

The Cost of the Mission: Stephen's Martyrdom

The cost of being a disciple who seeks to be faithful to Jesus mission

1. Intro

- The same-sex marriage debate last year got very personal and costly for a number of Christians holding to a traditional view of marriage
- Mark Allaby is a Christian man and used to be an exec at PWC
 - In 2016 he was pressured to stand down from the board of Australian Christian Lobby because of a social media campaign from same-sex marriage activists against his employer PWC accusing the company of hypocrisy for allowing an employee to be involved with "an anti-LGBTI - organisation".
 - Not only did he step down from the board of ACL, he eventually left his employment at PricewaterhouseCoopers, due to the public shaming of both himself and PWC
 - Not long after he joined IBM, who were once more targeted by the same-sex marriage activists because Mr Allaby was a board member of Lachlan Macquarie Institute - another Christian organisation. They declared Mr Allaby's role on the board was incompatible with IBM's support of the LGBTI cause
- Margaret Court was another ... who was publically shamed by the media and many others for daring to publically state her view on the issue of same-sex marriage
- Because it was considered blasphemy not to affirm same-sex marriage ...
 - Her character, and her legacy were destroyed and
 - She was metaphorically exiled by most Australians
- For Margaret Court and Mark Allaby being a Christian and standing up for what they believe ... has come at a cost ... because the world around us tells us loud and clear ... that advocating for a traditional view of marriage is blasphemous
- Now it's not just issues of sexuality and gender that the world considers blasphemy
 - Jesus is the only way
 - Bible gives us an objective truth
 - Humanity is sinful and needs saving

- To say any of those things today will land you in the court of social media being charged with blasphemy ... not against God ... but against modern secularism
- And what is true for Court and Allaby ... is true for anyone who's a disciple of Jesus and is committed to standing up for the things they believe
 - Yes, it's possible to hide and stay silent and not bear the cost
 - But if you're a person who's committed to declaring the good news of Jesus to people around you ... then there'll be a cost
- As we look at Acts 7 ... we see there **is** a real cost to mission
 - If you and I are going to live to be and make disciples of Jesus
 - If you want to see Peakhurst and beyond transformed by the gospel ... then it will cost you
- As we look at this chapter this morning ... we're going to see how Stephen suffered a great cost for standing firm in his faith and boldly declaring the gospel
- As we do that, we'll see
 - **Why** is there a cost to mission?
 - **What** is the cost of mission?
 - How do you bear the cost of mission

2. Context

- Jesus has risen from the dead
- He's appeared to many people and at many times
- During this time he commissioned his disciples, saying
 - *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth"* 1:8
- The pattern we've seen since then is ...
 - After receiving the HS in Acts 2 ... the disciples have been boldly declaring the gospel in Jerusalem
 - And that whenever they've done that ... it's inevitably met with opposition and persecution
 - And yet despite that, God is ensuring his church continues to grow

3. Why is there a cost of mission?

- Last week we were introduced to Stephen in 6:5

- He's one of the deacons appointed to help oversee the ministry to widows
- Luke describes him as a man
 - Full of faith and the HS (6:5)
 - Full of grace and power (6:8)
 - He was able to speak about Jesus with great insight (v10)
- He was so persuasive and thought through in what he had to say ... that the religious leaders
 - Were unable to match him in their debates ...
 - So they trumped up false charges and false witnesses to silence him
- What's their accusation?
- Blasphemy against Moses and God! (v11)
 - They hit him with two charges in v13-14
 - *"This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.*
- First charge is ...
 - Blasphemy against God ... because he is speaking against the holy place / temple, saying that Jesus will destroy it
- Second charge is ...
 - Blasphemy against Moses ... because he speaking against the law, saying that Jesus will change the customs handed down by Moses
- And the rest of Acts 7 is Stephen's response to these charges
- Now the Jews in Jesus time had developed this idea about the temple that bordered on idolatry and superstition
 - Because the Temple is the symbolic house of God and represented God's presence among them ...
 - They thought ... as long as they have the Temple ... then they're invincible
 - Because ... it's God's temple, it's God's house, and God is powerful ... and as long as he is with us ... we're safe
- And as a result ...
 - The Jews became complacent and apathetic and arrogant in their relationship with God
 - Because to them ... the Temple was a like a good luck charm
 - As long as they had the Temple ... they were sweet

- And along comes Jesus teaching that temple was just a shadow of the real temple to come
 - That he is the true temple, because
 - He's the true high priest who offers the once and for all sacrifice for people
 - He's the true presence of God among them
 - He's the one they're to come to if they want to come into God's presence

- So when he said in John 2:19 - "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."
 - He of course is referring to himself and his impending death and resurrection
 - The Jews think he's referring to the physical temple ... and so they are think that by destroying the temple ... God presence will be removed from them

