

[Stephen said]: 'You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers; you always resist the Holy Spirit.' Acts 7.51.

All the pundits are agreed that when the PM gets back from his summer holiday he must give the speech of his life to his party conference, if he hopes to survive. Well, St Stephen who has just been arrested by the Temple clergy on trumped-up charges, must now give a similar make-or-break speech to the same religious leaders who only a few weeks earlier had just killed Jesus. It proved to be a mighty speech. After Jesus' Sermon on the Mount it is the *longest* speech in the NT.

So how does Stephen react to his arrest? We know that they lied about him, 6.11-14... How did he respond? *I* would have been pretty scared and would have *pleaded* with them. But that is precisely what Stephen does *not* do. As the saying goes, 'Never apologise; never explain'. He stands up tall, with his head up. Integrity and courage shine from every pore. He's not frightened of them. And he eloquently and powerfully goes on to the offensive against these outrageous clergy by lecturing them on their own Bible, beginning at 7.2 with the great Abraham. He then goes on to Isaac and Jacob; then to Joseph and Moses. Look at the cheek of Stephen in v43 when he reminds them that God sent their ancestors into exile because of their disobedience... All this is to make the simple but devastating point in v51 that they've *always* disobeyed God. That's why they killed Jesus! It's their way, vv51-3...

It was a virtuoso performance. *I* couldn't have been so bold for Christ. But is that actually true? The clue to understanding *Acts* is observing how often the Holy *Spirit* is

mentioned. Peter, Philip, Stephen aren't in fact supermen. They're ordinary. Peter was a coward who denied knowing Jesus. But these ordinary people, like us, were made *extraordinary* because they were filled with God the Holy Spirit. Let's go back to 1.8... That Spirit is poured out at Pentecost. Look at the description of Stephen in 6.5... and at v10... And why are these religious leaders so *wrong*? It's because they *don't* have the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth, v51...

Read this mighty speech when you get home. It's very subtle. For instance, in v2 you'll see that God spoke to Abraham *in Mesopotamia*, ie *not* in Israel. All that stuff about Joseph in *Egypt* is to make the point that God was with Joseph *outside* Israel. The great Moses was born *outside* Israel in Egypt. V29 tells us that Moses was an *alien* ... while v30 records that God spoke to Moses from a burning bush at Mount Sinai, *faraway* from Israel. Later in the speech, Stephen reminds them that God was with his people in the Ark of the Covenant, vv44-48... Stephen is hammering home the fact that God was with his people *outside* Israel and *without* a Temple. In other words, God can and *does* act without you clergy!

Very interesting, you're saying, but so what? We need to remind ourselves that the opposition to Jesus came from the *clergy*, not from the murderers, thieves and adulterers. It was the *religious* people who arrested Stephen as he stood up for Christ. Are today's religious leaders any different?

People in our society are desperately hungry inside. People want their lives *changed*, and only Jesus can do that, but they don't *know* that yet. The sad truth is that there is a

real crisis among our clergy, and it's this: they themselves don't know this Jesus our people so much need. You know, it's nice being a clergyman. There are perks and kudos, but what do you do if deep-down you're unsure about Jesus? You can appear to be terribly busy with useful social work or with right-on political activism. If you're embarrassed to name the name of Jesus, you can always appear 'religious' by offering a vague thing called 'spirituality'; it's feel-good and makes no demands of you. A lot of clergy who are embarrassed about the Bible have jumped on the pro-homosexuality bandwagon. It makes them appear caring, tolerant, and 'relevant'. They even claim that it's the Holy Spirit who is leading them to the truth. Didn't Jesus himself say so? Turn to p1084, *Jn16.12*... And isn't it the Spirit who leads us to the truth, *v13*...

The trouble with this sophistry is that the Spirit does not contradict himself. If he said it was wrong 3000 years ago, he will hardly say it's OK now. Does truth change? What next? The Holy Spirit telling us that adultery is OK? No, they see what they want to see. They're *resisting* the Spirit.

But just when I thought I might have been exaggerating the emptiness of belief in today's Church, the other day I visited York Minster, the ancient heart of Northern Christianity. What did I see? Dancers circling round and round in black capes to an incessant drum-beat, while a reader said in a low, meaningful tone, 'We go round in circles, as the birds go round, for their religion is ours'. I was flabbergasted, but the large crowd loved it. I turned to an elderly clergyman and said, 'This is pure *paganism*', but he

looked baffled and just said, 'I don't understand modern art!'

How was this druid-like nature-worship allowed in a Christian cathedral? The minister didn't seem to understand or care. Later he went to take communion next door. The same crowd didn't follow him to the Lord's Table. What are we doing? 'You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit'. The minster was full of activity, full of pagan dancing and tourists, but was it full of Christ? You can be so full of religiosity that you miss God's main point which is his Son Jesus Christ.

That's precisely what happened with Caiaphas, his priests, and the Pharisees, as Jesus stood in front of them. It happened also with Stephen's accusers. And it's happening in our churches today. Christ has gone out of Christianity. You can be so religious that you don't see Jesus. Churchianity must never shut out Christianity. The central challenge to our churches, and to us as individual believers, is to get Christ back into our Christianity, Christ as Saviour and Lord.

I used to worry about churches closing. Now I'm glad. If we're not honouring the Lord Jesus, we deserve to close, even a glorious building like York Minster. The Jerusalem *Temple* was glorious. The Romans destroyed this fabulous building in 70AD, and God allowed it to happen, because, for all their religion, they had refused his Son Jesus. 'Religion' and fancy buildings are false if Christ isn't in them, and will fail. But the truth will never die. People don't need 'religion'. They need *Jesus*, as their Saviour and Lord.