

STEPHEN

Acts 6:1-7

The church lunch was ending now. Dishes clattered as people began to clear the tables. But then, above the clattering once again voices were raised, angry, resentful voices.

“I’m not doing the washing up,” said one.

“Well, I’m certainly not doing it, it’s not my turn,” said another.

“Let’s get Stevie to do it - he’ll usually do anything. Hey, Stevie!”

Stephen turned from the table he was clearing and nodded. He had heard it all, but they were right, he didn’t mind doing the work. Later he looked at the stacks of dirty dishes left for him and wondered how many hours it might take. Then Philip came over. “I’ll help” he said, and so the two of them rolled up their sleeves and got to work.

Starting a lunch programme had been a great idea. There were so many people who were in need, not just in the church but in the community. Everyone agreed it was the right thing to do. But keeping the lunches going was another thing altogether. It seemed to bring out the worst in everyone.

First there had been disagreement about who would do the serving.

“I’m not sure I have the strength,” said one. “Those dishes are very heavy.”

“I would help but I think I have to be at work,” said another. “Maybe next time.”

Then there was the problem about who was to be served.

What are those people doing here?” they would say. “You’re not going to serve them too, are you? What will people think? Look how dirty they are, and no table manners at all! And listen - they don’t even speak our language. Surely they should speak our language if they want to come to our lunch.”

The arguments continued and grew and the apostles decided that they had to intervene.

“Look, everyone,” said Peter, speaking for all the apostles as he usually did, “We have to get organised. Firstly, no one is going to be turned away. Jesus never turned anyone away and we aren’t going to either.

“Secondly, it’s a dirty job, but someone has to do it. We need some volunteers to take charge of this task, and get it done right. Andrew here will form a committee and come up with a job description.”

The committee held its meeting. Levi asked what qualifications they were looking for. He suggested that they find people who were thrifty, so they could get the most out of each bowl or penny. Martha pointed out that there was an art to serving at table. They needed people with service experience.

But Andrew had other ideas. “Remember what brought about the problem in the first place,” he said. “It wasn’t lack of experience to wastefulness. It was selfishness. We need people willing to serve everyone, who won’t play favourites.” It passed unanimously.

Next day the church newsletter carried an ad. “Wanted, seven table servants. No previous experience necessary. Primary qualifications: compassion, generosity, a hospitable nature, a willingness to serve all.”

They were *not* swamped with applications.

But there were some people who were obvious for the job, the kind of people who could always be depended on when something needed to be done, the little people of the church who were willing to do the basic jobs which kept the church

going. Among them were Philip and Stephen.

And so Stephen was appointed table servant. But we don't actually hear of him serving tables again. Presumably he did so, but he had other gifts as well. How often that is the way: those who begin with one small act of service discover that God can use them in many more ways as well.

Sing hymn 198 Let us build a house where love can dwell

We are told that Stephen did wonders and signs, though not what these were. But something he did or something he said annoyed a group of Jews from other lands who were living in Jerusalem. What did he do? It may be that it was something to do with the way the church accepted everyone, even those who were not Jews. Foreign Jews tended to be very particular indeed about keeping themselves pure.

Up until now, although there have been various run-ins between the church and the Jewish authorities, the authorities have always had to back down, because the people favour the new church and its way of life. But now these foreigners, who perhaps care less for the peace of Jerusalem than others, or perhaps care more, bring accusations against Stephen. Luke tells us that just as in the case of Jesus, they couldn't actually find anything with which to accuse him, so they had to make things up. They accuse him of speaking against the temple and the Law, and saying that Jesus will do away with the importance of Moses.

When Jesus is accused he says nothing in reply, but Stephen does. He makes an impassioned speech. It's either clever or inflammatory, depending on how you look at it - and of course we have only the outline and no idea of the tone of voice in which it was delivered.

He begins with Abraham and tells the story of the Jews being promised a land. He moves to Joseph, and the way that he and his brothers ended up in Egypt. It was from Egypt that Moses was to lead the people, and so Moses is the next focus of the speech: His birth and up-bringing, the dreadful act of murder he committed which led to him living for years in exile, and finally his calling by God. Already Stephen has reminded people that Moses was less than perfect, and now he goes on to remind them that under Moses' leadership the people continually rebelled against God. They weren't pure.