- Now based on their accusation in 6:14, Stephen has clearly been teaching them what Jesus taught

- And so in the face of their accusation of blasphemy ... he gives this lengthy reply

- And his basic argument is this ...
 - God is not restrained or confined to a building
 - His glory and presence is available without travelling to Jerusalem and a temple
 - God is not in a box! God is bigger than that
 - He proves their charges are spectacularly misguided ... by pointing them back to their very own scriptures

- He walks them through their own history and reminds them of all the times that God was present with and appeared to his people
 - Abraham in Chaldea (Babylon / Iraq) and Haran (Turkey)
 - Joseph in Egypt
 - Moses in Egypt and in Midian and in Egypt
 - Israel in the desert > Sinai > tabernacle

- Wherever they were and wherever they went ... God was there in their midst
 - revealing himself to them
 - protecting and providing for them

- When King Solomon finally built the temple in Jerusalem about 1000BC, God warned that he 'does not live in houses made by men' (v48)
- And in v49-50 ... Stephen quotes Isaiah 66:1-2 where God says
 - He's not confined to a temple and he's not even confined to Israel ...
 - For heaven is his throne and the earth is his footstool and there's no house / temple anyone can ever build for me that can contain me

- Stephen's main point here is clear
 - He can't be guilty of blasphemy against the Temple ... because God doesn't live there
 - The implication is, that they are the ones blaspheming ...
 - because they're putting their trust in the Temple building and worrying that it might be destroyed ...
 - rather than putting their trust in a the true Temple Jesus ... whom they did destroy

- Their second accusation against Stephen is
 - Blasphemy against Moses because he is accused of speaking against the law, saying that Jesus will change the customs handed down by Moses

- The customs that Stephen is being accused of saying that Jesus will change ... are not the OT Law given to Moses at Mt Sinai¹
 - Its referring to the oral traditions that the religious leaders had developed over the years to interpret or apply the Law ... and these were wrongly regarded as having come from Moses

- And Jesus quite rightly attacked those traditions, particularly where they obscured the law or caused people to deviate from the Law
- 7:39-43 and in v51-53 Stephen's response is ...
 - "I don't disregard the law — it is you who do so."
 - He points to how
 - Israelites where making and worshipping idols even while Moses was up the mountain receiving the Law
 - How they worshipped other gods
 - How they ignored and killed the prophets who urged them to turn back to and obey the Law

- And he goes on to say ...

¹ Ethos = custom vs Nomos = Law

- "Now you have betrayed and murdered the Righteous One the Law pointed to"
- "If you'd been obeying the Law ... you wouldn't have killed Jesus"
- In effect, what they'd done is create all these traditions that were their attempts to make the Law do-able ... and ignored the Law itself
- And so when Jesus comes and challenges them on this ... and Stephen reiterates Jesus teaching ... he's accused of blasphemy

Implication

- Here's the problem
- The Jews had in effect attempted to constrain and limit God and the Law to a form that they were comfortable with
 - And when Stephen started preaching the truth ... they didn't like it
- They had God in a box that was comfortable for them ... and had limited him to a form that didn't challenge them too much
- They thought they had the customs under control ... which allowed them to ignore the essence of the Law and not be challenged by them either

- But when Stephen speaks the truth ... and doesn't conform his message to
 - what they want to hear ...
 - what they're comfortable with
 - what they find tolerable ...
- They say "you can't say that" and they charge him with blasphemy

Application

- It's not very different today both in the world and in our churches
- Unless you proclaim a version of Christianity or the gospel that the world is happy with ... it will accuse you of blasphemy

- What are the things modern people hold as sacrosanct?
 - I'm a good person
 - I have the right to do what I want
 - Life is all about being happy
- Anything that challenges that ... is blasphemous

- So when it comes to God, Christianity and Jesus ... the world wants to limit God and put him in a box so he doesn't challenge them or their world view
- And so, people will often say things like ...
 - I like to think of God like this ... [they will define their view of God]
 - I don't like the idea of ...

- Hell, sin, judgment, traditional view of sexuality / marriage
- When you hold to and proclaim the truth of the gospel ... the world will oppose you
 - It will charge you of blasphemy
- Tow the line, tweak the message, make it more tolerable ... and the world will tolerate you
- Don't tow the line and speak the **truth** ... the world will not tolerate you at all and will hate you

- It's not just a problem with the world wanting to put God in a box and limit him to something they're comfortable with
- Christians do it too
- **Illustration – Churches in SA**
- John telling me a story of a Pentecostal pastor he knows from South Africa who runs and speaks at various pastors conferences
 - Told John of the time he spent a whole week preaching the gospel > a whole bunch of pastors were converted!
 - Pastors came up to him thanking him ... saying they'd never heard the gospel preached like that before
 - And when they went home and started preaching the truth of the gospel ... people left their churches because they didn't like what they were hearing
 - One church went from church of 250 > 10!

