

Sermon: 2020/05/10 (Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A) - Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5,15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; &, John 14:1-14_BTR

The Psalmist - very likely King David himself,
Jesus' own illustrious, royal forebear -
King David the great *warrior* who, as a mere, young shepherd-boy, fought "lions" and "bears" with a leather sling [1 Sam. 17:34,37;
who killed giant Philistines [17:48-51];
who faced down *murderous, mad* king Saul [18:10-11]
- *that "David"* - writes to us today (from the Old Testament), *fretfully*, full of self-doubt and self-pity in verse three,
pleading with God;
crying to God to - and I quote -
'Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe...' [Ps. 31:3]

What had him so afraid?

No idea!

There isn't a single contextualising detail in the Psalm in question.

We can only speculate.

After all, this was David who, on countless occasions, stood as a captain of infantrymen in the front rank of Hebrew armies, as they were charged upon by the scythed chariots of Canaanites, Amalekites, Edomites and Moabites: [2 Sam. 8:11b-12].

How many times had he, unflinchingly, looked death "squarely" in the face, rushing toward him?

Not abstractly, but in the most *literal* sense:

on many bloody battlefields as arrows flew overhead and enemies attempted to pierce him with a sword or bash in his skull with an axe?

(Early Iron Age warfare was a shocking, *brutal* "business.")

And yet look again at the text: at how meek and nervous David is.

And then contrast how he seems there with Stephen the Deacon's example in the Acts reading.

Whilst David urged God with his prayers to '*be*' a 'strong rock', it was "strong rocks" that were thrown at Stephen by the Sanhedrin Council and their thugs; it was "strong rocks" that *pulped* his body till he died.

It was a grisly, *awful* way to be executed.

Your only hope was that one of your killers would have "a good arm," and, *mercifully*, deliberately, aim for your head to knock you unconscious so that you wouldn't have to endure the protracted agony of *many* blows breaking your bones bit by excruciating bit.

However, we find him using his last minute of life asking God *not* to intervene and *prevent* that outcome, *but* to *forgive* the priests and the people for their lethal, *hateful* intolerance of his Christianity.

And notice that he makes this request *in the midst* of the stoning.

(After it was already underway.)

That is to say, *no one* did, in fact, in that mob, have either the mercy or the "good" throwing skill I just mentioned.

No, he died *slowly*.

"Slow" enough to pray and seek the Lord's pardon for his persecutors.

Could *you* do that?

Could *I*!?

His example *shames* me.

I find myself bearing little grudges for all kinds of perceived sleights and unkind words.

Mercifully, my anger burns hot only for a short while.

That is to say, yes I feel reddening adrenaline *rush* to my face and my fists, but only for a moment.

And I give thanks to God for His Holy Spirit that this is the case; that I'm quick to cool down.

Though I do not forget!

The memory of the encounter - whatever it was - sits on my memory like a lead weight.

I re-play it.

I imagine what clever come-back I might have retorted.

And all this quite dispassionately.

And again - let me say it: praise God that He is at work in my life, that I've made at least *this* progress;

that I have *some* grace to extend others, and am not completely consumed by resentment.

How many of you struggle in a similar way, I wonder?

How many of you look at Stephen and what he was able to do in a moment of terror and injustice, and think to yourself: "*Gosh*, that's *nothing* like I would do."

(I'd have kicked and screamed and wept and cursed them with foul language.)

Which is certainly why we need to see his example held up at this time of pandemic and paranoia.

How can we respond to deadly, *viral* adversity (in particular) with the same courage?

With the same... *dignity*? (As Stephen.)

- *That's* something in short supply right now: "*dignity*."

Indeed, it seems *fearfulness*; anxiety is the fashionable, respectable, "thinking-person's" response.

Pundits (on the news) seem to be trying to outdo each other with their pessimism; with their "doom and gloom."

Sceptics - those few who question the dire predictions of millions dead; those who question whether we *all* should be hiding in our homes are denounced.

So, I pose you this question:

"If he was alive now, what would Stephen be doing despite 'the daily drumbeat of depression and terror' [n.1]?"

Would he be quaking and cowering?

Tenaciously paying *any* price for just another second; for just one more breath - to do what with, exactly?

Proclaim the Gospel?

To prove God's love for the poor?

Or, more likely, to fritter away on "social media"?

Or to complain about some offence taken?

To waste on some further, selfish purpose.

No, I think Stephen would tell us that 'COVID-19 is God's megaphone to a slumbering world.' [n.2].

"Slumbering" in denial.

"Slumbering in denial" about humanity's invincibility.

"Slumbering in denial" about humanity's ingenuity.

Two things that are both *grossly* overestimated.

Thus, I think he would preach that COVID-19 is a "wake-up call" to see life as it has been *all* along:

That is - fragile, finite, *precious(!)*, and *always* already having been under a death sentence -

by contagion, yes, but also by car-accident, by war, by cancer, by natural-disaster, by old-age and general decay.

Furthermore, the "key" was always already to focus on something else more *permanent* and of greater importance than one's own (physical) well-being - *Jesus!*

Jesus living *eternally* at the Father's side [Acts 7:56], "preparing a place for us." [Jn. 14:2]

This is how Stephen was "able" to keep his heart from "being troubled" [see Jn. 14:1] when those bigots and sceptics came to *violently* silence him for sharing Christ crucified.

And though we might *not* see Jesus quite as clearly as Stephen did, standing "plain as day" among parted clouds, He *is* there:

we know He's there because of *hard* facts like the empty tomb.

Historical facts as "hard" as any "strong rock."

Footnotes:

1. See: https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2020/04/18/bill_maher_the_media_needs_to_stop_with_the_panic_porn_fear_mongering.html
2. Anderson, Matthew Lee (20th of March, 2020), 'On Living in a Pandemic Age', *Christianity Today*, available at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/on-living-in-pandemic-age.html>, (accessed May 6, 2020).