

Worship 18th April
Aberlour Parish Church
Rev Andrew Kimmitt

Call to Worship

God of all refuge, may we know your shelter today.
And may we have the courage to own and proclaim our trust in you in the face of all that comes our way.
Send your Spirit with us now,
and may our worship give you alone glory.

Prayer of approach, confession and Lord's Prayer

Saving God,
we come to you this morning,
to learn of your love for us.
You are never the one to throw stones at us.
We come knowing that
you do everything in your power to protect us.
Help us to remember this.

Servant God,
we come this morning,
wishing we could be more like you
and less like the ones holding the cloaks
of the stone throwers.
May we want to witness to you,
to be more like Stephen than ourselves.
Help us be courageous in our faith.

Spirit God,
we come this morning
seeking the inspiration and strength
to share our faith with others,
to stand up for what we believe,
to be living witnesses to your love.
Help us and guide us.

Help us and guide us through all the times when we fail.
Those times when we fail to act as faithful witnesses,
when we turn a blind eye to oppression,
when we cross the road to avoid need,
when we leave words of love unsaid.

Help us to be courageous in the dark places

into which our lives can take us:
where we start to deny your presence,
where we do not listen for your voice,
where try to go it alone.

Help us to remember
you are ever loving,
ever forgiving,
ever present to us.

This we pray, together with the prayer you taught your disciples to pray as we say together:

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive us debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

Hymn CH4 192

1 All my hope on God is founded,
all my trust he shall renew;
he, my guide through changing order,
only good and only true:
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

2 Human pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray his trust;
all that human toil can fashion,
tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.

3 God's great goodness lasts for ever,
Deep his wisdom passing thought,
splendour, light, and life attend him,
beauty springing out of naught.
Evermore,
from his store
new-born worlds rise and adore.

4 Day by day our mighty giver
grants to us his gifts of love;
in his will our souls find pleasure,
leading to our home above:
love shall stand
at his hand,
joy shall wait for his command.

5 Still from Earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done;

high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ his Son:
hear Christ's call,
one and all –
we who follow shall not fall.

Reading – Acts 6:1 -7:2a;44-60

6 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and 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—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

7 Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

² To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me!

⁴⁴ "Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵ After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, ⁴⁶ who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

⁴⁸ "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

⁴⁹ "Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me?
says the Lord.

Or where will my resting place be?

⁵⁰ Has not my hand made all these things?'

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

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.

Reflection

This is a story of community divisions.

It is a story of unpopular truths that no-one, and certainly not those in power, want to hear.

It is a story of a courageous servant of truth.

And it is a story of scapegoating, or a witch-hunt that ends in a scene of brutality.

And it's a story that asks very deep and probably uncomfortable questions of us.

To understand the story we need to know a little about the two camps we're introduced to at the beginning. Our reading called them the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews.

Those names tell us the first major difference between them: language, or first mother-tongue language at least. Hellenistic simply means Greek-speaking. Hellene is the Greek word for Greek. Meanwhile there are the Hebraic Jews, who speak, you'll have guessed it, Hebrew-based Aramaic

But as is always the case, language difference is also cultural difference. And that has to do with the history involved.

When the Romans conquered Palestine in 63BC, they took many people to be slaves, and exported them around the Greek-speaking part of the Roman empire. And so the Roman Jewish Diaspora comes to be. As time wore on, some of these (or their children) were freed, or released, or escaped and return to Jerusalem. And so we hear in the reading about a synagogue of Freedmen – this would be a gathering of these ex-slaves. That is obviously a very different story to those who were left behind. Although they share an experience in history, forced on them by an oppressor, their experiences (and language and culture) diverge. It happens throughout history: round here you only need to think of the highland clearances, and how the paths diverged of those who were left behind, those who emigrated to places like Canada, and those who re-settled in Southern Scotland. In each case the markers of identity morph and change. What is held dear differs, as do the ways of telling the story of what happened.

So you have a community that has come back from an exile of slavery. Who have lived their faith and identity without access to the Temple in Jerusalem for generations. Who have picked up cultural and linguistic differences.

And you have the ones who, oppressed by the Romans as they may be in their homeland, have never known slavery, and have enjoyed unfettered access to the Temple and the religious rituals that define who they are.

Now the two exist together. Yet there are pronounced frictions. And in the new community of Jesus followers, they come to a head over issues of fairness. The Hellenistic Jews say that the widows in their community are not getting the fair allocation of the daily allocation of food. This is the welfare system that is meant to protect the poor, the incomer and the widow to ensure their basic needs are met. And it's not working.

Not that we, today, can take the moral high ground here.

