

You will be my martyrs

In Acts 1: 8 Jesus said to his apostles, to those who were to found the infant New Testament church, "you will be my witnesses." This is the last assignment Jesus gives his church before he goes to heaven. And even though he said that to the eleven apostles at one point in the history of the church, I think Jesus continues to say to his church, to us who are part of his church, "You will be my witnesses." A witness is someone who tells others what they have seen, heard or experienced. He is someone who announces the truth. This is what Jesus asks us to do. Talk about me. Let me be known in the world. Testify about me. But often when we start talking about witnessing, it scares a lot of us. Although we have had the joy of speaking to people who ask a lot of questions, who seek to know God, very often we have a sense of failure or frustration in our witness. The people we talk to don't want to listen. They are hostile to the gospel. Our efforts seem to bear little fruit. And the danger is that we end up not talking about Jesus anymore. It's too difficult. It does not bear fruit. Today we look to Stephen's example to encourage us in this task that Jesus has given us: You will be my witnesses.

Stephen's witnessing is not easy. - Last Sunday we saw Stephen's character together. We saw a man filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with faith, grace, wisdom, and power, a man who had done great wonders and signs. Clearly he is a man well equipped to bear witness to Jesus. Here is a man who will have no trouble convincing his listeners. If ever there was a man for whom it would be easy to bear witness to Jesus, it was Stephen. But that's not what we are seeing. In Stephen's life we see that witnessing for Jesus is not easy. First, there, in these chapters, he's all alone. In other chapters we have seen Peter with John or with other apostles. Luke seems to give the impression that Stephen is alone here. He is in a very small minority. It is not known exactly how many people are in league against him, but it is a number that continues to grow. V9 - a few. V11 - They bribed men. V12 - They stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes. V13 - they produced false witnesses. V15 - there is the Sanhedrin. 7.1 There is the high priest. Stephen finds himself alone against this impressive array of opponents. They tell lies against him and accuse him falsely. And opposition to Stephen comes mainly from those who should have been better disposed to his message, who should have understood him, accepted his message. Here, Stephen shows us that witnessing for Jesus will rarely be easy. We find ourselves alone, facing intimidating people with their arguments that oppose us and our message. Stephen's witnessing is not easy.

Stephen's witnessing is biblical - In chapter 6, there are two main charges against Stephen. V11 - "We heard him utter blasphemous words against Moses and against God" V13 - "This man never ceases to utter words against this holy place and against the law" So how does Stephen respond to these accusations? He relies on the Bible. He talks about people and events that his opponents know but do not understand. This is often the case when talking to people. They know things about God, about Jesus, but they understand almost nothing of the plan of redemption, of the work of Christ. So let's look at Stephen's arguments.

Stephen begins with Abraham V2 to 8. And immediately, he makes a link between Abraham and the Jews with whom he is speaking. V2 - "our father Abraham." V4 - "God sent him to this country where you now live." Verse 8 speaks of the Covenant of God, the Covenant of which this people was a part. He says: The story of Abraham is your story, our story, the story of our people and especially of our God. And what Stephen demonstrates is that there was a relationship between God and his people long before a Temple was built. Stephen speaks in verse 7 of worshiping God long before the Temple. "Look at your story to see that God does not need a temple to relate to His people."

And after Abraham, Stephen speaks of Joseph from verses 9 to 16. And in these 7 verses, what is the word that is repeated 6 times? It is the word Egypt. This country which is considered an enemy of the Jewish people. Stephen describes how the patriarchs, the ancestors of those with whom he speaks, in their wickedness, they reject Joseph. They reject the one who should rule over them, the one God had chosen to save them. Do you recognize that? A man chosen by God but rejected by his brothers? A man chosen by God to save his brothers but mistreated by his brothers? Stephen describes how God's people were saved, thanks to what God had done in Egypt. God, Stephen says, can bless his people, even in a place like Egypt.

And from there, Stephen speaks of Moses. He describes how Moses is called by God, protected by God but in verse 25 we see a terrible criticism of the Jewish people. "He thought that his brothers would understand that God was granting them salvation by his hand; but they did not understand."

Again, do you see the significance of what Stephen is saying? Someone is sent by God to his people to "grant salvation by his hand" but the people do not understand. With the rejection of Jesus by the Jews, history repeats itself. The similarities between the treatment of Moses and Jesus are so obvious. Verse 35: "This Moses whom they denied, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge? It is he whom God sent as leader and as deliverer." What was said about Moses is the same as what was said about Jesus.

