

**GSM 2/11/14**

**Acts 6:8 – 8:3**

*“If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story.”* – Orson Welles

In 2006 I took voluntary redundancy from the place I was working at the time. The redundancy payment was generous and it meant I didn't need to go straight back into work. Jo at that time was retraining as a teacher having spent the first part of her working life as a physio, and part of her retraining was doing an English degree part-time at London Met. We agreed that she would increase the pace of her studies for 6 months whilst I spent more time looking after the kids at home. Now Jonny was already at school at that stage but Becca wasn't – she was 3. She and I spent a lot of time together in that 6 months, and it's a really precious time I look back on with great fondness. But along with the good things around that time I developed a hatred of something. This would be the first thing I would put into Room 101. If there was one thing I could banish into outer darkness it would be this.



Specifically, the Barbie website. Here's the reason I came to detest it so much. Any other website you go on with a young child – Cbeebies, Disney, whatever – would tell you stories.

So you'd be reading a story about Flopsy Bunny or whatever and it would go like this "Flopsy Bunny is happy – Flopsy Bunny is sad because something troubling is happening – something happens to make the bad thing go away – Flopsy Bunny is happy again". But – oh, the Barbie website. Uniquely, the Barbie website would do this. "Barbie is happy – Barbie is sad because something troubling is happening – *if you want to hear the rest of the story then buy our Barbie DVD "Barbie and Dancing Pegasus"*". So I had a girl worried because Barbie couldn't dance any more, or because Barbie had stubbed her toe, or whatever, and there was no way of finding out how this great calamity could be overcome without buying the DVD. That would cost £14.99 and take a number of days to arrive. How I hated the Barbie website.

Here's the thing. Each of us has an in-built yearning to see the end of the story, to know that justice is done, to know that a happy ending comes. In classic Greek tragedy, there is always a reckoning – a nemesis – for the bad guy, the guy that causes the tragedy through his evil or character fault. Disney kids films always end with a happy ever after. Of course, when filmmakers monkey with this notion you get some of the most unsettling films ever made – for those of you who have seen the film *Seven* you know what I mean – great evil is done but at the end of the film it's unresolved. It unsettles you. In law you have the notion of what is called *natural justice* – this notion that for every evil there needs to be something put right, there needs to be a *resolution*. This is one of the great themes in most of the great world faiths also – the problem of evil is solved by sacrifice, or scapegoating, or doing penance or paying some sort of price. Christianity is no exception here – the story of the Bible is how God solved the problem of man's rebellion so that man could be in harmony with God once again. It's the ultimate happy ending.

But the thing with happy endings is that they often take a while to come. The great actor Orson Welles said this "If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story."

*"If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story."* – Orson Welles

That's surely true. In any story that ends with a happy ending, press the pause button at certain stages in the story and it doesn't look happy. Sleeping Beauty eats the poisoned apple and falls into a coma. Rapunzel is locked up in a tower. Not good. So where do you know where the ending is and whether it's happy? Where do we stop the story and work out if the ending is happy or not?

This morning's story doesn't look much like a happy ending, does it? A man is falsely accused, comes before a kangaroo court and is stoned to death. The first person in Acts who dies for his Christian faith. Chapter 8 verse 1 – the church is scattered. Verse 2 – people mourn the death of Stephen. Verse 3 – Saul begins to destroy the church.

But have we stopped the story at the wrong time? Is there a happy ending here? Yes. What we see in this story is two things – firstly, that as Christians we will face opposition, and secondly that God will work things for good.

Let's take these in turn. Christians will face opposition. Turn with me to chapter 6. What do we see there of Stephen? Verse 8 – he is doing great wonders and miraculous signs. Verse 10 – he is speaking with great wisdom and by the Spirit. Verse 15 – his face was like the face of an angel. This is a man who stands out. You would look at him and say – hold on a sec, it looks like this guy has God on his side. How is he doing those wonders and miracles? Where did he get that wisdom from? Why is his face shining like that?