In our bible episode, the solution proposed by the 12 disciples (we're back up to 12, earlier in Acts we hear how a replacement for Judas Iscariot was found) is that 7 of the Greek speaking Jews should be found to help lead in the service of care. We hear the list: but among them the name of Stephen stands out. We're told Stephen is full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

And for a while the problem is solved. Vv7 tells us that the congregation of Jesus followers in Jerusalem grew and grew. Stephen was among them, and performed miracles and wonders.

It's hard to know why the opposition to Stephen came from where it did. We're told that some in the congregation of the Freedmen opposed him, But this congregation – made of of Jews from the Greek diaspora, either descendants of Roman slaves or former slaves themselves; are meant to be Stephen's own people. Maybe it's tall-poppy syndrome -we see that often enough in our own times, where someone emerges as particularly prominent, and then their own community disown them: too big for their boots.

Either way, things get nasty very quickly. Bribes are paid to generate false witnesses. And the accusation? The one thing that is completely unacceptable for any Jew, let alone a Greek-speaking one from outside the religious circles of the Jerusalem Temple: that he spoke against Moses, against the Temple, and against God.

You may well know the blasphemy scene from Monty Python's life of Brian. In that, for comedic effect, some poor soul is hauled outside the city on the charge of saying 'Jehovah' – God's name so holy that it should never be spoken in Jewish practice. Of course the crowd are seen to be just wanting a good excuse for a mob execution: and things get farcical when the accuser says "He said Jehovah" therefore saying it themselves. Soon the rocks are flying – stoning being the obligatory death for blasphemy – and the scene descends into hilarious chaos.

The fate awaiting Stephen is just as farcical, the accusations just as trumped up, and the trial but a similarly unscrupulous kangaroo court.

But Stephen's death doesn't have much comedic value. Often when this episode is read in church the focus is on Stephen's death: his martyrdom. Preachers point on the similarities between Stephen's death and Jesus' crucifixion; the crying out, the forgiveness, the execution of an innocent man speaking truth to power. These are clearly deliberate parallels, both made by the storyteller, and perhaps even by Stephen himself as he realises his fate.

Or sometimes on the first introduction to Saul, who we'll come to know as Paul, a saint, even as now he watches on approvingly holding the coats of Stephen's killers.

And then there's Stephen's vision: a vision of heaven, of Jesus in heaven, at the right hand of the Father (a phrase, the very observant will note, makes it into our creeds and statements of faith: I believe in Jesus Christ who.... Ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the father).

All of those facets are interesting and important.

But we're going to focus, not on the end, but by rewinding a little, to the bit we don't normally get when we hear Stephen's story. And that's his speech before the Temple authorities.

It's a lengthy speech Stephen makes, and even though our reading was a long one, there was a big old portion cut out.

The bit we didn't hear is Stephen beginning from Abraham, and telling the story of God's people from Abraham all the way through Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, to Moses – where we pick it up- and Joshua entering the Promised land, and King David, and Solomon building the Temple. If you ever want a condensed version of the story of the Old Testament, you can do worse than to read Stephen's speech here.

To our ears, there are probably details in Stephen's speech that are – at best – a bit hazy from Sunday School stories, or that we might mostly all know, but rarely join up in such an overarching zoomed-out way. It's quite interesting for us.

But for the folk Stephen was speaking to: these stories were the religious equivalent of teaching your granny to sook eggs. So why does Stephen bother telling them all these completely familiar things that they themselves know inside out?

I'd guess, partly it is in rebuttal to the accusation made against him. That he spoke against Moses, God and the Temple. It might be too easy to try and stick such an accusation on this outsider Greek speaking Jew. It would play to all the stereotypes the Temple authorities might have against him. But Stephen knows his stuff, and doesn't mind proving it. He knows the Story of Moses – in detail – and he knows the origin of the Temple – from tent and ark of the covenant in the wilderness, to tabernacle in the promised land, to it's moving to Jerusalem (or just outside) in David's reign, to the building of the temple in Solomon's. This is not someone with disdain for the stories of his faith.

And do you know, I wonder if Stephen had shut up then, he'd have lived?

But just after proving his knowledge, and everything he shares in faith with the Temple authorities; Stephen goes further. He quotes the prophet Isaiah against his accusers. They had tried to make the bible a weapon against Stephen and failed, and now he retaliates, using the same holy texts against them.

To those who love and serve the Temple, the building at the centre of their devotion, and which they can't imagine religious life without, Stephen, in the voice of the prophet, says: God does not dwell in houses built by human hands.

And we know what happens next. That's a step too far. The anger and the rage rise up, they rush against him and Stephen's fate is sealed.

And we're forced to ask ourselves:

Is Stephen's challenge to the Temple authorities (who loved their practices and holy paces so much) a challenge to us today?

What is it we worship?

