

# *stoning the prophets*

a sermon preached on the

*fifth sunday of easter*

14 May 2017

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by fr richard wilson*

the lections: Acts 7.55-60; Psalm 31; 1Peter 2.11-25; John 14.1-14

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those that are sent to it. So Jesus spoke to those who warned him that Herod wanted to kill him. That warning places Stephen, whom we heard of in the first reading, in a long line of martyrs who were killed or persecuted for a faith that moved them to criticise power and the status quo – they are martyrs who included Jesus, Jeremiah before him, Oscar Romero in our own lifetimes and countless others.

It is worth going back to the events that led to Stephen's stoning. Stephen is one of seven members of the early church nominated to serve the community. He was therefore, one of the first Deacons of the church.

The record of Stephen's history – from Acts Chapter 6 – says he was very effective in his ministry and wise to the point that few could win a debate against him. This put some people offside, so they 'stirred up the people and the elders and scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council'. Then they accused him of blasphemy.

Of course they did! It's so easy. Blasphemy is an easy charge – anything that you disagree with. We have seen an example of this behaviour in Jakarta this week.

At a kangaroo court before the elders and scribes, Stephen is asked if the claims against him were true. So he preaches to them. It is a rather long monologue that rehearses the salvation history of Israel from Abraham, through Moses and the rejection of the law at Sinai, the dispossession of Canaan at the end of the Exodus and the reign of King David.

But rather than glorifying Israel, Stephen points out that their history is one of resisting the Holy Spirit. The charge of blasphemy is compounded by his accusation, the mob goes wild and he dragged outside. The rest you have heard this morning. Stephen was killed by the mob. It was a summary execution, there was nothing like a just trial, his defence was ignored and his death was cruel, slow and painful.

We continue to stone the prophets to this day when they tell us things we don't want to hear. What we have heard in this parish over the past few weeks is hard to hear, both the truth of what has taken place and people's reaction to it. It unsettles our status quo, Some are unwilling to hear, some unwilling to believe. Some won't want me saying these hard things now.

I am prepared to take the risk because in my appointment as locum for the duration of David's leave I see my task as not to simply hold the fort until he returns but to work to help us all through a process of reconciliation. I am thankful to the Wardens and many other people who support me in this endeavour.

I don't claim any particular expertise in this except as an observer, occasionally a victim and sometimes, no doubt, as a perpetrator.

So I have sought assistance from colleagues especially some friends at Trinity College. I was given a book by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho which maps out a process for reconciliation based on their experience in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. I offer to you to join me over the coming weeks in an adapted version of the process they have described.

This will be hard for us, if we choose to participate. I will not resile from it, it will be the theme of all that I do in my time as your locum. For me it is emotionally and personally challenging, but I truly believe it is worthwhile, and it is essential for all of us if this community is to be rebuilt. So I ask you to pray for me and for ourselves-all of us, and for David and Judy especially.

The good news is that we have begun the process and there are some things already in place. Two weeks ago you heard a series of people stand in a meeting and express support for David and lament, with great emotion describe the pain they feel for what is happening.

Also you already know the times I am available if you want to talk these things through. These commenced on Friday. People came, we listened to each other. The Wardens have also nominated Evening Prayer each Thursday as a time to be spent to pray for the parish, for all of us. We have been listening.

We know there is some confusion over what has happened and this will be addressed. There is a lot to do and think about, please give us some time as we work it through. A further Parish meeting is planned to explore how we move forward – see today's CONTACT.

Desmond and Mpho Tutu's book begins with the need for us to recognise the pain and what has caused it. This is as, I said last week, abuse, disloyalty, undermining, and a failure of corporate responsibility, and of resistance to accept what we must recognise in ourselves. I also said that I believe we have to sit with these things for a while.

The Tutus suggest an exercise to help with this. They say:

Please go out and find a stone that appeals to you on some level. It can be beautiful or ugly. It shouldn't be a pebble, nor should it be a boulder. Find a stone with some weight to it. It should be small enough to carry in the palm of your hand and large enough that you won't lose it. Note in a journal exactly where you found the stone and what it was about the stone that appealed to you.

This is my stone.<sup>1</sup> I think it is rather beautiful. It is a river stone, smooth, black with some white stripes, and it has weight. Weight enough to represent pain. It fits in the palm of my

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<sup>1</sup> Preacher walked through the congregation with his stone.

hand and it's comfortable, but the weight of it reminds me of the pain. It is asymmetrical and one side sticks out - that is also a reminder to me. It is not completely smooth - there are some fissures, imperfections, so it is like me.

Tutu suggests you spend a half a day with your stone in your non-dominant hand. You could just spend that time sitting with it or try doing what you normally do but with your stone, your pain, as your companion. Then he suggests you write in your journal what carrying the stone felt like - did it weigh you down, did it hinder you, did it remind you of pain you bear, did it remind you of people you may need to forgive or who may want to forgive you?

I have been carrying this stone during the week. I can feel it in my pocket – its weight pulls down, and it sticks out, a bump on my leg. My pain travels with me. Sometimes I have forgotten it, but it comes back.

I have been thinking about what I might eventually do with it. Of course, one option is to stone a prophet. I might be able to give it to someone else, or take it back – these are my pains, no one else's, I could try and throw it away, I might be able one day to place it in a significant place and ask for forgiveness, but I'm going to hang on to it for a while to remind me of the pain I bear and that I have caused.

You may have noticed a pile of stones in the font. They are for you.