

St Stephen St Stephen's 10.30 Matt 23: 31
26.12.21

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that murders the prophets.”

I have always wondered why it is that out and out atheists get so annoyed when confronted with the claims of the Church? If, as they believe – and it is only a matter of faith, after all, that they can say there is no God – why it is that they waste so much emotional energy and time disparaging what they don't believe exists? Yet they can't leave it alone.

There seems to be something deep within us that ideas, and especially in matters of faith with which we don't agree, touches something which sets off a hostile reaction. All people of faith – atheistic or religious – react in the same way.

The history of Israel abounds with examples of the prophets being rejected and put to death because their word of truth was too hard for people to accept. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that murders the prophets.”

The account of Stephen's trial before the Sanhedrin is a wonderful summary of Israel's history, leading up to its culmination in the person of Jesus. When Stephen said to them: “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are for ever 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 who received the Law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” ‘When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.’ (Acts 7: 51-54)

The Church has been equally adept at silencing those who threaten orthodoxy, either by putting them to death, or effectively silencing them. It killed Wycliffe for daring to publish the Bible in English. In our day, it has sought to silence the late Hans Kung for daring to question Papal infallibility among other things. The reason is that prophets, those who question the status quo, are difficult people, beyond the control of those in authority and threaten the stability that the authorities strive so hard to maintain.

Jerusalem was the religious city par excellence. This was known around the Mediterranean world and admired for its single mindedness in worshipping the One God, creator and sustainer of all creation. The Jewish leaders, whose duty it was to safeguard the faith delivered to their forefathers, saw in Stephen's words a direct challenge to all they held most dear. That challenge was to question their assumptions about the tradition, and reinterpreting them in the light of Jesus. That it was in Jesus that all the ancient promises of God found their fulfilment. So angry were they, that in order to silence this heresy, they stoned Stephen to death. It was ever thus. As someone said: “Prophets were twice stoned – first in anger, then, after their death, with a handsome slab in the churchyard.”

Being a prophet is not easy. As Achbp Donald Coggan said: “The true prophet will probably have to endure loneliness and censure even in the house of those who might be

expected to be his friends It is hard enough to stand out against the world How much more difficult to stand out against the Church?"

Before we condemn the Jewish religious leaders out of hand, we need to remember that the Church needs organising, and prophets are not good at that. If a prophet was asked to organise anything, the end would likely be chaos. On the other hand, if orthodoxy is not questioned and challenged, religion becomes empty and sterile. No wonder Jesus wept over the city, to which God had sent so many prophets, all of whom had been ignored, even God's own Son.

The Church needs order, but it also desperately needs its prophets, those who challenge our complacency and assumptions and forcing us to re-assess our priorities. There is always the tendency to settle down to a comforting faith, which doesn't challenge and has little effect. In the end it becomes totally irrelevant. It is the prophet who wakes us up and sets us again on the exciting journey of faith. Remember, that it was the death of Stephen which led directly to Saul being converted and becoming the apostle Paul, and the Church is still enlivened by Paul's teaching.

Michael Harper wrote: "Christianity is prophetic through and through. When the prophets are silent and the Word of God is in short supply, the Church withers and dies. If there are prophets today, their hands are tied and their mouths gagged by the clumsy democratic processes of Church institutions. It is, alas, as true today as it was in Jesus' day that prophesy is seldom heard within the establishment. For prophesy comes by the Spirit of God, not by consensus or debate."

Those of us who are called to lead the Church, who set out God's word week by week, are to be God's forthtellers, not foretellers. For it is by insight rather than foresight or hindsight that the truth of God is found and will be open to those who live close to God day by day and see the gap between God's call and the people's response.

Old Hans was sitting, just about to start his simple lunch of bread and cheese, when the Carl, the landowner came by on his horse. Hans had bowed his head in prayer, and when he looked up and saw his employer, & apologised. The owner, seeing the coarse bread Hans had, sneered: "I don't think I'd feel like giving thanks if that was all I had to eat." Hans replied that it was quite sufficient. He added: "It's remarkable that you should come by today, for I had adream this morning, it was a peaceful scene, yet I heard a voice saying that the richest man in the valley will die tonight." "That sounds nonsense," replied the owner and rode off. But as so often happens, he couldn't get this out of his mind. So he called the doctor and explained why he'd asked him. The doctor gave the owner a thorough health-check and told him that he was strong and healthy and good for many years yet. At that moment, there was a knock on the door and the doctor was summoned: "It's old Hans, he's died in his sleep."