

## **Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse – November 22nd 2009 Acts 6:8 – 7:60 Stephen's Martyrdom**

Ian used to be a history teacher so he has noticed that now history is very popular in the press and media, because everything that we once thought was a fact has been challenged. Instead of saying that the Tudor monarchs were enlightened, as we were taught thirty years ago, the revisionists now say that Richard III was a kindly prince and the Tudors were tyrannical.

When Stephen stands up in this passage in Acts he embarks on a radical revision of his own history. This is why the Jews are scandalised because it is so different to the one they had known. Jewish children in those days would have been taught about God's care for His people in the Exodus, the conquest of Canaan, on to the glory of the reign of King David, and the glories of Solomon's temple. Stephen tells the same story but it is not a particularly glorious story, but rather one of disobedience and rebellion.

And it is not just about how much treachery there is in their history, and rebelliousness, but about their small-mindedness. They have reduced the mountains of God's grace and mercy into the molehills of organised religion. God is transcendent and works on a big canvas, mostly with people outside the Promised Land. When he does choose to make his presence known in a dwelling, it is significant to see that it is a tabernacle, something not fixed or static, because God is on the move. Stephen accuses his listeners of taking the moving, dynamic temple and tying God up in bricks and mortar. If the Tabernacle had continued God would have been pleased, but Solomon went ahead and built a temple. The glory of God comes upon the Temple, but Solomon realise that something happened when the temple was built and that it has turned something dynamic in to something static and dead. He takes one look at the finished Temple and exclaims on his knees 'but will God dwell on the earth?'

Stephen takes this prophecy further – now they have a temple, but they have reduced it to idolatry. He strikes at the heart of their power, and their worship, just as Jesus did when he says that 'this house has become a den of thieves'. NO wonder he is stoned to death! They are so absorbed with the structure that they can't see the living presence of God.

Is that not what we do when we reduce the Gospel of the incarnation, the virgin birth, Jesus' ministry, His crucifixion, resurrection, ascension to itsy-bitsy religion! We know a work of the Spirit and then we want to enshrine that event in a memorial. Those who know the power of the Spirit in revival are often the most resistant to change. God cannot be reduced to a certain time or place, or even a building. Unless we are careful a movement becomes a monument. We reduce our expression of Christianity to 'do not drink, smoke etc...', when we should be majoring in justice, mercy and compassion. We trivialise God by our understanding of him - as Karl Barth would say – the angels are laughing at our books.

God is bigger than all of this, bigger than our experience, our expression and our understanding. As Christians we renounce all this and God accommodates us into his ways, and not the other way round.

All the people are yelling around him, because Stephen can see God and Jesus at his right hand, but ironically it is the Sanhedrin who are the blasphemers. Stephen has given a true rendering of Israel's story.

Annie Dillard wrote: 'Why do people in church appear to be cheerful, brainless tourists on a package tour of the Absolute? Do they not realise the power they invoke? We should be wearing crash helmets! Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. For the sleeping God may wake some day and take offence, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return.'