

The Mind of a Martyr - Easter 5 - 22 May

Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 17-18; 1 Peter 2:11-25; John 14:1-14

Stephen is described in Acts 6 as “a man full of faith and the holy spirit” (Acts 6.5) and “a man full of God’s grace and power, [who] performed great wonders and signs among the people.” (Acts 6.8)

He was chosen for responsible tasks and was a man with his mind and heart on God while his hands served God’s people.

He was in every way a man of God. And he died a martyr.

Martyrdom

We are all familiar with the idea of martyrdom but different people mean different things by martyrdom. The most obvious aspect of martyrdom is death. Martyrs die for their faith. What is in the mind and heart of a martyr?

Today I will try to highlight the mind of Stephen by contrasting it with four aspects of the popular view of suicide bombers who are self-proclaimed martyrs or proclaimed as martyrs by those who promote these strategies. I emphasise that this is the popular generalised media view or stereotype. I do not have the knowledge, experience or authority to comment on any specific suicide bombers, nor on their faith or what is in their minds and hearts. I use the media generalisation only as a device to throw a contrasting light on the martyrdom of Stephen. Obviously, there have been many other martyrs, different in both mind and circumstances.

The first aspect of the mind of the martyr is his intention. Suicide bombers are portrayed as seeking death for themselves and also as a tactical tool in their quest to kill others. This may be motivated by socio-political factors at least as much as by religious ones, but we will confine ourselves to the religious factors.

Actively seeking martyrdom is rare in Christian history. The lines do blur a little here and there. For example we are familiar with historical incitement to holy war or ‘sacred violence’ where violent action is seen as pious. In these circumstances death as an unintended but not entirely unlikely result is seen as martyrdom. However, admiration and respect for those who died for their

faith has more commonly been a means of strengthening courage to face unsought persecution and martyrdom.

Stephen did not choose to die. He was not suicidal. He probably knew he would be killed but that was not what he sought.

Hard question number one: Stephen died willingly for Christ but his intent was to live in Christ. What is our intent, and what would we willingly endure?

The second aspect of the mind of the martyr was how he regarded his persecutors. Stephen did not attack his persecutors, glaring, accusing or seeking to harm them. He kept his eyes on the glory of God, and Jesus Christ, standing at the right hand of the Father. The glory of the Father and the Son was his concern, his only focus. This was what mattered, not those who hated Stephen and sought to harm him. At the time of death Stephen prayed, *Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*

The suicide bomber is focused on the death and destruction of others. It is to this end that his actions are focused. At the time of death, the intent is maximum carnage.

At the time of Stephen's death his focus was on God and his desire was that his persecutors be forgiven. His last words were, *Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*

Hard question number two: How do we regard those with whom we profoundly disagree? Those who offend us to the deepest core of our values and beliefs? Do we desire their harm? If they seek to harm us by word or deed, do we genuinely desire their forgiveness?

Thirdly, the martyr is intensely aware of what he believes God requires of him. For the suicide bomber, this is a self-appointed role as the agent of God's justice or vengeance. Not entirely unlike the members of the Sanhedrin perhaps, although there are other factors there.

However, we are not asked to be God's avengers. We are commanded to love, not to persecute.

Micah 6.8 says *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

Romans 12.19 says, *Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.* The place where "it is written" is Deuteronomy 32.35a, *It is mine to avenge; I will repay.*

This does not preclude us from seeking justice and seeking the coming of God's kingdom. Indeed, many have been martyred for the sake of justice. In relatively modern times, Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed for his eloquent outspokenness on civil rights. He used the scriptures to powerful effect.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, *We are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until 'justice runs down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream'*, a quote from Amos 5.24. And compare the death of Stephen with the words of Martin Luther King Jr. who was also to be martyred:

Like any man, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Stephen's eyes were also on the kingdom of God's mercy and God's glory.

Hard question number three: What do we believe God requires of us? Are our eyes on the glory of the Son at the right hand of the Father, and the coming of God's kingdom of loving kindness, of justice and mercy, of the light which drives out the darkness?

Fourth, and last, the martyr believes there will be a personal result from, or reward for, his martyrdom.

For the suicide bomber, there are expected material rewards, prestige and financial rewards for himself or his family, and the promised rewards of paradise.

Stephen did not seek personal rewards but spiritual rewards. He sought God – God's glory, God's kingdom. This was his heart's desire.

One of the things Stephen did not see or anticipate was the heart and the future of that young man, Saul, standing minding the coats. But that's another story.

Hard question number four: What is our true heart's desire? Is it to see the glory of God and the coming of his kingdom? Does this matter more to us than the other things that seek precedence in our lives?

Conclusion

So, do we want to be like Stephen?: Full of faith and the Holy Spirit, eyes on the glory of God and the Son standing at the right hand of the Father, seeing our ultimate destination with Jesus, and forgiving all who wrong us?

That's a big ask, maybe more than we can do. But perhaps we can take some small beginning steps in that direction.

We can try to reject self-glorification; we can try to love and forgive those who appeal to us the least; we can be mindful of what God does require of us; and we can regularly examine the true compass of our hearts. That much is certainly possible.

I will close with some more of Martin Luther King Jr.'s words: *Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.*

May we daily seek not our own will and our own glorification, but the glory of God, and the light of God's will, God's justice and God's mercy for all. **Amen**