

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he said this, he fell asleep. Acts 7.59-60.

What a knock-out speech Stephen made to the Jewish religious leaders after they arrested him! He took the Bible, and, beginning with Abraham, and quoting Moses, he shewed that their treatment of him, was all part of the way they had always rejected God. Didn't they reject God to worship the golden calf in the Sinai desert centuries ago? Wasn't it because of their refusal to heed God's prophets that God sent them into Exile in Babylon hundreds of years earlier? God had promised them a Messiah, and when he finally came in Jesus, what did they do? They murdered him! Now they want to silence Stephen for preaching Jesus. They have 'form' Acts 7.51-3...

And how did the clergy react to this bravura speech? They went mental, v54... But Stephen was not put down by this. Filled with the Holy Spirit he looked up - to heaven to see the risen and ascended Jesus in glory, v55... When he *told* them what he could see, they went pure berserk, vv57-58a...

It's not very nice, is it, when someone loses their temper and blows up in your face. There *have* been times when people have lost it with me, and I've deserved it. But if I've been in an argument and my opponen starts to become *abusive* towards me, then I know I've won. I've hit the bulls-eye. Well, judging by their furious reaction, Stephen had clearly hit the bulls-eye with *his* speech. These were learned men who knew their Bibles inside-out. Why did no-one get up and coolly refute his arguments? Because, of course, they *couldn't*. All they could do was lose their temper and insult him. The only

way they could deal with him was to shut him up for good. So they stoned him to death, vv57-58a...

It's just what they did with Jesus himself. At his trial he didn't say much, but when he did, they couldn't answer him. All they could do was abuse him and slap him. Turn to p1086, to *John* 18.19-23... They had to kill him to shut him up.

Robert Mugabe couldn't bear being heckled as he opened parliament the other day. He arrested three MPs, because he has no answer for his critics. It was the same with Stalin, Hitler, Mao. Their regimes were false, and they couldn't bear the truth. Execution and the gulags were their only answers. When Muslims start frothing at the mouth because of some perceived insult to their religion, they shew they are *weak* not strong. There's a lovely story about a Methodist lay preacher who had written a little note in the margin of his sermon: 'weak point, shout louder'.

Jesus was killed. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. Christians are *still* being martyred. I weep for our Christian brothers and sisters being treated like this, but, do you know what? it tells me that this Christian-thing really bothers people. Why do they have to kill Christians? If Christianity is false, why not just prove it? But they can't, and that's why they fly into a rage, as the clergy did with Stephen. No-one persecutes Rotary, the WI, or the golf club. Why not? Because, though they do so much good, they don't claim to be the truth or to control people's lives. People reject Jesus, because he insists on being Lord, Lord of the whole world - our politics, education, business - and Lord of your personal

life. People resist that, because they want to do what *they* want to do without being accountable. So they abuse Christianity by shewing it is ridiculous, silly, unhealthy. That's precisely the tactic of Richard Dawkins. Why is he so *bothered*? He is no different from the Jewish clergy who 'were furious and gnashed their teeth'. Like them, he isn't listening either, v57 ... Dawkins constructs a caricature of Christianity and then attacks his creation for being ridiculous. He doesn't *want* Christianity to be true, because he would have to change his life. Muslims who refuse Christians to preach among them are bothered. If they were really confident of the superiority of their faith, they would have nothing to fear from us Christians. Why do they have to threaten death to Muslims who convert to Christianity?

Did you read in last week's newspaper about Mosab Hassan Yousef? He is the son of one of the most revered leaders of the Palestinian Islamist groups called Hamas. He has left Islam to become an evangelical Christian. Nine years ago Mr Yousef had a chance encounter with a British missionary. He began secretly studying the Bible. What struck him was the central tenet, 'Love your enemies'. He had never heard this beautiful message before. Only Jesus had said this.

Even as Stephen is dying with the stones crashing in his face, he *amazingly* acknowledges that Jesus is his Lord, v59... Jesus is in control even in this terrible act of hatred. You see, death for the Christian is not the worse thing that can happen to us. Stephen, we read, 'fell asleep'. And notice the first appearance of the young man Saul. He was left to look

after their coats while they got on with the stoning, v58b... Saul voted for this act of hatred and barbarism, 8.1... It was a decision which would haunt him and one day change his life.

But let's get back to Stephen. As they shouted at him, and fired stones at his head, he did not respond with hatred and curses for their evil. What they were doing was most certainly a 'sin', for they were opposing God himself, but his prayer was for their *forgiveness*: 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'. It is a beautiful prayer and recalls Jesus' own as they drove nails through his hands on the Cross: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'.

*Why* do they know not what they do? Why do good people so *violently* reject Jesus? Two passages in scripture have helped me here. Let's turn first to p1074, to *John* 8.42-44... The devil is abroad deceiving people and taking them away from God. He leads them to destruction, v44b... Now turn to p1160, *2 Cor* 4.4... 'the god of this age has blinded them'. 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. What a prayer!

Even in the midst of his agony Stephen prayed for his enemies, echoing Jesus' own prayer for his murderers. This is the beautiful heart of Christianity. God loves the unlovely and the undeserving. He forgives those who want to be his enemies. Forget Dawkins and his silly games. This hurting world is crying *out* for forgiveness and love. How can God's command to love our enemies be considered irrelevant or out-of-date? This is the very heart of our Christian faith. Forgiveness is the heart of Christ's Calvary work. We believers should be *confident* of it, and live it.