**WHEN THE SAINTS …**

26TH of DECEMBER STEPHEN

STEPHEN, the first Christian martyr, occupies chapters 6 and 7 of Acts. At the beginning of ch6 he and six other Greek-speaking Jews are appointed and prayed over by the apostles to distribute alms to their constituency of the early church so that the apostles can get on with their calling in mission, which is not to say either that the deacons never preached, nor that the apostles had nothing to do with alms administration, as the rather dark story of Ananias and Saphira illustrates.

There are parallels here with the trial and execution of Jesus which you might expect of a first martyrdom: a farcical trial; false witnesses; visions; ‘Forgive them…’ and the destruction by Jesus of the temple seems to be the issue. Instead of Peter’s denial we have Saul. But there are significant differences, and they originate from the reference in ch6 to the ‘free synagogue[s].’

It seems later in ch6 that Stephen, himself a Hellenistic – Greek-speaking – Jew, was being accuse in the first place by his own community, who had taken grave offence at his down-grading of the temple’s significance in both Christian and Jewish worship. The ‘Free men’ were the descendants of slaves taken by Pompey in 164bc and carried off to other Roman provinces. Over time these slaves were freed, as was often the case in Roman society, and therefore had, no doubt, cherished a special and life-long wish to return to Jerusalem, and live and die as near to the temple as possible. It would offend these people’s particular sensibilities to be told that the temple mattered less than they had always understood.

The quarrel had already got out of hand: we would think in a situation like this of maintaining church unity, but all of the parties here still saw themselves as Jews, though of differing traditions, so the fact that the accusation is brought to the Sanhedrin, or, at least, to some sort of constituted authority, demonstrates that feelings are running very high, and it would be natural for the authorities to defend the primacy and authentic position of the temple in Jewish worship and theology, and it seems likely that the words Luke puts into Stephen’s mouth are from a source other than those traditionally attributed to him, Mark Matthew, perhaps, and what is known as Q. The theology is not Luke’s, so it seems likely that he took trouble over finding and reproducing it.

The Bible is full of various recitals of Jewish history and tradition, which serve as affirmations of identity to the community, but in different ways. The history in Ps105-6 represent worship; others represent an exhortation to the people to recall their obligation to God for his goodness: Peter’s Pentecost speech places Jesus as messiah, and offers God’s grace and forgiveness to a crowd of pilgrims who may not have been directly responsible for Jesus’ death. In another part of Acts Paul deliberately exacerbates the rivalry between Pharisees and Sadducees in order to create division among his angry accusers. Each recital stresses those aspects of the common tradition that support the speaker’s argument.

Confronted by his accusers, Stephen appears to be more concerned with having a platform and with the rightness of his case than with any apparent wish to preserve his own skin. He is accused by a caucus of those we might think of as ultra-right among adherents to temple worship, and he could probably have steered a course that could have mollified the authorities, but he went for the jugular, in effect claiming that the temple was a mistake from the beginning; that God had been with his people in times and places before it was built; that, God had told David that no space could confine him – that there was nowhere that he ‘lived,’ and his peroration implied that those who over-valued the temple were idolaters, and there was no mitigating hint of grace or forgiveness. In layman’s terms it rivalled the 1983 Labour manifesto as the ‘Longest suicide note in history.’

Although false witnesses are mentioned, the parallel with Jesus’ trial is that Stephen is heard to condemn himself, and it is not clear how the execution is carried out. An account of a straightforward lapidation in 1920’s Morocco stresses that the victim was buried under a heap of stones before he was able to draw a weapon from under his cloak, in his determination to pursue a feud in a market place, where a truce was strictly enforced. There is an account in John ch8 in which Jesus’ hearers were already picking up stones, presumably because they felt goaded beyond any need for formal justice. The institution of stoning a blasphemer of God’s name is set out in the Torah, and involves taking the convict to the city gate, throwing him over a cliff and dropping rocks and stones on him if he is still alive. Those who bear testimony against him are enjoined to throw the first stones. Here, in Jerusalem, Stephen would be dragged to the gate opening in the direction of the Kidron valley, so that his vision and words of forgiveness would, presumably, have been uttered along the way.

The problem here, of course, is that everybody who reads the passion stories recalls that Jews were not permitted to perform executions without authority from Rome, so it has been suggested that Stephen’s martyrdom may have happened in the interval between Pilate’s recall and the appointment of Herod Agrippa, otherwise there is the possibility of some confusion, because A E Harvey maintains that the execution could not have taken place in this formal manner because it was not re-introduced until a century later. Perhaps we need to think of mob rule taking over, stirred up by the party who had been most offended.

From a position of growth – even of the obedience of some priests – Stephen’s martyrdom brings on a general persecution that disperses the faithful around the country and beyond, and, after the episode of Philip, another of the deacons, evangelising in Samaria, we move to the conversion of the gentiles. Once more, it has taken the death of one innocent man to disperse the seed.