

**10.00 Mattins – 31st January 2010
Epiphany 4 – Candlemas – Year C**

1 Chronicles 29: 6-19
Acts 7: 44-50

Occasionally, the lectionary, that is the list of what the readings are for each church service, both on Sundays, and for the other days of the week, plays tricks on us. For example, this morning's second reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, is one such occasion. Knowing that much of Acts is the story of the early Christian Church, and the parts that Peter and Paul had in it's emergence as a Church in it's own right, separate that is from the Jewish religion, can you guess who is talking in the portion that we heard read this morning ? In fact the whole of chapter 7 is a long story presented to the High Priest by a young man who was to become the first Christian Martyr, Stephen.

Earlier in Acts we had been told that Stephen was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He had been chosen, along with six others, by the apostles to be a leader amongst the people. They were to be administrators of the new church, so that the apostles could dedicate their time to prayer and preaching. The Jewish authorities had then seized Stephen, because he was doing great wonders and miraculous signs. The authorities, who could not stand up against the power and wisdom of God that was found in him, convinced others to lie, and to claim that Stephen had committed blasphemy against Moses and God. When the high priest asked Stephen if the charges were true, he answered with a story.

In his reply Stephen was, of course, following the style of Jesus. Stories, that is oral stories, have been shared in every culture as a means of education, cultural preservation, and in order to instill moral values since long before the inventions of both writing and of books. Crucial elements of stories and storytelling include plot, characters, and a narrative point of view. As the priest and theologian Matthew Fox has put it -

Jesus chose the way and the lifestyle of the storyteller. The parable-maker who fashioned a new creation out of the holy materials of the only creation that we all share in common – the birds, the lilies of the field, the fishes caught, the fig tree in bloom, the sheep versus the goats, the leaven in the bread, the mustard seeds of the world, and the rains that fall on the just and unjust alike.

Stephen told his accusers the story of God and His relationship with His people from the days of Abraham, Joseph and Moses. He reminded them how God's hand had led them out of difficulties into the Promised Land, according to His good and perfect will. He showed them how God had chosen these men to be His servants and how the people had always rebelled against their leadership. He reminded them how their forefathers had rejected God, by turning their backs on Him and refusing to obey His Word. Even David, who was a beloved son and the king of Israel, could not build the temple due to his disobedience. It was left for Solomon to build the temple, even though the God can't be shut away in buildings of stone.

Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands. As the prophet Isaiah says, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?'

But Stephen then went on to say:

"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become His betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it."

No wonder his accusers were not happy! When Stephen faced his accusers, he knew that it was not enough to just tell them about Jesus, but to show them, as Jesus had shown his disciples, how the crucifixion and resurrection fit into the whole story of God. His persecutors had to see how this had been the pattern of their own response to God from the beginning, so that they could see the error of their ways and turn back to God. But Stephen's story telling did not soften their hearts, however, and they became angrier than ever.

They rushed him, took him outside the city and stoned him to death. And so Stephen became the first martyr for Jesus Christ. He was killed for telling the story of God's people to those who did not want to hear. When Stephen finished his storytelling, he looked up to heaven and saw heaven open, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He tried to show his accusers this wonderful sight by saying, **"Look!"** but they refused to listen. They put their hands over their ears and yelled at the top of their voices. They didn't want to hear what Stephen had to say to them.

And the same might well be true when we share our own witness of the Glory of God. As the history of God's people clearly shows, some people – even those among the chosen race – will be unwilling to hear.

We all have a story to tell. It might be about our search for Christ, or our lives after He found us. It might be a short story, it might be a simple story. It might be a sad story, or it might be an heroic story. But we all can tell a story.

No doubt there are some amongst us today who are still telling stories about the gas problems and the snow of a month ago. Some will take every hardship as an excuse to complain and claim to be victims of circumstances. But others will look for God's grace among the rubble of disasters, and look forward to the glory He will reveal on the other side. Stephen was about to die, but rather than sink into despair he looked up at heaven and saw God's glory in the midst of trouble.

May we all tell our stories with the same hope and peace as Stephen. And may we all look forward to the better days that do lie ahead, no matter how bad today may seem. Amen.