

## The First Martyr – Acts 7: 54 – 60



We learn from the Acts of the Apostles that the leading members of the Early Church soon found themselves in conflict with the authorities. The first person to die for his faith was Stephen, one of the “admin staff” who had been appointed, with six other men, to organise the distribution of funds to widows in Jerusalem. His administrative duties did not keep him from openly speaking about Jesus, and people who tried to argue against him found him an able and eloquent opponent. Because of this they wanted rid of Stephen, so, in the end, they bribed some men to bring false accusations against him, including that he wanted to destroy the Temple. These were remarkably similar charges to those which had been brought against Jesus Himself.

Stephen’s address to the High Priest and the rest of the Council can be found in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 7. His argument was powerful, but far from complimentary to the religious leaders of his time. This so angered the Council members that they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. Thus Stephen became the Church’s first martyr, a word which comes from the Greek *martus*, “a witness”. Stephen certainly was a witness to Jesus Christ: in his work, his words, and in the manner of his death. His dying prayer was, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”, a plea reminiscent of his Master’s own words from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”.

We do people a disservice if we appear to suggest that following Jesus will make their lives comfortable and carefree. Charles Wesley wrote, "Why should I complain of want or distress, temptation or pain? He told me no less: the heirs of salvation, I know from His word, through much tribulation must follow their Lord." (Hymns and Psalms 667)

Stephen believed, however, that whatever happened to him in this life, nothing could separate him from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Before he was dragged out to die, he was granted a vision of heaven opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7: 55 & 56). That must have sustained him in the ordeal that lay ahead.

Stephen's executioners left their cloaks in the care of a young man named Saul. How much, I wonder, did Stephen's witness influence Saul's life in the years that were to follow? We know him now, of course, as St Paul.

**A prayer:**

*Heavenly Father, we pray for all those who are persecuted today because they are followers of Jesus Christ. We think especially of people whose lives are at risk because they refuse to deny their Lord. We ask that you will make them strong in their faith, help them to know that they are not forgotten by their fellow Christians, and assure them that there is no power on earth that can ever separate them from your everlasting love in Jesus Christ our Lord.*  
**AMEN**

**- Rev John Barnett**

**Image:** Annibale Carracci (1560-1609) - The Stoning of St Stephen