

Acts 7:55-end & John 14:1-14

We are still in the Easter season despite the disappearance of chocolate eggs & bunnies from the shops. We may have moved on from Easter but the Lectionary keep us in the season for another 2 weeks and we are hearing the stories of the beginnings of the early church right after Jesus' death. Jesus (according to the church calendar) has not yet ascended into heaven.

I am not sure about you - but this year I seemed to pay more attention to the people that witnessed the events of Good Friday, Easter Sunday and beyond – the likes of Mary Magdalene, John, Peter, Mary the Mother of Jesus, Thomas, Simon of Cyrene, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus. I found myself reading their stories in a new and fresh way and I have done that with the life and story of Stephen in the Acts reading for today.

Stephen usually doesn't get too much of a look in during the church year. His saints day is celebrated on December 26th – not exactly convenient being the day after Christmas. Most people do not like to have to think about death, persecution and martyrdom after just celebrating the birth of baby Jesus.

So who was Stephen? He is of Greek origin and his name means 'crowned'. Stephen was one of the seven deacons of Jerusalem named by the apostles in Acts 6 – this is where we first meet him. We are told that Stephen was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

From these seven men – Stephen gets singled out - we learn that he was full of grace and power and did great wonders and signs among the people.

This of course caused Stephen to run into trouble with some of the leaders of the synagogue as they accused him of blasphemy against Moses and God.

Stephen appears to have had huge scriptural knowledge as he argued that the Jews were being resistant to the Holy Spirit and did not want to

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recognize the Messiah. You will have to read Acts 6 & 7 to see what Stephen knew and how he argued!

I want to look at a couple of stand-out moments in Stephen's story – and they all begin with F.

Firstly – Stephen was full! We like to be full don't we – whether that is full of food or fun. We hear sometimes after a person has died that 'they lived a full life.'

But are we full of the things that really matter? We can be full of lots of things – but sometimes the things that fill don't make us full. So – what are you full of?

Stephen was full of faith, grace, power and the Holy Spirit. These are the things that matter. I am not sure how you feel about 'being full of the Holy Spirit' and what images that creates in your minds.

Maybe you are uncomfortable with that language, or it creates images of people rolling around on the floor laughing and carrying on seemingly out of control? Now Stephen did do wonders and signs among the people and would have attributed them to the workings of the Holy Spirit.

Lots of Christians are okay with Father and Son – but when it comes to the Holy Spirit – they get a bit nervous. If this is you – then maybe worth some time and thought in these weeks leading up to Pentecost.

In the Acts readings – starting in verse 55 – we see Stephen standing in front of the Sanhedrin and filled with the Holy Spirit. He is not rolling around on the floor but seems to be in his right mind – for a man facing his own very imminent and very painful death.

It was the Holy Spirit who filled Stephen with the power, faith and grace so that he could speak the way that he did in the face of death. It was the Spirit who lifted Stephen's gaze to the heavens so he could see the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

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This is what the Spirit does for us – lifts our heads so we can see the glory of God. Even in the face of death.

My first F is full – Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit.

The second F is forgiveness.

The death of Stephen has some similarities to the death of Jesus – Stephen commits his spirit to God and ‘cries out in a loud voice’. Stephen also prays a prayer of forgiveness for the people stoning him.

Stephen asks in the very last moment of his life for the forgiveness of the people who are murdering him. That level of forgiveness is only possible with the help of the Holy Spirit.

It is also a good reminder of the forgiveness that we need to extend to those who have hurt us. If Stephen can pray for the forgiveness of those people with the rocks in their hands - then we too have to forgive those people who hurt us.

It is not for their benefit that we forgive them – it is for ours. One of the best descriptions of unforgiveness that I have heard is that ‘it is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies’. This is of course a topic for a whole other sermon as there is more to say.

The Holy Spirit was sent to help us in our times of need – in those desperate prayers or situations we find ourselves in sometimes. The Holy Spirit can also give us the power we need to forgive – but we need to ask for it.

So – from Stephen we are reminded of the need for the fullness of the Holy Spirit to live and die well and for the need to forgive others.

There is also a third F – that is the Father.

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Stephen - full of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness is looking at the Father and Son. This takes us to the John reading for today and Jesus' words of comfort and reassurance: 'In my Father' 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?'

I preached these words at a funeral a few days ago for a man who had lived in care homes from the age of 10. He had lived in many houses in his life but was now home in the Father's house.

This house is where Stephen is going when he says 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'. The Father's House. Jesus is going to take him there – Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him.

Jesus also says 'if you know me, you will know my Father also.'

The biggest difference in the deaths of Stephen and Jesus is that Stephen calls on the name of Jesus to receive his spirit; Jesus calls on the Father to commend his Spirit. For Stephen it is the exalted Jesus whom he expects to receive his Spirit. It is Jesus who will take Stephen to the Father's House.

Because Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in Jesus. The Holy Spirit was sent to us as a gift – to fill us with faith, grace and power to help us forgive those who hurt and offend us and to ultimately and eternally connect us to the Father and the Son.

So Stephen – full of the Spirit and able to forgive those who are stoning him as they are doing it – goes to the Father's House where Jesus has received his spirit and made a place for him. This is all possible for you too.

As we come closer to the end of the Easter season and into Ascension and Pentecost – I would encourage you to look again at the work of the Holy Spirit and what it might mean to be full of it. Maybe check to see what you are full of! Is there anyone who needs to be forgiven? How is

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your relationship with the Father? Read the full account of Stephen in Acts 6 & 7. Ask the Spirit to fill you and see what happens.

Amen.