

During these Sundays after Easter our first lesson, instead of being from the Old Testament, has been drawn from the Acts of the Apostles. It is a book we often tend to pass over. The passages we read in these weeks of Easter present us with a picture of the Church on the move, of the Gospel being accepted and people of all backgrounds coming to faith. Of course this was not the whole story, even in those early days. The disciples faced a degree of harassment from the Jerusalem authorities and, as we are reminded in the passage that we read today, Stephen met his death at the hands of a mob.

This was a foretaste of what was to happen to so many of the disciples as they carried the gospel out from Jerusalem into the wider world. What often impresses those outside the Church is not so much the Church Triumphant as the fortitude of Christians in the face of suffering – the attitude of the Coptic Church in Egypt to the recent attacks by ISIS in Cairo are a recent example of this. Ordinary, understandable human reaction to suffering, transformed by the Gospel.

This is what we see in the attitude of Stephen in the closing moments of his life. There is a calmness in the face of death, prayer for those who are killing him, that comes from his allegiance to Christ. It is not just a matter of Stephen's faith giving him strength in the face of death, his attitude influences at least some of those who were present. Among those present at the death of Stephen was Saul of Tarsus. Could it be that the memory of the way Stephen faced his death was one of the initial influences that culminated with his own meeting with the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road? Augustine says of this passage, 'The Church owes Paul to the death of Stephen.'

Such strong and resilient faith such as we have seen in this passage can inspire, but can also leave us feeling slightly inadequate, asking perhaps ‘Why cannot I show that sort of confidence?’

If we are feeling like that it is worth turning to our Gospel passage. This finds us with Peter and the rest of the disciples in the Upper Room with Jesus on the night before he died. That night, Jesus speaks of his own coming death and suffering, of the problems they are going to face in the time to come.

We find them still uncertain, still trying to understand. Jesus explains to them the intimate relationship between himself and the Father. But not that, he is the one who enables them to draw close to the Father as he says ‘I am the Way.’

If you would forgive me for stating the obvious; any journey I undertake begins with where I begin. Jesus is with the disciples as they question, as they seek to understand and says ‘I am the Way’.

He draws near to where I am now. My journey begins whenever I realise, however faintly or imperfectly, that in Jesus God has already come to me and he accompanies me on my own journey towards God.

It is in this journey towards God, made in the company and strength of the Risen Christ, that I find power in the face of suffering and discover my place as a member of the people of God.