Maybe there's a tendency for us to think that when we're doing God's work people are always going to respond positively. People around us when they learn that we're Christians might start like this:-



However, if we're helping people, if we're speaking the truth, if we're making society a better place, then people will turn from that into this:-



They will respond in praise to God. The Bible does say we should do good deeds so people will see them and praise God. But that's not the only response we'll get. Even where Christians do good, there will be those that are against us and attack us. People will start like this:



And end like this:



There will be people whose beliefs we challenge as Christians, as Stephen did here with the members of the synagogue. There will be others that simply take against us and want us out of the way. And we can't expect people opposed to us to play fair. Look again at chapter 6 –

verse 9, the members of the synagogue tried to argue with Stephen but found they couldn't, so they resort to underhand methods. Verse 11, they encourage people to accuse Stephen of blasphemy. Verse 12, they stir up the people and the leaders. Verse 13, they produce false witnesses.

None of us should be surprised at the fact that as Christians we face opposition from some people and that some people are not won over by our actions or words. The Christian faith is *against* what the world stands for. The Bible says that God so loved the world that he sent his son, but the world has not loved God back. We are called to love those around us, our family, our colleagues, our neighbours, but we cannot expect that everyone will love us back. Let's not be naïve on this. This is what Jesus said to his disciples in John 15 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." As Christians, the world will *hate us*.

As if to prove the point, Stephen in his speech in Acts 7 talks of a number of different situations where great men of Israel were rejected or treated harshly by those around them. In verse 6 God tells Abraham how his descendants will be enslaved and ill-treated. In verse 9 Stephen speaks of Joseph being sold as a slave. In verse 27 and 28 Moses is rejected by those he thought he was serving. In verse 39 the people of Israel reject Moses and turn to other gods. And Stephen ends his speech this way, reading from verse 51: "You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him."

We will face opposition. Stephen faced opposition, and died horribly. Shall we stop the story there? Not much of a happy ending. Or shall we look further? Because if we do we'll see how God is working here.

Let's start by looking at the characters mentioned by Stephen in his speech in Acts 7. The first one mentioned is Abraham in verses 1-8. There we see Abraham becoming an exile, all on the basis of a promise that God would give his descendants the land. But first there would be 400 years of ill-treatment. The second one is Joseph in verse 9-16. He rises to a place in Egypt second only to Pharaoh. But first there is slavery. Then there is Moses in verses 20-43. He leads God's people to freedom. But also, he is at risk of death as a child. He is rejected when he tries to sort out an argument between two Israelites. And he has the people turn away to worship an idol when in the wilderness. What's the pattern here? Is God only with these people in the good times? No – God makes his promise to Abraham before he goes into exile. God gives Joseph his famous dreams before he is sold into slavery. And God meets Moses at the burning bush before the people turn to idols.

What pattern do we see here? God's people receive promises and callings but then go through suffering before they are fulfilled. Where should we stop the story in the case of each of these great men of the Old Testament? When they're facing death? When they're sold into slavery? When they're in exile? Or when the promises are fulfilled?

How do we get to the happy ending? There are two things going on here.

## God is at work

Firstly, God is working to spread the gospel. In verse 1 of chapter 8 we read that the church was scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. How terrible – what great persecution that drives people from their homes into foreign lands. But wait – turn back from verse 1 of chapter 8 to verse 8 of chapter 1. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, *and in all Judea and Samaria*, and to the ends of the earth”. Hadn't Jesus said to the church that they would be his witnesses in all Judea and Samaria? No-one had left Jerusalem to spread the gospel into those places despite what Jesus had said. Suddenly, there is a movement of Christian believers into Judea and Samaria, speaking the gospel, telling people about Jesus. The words of Jesus are fulfilled. Maybe not fulfilled in the way the believers expected or hoped. But they are fulfilled. God is working his purpose out. Now, was it a *good* thing that the church was persecuted and Stephen died? Of course not! But despite the thing being bad, God worked in it.

