

“Jesus stands in solidarity”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

Wesley Uniting Church, Forrest, ACT

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Every time I read of the stoning of Stephen, my mind goes back to a Bible study that I heard in 1985. It was given by Dr Han Wang San, a Korean lay church leader and elder of the Presbyterian Church, who at that time was professor of sociology at one of the big Seoul universities, who later on became one of Korea's vice-presidents and held a cabinet position in the Korean government in the 1990s, but in this study of the stoning of Stephen he took us back to an earlier stage in his life.

Dr Han was one of the leaders of the pro-democracy movement in South Korea back in the 1960s and 70s when Korea was governed by a succession of military dictatorships. During that time Dr Han spent 18 months in solitary confinement in a Korean prison, and in that 18 months the only book he had for any stimulus or any comfort was a copy of the Bible. After 2 or 3 months in solitary confinement a sympathetic guard told him that in the next door cell to him was another Christian protestor, who had no books whatsoever. Dr Han told us he spent 2 or 3 days agonising in prayer should he try to do something for his mate in the next door cell.

And eventually he decided yes he had to, so he tore his Bible up into sections, and he said rather sheepishly “I kept the best bits for myself - I kept the four gospels and the book of Acts, I kept the psalms and the prophets, and gave the rest to my mate next door”, through the sympathetic guard. And he said that over the next months he got to know his Bible very well, including the book of Acts. He was fascinated that in the story of the stoning of Stephen there's a particular emphasis and a particular vision that appears nowhere else in the Scriptures - listen to it in the first couple of verses: “filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look’, he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’”

Dr Han pointed out to us that elsewhere in the Scriptures, in a couple of the gospels and in Colossians and Ephesians, and in the Apostles and Nicene creeds, there are references to Jesus in heaven seated or sitting at the right hand of God. But here in Stephen's vision, as he's about to be executed, it's Jesus standing at the right hand of God. It's told to us twice, with Biblical emphasis. Dr Han said what's going on here? Why is Jesus standing?

And he said think of a football match. Those who go just to have a pleasant time and enjoy the match sit, they're spectators. But the bulk of the crowd at a football match get involved, they're participants, they stand up and boo the referee, they barrack for their side and they pour scorn on the opposition side, they're standing. Dr Han's vision was that as Stephen is about to be executed, he didn't think Jesus was just standing at the right hand of God, rather he was stamping his feet in frustration and anguish that one of his followers was about to be killed. Jesus is no spectator, Jesus participates with us. Jesus is in solidarity with those who are suffering for his sake. It's a beautiful image and it's stayed with me ever since, every time I read this chapter, of the stoning of Stephen.

Stephen got into trouble because of his marvellous speaking ability. Back a chapter or two earlier it says “but they (and this is the opponents in one of the synagogues in Jerusalem) could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which Stephen spoke”. But Stephen first comes to notice to us in the Scriptures not as a great speaker, not as a great evangelist, but as a doer, as a deacon. He was appointed to be in charge with others of the distribution of food to those who were in need within the Christian community and within the wider community. He's appointed primarily as a doer. But it's as a speaker and a doer that he gets into trouble with the authorities in Jerusalem, and is stoned to death.

A quick look at the passage from 1st Peter. This is one of my favourite passages, also set for today. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.. once you were not a people, but now you are God's people”. Notice how the Scriptures say “you are a chosen people. This passage doesn't say “God wants you to be” or “you're meant to become” or “hopefully you'll get there in the end”. This

passage says to us “you are a chosen race, you are God’s people”. And the people to whom it is addressed are no better than us, folks, Christians in Australia in the 21st century, we are God’s people. And our purpose is stated for us, that “you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”. Proclaim his mighty acts, what he’s done for us in Jesus Christ his Son, what he’s done for us in creation, what he does for us every day in being available to us as a God of love and of wisdom and of guidance. We are God’s people, and we are to proclaim, in word and in deed, and when we do so, the risen Jesus stands with us, in solidarity, in support, often frustrated, but stands with us, as we seek to serve God’s way in word and in deed.

Now I could stop there and I probably should, but let me go on to share with you one of the issues to do with solidarity and justice I’m much involved in at present. The conflict between Israel and Palestine seems to be intractable, with the tension, the fear and the suffering going on year after year. Perhaps more than any other single issue or place, this Middle East conflict does more to arouse deep feelings, extremist attitudes and even terrorism, and is a constant drag against the world’s aspirations and efforts for worldwide peace.

