

Hope in the face of violence

It would have been nice, on the eve of my sabbatical, to have an upbeat sermon to deliver. But I'm afraid it is the stoning of Stephen which captured my attention. I see it was the same back in 2011, when I was troubled by the military execution of Osama bin Laden and the consequent rejoicing on the streets of America. 15 years on, and again violence around the world is increasing; and even British society is becoming more hostile. And here again in the lectionary is the hostile reaction to Stephen, resulting in his violent death.

There are tensions in the text: was Stephen condemned to death by a religious court, or was he lynched by a mob? The way Luke tells it there is a trial, which, without formally reaching a verdict or passing sentence, turns into a summary execution, driven by people's anger at what they consider to be Stephen's blasphemy. That vengeful anger is a dangerous emotion; but we see in our own time that there are those prepared to encourage, even deploy it for political ends. Luke points out the young man named Saul watching Stephen's stoning: not participating, but approving. Today it is generally young men who are encouraged to adopt hostile views, targetted at the other side, whoever they may be. Islamic extremism is one example; but is the Israeli Defence Force another? Social media is proving a powerful tool to keep resentment simmering away, until it can be unleashed. That might be in a terrorist act, such as we're seeing in the current wave of anti-Semitic attacks; or the staging of a hostile demonstration. What about the uprising in Washington when Donald Trump lost the 2020 presidential election; or the crowd which assembled when Rupert Lowe MP thought a small boat off Great Yarmouth was bringing migrants to the Norfolk coast?

Stoning is a penalty prescribed in the Pentateuch; but by the time of Stephen, if the Jewish Council did had the power to impose it, it is likely that it would have been more of a ritual execution: dropping the offender onto a hard surface, with only the witness casting the decisive stone. Luke's account of a free for all bears closer resemblance to what's set out in Leviticus; as does the Gospel story when a woman caught in the act of adultery is dragged before Jesus. He exposed the self-righteousness of the mob by ruling that the one without sin should cast the first stone. The crowd dispersed.

Violence fuelled or apparently sanctioned by self-righteous conviction can be just as dangerous and troubling as the emotion of a mob. Stoning is justified in the Pentateuch as ridding the community of evil influence. The equivalent in later, Christian history, would be the burnings at the stake during the Reformation. Now we just mourn the suffering on both sides of the religious divide. The application of each of these capital punishments as a remedy for blasphemy and beliefs held to be heretical seems distorted: do we think God needs us to defend his cause; to react violently on his behalf?

We can be relieved that such violent penalties been since been outlawed in this country; but only within living memory, if you consider the end of hanging in the 1960s. But the international law designed to place limits on violent conflict between nations is proving ineffective, with Russia, Israel and the United States, to name but three, prepared to put themselves beyond or above it.

Apart from the suffering caused, not least to civilians, the trouble is that violence engenders fear, suspicion, prejudice and thereby begets violence, whether locally, or on the other side of the world. We need actions which work to break that cycle. We can't influence Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin or Benjamin Netanyahu; but we can work (and vote) locally to encourage understanding, build relationships, counter prejudice and promote reconciliation.

In that direction our violent reading from the Acts of the Apostles holds out two sources of hope. For me, the character who really catches my attention is not Stephen: it's that *young man named Saul*. Perhaps that's what Luke intended. For we know who Saul is; and who he will become. An approving bystander in this scene, we know he will become a zealous persecutor of the church: in Luke's words, *ravaging the church and breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord* – fuelled by his religious convictions and, it seems, within the rule of law: sanctioned by letters from the chief priest to arrest and lawfully to convict. But we also know all that will change: soon Saul (or Paul) will be redirecting his religious zeal to promoting belief in Jesus Christ; no longer imposing suffering on others, but prepared to suffer himself, *becoming like [Christ] in his death* – those are Paul's own words, writing to the Philippians. By the grace of God, transformation is possible. We have to beware of placing those who perpetrate violence beyond the realm of redemption.

In a more literal way than Paul intends, *Becoming like Christ in his death* is what Luke shows Stephen doing: praying for his persecutors; commending his spirit to Jesus – Luke deliberately evokes the crucifixion. Both Stephen, as a faithful disciple, and Jesus, as the Saviour of the world, act to break the cycle of violence. There is no righteous anger or avenging recriminations against those who have acted violently towards them, for it is love which must prevail. And love cannot be imposed, least of all by violence: it can only be demonstrated, extended, shown. That God's love has been extended to us in Jesus, to be emulated by those who follow in his way, is the second and greater source of hope, for a sometimes violent world.