



## Parish of Finchampstead and California

# THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

## 24 - 29 AUGUST 2020

### INTRODUCTION

The NT readings for Morning Prayer continue their progress through the Acts of the Apostles; each day's thought is based mainly on the parts of the readings in bold type.

### MONDAY - Acts 6:1-15

<sup>1</sup> Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup> And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, <sup>4</sup> while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' <sup>5</sup> What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup> They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup> The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

**<sup>8</sup> Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.** <sup>9</sup> Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' <sup>12</sup> They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. <sup>13</sup> They set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.' <sup>15</sup> And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

### ***Thought for the day***

*Stephen, along with the six others, was appointed by the Apostles to ensure the fair distribution of food. It sounds like an administrative role, but clearly Stephen's ministry went far beyond that, doing 'great wonders and signs' (v8) and preaching (v13). From all that follows it is clear that his initial appointment in a specific role was only the start of something much bigger. Perhaps we think that our gifts are small ones, and that we shouldn't presume to put ourselves forward. But it may be that it's God who is pulling us out of our comfort zone.*

### TUESDAY - Acts 7:1-16

**<sup>1</sup> Then the high priest asked Stephen, 'Are these things so?' <sup>2</sup> And Stephen replied: 'Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham** when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, <sup>3</sup> and said to him, "Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you." <sup>4</sup> Then he left the country of the Chaldeans

and settled in Haran. After his father died, God had him move from there to this country in which you are now living. <sup>5</sup> He did not give him any of it as a heritage, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as his possession and to his descendants after him, even though he had no child. <sup>6</sup> And God spoke in these terms, that his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others, who would enslave them and maltreat them for four hundred years. <sup>7</sup> "But I will judge the nation that they serve," said God, "and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place." <sup>8</sup> Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

<sup>9</sup> The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him, <sup>10</sup> and rescued him from all his afflictions, and enabled him to win favour and to show wisdom when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who appointed him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. <sup>11</sup> Now there came a famine throughout Egypt and Canaan, and great suffering, and our ancestors could find no food. <sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there on their first visit. <sup>13</sup> On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. <sup>14</sup> Then Joseph sent and invited his father Jacob and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five in all; <sup>15</sup> so Jacob went down to Egypt. He himself died there as well as our ancestors, <sup>16</sup> and their bodies were brought back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.'

### **Thought for the day**

*The high priest was simply wanting to hear Stephen's response to the (false) charges against him, probably expecting a yes or no. Instead Stephen says 'Listen to me' before launching into a recap of Jewish history which, in itself, would hardly have been contentious to his listeners, though they might have wondered where it was all leading. Sometimes Christians have not to be constrained by the expectations of others when they explain what their faith means.*

### **WEDNESDAY - Acts 7:17-43**

Stephen continued, <sup>17</sup> "But as the time drew near for the fulfilment of the promise that God had made to Abraham, our people in Egypt increased and multiplied <sup>18</sup> until another king who had not known Joseph ruled over Egypt. <sup>19</sup> He dealt craftily with our race and forced our ancestors to abandon their infants so that they would die. <sup>20</sup> At this time Moses was born, and he was beautiful before God. For three months he was brought up in his father's house; <sup>21</sup> and when he was abandoned, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. <sup>22</sup> So Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds.

<sup>23</sup> "When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his relatives, the Israelites. <sup>24</sup> When he saw one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> He supposed that his kinsfolk would understand that God through him was rescuing them, but they did not understand. <sup>26</sup> The next day he came to some of them as they were quarrelling and tried to reconcile them, saying, "Men, you are brothers; why do you wrong each other?" <sup>27</sup> But the man who was wronging his neighbour pushed Moses aside, saying, "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? <sup>28</sup> Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?" <sup>29</sup> When he heard this, Moses fled and became a resident alien in the land of Midian. There he became the father of two sons.

<sup>30</sup> "Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush. <sup>31</sup> When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight; and as he approached to look, there came the voice of the Lord: <sup>32</sup> "I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look. <sup>33</sup> Then the Lord said to him, "Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup> I have surely seen the mistreatment of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them. Come now, I will send you to Egypt."

