

St Marc, Grenoble  
Sunday 7th May 2023 (Easter 5)  
Acts 7: 55 - 60  
John 14: 1 - 14  
Believe!

Good morning, and welcome, to everyone here in church, and those of you joining on Zoom. Let's Pray

First , as usual, I'd like to know your thoughts as we listened to the readings this morning - what challenged you, what jumped out at you, or what puzzled you? By the way, can anyone say what the word martyr means? (Witness) Thank you.

This week, although it is chronologically wrong, (the stories are in the wrong order), I'm going to look first at the reading from Acts.

To begin we probably need to look at the context. In Chapter 6, we're told that Stephen, (who was one of the first Christians to be elected as a Deacon, caring for the day to day running of the church) had started preaching and healing in the Name of Jesus in various synagogues; and he'd been making himself very unpopular, especially with some Jewish people from outside Jerusalem (Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and 'Asia'.) We're told they disputed, or argued, with Stephen, but they could not resist the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke.

So, not surprisingly, they'd been trying to find a way to silence Stephen, and stop him from causing more trouble and remove him from the scene. They seized him, and took him before the Assembly, falsely accusing him of speaking against the temple, and saying that he'd said Jesus would destroy the temple, and change the customs passed down by Moses.

But, we're also told that everyone sitting in the Assembly looked hard at Stephen and saw that his face was like the face of an angel. The high Priest then asked him if these things were true.

Stephen asked permission to speak, and launched into a historical dialogue relating events and prophecies from Abraham to Moses. He also accused the current Jewish authorities of being 'stiff necked' and resisting the Holy Spirit, just like their ancestors. He was persistent, direct and outspoken towards them. He accused them both of hypocrisy and of crucifying the Son of God.

You could say he made himself a real thorn in their side. He was really winding them up, and they were gnashing their teeth at him, because of what he was saying.

We're told Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit and saw a vision of Jesus, in heaven, standing at God's right hand, which he shared with them.

For the religious Jews, this was nothing short of absolute blasphemy. They blocked their ears, so they couldn't hear it, and a whole group of people rushed at Stephen, bundling him out of the city and began throwing rocks at him. It seems Saul, (later known as Paul) was there too, looking after the coats of Stephen's attackers.

Despite this vicious and wicked attack, Stephen didn't give up, he carried on calling on the name of Jesus, asking for His blessing; and calling at the top of his voice for Jesus not to hold this sin against them - then we're told, quite simply, he fell asleep and died from his injuries.

Stephen is often described as the first Christian martyr - personally, I think of John the Baptist in that place. But, perhaps, he wasn't technically considered a 'Christian'.

So, although - thankfully, it doesn't happen very often in our culture at the moment ; don't be too surprised if living as a Christian doesn't always seem to be easy or pleasant - it could quickly get a lot worse!

You may like to reflect for a moment on what your response would be, if someone started throwing rocks at you because you refused to deny your faith in Jesus. Could you manage to stand up for your faith in those circumstances, putting your trust in Jesus as Stephen did?? Without the help of the Holy Spirit, I know I would struggle.

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So, now, with that dramatic and painful story in mind, let's move on, and consider this morning's rather contrasting Gospel reading, from John 14.

This is a reading of amazing hope; and, because of that, I have often used it at funerals and memorial services. Especially In these challenging and very difficult times, it provides real positive hope for our daily lives.

Jesus was preparing His disciples for the shock they were about to experience – His crucifixion; but also for their lives after the resurrection. He was helping them to understand they had an important ongoing job to do - proclaiming the Gospel in all the world. (As 21C Christians that is still our job too!)

Jesus said: 'Look I'm going away, but don't worry – just trust me – Trust God and trust me!' 'I'm going on ahead, to prepare a place for you in my father's house; then I'll come back and take you with me. 'But, you already know the way!'

Of course very much in character, Thomas, sometimes called 'The Doubter' (although I prefer to think of him as the Questioner) responded 'Hang on a minute: we have no idea where you're going, so how can we possibly know the way?!

Jesus' life changing response was 'I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life. Nobody comes to the Father except through me.' He was saying, in effect, 'If you want to meet my Father God face to face, follow me, I'll introduce you to Him.'

Jesus' words are clear – in modern parlance 'Trust Me!'  
If a used car salesman said that to me, I would almost certainly walk away.  
But, this is the Son of God speaking – we must be able to trust Him!

It's interesting that later - after the resurrection, even Thomas' response, when he met the risen Lord Jesus, was: 'My Lord and my God!!'

But just then it was Philip's turn to doubt, 'Just show us the Father, then we'll believe you.' Oh dear ... Jesus said 'Have you known me all this time Philip and still don't realise, anyone who has seen me has seen the Father??!  
[That is a fascinating comment, which touches on the concept of the Holy Trinity, but if we stop to explore that now, we'll probably be here all afternoon!]

But there's one final piece of amazing Good News that we must take away from our Gospel this morning – in vv.12 & 13 Jesus assures us: 'Anyone who trusts in me will also do the works that I am doing. In fact, they'll do even greater things because I'm going to the Father!' 'Whatever you ask in my name,' Jesus says 'I will do it, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son' What an amazing promise to take with us into our week ahead ... Whatever we ask in Jesus Name, He promises He'll do it for us.

The challenge is, will we do our bit? Will we ask Him and then faithfully Trust Him? Will we ask in faith and claim Jesus' promise? Then, will we trust Him for His Response?

We need real courage and trust to ask *In Faith*, in Jesus' Name, and to expect the response that He has already promised us.

I pray you'll have the courage and the faith to ask, to trust - and to be delighted, in the week ahead.

Let's Pray ... Amen