Stephen is saying, "Are you accusing me of disrespecting Moses? It is you who disrespect the one Moses spoke of, Jesus." V37: "It is this Moses who said to the sons of Israel: God will raise up for you from among your brothers a prophet like me". If you really care about Moses, why do you reject the prophet he spoke of?

Stephen also goes to great lengths to show that he is not against the law at all. In verse 38 he says that the law came through to Moses through the Angel of God at Mount Sinai. Our fathers received oracles "to give them to you" but look at the real problem with the law in verse 39: "Our fathers would not obey it. . . in their hearts they turned to Egypt." Verse 40 and 41, our fathers make themselves an idol. And the scourge of idolatry is a permanent scourge among the people of God. Stephen quotes the prophet Amos in verses 42 and 43. It is because of the idolatry of the Jewish people that God allowed his idolatrous people to be sent into captivity. It is amazing that the descendants of those who rejected Moses, rejected the law of Moses, accuse Stephen of disrespecting Moses and the law.

And then between verse 44 and verse 50, Stephen again responds to the charge that he is speaking against the Temple, the place of worship of the Jews. Stephen shows that he is well acquainted with the history of the place of worship for the people of God. He begins in verse 44 with "the tent (or tabernacle) of witness". For years the tent or tabernacle was the place of worship, v45, "until the days of David". It is King David who wants to build a temple to the glory of God but, v47: "It was Solomon who built him a house". Stephen knows the history of the Temple. But he also knows that the God who was present with Abraham, with Joseph and Moses in Egypt and in the desert, in the tabernacle, in the Temple, should not be limited to one place. Stephen quotes the prophet Isaiah to support his argument: V49 "Heaven is his throne and earth his footstool". You, Stephen said to the Sanhedrin, you limit God. You confine him. He is bigger than your temple.

So you see how Stephen relies on the Word of God. He knows it. He understands its message, its meaning. And Stephen's testimony is a model for us. In our testimony we seek to present the truth of the Word of God. It's alive. It's powerful. It is our sword. We use the Word to convince. And God has promised that his Word will accomplish what God wants him to do in the hearts of those who hear it. Isaiah 55: 10-11:

"As rain and snow come down from the heavens, and return not without watering and fertilizing the earth, and causing plants to germinate, without giving seed to the sower, and bread to him who eat, So it is with my word, which proceeds out of my mouth, It does not return to me without effect, without having carried out my will and accomplished my purposes." We want people to come to faith in Christ. How does that happen? Where does faith come from? Romans 10:17: "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard is from the word of Christ." The word of God read, preached, taught, explained, it must occupy a central place in our witness. Stephen's witnessing is biblical.

Stephen's witnessing is direct - Stephen is not happy to talk about the history of God's people. This is not his goal. His purpose is to show the members of the Sanhedrin how this story applies to them. And at V51, his message becomes much more personal, much more direct. And these verses are a scathing criticism of religious leaders. Look at what Stephen is saying. "Stiff-necked men, uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always oppose the Holy Spirit, you like your fathers. Which of the prophets did your fathers have they not persecuted? They put to death those who announced in advance the coming of the Righteous one, whose murderers you have now become after having delivered him, you who have received the law by the order of the angels and who have not kept it." Stephen is not afraid to tell them the direct truth to these men. He does not say "there are some people with stiff necks! Some people oppose the Holy Spirit. We all know people who have not kept God's law." No, he said, "You're the stiff-necked men. It is you who oppose the Holy Spirit. It was you who did not obey the law of Moses." He speaks to their conscience. And it is true that we seek to convince people of the truth about Jesus but also of the implications of this truth for them. What does God ask of them? We say to people: This is what God wants to tell you, what He asks of you! God is speaking to you. God has something to tell you. It is like the prophet Nathan telling David about the rich man who took the lamb from his poor neighbor. David was outraged by this story and Nathan told him, "You are that man!". We mustn't be afraid to say to people: "You're the man! You're the woman!" Stephen's testimony is direct

Stephen's testimony is not well received. - If Stephen had finished his talk in verse 50, the Sanhedrin might have thanked him for his talk and sent him home. They might have appreciated his presentation of the history of the Jewish people. But since his message reveals their sin, their hard heart, the members of the Sanhedrin are outraged against him. I saw this on our St. Patrick's Day parties. We always end with a little talk about Patrick's life. And people follow with interest and then the message gets a little more personal, the gospel is explained and you see people's faces changing. This is what is happening here.

