

# Stephen's Sermon To His Murderers

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Date: 18 October 1987

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[ 0 : 00 ] Please be seated. As Archie has told you, this is St. Luke's Day, St. Luke the Physician, and we celebrate that.

And it's also, if you look on the back of your folders, the week in which we celebrate the 200th anniversary of Bishop Charles Inglis arriving in Halifax to be the first Canadian bishop of the Church of England in Canada.

And the Anglican Church is made up of bishops who are the overseers, priests who are the presbyters or elders, and deacons who are the serving ministry.

And though in most of the Reformed churches, bishops were dropped, in the Church of England, bishops were retained because in the peculiar and wonderful history of the Reformation, it was the bishops who died at the stake for their faith in Christ.

And so we have that order of Church life maintained still in the Anglican Communion. So that's Bishop Inglis.

[ 1 : 23 ] Then, in commemoration of that, our former primate, Archbishop Scott, is going to be preaching at the cathedral at 4.30 this afternoon to commemorate this 200th anniversary.

And so that's at Christ Church Cathedral this afternoon at 4 o'clock. And this morning you were asked in reliance upon God to make your pledge for the support of the work of this congregation in the year ahead.

I hope that didn't offend your sensibilities. It always does mine. But through the good offices of Mr. Dave McMillan and Mr. Ernie Eldridge, I really do think that it's meant to be, and it has proven to me to be, a grace from God to help put my chaotic finances in some kind of order by saying, this belongs to the Lord, and this I take as God's provision for me and my family through the year.

And to make that a specific transaction with God has been a great blessing. You may also wonder if you are wondering what service we're taking this morning.

There is in the new book of alternative services two communion services which are in the language of the prayer book of 1962.

[ 2 : 54 ] And it's one of those services that we've taken this morning as a kind of bridge service for those who are sort of torn between the VAS and the prayer book. This is to help you bridge those two, and I hope that it will prove a blessing to you.

The other thing which is unusual and which I need to explain to you is that we've tried this fall, and this is the second attempt, to have all the children in for the whole communion.

And then as they go to receive their instruction in the church school, then we wait to receive ours here. The results this morning seem to be particularly chaotic. However, here we are, and I want just to take a few moments to share with you from the Word of God, and to ask that God will quieten our hearts in the midst of all our busynesses to hear that Word of God.

So can you just, as you're seated, bow your heads for a moment while we pray? And if you could turn in your Bibles at the same time to Acts chapter 7.

Acts chapter 7, and we bow our heads to pray. Amen. We read that the Word of God increased under the ministry of Stephen and the other deacons.

[ 4 : 43 ] The number of the disciples multiplied greatly, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. Our God and Father, may the Word of God increase among us, so that we see the enormous relevance of it to every circumstance of our lives.

May the number of your disciples multiply greatly in our midst, those who are seriously concerned to be the disciples of Jesus Christ in a world which is alienated to itself and to him.

And among us, may many of the priests become obedient to the faith, the elders among us.

Father, we need to allow that Word to increase among us. We need to learn discipleship. We need to become obedient to the faith.

As we look at this passage of Scripture, grant that the work which you have shown us here, you might, by your amazing grace, do in our hearts and lives.

[ 6 : 10 ] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. You can regard Acts chapter 7 as a kind of murder mystery.

The work of a murder mystery is simply to, the chapter ends with a violent murder.

And when you read a murder mystery, the writer of the murder mystery leads you on with all the possible evidence which he can give you.

And in order to bring you to the wrong conclusion, and having brought you to the wrong conclusion, then in the last chapter, he tells you what you should have seen and never saw before.

That's how you write murder mysteries. Any of you can do it. And the trouble is, most people think they really can. But that's how it works.

[ 7 : 18 ] Now, what happens in chapter 7 is a great deal of evidence of enormous relevance to the people who heard this sermon was put before them. It's a sermon which outlines the whole history of God's plan of salvation.

God's plan of salvation is not a Sunday phenomena. God's plan of salvation is something that marches through history, unerring in its goal, and ultimately will be victorious in its objective.

That men may come to confess the faith of Christ and him crucified, to come into the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, and to forsake the kingdoms of this world.

So that's the plan of salvation that opens. And he tells... Stephen is an extraordinary man.

He's an extraordinary man because he was full of grace and truth. His face was as the face of an angel.

[ 8 : 36 ] He preached and disputed with men and spoke to them concerning the reality of the kingdom of God and of his Christ.

And he did so with such eloquence and with such power that Jerusalem, the whole city, was churned up by it. And you begin to see forming the terrible phalanx of opposition to the gospel.

The first sermon that we dealt with, the congregation thought that the disciples were drunk and dismissed it that way.