But for me the most striking thing here is this –

## Stephen's defiance

Stephen is faced with a murderous mob and must have realised that his life was at least in danger. What would we have done? Maybe try to backtrack a bit – suggest that he had been misunderstood. After all, we're told that the people set up to testify against him were false witnesses. At the very least in that sort of situation I'm not sure that I would have *gone out of my way* to wind up the mob who were after my blood. Now look at how Stephen addresses his accusers in verse 51 – he calls them stiff-necked or stubborn. He says they have uncircumcised hearts and ears, which means that although they may show the outward signs of being God's people inwardly they are just like the hated Gentiles. And he calls them murderers.

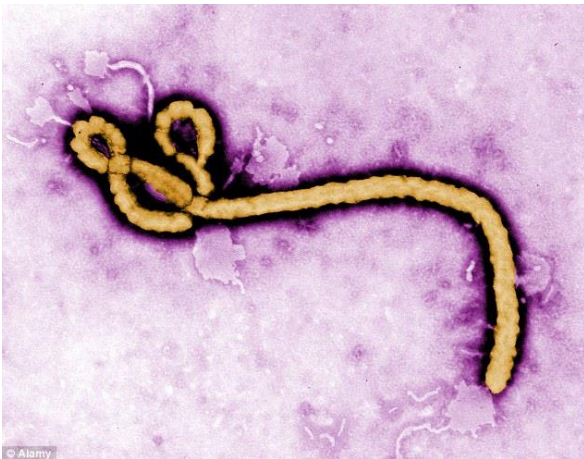
It's hardly likely to calm them down, is it?

Christians down the ages have always taken risks. They have risked their lives, or put themselves in deliberate danger, for the sake of the gospel. My family and I last week visited the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam, where a family of Jews were kept in hiding by the employees of a jam factory. At the end of the tour there is room for visitors to reflect and leave behind comments, and it showed what some famous people had said. There was one reflection that stuck with us all from a Jewish actor whose name escapes me, who said that he used to play a game with his sister when they were growing up – they used to try to work out, if the Nazis came for them, who could they rely on to hide their family?





It reminded me of the story of Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch woman whose father took in Jews fleeing the persecution of the Nazis and hid them in their house. Eventually the ten Boom family were rounded up and sent to concentration camps and various members of the family died there. The ten Boom family were not Jewish and did not face the same risks as those they were helping. Yet they put themselves in deliberate danger in helping to hide them. And several of them died.



Here's another example. This is the Ebola virus. At this stage we don't know of course whether there will be an outbreak in London, though it seems likely that at some stage someone infected will come into London. Maybe that person will infect others, maybe the virus will mutate and spread. People may begin to panic. How will we react in the worst case scenario? Well, in the third century AD there was a great plague that swept through the Roman world, more deadly than the current Ebola outbreak. There was a bishop in the church at the time called Dionysius who wrote this:-