<sup>35</sup> "It was this Moses whom they rejected when they said, "Who made you a ruler and a judge?" and whom God now sent as both ruler and liberator through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. <sup>36</sup> He led them out, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. <sup>37</sup> This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, "God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up." <sup>38</sup> He is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living oracles to give to us. <sup>39</sup> **Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him; instead, they pushed him aside, and in their hearts they turned back to**

Egypt, <sup>40</sup> saying to Aaron, "Make gods for us who will lead the way for us; as for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him." <sup>41</sup> At that time they made a calf, offered a sacrifice to the idol, and revelled in the works of their hands. <sup>42</sup> But God turned away from them and handed them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: "Did you offer to me slain victims and sacrifices for forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? <sup>43</sup> No; you took along the tent of Moloch, and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; so I will remove you beyond Babylon." ' "

### ***Thought for the day***

*Although Stephen's account of Jewish salvation history remains orthodox, he emphasises the hardness of the people's hearts towards Moses, God's chosen leader, (v39-41). By doing this he provides a context (what we might call in a criminal case 'previous form') for the way in which the people later rejected Jesus. For Jesus himself and for the earliest Christians, the Hebrew scriptures (our Old Testament) could never be irrelevant to the situations they found themselves in. It's too easy to reject the OT because some of it seems brutal and immoral. But we risk losing sight of who God was, and remains, before Jesus came, which formed so much of Jesus' teaching and example.*

## **THURSDAY - Acts 7:44-53**

Stephen continued, <sup>44</sup> 'Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the wilderness, as God directed when he spoke to Moses, ordering him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. <sup>45</sup> Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our ancestors. And it was there until the time of David, <sup>46</sup> who found favour with God and asked that he might find a dwelling-place for the house of Jacob. <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built a house for him. <sup>48</sup> Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says, <sup>49</sup> "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? <sup>50</sup> Did not my hand make all these things?"

**<sup>51</sup> 'You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. <sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. <sup>53</sup> You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.'**

### ***Thought for the day***

*The sting in the tail: after some 50 verses of introduction, Stephen reaches the point he's been patiently building up to - the religious authorities are culpable (stiff-necked, betrayers, murderers) in relation to Jesus, whom he describes as the Righteous One (v51-53). This is an unusual description, probably referencing the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53:11. There is anger in Stephen's accusation, causing us to reflect on the circumstances in which anger might be justifiable.*

## **FRIDAY - Acts 7:54-8:3**

<sup>7.54</sup> When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. <sup>55</sup> But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' <sup>57</sup> But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. <sup>58</sup> Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> **While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'** <sup>60</sup> **Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.**

<sup>8.1</sup> That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.

## ***Thought for the day***

*Anger is met by outrage (v54), which is intensified by Stephen's claim to see a vision of Jesus with God (v56). Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit (v55), seems to be almost in a trance and suffers an exemplary martyrdom, with the last words of Jesus on his lips (v59-60: see Luke 23:46&34). And as Stephen dies the focus shifts briefly to Saul (v58, v3) who is to become the dominant figure in the second half of Acts. Luke's narrative is carefully constructed to show the hand of God continuing to work through the Holy Spirit even in the most unpromising of events. How do we feel God acting in our own lives in this way?*

## **SATURDAY - Acts 8:4-25**

<sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. <sup>6</sup> The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, <sup>7</sup> for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralysed or lame were cured. <sup>8</sup> So there was great joy in that city.

<sup>9</sup> Now a certain man named Simon had previously practised magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. <sup>10</sup> All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, 'This man is the power of God that is called Great.' <sup>11</sup> And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. <sup>12</sup> But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. <sup>13</sup> Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.

<sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. <sup>15</sup> The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit <sup>16</sup> (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). <sup>17</sup> Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, <sup>19</sup> saying, 'Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' <sup>20</sup> **But Peter said to him, 'May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money. <sup>21</sup> You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup> Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. <sup>23</sup> For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.'** <sup>24</sup> **Simon answered, 'Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me.'**

<sup>25</sup> Now after Peter and John had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans.

## ***Thought for the day***

*Philip was another of the seven deacons (see Monday's reading - v5) who soon moved on from admin to evangelism. He went first to Samaria, a tough assignment for a Jew given the strong historic hostility between the two adjacent nations. Peter and John went to investigate his surprising success. Once there they had to confront the idea that money can buy spiritual power. At least Simon the former magician had the grace to repent of his attempt to buy the Holy Spirit (v18-24). I wonder how many of us still cling to the idea that somehow wealth is a great good, even when almost all the evidence in the New Testament shows us the opposite.*