

Sermon 18 May 2014
1 Peter 2:2-10 Acts 7:55-60 'Courageous Faith'

Prayer: Loving God, remind us of your presence. When we want to close our hearts and minds from your call to live in your different ways – soften us, open us. Remove our fears, and enliven us with your spirit. Open us, we pray to have the courage to follow your way. Amen.

The email form of information sharing can be extensive and time consuming (like all forms of the internet) – but sometimes it is 'really interesting' *stuff*. As I already knew our Sunday theme was courageous Faith, I found this week I was really pulled into a discussion based on an article called 'Listening to Young Atheists: Lessons for a Stronger Christianity'. (inShare)

The article was published by a Christian Foundation who interviewed University aged nonbelievers about how and why they left religion. The researchers found some interesting things out and their 7 summary headlines from the students are: 1. they had attended church. 2. The mission and message of their churches was vague. 3. They felt their churches offered superficial answers to life's difficult questions. 4. They expressed their respect for those ministers who took the Bible seriously. 5. Ages 14-17 were decisive. 6. The decision to embrace unbelief was often an emotional one. 7. The internet (you-tube) favoured heavily into their conversion to atheism.

It seemed to me that this research showed a huge challenge to the church to have a courageous faith and share what we believe by our daily living. To tell the truth of our story – and mean it so much we **accept being** cast out, yelled at, have people throw stones at us, stumble over us, **To tell the truth** of our story including that we don't have all the answers, we are not perfect, we know we are on a life journey to maturity, and that we need our faith community. We need our faith community around us to hold us, feed us, love us and be real. And while we all know just *how hard* that is; **how often** do we acknowledge how much courage we need to do it? Cv

Today we have two texts which when combined have incredible strength and teaching for us. There is the dramatic picture of Stephen, the first of what was to be a long, long list of Christian martyrs. And there is the wonderful piece from 1 Peter, crammed full of biblical quotes to teach, encourage, strengthen and fill us with courage that each day we choose to make our faith real. cV

Stephen was a Greek speaking convert to Jesus 'way'. He started his life with the Jesus community waiting on tables, but when he was commissioned with the laying on of hands, his life turned around and he found himself telling Jesus story. The truth of what Jesus was and what God was doing in Jesus. *Very much like* Peter's speeches Stephen was telling the story of Jesus being a **continuation** of God's presence on earth, **with** His chosen people, **for** the whole of the world.

Unlike Peter (well at this point in the early Church story) – unlike Peter *whom we heard of* last week when thousands of people stepped forward for baptism because of his preaching, Stephen's listening crowd refused to hear the truth, **see the continuity** of God's revelation and in case they might be tempted to hear the truth, they covered their ears and yelled really loud – as they reacted to Stephens's message.

This is an emotional response to a rational line of thinking! Remember the new young atheists? They all thought they chose no-faith on rational lines, but the research found most of them had an emotional quotient that factored into their decision making. Faith has an emotional quotient whether we like it or not. It includes such things as a need for courage for us to really live our faith, for us to admit we don't have all the answers, and we do muck it up at times, for us to tell Jesus story to a world hungry for Good News, for love, for forgiveness, mercy and life, even when it covers its ears and yells loudly!

It takes courage to keep doing what is good, and truthful and what is simply *right*, when the world has its ears covered, and is yelling really loud about another 'way'. It takes courage to be different, which is a consequence of choosing Jesus way. Jesus way is simply different to the "crowd", it is not necessarily more spiritual, emotional, rational, logical. It is different and the choice is yours to follow Him *or not*, to keep following, being nourished & growing in maturity of faith/ life – *or not*.

Whether you follow Jesus way or not, it takes determination to keep to a different 'way' of life to the world, which all too often demands the proving of success and financial wealth, demands being on the 'must invite' friendship list, demands the displaying of intellectual or artistic brilliance, winning at any cost...in order to have value, belong, have a place, in order to be somebody. cV

Now I don't think for a moment that following Jesus means we must deny, ignore or waste our wealth, artistic brilliance, friendship gifts, our brains etc – But following Jesus way certainly teaches us how to **live with all this and more** in a way that is Good news for all people. Even more important following Jesus way means we are somebodies – because we are loved, and were loved first before we realised we were brilliant, had wealth, could play any instrument we chose, were everyone's best friend.... Our value comes from being loved first, *before anything else*. cV

1 Peter has these most wonderful words: “. **9** But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. **10** Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

God has chosen you, given you a place at his family table, once you were no-body, now you are chosen, royal, holy, belonging to God – called into his wonderful light – so tell this story, and declare His praise, and share the good news of Jesus, you are wanted and belong; you have a place you can call home where there is food to nourish you, and people to love you, because we all follow Jesus way. Cv But it's not just that simple is it?

Stephen was rejected, yelled at, dragged out of the town and they threw stones at him until scripture says 'he fell asleep'. A Uni student in the Young Atheist research chose not to believe in a God that didn't answer her prayer to reunite her family after social services had to intervene because of abuse... We know what it is when our prayers seem to fall on deaf ears! When talk turns to stone throwing and words that are yelled and rejection hits and ... and so we are different because in Jesus way these things do not make us victims but conquerors. In Jesus way what is rejected by the world is **precious to God** and used in the foundations of his building work.

We, like Jesus are living stones to build good things, strong things, healthy ways of living for ourselves, our loved ones, God's loved ones and so like Jesus we will never be put to shame. We may well be hurt, have stones thrown at us – literally or figuratively; have years go past before we understand why it was a 'no' to a prayer; have layers shaved off our personalities; be given spiritual gifts we'd rather not have the responsibility for.... That's life!

And for us of Jesus way we are loved and **nothing** will ever separate us from that source, we are wanted and **nothing** will ever prevent that claim on our lives; we have a place to come for food to grow our spirit- or as 1 Peter puts it – 'to grow our salvation' a place where we know the taste of the Lord is good. **We have a way of turning** the things of the world that look good, sound good, even taste good – in the "immediate" but kill the soul, dull the spirit, making us victims around for good.

Our way turns all this around just like it did for Stephen who *fell asleep* while another young man watched, listened, wondered and opened himself to new possibilities, new truths, the living God in Jesus. He became I think, **the** most important foundation on which the N T was built, Saul-Paul. When **each** one of us lives our faith courageously – Gods house through Jesus is built, added to, and strengthened, it's that simple and good. When **each of us** lives with courageous faith. Amen.