Look at their reaction to verse 54: "On hearing this they were furious in their hearts and they gnashed their teeth against him." In verse 57 they no longer want to hear the words of a man of God. "Then they shouted with a loud voice, covering their ears and they all rushed at him together, chased him out of town and stoned him." Their reaction to the truth is so violent that they take the life of this gentle man, full of grace and of the Holy Spirit, this man whose face shines. They kill him. They hate the message. They kill the messenger. They kill the man who tries to tell them about Jesus. They kill the man who shows them the way of salvation. They kill the witness of Jesus. They kill the martyr of Jesus. It's truly remarkable. Given Stephen's character: a man filled with the Holy Ghost, filled with grace, wisdom, faith, and power, a man who presents water-tight arguments to answer the charges. His face shines like the face of an angel. If ever a testimony was going to be well received, this is it. They scream, they cover their ears, they jump on him and they kill him.

And dear friends, Jesus said to his church: "You will be my witnesses, you will be my martyrs". He never says that the witness of Jesus will be well received, well appreciated. He never says that because of our testimony, hundreds of people will be converted. He does not say that those who listen to our testimony will immediately be touched in their hearts by the message, by the power of the gospel. He tells us: "You will be my witnesses". And the apostle Paul gives us an idea of the reaction when we tell people about the cross of Jesus: "we preach Christ crucified, scandal for the Jews and foolishness for the gentiles."

We have to be realistic. Our testimony will often be received with indifference or hostility. The Bible prepares us for this. It was the case with the prophets. It was the case for the apostles and here for Stephen. It was even the case with Jesus. And that has already been our experience. Some of you have had a very hostile response to your faith. People get angry when you talk about Jesus. You shine the light of Christ in darkness. It's no wonder there is such a reaction. But let's not be discouraged. Why am I saying this? How can we rejoice even if our testimony is poorly received?

Stephen's witnessing is not a failure. - In this chapter, Stephen preaches the Word, no one is converted, and Stephen ends up dying. Is his testimony a failure? We testify of Jesus, we explain the gospel, and the person we're talking to says, "No thank you, I'm not interested." Is this a failure on our part? When Jesus teaches in John 6 and we read: "Many of his disciples, after hearing it, said: This saying is hard; who can listen to it? From that moment many of his disciples withdrew, and they no longer went with him." Did Jesus Fail in His witnessing?

I come back to the passage quoted earlier from the prophet Isaiah: "So it is of my word, which goes out of my mouth: It does not return to me without effect, Without having carried out my will and accomplished my purposes."

Stephen's witness did exactly what God wanted it to do. Admittedly, there is no obvious impact. We do not read of members of the Sanhedrin who repent and convert. But there is a young man Saul who watches everything that happens in this chapter and who will never forget what he sees and what he hears. What he sees and hears has a huge impact on him, an impact that Stephen knows nothing about.

And then from that point on in the life of the fledgling church, there will be great persecution. Chapter 8.1 "On that day there was a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem". One might be tempted to say, "It is terrible that Stephen's speech leads to persecution for the church. His speech is causing trouble for Christians. He should have kept quiet! But God is using this persecution to accomplish His purposes."

Look at the continuation of verse 1: "and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria." When was the last time in this book we heard of Judea and Samaria? It was in chapter 1.8, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." God uses Stephen's testimony and his death to proclaim the gospel in Judea and Samaria. The wave of persecution unleashed by Stephen's speech and death pushes Christians out of Jerusalem, and wherever they go, the gospel accompanies them and the gospel is preached. I come back to my question: Was Stephen's testimony a failure? Of course not. Stephen doesn't know what God is going to do. He doesn't know the purposes of God but he rejoices in being able to testify of Jesus. God does not tell us how he will use our testimony. Sometimes we have the joy of seeing the fruit of our testimony, but not always. Are we ready to obey and trust God?

In every generation since Stephen's death, Christians like us, called to witness, called to speak about Jesus, to preach the gospel in situations of hostility, to people who will react badly, perhaps with violence, the example of Stephen is a real encouragement for us who often lack assurance and zeal. Look at Stephen! Imitate Stephen. Look at his trust in Christ. Look at his love for the enemies of Christ. Look at his courage. And look at what God did by means of his apparent "failure." And when you testify of Jesus, a calendar or a book offered, a conversation with a friend, neighbour, colleague, by a life that reflects the life of Christ, maybe you will never see the effect of your witness. You will never see the impact, the fruit. You will never know what God is accomplishing but here is what is true, always true: The word of God, announced, read, explained, lived, it does not return to him void, without having carried out his will and accomplished his purposes." May God help us to be his faithful witnesses and to have confidence in his sovereign will and eternal purposes.