

May 26, 2019 A Key Event 7:54-8:1

Corrie ten Boom, a young Dutch woman during World War II, spent time in the death camp (Ravensbruck) with the Jews. Her father and her sister died there. The Ten Boom family was not unique. But their faith in Jesus was the reason they hid Jews in the attic of their home in Holland. And when they were caught they were treated as the Jews they had hidden were treated. Corrie always testified that her father had said the state of Germany would lose the war and the reason would be that in touching the Jews they had touched that people which was the apple of God's eye, His chosen people, the people to whom He first sent the Messiah, Jesus.

I mention that reality this morning as we read and examine the story of the death of Stephen, who was the first Christian martyr. In its healthiest moments, the Church has remembered those details about the Jewish people. They are the people whom God chose for His own. They are the people in the midst of whom the Messiah's coming, HIS birth, HIS ministry, HIS death and resurrection were prophesied. It was in their midst and their Scriptures, that it was prophesied HE would also save those who were far from God, the Gentiles. A message about us and Jesus. We need to remember the importance of the Jewish people and the fact that everything we claim the Old Testament says about the Messiah, the Jewish people recognized long before we or our ancestors did. The

bond between disciples of Jesus, the Jewish people, and Israel are very real.

We also need to recognize where the persecution of the followers of Jesus first arose. It was the Jews, and particularly those who were in Jerusalem, who led the way in terms of persecuting the disciples of Jesus. They taught the Romans, the puzzled Romans, that followers of Jesus were no longer Jews, but the participants in a “new” religion. The Romans perfected a policy of persecution for 3 centuries....but it started where it ought not to have started....in Jerusalem. Stephen was the first to die for believing Jesus to be the Messiah, the Savior, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

The death of Stephen is a key event in understanding the Acts of the Apostles as a Book of the Bible, and as the key document in understanding what happened next, following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The death of Stephen at the hand of the Sanhedrin, the Rabbinical Council of Jerusalem was the moment in which this new faith, the church of Jesus Christ was made recognizable as a separate entity from the Jewish religion. It was a key event in the history of the world.

Remember that the followers of Jesus, the emerging church was at that time primarily made up of people whose roots were in the Jewish faith. Stephen’s death marks the moment at which the umbilical cord has been cut. The Church of Jesus Christ is not part of the Jewish religion. This key event, and this key death mark a very special moment. The fact is that

from that moment forward, the relationship between Christians and Jews becomes at best awkward. But it is not just that.

The death of Stephen marks another reality. Followers of Jesus suddenly realize they are in genuine danger if they remain in Jerusalem. For many it is understood that that danger is real in the whole of Judea. The believers begin to flee to Gentile cities in the Greco-Roman world. The mission to the Gentiles begins as a result of that inability to stay in what had always been home, Judea. For many who believe in Jesus, it is a simple choice about survival. And yet we know that for years Peter remained in Jerusalem as a leader of the church. Ironically, Rome would hunt for him because the Roman Empire did have a policy about “local religion”. They did not allow it. For 40 years they would give the Jews continued unique status, but ultimately the Romans would decide that was a mistake. What began with the death of Stephen at the hand of the Jews would end at Masada, when the Romans sought to crush Jewish rebellion, which they blamed on the Temple community in Jerusalem. That is the history.

Something more remains for us to examine, and understand and remember. As believers in Jesus we talk about giving our lives to God. The whole of the Bible teaches that can be a painful reality. Remember Samson, dying at the hands of the Philistines? Or Daniel in the lion’s Den? Or Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego in the blazing furnace? They were each

one put in that “life on the line” situation with the issue being their faith in the Lord God Almighty. And the key question is whom will you serve? Will you compromise? Will you deny the Lord who redeems to save your own life?

We have grown up in our faith in Jesus with the awareness gleaned from the stories of the both Judas and Peter. What have we learned? The story of Judas has taught us that if we deny the Lordship of Jesus, we will wind up destroying ourselves. Judas betrays and then Judas kills himself because he cannot live with what he has done. Peter denies Jesus. Finds himself face to face with the risen Christ. What is the question? Peter do you love me? Yes. Feed my lambs. Three times the question is asked and each time Peter says he loves Jesus more than any one else. And Peter serves Jesus unto death in Rome.

We have been taught that the church was built on the blood of the martyrs. Hear me. It is not the blood of the martyrs that built the church. It is the ability of the martyrs to refuse to deny Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings even when their lives are threatened. We live in an age in which more people have been martyred because of their faith in Jesus than in the past. One of my heroes is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred by the Nazi Reich for opposing that authority in God’s name and refusing to save his own life by simply being silent.

Jesus said, in the sermon on the mount, “Blessed are you if men persecute you for my name’s sake.” That is precisely what happened to Stephen. He is the measure by which we are called to deal with that kind of persecution. We are to declare the Lordship of Jesus, and let the chips fall where they may. It could cost us our lives. For many who followed Jesus without compromise...that was the price that was paid.

And that is why the death of Stephen is A Key Event. Here we see the cost of discipleship defined. He tells the truth. The Biblical truth. God’s truth. And it cost him his life. We have been given an easy lot for the most part as followers of Jesus in Canada. But one of the things we need to remember is that can turn on a dime. We read the Book of Acts because it honestly tells us what happened next. And it tells us what discipleship really looks like in a culture that is hostile to faith in Jesus. We need to remember and cherish this lesson.

I want to leave you with two quotations from Corrie ten Boom. “Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength.” And, “Never be afraid to trust and unknown future to a known God.”

It is time for us to pray. Obviously I have been reading hymn lyrics in the discipleship section of the Book of Praise. I am surprised at how many of them I do not know. I am not surprised at what the words to these hymns say....Let us pray. The hymn is number 636 and I am reading verse 2.

O Lord, when truth is hard to follow and fact is hard to find,
When crowd appeals are shallow, reshape, renew our minds.
Your ways we would be learning, oh make our choices clear,
That we the more discerning, the more may persevere. In Jesus
name we ask...Amen.