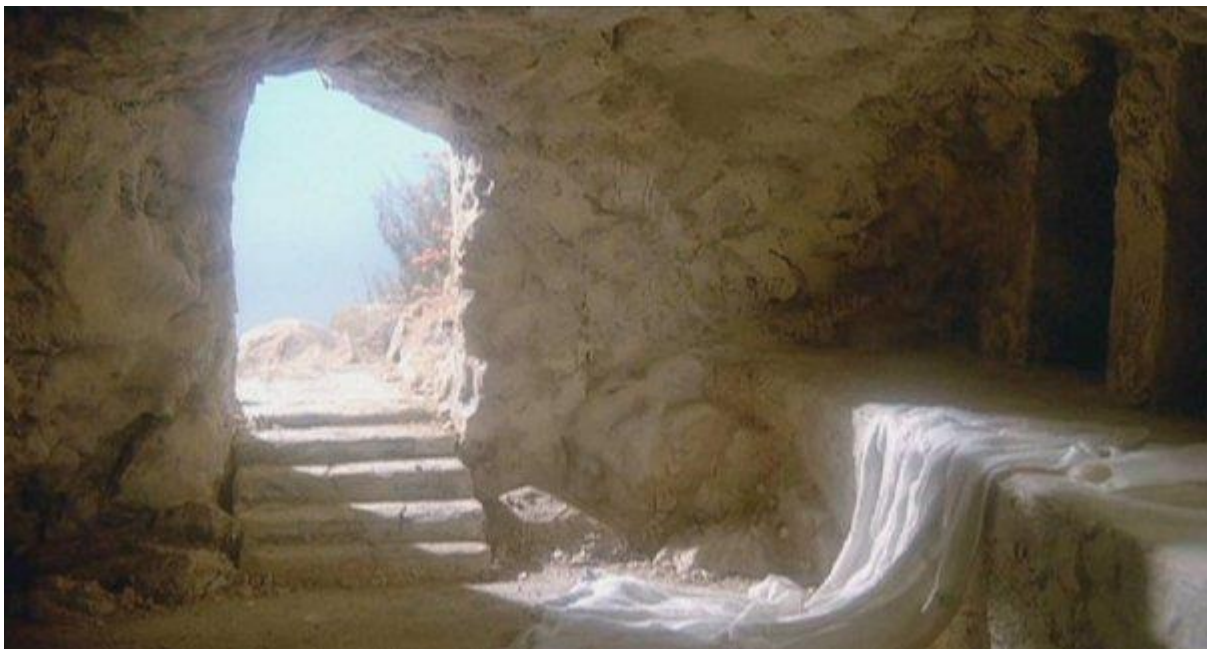
***Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge***

*of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead ...*

*The pagans behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease.*

Now clearly if you want to survive then you'd behave as the pagans did – get away from infected people as quickly as you can. But the Christians took in the sick, often at the cost of their own lives.

Why? Were the Christians in the third century *better people* than those around them? Were the ten Boom family in some way good in the way that their neighbours weren't? Maybe, but I think it's more likely that the third century Christians knew that their story didn't end with their death.



What drives our actions? If our life comes to an end with our death, then we should run away from risk, whether that's turning away those who are sick or refusing to hide those fleeing the authorities. But Stephen knew that his death was not the end of his story. He has a vision of Jesus welcoming him into heaven. And did you notice? His two prayers at the end of chapter 7 mirror Jesus's prayers on the cross. "While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit". Then he fell on his knees and cried out "Lord, do not hold this against them".

Why the parallel with Jesus's death? Because for all Christians, our life follows the pattern set by Jesus, of death and resurrection. We know from the Bible that for those who follow Christ, the world will hate them and they will face opposition. But we know from Jesus's resurrection that those who follow him do not have their stories end with their death. 2 Corinthians 4:14 – "we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence."

For Christians, the ultimate happy ending is not a good death, or a legacy of everyone remembering how nice you were or what a good husband, father, wife, mother, or whatever. It is not knowing that your children are happy and well set. It is to be welcomed home into heaven with the words "well done, good and faithful servant". I want that. I want that so much. In heaven we find the world made right, brought under God's command, the curse lifted, full forgiveness, knowing God fully, seeing him face to face. We will see God as he is, no longer through a glass darkly. And we will marvel and be taken up in his love, justice and majesty. We will share in his glory.

To finish. This passage begins the process when people went out from Jerusalem as missionaries either because they were scattered and had to flee, or because they went on planned missionary journeys. These involved risk. The Greek word for "witness" is the word we get our English word "martyr" from. A martyr is someone who dies for their faith. Throughout history, God's people have been one or two steps away from dying for their faith. How about us? We live in a country where it is safe at the moment to be a Christian. Go back a couple of centuries and people were being burned at the stake in England. Who

knows what the future holds for us in terms of opposition to the gospel or in terms of the challenges that lie before us. We may find ourselves at risk because of our faith, or in situations where we may have to take difficult choices. Our actions will show what we believe. Our actions will depend on us knowing where our story ends.