

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Christmas means commitment

Presented by Michael Robinson

INTRODUCTION

At last, Christmas is over – and here we are bright and early on Boxing Day. Well, early any way. Who can be bright the day after Christmas? Most people feel a little flat after the excitement, excesses and running around of Christmas Day.

If you are already feeling a little flat, let me make it worse. On the day after Christmas Day, most Christian traditions commemorate the first Christian martyr, Stephen. He was stoned to death in Jerusalem for his faith in Jesus Christ. From the joy of the birth of Christ to the sorrow of the first Christian martyr seems like a big jump down. Or is it? Stay tuned!

ONE

It looked like a market place... Small groups of women gathered around the seven food tables. Stephen, Philip and the other stewards gave each woman the food she needed.

Hannah and Eirene filled their baskets and turned to leave. Stephen stopped them and gave Hannah an extra loaf of bread. When Eirene saw this, she snatched the loaf and waved it in Hannah's face.

"Look, just because you were born here and speak the language better than I do, doesn't mean you're entitled to more food than I am!"

"Well, there'd be plenty to go round if all you Greeks went back to where you came from!"

Stephen interrupted. "Are you still arguing about who gets what? We don't hand out food on the basis of background or language, but according to need."

He spoke to Eirene in Greek, "Hannah has more than you because she has three children to feed. You have only one."

Eirene shuffled uncomfortably. But Stephen grinned. "Look, Peter appointed me and the others to make sure that all you widows have enough food. If you keep arguing like this, everyone will think I can't do my job!"

The two women smiled at each other. Eirene gave the bread back to Hannah. "I'm sorry. I had no idea you have three children. Stephen, I'm sorry I misjudged you. After all, you're Greek like I am."

"Greek or Hebrew – it doesn't matter," replied Stephen, "The Lord Jesus has made us all one family."

How people loved Stephen.

“He is always so kind and wise.”

“The way he trusts God strengthens my own faith.”

“He reminds me so much of Jesus.”

Stephen was good at living the Christian life. He was also good at explaining the Christian Faith.

He told his Jewish friends that they should trust Jesus, who died and rose again. He said, “You don’t have to keep all the Laws of Moses. You don’t have to go up to the temple to sacrifice animals any more. Jesus is the fulfilment of all God’s promises – he is the Christ. He is all you need to become God’s friends.”

When he debated with people who didn’t believe it, they often ran out of arguments. But they didn’t like it – and they didn’t like Stephen... But still, many of the temple priests became followers of Jesus.

No doubt the Lord had great plans for Stephen.

Two

Stephen was a bright, upcoming young leader in the early church in Jerusalem. He was spiritually devout, outspoken about the Lord Jesus and highly esteemed by the Christian community. No doubt the Lord had great plans for Stephen.

One day the widow Hannah was in her house preparing a meal for her three children. The door crashed open and in burst her Greek-speaking friend, Eirene. Eirene’s cheeks were wet with tears and her eyes red and puffy. “Oh, Hannah, it’s horrible. They’ve killed Stephen!”

“Sit down, Eirene. Take a deep breath. Now, what are you saying? Stephen is dead?”

“Yes... they stoned him... he’s gone.”

“Who stoned him?”

“The Jerusalem Council. Some of the elders dragged him before the Council to stand trial. They found some lying witnesses who said he had been speaking against God. They told the Council that Stephen said Jesus will destroy the temple and change the customs Moses gave us.”

“How could Stephen say that when he taught that Jesus came to fulfil the laws of Moses?”

“Perhaps they’re worried that even temple priests are becoming followers of Jesus. Or perhaps they just hate us Greeks... Oh, I don’t know... I was sure Stephen was going to do so much good. It’s such a waste of life! Why, Hannah, why?”

Hannah put her arm around Eirene’s shoulders. The door swung open again and Philip entered. He saw Eirene sobbing. “Is she all right?” Hannah just shrugged, and looked away.

Philip sat down. “I saw what happened to Stephen. It was terrible. But Stephen never stopped trusting the Lord. He knew that Jesus would never let him go. It seemed he could see Jesus standing to welcome him into heaven. He said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’. And he kept loving others right up to the end. His last words – he actually prayed for his murderers, ‘Lord, don’t hold this sin against them.’”

Hannah’s eyes welled with tears. “Just like Jesus... praying for those who killed him...”

Philip said, “Remember what the Lord said, ‘If anyone wants to come with me, he must give up all right to himself, be prepared to die every day and follow me.’”

Eirene sighed. “Let’s make sure Stephen’s death isn’t wasted. Everyone must hear the good news about Jesus. And we must show that we are serious about following Jesus – whatever happens.”

Philip added, “But those who hate Jesus will hate us. I don’t think Stephen will be the last to die for the Lord.”

THREE

The day after Christmas is also known as St Stephen’s Day. Stephen was the first Christian martyr – the first to die for being loyal to Jesus.

And he wasn’t the last.

On December 20 1977, I was at an Ordination Service in St Andrew’s Cathedral, Sydney. During the service, the news came through that President Idi Amin of Uganda had shot and killed the Anglican Archbishop, Janani Luwum. Luwum had been a vocal critic of Amin’s murderous excesses.

That announcement drove home the cost of Christian commitment to those being ordained. I know, because I was one of them.

But not just those being ordained – every Christian in that building was moved by Janani Luwum’s courage. The news of his martyrdom forced us all to consider the depths of our own commitment to the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Christians love to talk about the advantages of following Jesus – and they’re worth talking about. Forgiveness, friendship with God, new life with purpose and hope. God freely gives all this and more to those who put their trust in Jesus Christ and follow him.

But there’s a down side. And that’s the cost of commitment. Jesus never promised his forgiven and renewed followers trouble-free lives.

He clearly spelt out the cost, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)

When you follow Jesus, you walk the same path he did. From his birth in a stable to his death on a cross he walked a steep and stony path. People hated him, abused him, crucified him. His followers cannot expect better treatment.

Now, at Christmas we’re all supposed to think positive thoughts about peace and goodwill. And if we’re very good at it, we can actually show peace and goodwill – sometimes even past lunch time!

It doesn’t take long to evaporate, does it? Sadly.

Then why on earth for the past few centuries have Christians celebrated St Stephen’s Day right on top of Christmas? If any wisps of peace and goodwill are still floating around from yesterday, remembering the first Christian martyr is certain to blow them away.

Perhaps it's meant to.

The message of Christmas is too easily swamped by sentiment. When we focus on the baby Jesus, it's all too sweet and nice. I'm not knocking it, but we can lose sight of the fact that Christmas is about God's total commitment to people.

Behind Christmas is the bad news that we've all disobeyed God, hurt one another, damaged his world. We are justly under God's condemnation. But instead of destroying us, the Son of God gave up everything and became one of us, so he could rescue people. And at the heart of his rescue plan was his death on the cross. Christmas is about God's commitment and sacrifice. There's nothing sentimental about that. It is pure, costly love.

CONCLUSION

Boxing Day is also known as St Stephen's Day – the day we remember the first Christian martyr. The death of Stephen reminds us that following Jesus involves commitment and sacrifice. Not in order to win God's love, but in response to the loving commitment and sacrifice God has already shown in Jesus Christ.

On Boxing Day, we can put Baby Jesus back in his box till next year. But on St Stephen's Day, we know that following Jesus is a daily, life-long commitment.

And following Jesus is the only way to enjoy the peace of God which transcends all earthly peace.