

## Communion Service Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May - led by Mike Findley



*Very good of Mike to come to us at short notice to cover for Tony Alderman, who is now home from hospital and rebuilding his strength. Mike's interest in family ancestry has revealed two family branches coming together, one Calvinist the other Irish Catholic. Spanning these two is perhaps the clue to Mike's very open-minded and enquiring mind-set on his faith journey.*

The day's readings were to include the story of Stephen's stoning—a truly horrific event. Yet, despite its brutality, there were aspects of the story that remained relevant to us; there were messages we could take from it and apply to our own lives. This was to be followed by a very well-known passage from John's Gospel: John, Chapter 14.

Preaching on such a familiar passage, Mike told us, was always a challenge, as everyone brought their own understandings and feelings about what these words meant to them. Sharing an interpretation that differed from someone's deeply held beliefs could be unsettling, but it was important to be sensitive to this diversity of thought.

Mike's hope was to introduce some new perspectives—ideas to ponder and take with us as we journeyed through the coming weeks, months, and years.

The **Stoning of Stephen** was a saddening, violent story. The early Christian apostles were focused on spreading the word, so they appointed seven others to handle social service tasks, and Stephen was among those appointed to serve food and support members of the fraternity. Stephen, full of God's grace and power, performed wonders and miraculous signs among the people, but he faced opposition, and these adversaries falsely accused him of blasphemy, taking him before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council that governed religious life in Israel.

Stephen had delivered a lengthy speech, recounting Jewish historical events and highlighting where the nation had gone astray by ignoring God. Stephen had asserted, "the Most High does not live in houses made by men," emphasising that God was not confined within a human construction, like the temple in Jerusalem, but rather among people wherever they were. This idea troubled the council, and it led to his death by stoning.

Many believed that God was met in church, but the truth was that God could be encountered anywhere—at home, walking down the street, doing daily chores, or in nature. God could be seen in the faces of others: you could see God's suffering in the suffering and injustice in the world - and in those who were different from us. God was not confined to a building or place. While church offered peace and space for reflection, God existed wherever we were, and God's Spirit was always with us.

Mike was irritated by people quoting Genesis, saying man was made in the image of God. The author writing thousands of years ago could not have comprehended the vastness of the universe or the power behind it. God wasn't a bigger, nicer, stronger version of us sitting above the clouds. God existed in a completely different sphere, unimaginable to our minds, even with our greater understanding, and we needed to rethink our conceptions about God and where God lived, recognising God's omnipresence. Despite God's vastness, He cared for each of us individually and wanted us to be part of His world.

Christianity was often seen as simply being nice to people, leading some to argue it was irrelevant in today's harsh world. However, the Bible's messages of love, care, and compassion had first been preached in violent and unjust settings, where life was cheap. These messages were necessary then, and they remained necessary now. The light of the gospel persisted and continued to shine in a dark world.

The story of Stephen presented further challenges. Saul, later known as Paul (after his meeting on the Damascus Road), had been hunting down Christians, but had just held the coats for the leaders of the Jewish community when they stoned Stephen. This prompted us to ask whether we let others do our unpleasant work for us, holding the coats metaphorically for those who did evil in our name, even if we pretended it was not us.

Finally, as Stephen was being stoned, he looked up to heaven. Did we ever look up metaphorically, lifting our eyes to the glory of God. Ecstasy meant to stand outside oneself, and by doing so, we could see things differently. We should strive to be changed, amazed, and open to visions of God in our lives.

The lectionary for the day included **John chapter 14**, a well-known passage. Jesus's farewell discourse after supper was delivered to apostles who were content yet confused, continually asking questions. Jesus had begun by urging his followers not to let their hearts be troubled. Many of us had troubled hearts, but Jesus encouraged us to calm down and have confidence. "**I am the way, the truth, and the life**" was one of seven "I Am" sayings in John's Gospel. The early Christians were called the People of the Way.

Jesus offered confidence, joy, and relaxation. Many struggled to relax and sought constant confirmation in life. We were challenged to be confident, to know we were not alone, and to be confident that God's Spirit was with us. We were invited to reach out and hold the hand of God as we walked through life. If we put our hand in God's hand, our confidence would build, peace would come, and we would become relaxed about the future.



Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." – a message we should take to heart.

*And just before the close of the Service Janet spotted Ted Maycock, who will be celebrating his 90<sup>th</sup> on Tuesday – so we were able to sing Happy Birthday to Ted after all.*