The second sermon we dealt with, they thought, well, this is dangerous. We'll put them in jail overnight. And having preached again, they put them in jail again in the third sermon.

But now the opposition is taking very real structure. And at the end of this sermon, the opposition to the gospel is real enough that they take Stephen outside the city and stone him to death.

[ 9 : 50 ] So you can see how the opposition forms to the gospel, how the opposition in the society of Jerusalem in that day and perhaps in some measure account for the very real opposition to the gospel in your heart and mine and in our society in this day.

Now, the way Stephen did it was he went to these people and he picked on all the things that they believed in.

They believed in Abraham and that they were the children of Abraham. They believed in the patriarchs and they were the heirs of the patriarchs to whom the promises had been made. They believed particularly in Joseph through whom the whole people of Israel had been redeemed when they went into captivity in Egypt.

They very much believed in Moses who was their lawmaker, who established their community, their country, the laws of that country, the interrelationship, the whole structure of it was established by Moses.

They believed in David, who was their king, and the kings that followed him. And they believed in the prophets whom God had sent to teach them.

[ 11 : 10 ] Now, to greatly reduce this sermon in time, I want to tell you and leave you to examine the clues more carefully. The accusation which was brought against Jesus was, and you can see it if you look at chapter 6 and verse 13, the accusation that was brought against Stephen was, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.

And then he elucidates on that and says, For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us.

And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw his face, Stephen's face, like the face of an angel. And the high priest turned to Stephen and said, Is this so?

And it was then Stephen told them about Abraham, the patriarchs, Joseph, Moses, David, the prophets.

He said that, You don't understand. You think that your temple and this law is the basis of the community. Do not recognize that the inheritance which belongs to you is that Abraham was a man of faith, that God didn't appear to him in this temple.

[ 12 : 44 ] He appeared to him in Mesopotamia. He appeared to Moses down in Midian. The patriarchs are buried in Shechem. It's not this place.

And if you want to talk about the law of Moses, then look at verse 35. If you want to talk about the law of Moses, he says, You refused him.

You said to him, Who made you a ruler and a judge? The one whom God sent as both ruler and deliverer. You see, this, they had rejected Moses.

They had rejected Joseph. David had never built the temple. It was built by Solomon, as we read this morning. And the very ones whom God has sent, you have consistently rejected.

Not one of the prophets did you fail to persecute. Now, the message of Moses to you was that there comes after me a prophet, and you are to hear him.

[ 13 : 53 ] Stephen says, That prophet has come, the righteous one of God, and you have crucified him. Well, at this point, the congregation in Jerusalem was totally enraged, and they turned on Stephen and stopped their ears and rushed upon him and cast him out of the city and stoned him, because he had demonstrated to them from their own scriptures that the inheritance which they were so proud of was an inheritance that they should be deeply ashamed of, because they had failed to keep it.

He said, You who received the law as delivered by angels did not keep it, and so you come under the just condemnation of God.

Well, this so infuriated them that they took him out to stone him to death, and they did.

It's an amazing sermon, and I wish I could spend more time telling you about it. Do you see how it ends in that peculiar way? It says, As they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

He knelt down and cried with a loud voice, Do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And that magnificent first line of chapter 8, And Saul was consenting to this.

[ 15 : 39 ] The result of this stoning of Stephen was that the church came under fierce persecution. Persecution drove the Christians into many parts of the country where they took the news of the gospel, and many more people were converted, and churches were established, and Saul went on his way so deeply perturbed by what he had heard that he was doubled in his resolve to wipe out the terrible blasphemy which he thought the church of Christ to be.

That was the first reaction of the greatest Christian man in the whole history of the Christian church, one of terrible fury and anger, and he turned totally against the church.

And it was only subsequently, when you come to chapter 9, that you discover that this man is confronted this time not by Stephen, though he has obviously heard Stephen's sermon, but he's confronted by Christ and is brought to repentance and faith.

Now, I leave this with you. I leave it with you in the recognition that what happened here may, by God's grace, happen in our hearts. that we hear this word of God, that this word of God may be magnified among us, and that as we consider it and think about it, we will come to the place where we hear what God is saying to us.

So terrible, and I mean by that awesome, is the rebellion of our own hearts against the will of God. So profound is the antipathy for the purposes of God in our world that it is a miracle of amazing grace when we come to put our faith and trust in Christ, that it stirs up hatred and violence and murder is what you can see plainly.

[ 17 : 59 ] Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, and finally the fulfillment of that in the person of Christ whom they crucified.

And Stephen who stood up and said so was himself stoned to death. And Paul who heard him ended up suffering capital punishment of some kind.

