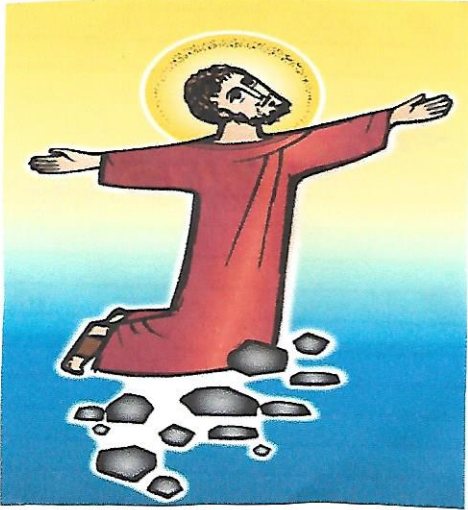


THE UPPER ALDE BENEFICE

The Fifth Sunday of Easter



Over the years people have often asked me how I write my sermons, by which I think they mean how I begin to think about what I want to say. The answer is always the same. I begin with the lessons set down for that particular Sunday and go from there. It means that it keeps preachers away from riding their own particular hobby-horses! It's the same pattern that I have followed since this series began and without fail I have concentrated on the Gospel reading in these weeks of the Easter season. This week, however, it was one of the other readings which caught my eye. It was the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. (You can read his complete story in Acts 6 & 7.)

It is a pity, in one way, that his feast day falls on December 26th and tends to get lost in the Christmas story.

He came to prominence because of a dispute. In the early days nearly all of those who became Christians had been Jews. Some spoke Hebrew as their first language and others spoke Greek. An argument arose because one group thought that some of their members were being treated badly in the daily food distribution. The Apostles heard of this situation and decided that it would not be appropriate for them to oversee the solution to the problem, as they had other responsibilities, but that they would appoint seven suitable people to ensure that everything was done fairly. One of these was Stephen who is described as *'a man full of God's grace and power who had performed great wonders and signs among the people'*.

Stephen was a good administrator and also a very powerful speaker. It was not long, therefore, before he was confronted by very powerful groups who were antagonistic to this new movement which Stephen represented. He was brought before the appropriate authorities and he made a defence of his beliefs in such a way that it stung his hearers. They could not have their evil motives exposed and they stoned him to death while, like his Lord, he prayed for their forgiveness. His final words show how much like Jesus he had become in such a short space of time.

'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 had said this, he fell asleep.'

Almost as an aside, the writer of Acts mentions that the witnesses who were carrying out this horrendous act had laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. This is the same Saul who became the Apostle Paul. Maybe this was the beginning of his conversion which culminated with his encounter with the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus.

I might be accused at this point of making an analogy which could appear somewhat trivial but some years ago, when I was a school chaplain, the head of General Studies asked me to give a lecture to the Sixth Form on the subject of Philosophy of Religion. Judging by their demeanour during the lecture I cannot say that they looked particularly enthralled. I thought I had done a reasonable job and after a number of years of encountering teenage boredom I did not give it too much thought. A few years later and completely out of the blue I received a letter from a girl who had been at that lecture. She wrote about what she had been doing and then told me that her purpose in writing was to let me know that the lecture I had given had completely changed the direction of her life. I have to say that my flabber had never been more gasted. It certainly made me very much more conscious of the fact that the things we say and do can have the most extraordinary effect upon people in ways which, at the time, we could not imagine.

Regardless of the career path we have chosen - doctor, bank teller, teacher, parent, priest, plumber - whether we are retired - if we truly consider ourselves disciples of the Risen Christ, we are called to *'do the work that he does'* (John 14:12). In our homes, workplaces and playgrounds, we are called to bring the miracle of Easter life: the reconciliation, justice and peace of the Risen One in whom God has revealed himself to all of humanity.

Prayer for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

Risen Christ, your wounds declare your love for the world and the wonder of your risen life:
give us compassion and courage to risk ourselves for those we serve,
to the glory of God the Father