

Acts 7:55-60

⁵⁵But filled with the Holy Spirit,
he gazed into heaven
and saw the glory of God
and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

⁵⁶'Look,' he said,
'I see the heavens opened
and the Son of Man
standing at the right hand of God!'

⁵⁷But they covered their ears,
and with a loud shout
all rushed together
against him.

⁵⁸Then they dragged him out of the city
and began to stone him;
and the witnesses laid their coats
at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹While they were stoning Stephen,
he prayed,
'Lord Jesus,
receive my spirit.'

⁶⁰Then he knelt down
and cried out in a loud voice,
'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'

When he had said this,
he died.

Reading the Acts This Week

The stoning of Stephen is a fast forward from Acts 2
culminating the trouble in Acts 5 and 6
His eloquent speech, longer than Peter's
is the longest in the Acts opera

Here at the end of his speechifying,
he gazes into heaven, seeing them opened,
seeing Jesus at the right hand of God as judge
appealing for divine mercy for the lynch mob

It's easy and common to read this with anti-Semitism,
as blaming and condemning 'them'
failing to renounce Judaism in favour of Christianity
God forbid we reinforce that heritage!

It's possible to read this as a confession by 'us',
of a pattern of infidelity and error,
given a promise, we fail in response,
only to be given another chance – 'us', not 'them'

Today's text is modelled on Christ's crucifixion,
and echoes his appeal to Psalms and Isaiah 53:12
the cry to forgive, and image of suffering servant

Acts puts Saul in the frame, holding Stephen's cloak,
and approving of the vigilante *posse comitatus*
setting us up for the Damascus Road

If Saul was at Stephen's stoning in 33 CE
and reappears in early 50's CE in Galatia
what's he been doing for 2 decades?

How do we use the stones we're given?

John 14:1-14

'Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Believe in God, believe also in me.

²In my Father's house
there are many dwelling-places.

If it were not so,
would I have told you
that I go to prepare a place for you?

³And if I go and prepare a place for you,
I will come again and will take you to myself,
so that where I am, there you may be also.

⁴And you know the way
to the place where I am going.'

⁵Thomas said to him,
'Lord, we do not know where you are going.
How can we know the way?'

⁶Jesus said to him,
'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me.

⁷If you know me,
you will know my Father also.
From now on
you do know him
and have seen him.'

⁸ Philip said to him,
'Lord, show us the Father,
and we will be satisfied.'

⁹Jesus said to him,
'Have I been with you all this time, Philip,
and you still do not know me?

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.
How can you say, "Show us the Father"?

¹⁰Do you not believe
that I am in the Father
and the Father is in me?

The words that I say to you
I do not speak on my own;
but the Father
who dwells in me
does his works.

¹¹Believe me
that I am in the Father
and the Father is in me;
but if you do not,
then believe me
because of the works themselves.

¹²Very truly, I tell you,
the one who believes in me
will also do the works that I do
and, in fact, will do greater works than these,
because I am going to the Father.

¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name,
so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything,
I will do it.

Reading the Gospel This Week

This is the 6th of the 7 'I am' statements:
"I am the way, the truth, and the life"

You've heard the opening bits too often at funerals –
reassuring us of a promise of mercy and grace,
palliating grief with a naïve image of welcome

'Doubting' Thomas provokes the instrumental question –
if we don't know the destination, how do we know the way?
The 'I am' statement comes in response

It's easy and common to read this as exclusivism:
Jesus is the only way, the only truth, and the only life (gate)
(and our church is the closest match, better than others)

It's possible, if rarer, to read this as accessible invitation –
rejecting esoteric 'secret codes' alternatives
affirming the incarnation, 'in the flesh', as necessary,
and rejecting entirely 'spiritual', 'other-worldly' magic escapism

We are used to instrumental reason,
technology and technique,
rather than formal and effective causes,
familiar to pre-Modern, Greek and Roman cultures
and traditional indigenous peoples

This concept of 'indwelling',
Creator in Christ, Spirit in Christ, us in Christ,
and in turn Christ in Creator, Spirit, and us,
sounds like double-speak, 'anti-language' –
not referential, but differential,
not pointing to a thing, but differing from other views
which propose hierarchies

The diction of 'believing in' is similarly fraught: *pistis*
If you remember grammar, it's a use of a 'genitive case'
what is the relation of 'faith', 'trust', 'belief' and 'Christ'?
faith in him, faith of him, belief in relation to him?

Submission to a cognitive proposition or agent
is not the only option for 'reading' this response -
'identification with' might be a closer representation
or even 'belonging' from a mix of given and chosen elements

The diction of 'glorified' is the final signifier to notice this week
what does 'glorified' signify in John?
winning, transcending, superior?
or suffering, reconciling, incarnating?

I apologize for those longer notes,
but given the narrow dominant 'readings' of John 14,
palliating phrases for funerals,
hardly the time for speculative provocations,
or Yankee evangelical exclusivism takes on the text
'pray to win' in the 'gospel of prosperity'...

Here are links to a couple of times I preached John 14
(in this century)

April 2008 Thornhill UC
Meeting Jesus the Way, Truth, Life
http://www.billbrucewords.com/2008/04/meeting-jesus-way-truth-life_23.html

May 2017 Lakeview UC
"I Am": John's Jesus on Mothers' Day
<http://www.billbrucewords.com/2017/05/i-am-johns-jesus-on-mothers-day-john-14.html>