So alien is the gospel to our world and to our hearts. And so deeply do we need to examine our own hearts to see why that opposition is there and why the purpose and plan of God's salvation is not for some reason acceptable to us.

let me pray. Our God, grant that as we read and examine this story of Stephen that you will open our hearts to the mystery of your purpose in our midst and that we may be enabled not to be filled with hatred and violence and opposition because you touch us in the place of our greatest sensitivities but that we may be open and responsive to the wonder of your love and grace. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Will you kneel? Will you kneel? this being stewardship Sunday and just having heard that word we pray.

[ 20 : 19 ] Lord God in return for thy great love we would bring an offering but there is only one offering worthy perfect obedience of thy son even unto death.

Lord God I remember that offering and I plead it before you and though it be all sufficient I add to it the offering of myself my body my mind my spirit my heart and my will all that I have all that I am all that by grace I can become accept oh Lord this unworthy sacrifice and cleanse it and sanctify it and use it in the service of thy kingdom for Jesus' sake Lord Lord in thy mercy hear our prayer.

There is a service this evening of very special significance to a number of people. We hope that these people who have been invited to hear Pat Patterson preaching on the cross are not yet able to pray as you may have just prayed.

So we pray tonight for those who are invited to come and hear about the cross of Christ and what God has done. We pray for those who are inviting people to come.

we pray for Pat as he preaches. We pray for other people who are going to be participating in this very special service. We adore and magnify you oh Lord our God that in Christ crucified you reveal the fact that the very essence of your nature is a love that will go to the uttermost lengths for every man and woman for the lost the lowest and the least for each and every one of us here as we kneel at the foot of the cross today.

[ 22 : 52 ] God and Father of us all you love the world so much that you gave your only Son for the salvation of mankind. We pray for those who are strangers to this love for those in spiritual darkness who have not really heard the gospel of Christ.

For those who having heard it have chosen darkness rather than light. In your mercy draw them to yourself especially this night through him who was lifted up on the cross that they may receive the gift of eternal life in him.

Lord in thy mercy hear our prayer. prayer. We pray for those who are suffering any sickness particularly sickness particularly people who are really infirm who have no medical chance of getting better.

This is a daily prayer of Mother Teresa. Dearest Lord may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick and while nursing them minister unto you.

Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise of the irritable the exacting the unreasonable may I still recognize you and say Jesus you are my patient.

[ 24 : 29 ] it is good to serve you. Lord give me this seeing faith and then my work will never be monotonous.

I will ever find joy in humoring the fancies and gratifying the wishes of all poor sufferers. O beloved sick how doubly dear you are to me when you personify Christ and what a privilege is mine to be allowed to tend you.

Dear Lord make me appreciative of the dignity of my high vocation and its many responsibilities. Never permit me to disgrace it by giving way to coldness unkindness or impatience and O God while you are Jesus my patient so also to me be a patient Jesus bearing with my faults looking only to my intention which is to love and serve you in the person of each of your sick Lord we commit all who are ill now in a moment of silence and also those who are looking after them and pray with Mother Teresa Lord increase my faith bless our efforts and their efforts and work now and forever more Lord in your mercy hear our prayer will you turn in the book of alternate services to page 865 page 865

Psalms 116 beginning together at verse 10 and together until the end how shall I repay the Lord for all the good things that I will be I will lift up my salvation and call on the name of the Lord I will fulfill my hearts of all in the presence of all his people and righteousness in the name of the Lord to be dead and served the Lord I am your servant I am your servant and child and in you and I bring you from my own I I love you who have my life and I have all the name of the Lord and will fulfill my promise to the presence of all of the people in the hearts of the Lord's house in the midst of you of Jerusalem hallelujah please be seated for the announcement good morning welcome again to

St. John's you've heard some of the announcements already I'd like to just emphasize a couple more for you and invite you to join us for coffee or tea in the lounge after the service you've heard that the speaker tonight the preacher will be the Reverend Pat Patterson we hope that you will all come and bring your friends to join in that worship service this evening the sympathy of the congregation I would like to extend to Blake Bromley and his family his mother passed away yesterday next Saturday the Kohanonia group is having a potluck supper there will be a newsletter available at the desk in the lounge please pick one up for details of that potluck supper next Saturday the 24th I would like to remind you of the vestry meeting which will be two weeks today it will deal with and allow us to deal with as a congregation the resources that we have been blessed with this

[ 28 : 49 ] Sunday and over the next couple of weeks as part of our stewardship campaign we will be taking time at a vestry meeting which will last approximately 45 minutes following the service and the coffee hour in the lounge to come to some decisions about how we will use the gifts that have been given to us in the year 1988 finally I'd like to mention to you that the outreach committee has invited Mr. Jim Wardroper to come and speak to us on Wednesday October 21st at 7.30pm you're all invited to come to that evening speaking thank you very much now we sing our concluding hymn hymn number eight yes ¶¶