fruits. His transfiguration and death will also lead to important developments in the life of the Church. It will in turn transform the lives of others.

One of these others is clearly Saul/Paul. The concluding episode of Stephen's trial introduces Paul as a consenting bystander to the lynching that takes place. Then, slightly cryptically in the account of Paul's conversion on the Damascus road, Paul, who had never met the earthly Jesus in his lifetime, is challenged by the voice from heaven/Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me* (Acts 9.4). At that moment it seems Paul may have realized that in

slaying Stephen he, Paul, had somehow participated in the slaying of Christ himself. So Stephen's identification with Christ leads to Paul being converted — and through him ultimately the Gentile world: a deacon has died, and so many others will have life.

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 originally chosen? Because, said the twelve apostles, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve at tables' . So often these words have been quoted in the history of the Church to justify the pre-eminence of priestly/preaching/and teaching ministries over diaconal work and service. I am acknowledging this as a person whose own ministry has been focused largely in the area of teaching. Yet remember those earlier words of Jesus from Luke 22.25-7 in which Jesus pronounces himself as one who serves at table . 'For who is the greater: the one at table or the one who serves (tables)? The one at table, surely? Yet here I am among you as one who serves!'

Perhaps, instead of taking the words of Peter and the others at face value and in all seriousness, we might consider whether Luke is being wryly ironic when he tells us of the hesitancy of the twelve to be table-servers. Is he suggesting that, as on a number of previous occasions, once again Peter is putting his foot in it, once again those apostles have something to learn, something that Stephen and his fellow table-servers have 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 three chapters later in Acts as he has to fight to overcome his traditional prejudices and meet with Gentiles. One of those who could not previously 'serve tables' now is willing to offer hospitality, to share food, to eat and drink, not only with his fellow Christians but also with Cornelius and the servants and family of a Roman soldier.

So perhaps it is appropriate to ask, is it then only as the church learns more about humanity and service that it can share the vision of God and become truly apostolic?

Christian mission is offering the hospitality of the face of Christ.

