**#73 Easter 5 SG/AS Joint 7 May 2023**

**Acts 7: 55-end**

**55**But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. **56**‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’ **57**But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. **58**Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. **59**While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ **60**Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died.

**John 14; 1-14**

**14**‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. **2**In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? **3**And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. **4**And you know the way to the place where I am going.’ **5**Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ **6**Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. **7**If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’

**8**Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ **9**Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? **10**Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. **11**Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. **12**Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. **13**I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. **14**If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

The bible is endlessly fascinating isn’t it, in its portrait of people and how they react to encounters and revelations?

What really strikes me about Stephen in this tiny part of Acts, in the midst of the horror of his death, is his serenity. Luke seems to have written two encounters here. Stephen is wholly encountering God, I think, he’s completely enveloped by the presence of God, whilst those around him are only concerned with encountering things on earth. Stephen’s only awareness here is of God’s revelation to him, and of encountering God’s presence with him.

His persecutors, ‘covering their ears’ as we heard, ‘cried with loud voices’ to drown out the presence of God, as they follow their indignant, rule driven, blind urges of rage.

The contrast is stark, isn’t it? Surely, if someone said to *us* that they can see heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, our first reaction would be to look for ourselves, rather than to block it out?

Wouldn’t we?

That’s the trouble with the prophetic – it’s difficult to recognise. I’ve been struck by Archdeacon Nikki’s two sermons that she has preached in the parish recently. Her examination of the Diocese’s vision of the future structure of our church is a message that many of us find difficult. But who’s covering their ears here – those troubled by that portrait of our future, or those embracing it?

And in my own views, on the same-sex relationship controversy that is ripping our church apart, is it me, who supports same-sex relationships, who is covering my ears, or is it some of my colleagues, good and prayerful people, for whom that development is a travesty of faith, that are covering theirs?

Stephen’s story is one of a brave and self-giving prophetic witness, and these words are the just the culmination of his witness; he’s been speaking like this for a couple of chapters by now. For the witnesses around him, of course, this is all blasphemy. How can it possibly be the case, they think, that this man is seeing a crucified manual labourer from Galilee standing at the right hand of God? For the people, this is unthinkable; it's grotesque, it’s a travesty. Although the local authorities are present, there is no formal judgment pronounced on Stephen – this mob rush to administer their own justice - no doubt they think it’s actually their duty - with an onlooker, a young man named Saul, quietly standing by, himself implicitly choosing to ignore God-in-Stephen, in this, his first appearance in the story of Christ.

You might call this episode Saul’s licensing in the work pf persecution that he is about to do. This example of mob rule, summary justice, an expression of a collective anger – whatever you might wish to call it – must be formational for Saul; it has the implicit approval of the authorities (at the very least they don’t stop it), and it will take a personal revelation, a personal encounter of his own with God, for him to repent. I wonder if he thought back on Stephen once he had his own encounter? I wonder what he thought, as Paul, of this day?

How do we recognise a revelation, an encounter with Jesus? In John the longing is there, as the disciples ask ‘Show us the father’, with Jesus, slightly testily, I think, answering ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the father.’ Alongside the reaction of the mob in Acts, it shows how difficult is it to recognise a personal encounter with God.

As Henry Vaughan wrote - beautiful lines by a great poet -

'There is in God - some say -

A deep but dazzling darkness, as men here say,

It is late and dusky, because they

See not all clear.’

In my experience, revelation through encounter is a lot more ‘ordinary’ than the experiences of Stephen, or the mob, or Saul, or Henry Vaughan. I don’t know why I’m surprised in that ordinariness; in Baptisms, I tell people that God uses the ordinary things of the world – oil, water and light in that case – and by his grace makes them special. No surprise, then, that revelation, that encounter, often uses recognisable things, and that that ordinariness might mask God’s presence - perhaps because we expect transcendence. But read Philippians 2; not all revelation is transcendent.

I think I have personally encountered God just once. A few years ago, God said to me, in a voice somewhere behind me and to the left, ‘what’s it like to be a priest?’ My reaction was, ‘what’s that got to do with me, why do I care’? But in subsequent events, that have led me to be here, standing before you good people, I can only think that God was there with me personally, guiding and kindly suggesting the way, and shining a light for me into that dazzling darkness.

So think of your own encounters with God; wonder at when he might have walked with you, personally. Be open to all sorts of ways of it happening for you. Above all, know that you are loved, loved so much, that the most natural thing in the world is that God wants to encounter you – encounter might work in both directions - because his love is unconditional, untroubled, uncomplicated, unending and forever given for you.

Let us pray, with St Symeon ‘the New Theologian’;

‘I know that the Immoveable comes down;

I know that the invisible appears to me;

I know that he who is far outside the whole creation

Takes me unto himself and hides me in his arms.

I know that I shall not die, for I am within the life,

I have the whole of Life springing up as a fountain within me.

He is in my heart, he is in heaven.’

We pray in Christ.

Amen