Then he reminds them that Moses didn't give them the temple - that was Solomon - and reminds them that even when it was dedicated, Solomon told them that God couldn't live in a building made by human hands - he is too big for that.

So Moses is not perfect and the temple cannot contain God. It was a bit like someone coming to an SNP gathering and denying that William Wallace and Robert the Bruce were great national heroes. (We tend to like to forget their faults too!)

Up until this point the people have listened - though we're not told in what sort of mood, but now Stephen turn to accuse them.

Read Acts 7:51-8:3

Those who were chosen to serve at table were very different people. They included both Philip, the easygoing, idealistic one who probably never met a person he didn't like. He was a natural at table service. And they included Stephen, who had the natural instincts of a prophet. He could not countenance injustice. He was a champion for the poor and downtrodden. And because of this, he, too, was a natural

at table service.

For Stephen serving tables, a behind the scenes job, had become dangerous. Maybe it was because he believed so strongly in his job as a servant that he began to speak out. He saw the table he served as a microcosm of the world at large. He could not imagine not providing a generous table to anyone who came to his community. He felt the world should work the same way. Justice in the world started with justice at the table, and vice versa. Stephen simply took everything about the church seriously, and for him table service was a model for the ministry of the church.

The story of Stephen is included by Luke as an inspiration to Theophilus and his other readers. He deliberately stresses how Stephen follows in his master's steps - wrongly accused, forgiving his enemies. But for us looking back from a greater distance than Luke had, we can see that it is also the story of a turning point in the life of the church. Up until now the church has been within the Jewish dispensation. But now Jewish people had turned against a Christian leader and murdered him. This was a dividing point between the church of Jesus Christ and its Jewish roots.

There were to be good and bad results from this division. Good results where God was in charge; less good when people were allowed to ride their own reactions. As the very next story in Acts goes on to show us, a mission to those outside Israel was to begin - the start of the mission that would bring the good news even to Scotland, and that still takes the good news to the ends of the earth. It began because the Christians were scattered through persecution, but God can use even that to bring about good. Nowadays the ends of the earth are sometimes right next door, where life is not remote, but impossibly grim; the ends of the earth are wherever God's Kingdom is not rooted, growing and bearing fruit.

But what was also to result was not so good for the Jews. This division was to cause Christian suspicion of the Jews and Jewish suspicion of the Christians. It was to lead to the long exile of the Jews, to their repeated expulsion from many countries - England included - and, eventually, to Auschwitz.

What caused the violent division? It would be easy to say that it was caused by the false accusations against Stephen on the part of the foreign Jews.

It would be easy to say that Stephen's sermon was inflammatory.

It is always easy to say this, that or the other.

Stephen would not compromise in what he believed, and he was right not to. We are not called to compromise, and Jesus never did. But again we are not called to deliberately inflame others - Jesus never did that either.

But this Jesus whom we follow does divide. It wasn't his intention, but he knew that division would follow him as surely as night follows day.

Stephen was a servant, a servant of the people but above all, a servant of his Lord. Probably the same thing would have happened at the end of the day, whether he had spoken up as he did, or had made no reply as Jesus did. There are times when the way to serve is to take a stand, other times when the way to serve is to allow yourself to be misunderstood. As I have been thinking over the troubling story of Stephen, I have also had a more recent story much on my mind, the story of Jane Haining.

Jane was a young woman from Dumfries, who went out to Budapest in the 1930s to work with the long-established Church of Scotland mission to the Jews there. She was a teacher in the school. During the War she did all she could to protect her Jewish girls, and tried to take more and more under her wing. In the end,

she was arrested, sent to Auschwitz and died there. And the main charge against her was simply this: that she wept when she saw her children coming to school with yellow stars sewn onto their coats. Her name is now recorded on the Jewish Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance in Jerusalem, as "Righteous among the nations." All because she would not stop loving the children given into her care.

God grant that we have the servant heart of a Stephen or a Jane Haining, committed to sharing good news and steadfast love and acceptance of all; without flinching from what the consequences may be for ourselves.