

Pastor Writes

Greetings to you all. Today we give thanks to God for Stephen the first martyr of the Christian faith. The word martyr comes from a Greek word *marturia* meaning 'to testify'. He boldly testified to the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore had to pay the price with his own life. Stephen was one of the seven chosen by the apostles to serve the poor. The problem at that time was that the Greeks complained to the Hebrews about the way in which their widows were treated when they were being assisted by the Christian community. Stephen and six other Greeks were chosen to handle the serving of tables so the apostles would be free to give themselves over to the service of the Word. Stephen was also well versed in the Scriptures and therefore was able to explain what the Gospel was all about.

In Acts Chap 6 Luke records for us that Stephen was a man full of God's grace and power and he performed great wonders and signs amongst the people. He was testifying boldly to the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen – Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia where he met stiff opposition. However they could not stand up against the wisdom of the Spirit that God gave him as he spoke. So they secretly persuaded some men to say that Stephen spoke blasphemous words against Moses and against God. They seized and brought him before the Sanhedrin and produced false witnesses who testified that he never stopped speaking against the temple and the law. They claimed that Stephen had declared that Jesus of Nazareth would destroy the temple and change the traditions of Moses. The high priest asked Stephen whether these changes were true or not to which he gave a recapitulation of God's gracious acts in the lives of the people of Israel and confronted the leaders with their stubbornness.

Stephen began to narrate the history of Israel from the call of Abraham in Mesopotamia and went on to talk about the 400 years of slavery in Egypt, the growth of Abraham's family into a nation, the exodus from Egypt through Moses, the worship of the golden calf, the covenant, the building of the temple by Solomon all the way to the coming of Christ. He clinches his argument by saying that they had always resisted the Holy Spirit, persecuted the prophets, and finally murdered the Christ, who came into their midst. He accused them of deliberate disobedience in spite of having the law. The members of the Sanhedrin were furious when they heard them and gnashed their teeth at him.

Stephen who was full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He said, 'Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God.' When they heard this they covered their ears, yelled at the top of their voices, rushed at him dragging him out of the city and stoned him. While they were stoning him Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' After saying this he died.

Stephen is the first martyr who followed Jesus in the way of the cross. Just as Jesus cried out from the cross, 'Father forgive them for they do not know what they do,' so also Stephen cried out, 'Lord do not hold this sin against them.' Both Jesus and Stephen have set us examples of forgiveness in the light of persecution and martyrdom. Christ has called us to be his followers. As his followers we will be persecuted and we may even face martyrdom. However the Spirit of God will speak through us and give us the boldness to speak the truth to those who persecute us. On our part, we are called to be faithful to the end. Jesus says, 'Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.' May we be faithful to the end.

Shalom

Paul Swarup