People of Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths are all involved in the Israel-Palestine conflict and in the efforts to bring about peace. Over the past 12-18 months the Palestinian Christians of Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza and Israel have been pleading in more heartfelt terms than ever before for the solidarity and support of the Christian family throughout the world. This, friends, is a fraught issue for us Christians. Our National Council of Churches in Australia and we in the Uniting Church are on the record as strongly supporting the right of the state of Israel to exist with secure internationally-guaranteed borders and we are very very conscious that behind our current support for the people of Israel lies a very chequered Christian history and lies the dreadful suffering of the Jewish people – 6 million of whom were killed in the Nazi Holocaust. And behind that Nazi Holocaust were some centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, Christian racism, where back in the Middle Ages and through to the 19th-20th centuries there were writings from some well-known Christian leaders that at the very least gave some favour, gave a little bit of support to the anti-Semitic movements that flourished in the 19th and 20th centuries and for which us Christians need to bear our burden of guilt. And we do.

So that means that anything we are asked to do that somehow is in conflict with what the state of Israel and the people of Israel and the Jewish people throughout the world are doing, is very hard for us Christians to accept and to come to the point. We walk various bits of barbed wire. One of the requests from the Palestinian Christian community and from the whole Palestinian community is that people throughout the world who want to try and help bring an end to the occupation of those Occupied Palestinian Territories, who want to bring a peaceful resolution between the people of Israel and the people of Palestine, is that we might engage in a boycott of Israel, a boycott of goods produced in Israel, a boycott of Israeli academics, a boycott of Israeli artistic and cultural contributions to the rest of the world. It’s a big request.

Where we Christians are taking up this request in places like Europe, including the Methodist Church in Britain, including in parts of North America – our partners in the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church in the USA – in Scandinavia, in various other parts of the world, most of the Christians have said, hang on a bit we’re not going to boycott Israel. But we will boycott the goods that are produced in the illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank. We now have access to a monthly updated list of what goods sold in Australia are produced in the illegal Israeli settlements, illegal under international law, in the conquered occupied territory of the West Bank. From those illegal settlements the most products that are available in Australia are cosmetics – Dead Sea cosmetics, you’ll have seen them in our shopping malls, they come from a couple of illegal settlements around the Dead Sea, land that has been confiscated from the rightful Palestinian owners.

So we’re contemplating in the Uniting Church such a boycott. We haven’t made a decision yet. I have to confess that I’m in the centre of this as one of our representatives to the World Council of Churches, as one who knows the Jerusalem Heads of Churches quite well personally, and as one who’s had some history of involvement over the past 20 years in Palestine and Israel. In the past months I’ve had meetings with various Uniting Church leaders, but more importantly with Jewish community leaders here in Australia. One of the facts about the Jewish community here in Australia is that proportionally-speaking more of them in Australia come from Holocaust victim families than in any other Jewish community in the world other than Israel itself. A high proportion of our Jewish community in Australia came as refugees from Germany and

Eastern Europe in the 1930s and following the second world war – one of those families lived next door to me in Melbourne when I was a child and I got to know the Schildberger family quite well.

So as we meet with the Jewish leaders and we say to them we're contemplating calling a boycott of illegal settlements goods then we receive a strong reaction – the very word "boycott" is of extraordinary sensitivity to the Jewish community because in the early 1930s one of the first Nazi Government actions was to call on the German people to boycott goods produced by their own Jewish communities in Germany. So boycott brings up all the Nazi Germany history for the Jewish community here in Australia and elsewhere.

With whom are we called to stand? With whom is Jesus standing, at this time? Is there an opportunity within the international community over these next months as President Obama seems to be suggesting, for a new effort, for a peaceful resolution between Israel and Palestine? Is there a place for our Australian Government to take a stance here, perhaps gingered up by the Australian Christian community?

We've recently established a group called the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network. It includes representatives from the Palestinian Australian community, from the trades unions, from international aid non-government organisations and from the churches – myself and the Rev Jim Barr who used to be minister down the road at the Canberra Baptist Church are the two Christian representatives on the Executive of the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network. We met here in Canberra, in our boardroom, all day yesterday, and we agonised over various questions such as the boycott and what should we be saying to our Australian Government.

So friends, I just share with you that dilemma, where does justice lie. We must support the people of Israel, that they can live in peace. But we must also respond to our Palestinian Christian sisters and brothers, who are crying out for action as they've lived under occupation now since 1967. Where does justice lie? What steps can we take in peace and in prayerfulness that might make a little bit of difference towards helping to bring about a peaceful resolution? Where does Jesus stand?

Jesus stands in solidarity with all those who suffer. While Jesus may have a foot in more than once camp at a time, Jesus stands in extraordinary anguish and frustration when people suffer needlessly year after year, decade after decade. We are called to stand with Jesus, to follow the guidance of Jesus. The vision of Stephen reminds us that Jesus is standing with us. Will we stand with him?

To the glory of God, Amen.