Do we worship the trappings of our religious practices? The particular way we do things? The familiar and safe? Can we imagine our faith existing beyond the boundaries we know, the boundaries which – if we are true to ourselves – we put much effort into maintaining? And what about our buildings?

This last year we have had to work out how to live our faith without them. And it's been difficult. And many have made big adjustments to do so. And some have even seen a bigger picture of how faith has been lived out. Now as we come out of Covid, are we rushing to get back to our buildings just because it's what's normal and safe and familiar? Or because these are genuinely the best tools we have available to us to worship as a community? Have we made temples of our buildings? Idols even?

Do our behaviours and practices amount more to worshipping these places and buildings than they do to worshipping the God for whom they exist? A God who, yes meets us here, but makes a home not in bricks and mortar, but in our hearts.

These are challenging questions. But they are also the questions of our time.

I believe in Aberlour and Craigellachie we have good buildings. Great buildings even. I'm a big fan. And yet I am challenged too. As we are able to re-enter and re-use them: what are we using them for?

And though walls are necessary to have a roof over our head: who are the ones who sense they are always on the outside? And who of us are too comfortable on the inside that we fail to see the invisible barriers that exist. Why do we fall so often into the trap that the place to be is here and our job is to invite people into our cosy 'inside': is it not just as true, more so probably, that the place to be, the place to be living our faith and worshipping is 'out there' beyond these walls, and meeting and serving, and loving folk where they already are?

Lots of questions. And every day, every week we as individuals and as a community are accountable for how our words, attitudes, actions and behaviours answer them: even if we don't realise it as we do it.

We can build secure walls, we can build edifices that will stand the test of time against the elements, we can even call them houses of God.

But God does not dwell in houses built by human hands.

Instead, Let us build a house, a space, a meeting or gathering, let us build a community, where love can dwell.

Amen

Hymn CH4 198

1 Let us build a house
Where love can dwell
And all can safely live
A place where
Saints and children tell
How hearts learn to forgive
Built of hopes and dreams and visions
Rock of faith and vault of grace
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions
All are welcome, all are welcome
All are welcome in this place

2 Let us build a house where prophets speak
And words are strong and true
Where all God's children dare to seek
To dream God's reign anew
Here the cross shall stand as witness
And a symbol of God's grace
Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus
All are welcome, all are welcome
All are welcome in this place

3 Let us build a house where love is found
In water, wine and wheat
A banquet hall on holy ground
Where peace and justice meet
Here the love of God, through Jesus
Is revealed in time and space
As we share in Christ the feast that frees us
All are welcome, all are welcome
All are welcome in this place

4 Let us build a house where hands will reach
beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
and live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger.
All are welcome, all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.

5 Let us build a house where all are named,
their songs and visions heard

and loved and treasured, taught and claimed
as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter.
All are welcome, all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place.

Text: Marty Haugen, b. 1950
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Tune: TWO OAKS (see RW #219)

Prayers for others and ourselves

Heavenly Father,
we call you that
and yet we know you are not far from us.

You are not far from anyone.
You see what goes on in your world,
some of it you like,
some of it must make you angry.
We bring to you now our prayers
for our world,
broken and angry as it seems to be.

We pray for those places
where faith and religion is misunderstood,
and hatred of the other
has caused missiles not stones to be thrown.

We pray for places where
the colour of your skin
has an impact of the level
of education and healthcare you receive.

We pray for places where
the wealth of your nation
decides on whether you have
enough food or clean water.

We pray for places where
your sexuality
puts you in the spotlight
and doors are closed in your face.

We pray for places where
your physical and intellectual abilities
separate you from the community
that you live in.

Lord in all these places
help us to be witness to your love
and not be on the side of the oppressor
but on the side of you, the life giver.
All this we pray.
Amen

Hymn CH4 644

- 1 O Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end ;
be now and always near me,
my master and my friend :
I shall not fear the battle
if you are by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if you will be my guide.
- 2 Oh, let me feel you near me :
the world is ever near ;
I see the sights that dazzle,
the tempting sounds I hear ;
my foes are ever near me,
around me, and within ;
but, Jesus, draw still nearer,
and shield my soul from sin.
- 3 Oh, let me hear you speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self-will ;
Oh, speak to reassure me,
to hasten or control ;
O speak, and make me listen,
true guardian of my soul.
- 4 O Jesus, you have promised
to all who follow you,
that where you are in glory
your servant shall be too ;
and, Jesus, I have promised
to serve you to the end :
now give me grace to follow,
my master and my friend.

John Ernest Bode (1816–1874)(*alt.*)

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Sending and blessing

Called to follow,
called to serve,
called to love,
called to stand up for the truth.
Let us go in peace,
in the name of the Prince of Peace.