- Why?
- You hold to and teach truth of god's word ... it's going to challenge you
- You should expect it to challenge you
- Often church people / Christians will say ...
 - "we don't like what you're teaching"
 - "This doesn't conform with how I like to think about God"
 - "I don't like it when you teach ..
 - Being a Christian means sharing my faith with others
 - Being a follower of Christ means being generous with my money
 - Being a disciple of Jesus means I have to confront my sin"

- **Illustration – Stepford Wives**
- If you won't allow the truth of God's word to it challenge and correct your thinking about yourself and God ... then you don't have a real god
 - All you have is a god that's a figment of your imagination
 - And a god you define and control is not a god worth having anyway

- Not only
 - will be a god with no power, no authority, no wisdom
 - it's not a god you can have a personal relationship with
- In any truly personal relationship, the other person has to be able to challenge you
- For example, if a wife is not allowed to contradict her husband, they won't have an intimate and meaningful relationship

- Do you know the movie The Stepford Wives?
 - The husbands of Stepford, Connecticut, decide to have their wives turned into robots who never cross the wills of their husbands
 - A Stepford wife was wonderfully compliant and beautiful, but no one in their right mind would describe such a marriage as intimate or personal

- Now, what happens if you eliminate anything from the Bible that offends your sensibility and crosses your will?
 - If you pick and choose what you want to believe and reject the rest, how will you ever have a God who can challenge you?
 - You won't!
 - You'll have a Stepford god!
 - You'll essentially have a god of your own making, and not a God with whom you can have a relationship and genuine interaction

- Only if your God can say things that challenge you and push you and stretch you ... as in a real friendship or marriage ... will you know that you have gotten hold of a real God and not a figment of your imagination
- And so the truth of God's word ... the truth of the gospel ... is not the enemy of a personal relationship with God ... it's the precondition for it

- There a cost to mission?
 - Because the truth about Jesus challenges people's worldviews
 - And unless you're willing to have a real and personal with God and allow him to challenge you ... the truth of the gospel will be blasphemy

4. What is the cost of mission?

- What is the cost to mission?
- What happens to Stephen?
- Despite being a man of great wisdom and godliness, full of grace a power, we see 6:9 ... no sooner does he start being a witness for Jesus ... he immediately begins to face opposition

- The religious leaders and the cultural elite come out and begin to debate with him
- Nothing wrong with debate
 - It's what the ancient Greek philosophers used to do
 - It's the foundational principal behind our modern world's belief in the freedom of speech
- However, when it became apparent that they were unable to match Stephen's logic, insight and wisdom in order to silence him ... they resorted to more underhanded tactics
 - They secretly persuaded some men to accuse Stephen of blasphemy
 - Then they produced false witnesses to testify against Stephen and the things he was saying
- They mocked him when he refused to deviate from the truth
 - And when the truth cut them so deep ... they became so furious ... they threw all legal protocols out the window ... grabbed him ... hurled him outside ... and stoned him to death

Application

- When it comes to living to be and make disciples of Jesus ... and seeking to see Peakhurst and beyond transformed by the gospel
 - Of course you ought to expect to face opposition
 - You ought to expect others to think differently ... to hold to different beliefs
 - That's okay ... you should welcome healthy debate
- However, one thing this passage teaches us loud and clear ...
 - That being a godly, faithful disciple of Christ ... is no guarantee of safety, security and prosperity
- And often, as in Stephen's case, a person's godliness, character or wisdom will be ignored
 - Because ... when you boldly proclaim the gospel that challenges the worldview of those around you ...
 - you will be de-friended, slandered, accused, abused, despised and in some countries even killed ...
 - regardless of how good or goodly or selfless you may be
- When it comes to mission ... there will be a cost

5. How to bear the cost?

- What's amazing about Stephen ... is the incredible peace and joy and forgiveness he portrays ... even as they are stoning him
- How does he do that?
- What resources and strength did he have that enabled him to deal with the cost of mission?
- The answer is there in v55-56 ... Stephen looked up to heaven and 'sees' the Son of Man standing, as opposed to sitting, at the right hand of God
- What was the significance of that?
- There are other places in the Bible where Jesus is seen **seated** at the right hand of God²
- But most commentators agree, that Christ **standing** at God's right hand is symbolic of him interceding to the Father on our behalf ... advocating for those who are his³
- So what Stephen sees ... is his Lord and Saviour ... the one he's been proclaiming ... the one for whom he's about to die
 - standing beside the Father, effectively commending the one whom the world is condemning
- As one commentator says ...
 - "Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God."
- Therefore, at the very moment that an earthly court was condemning Stephen, he realised that the heavenly court was commending him
- At that moment, Stephen got a vivid, powerful sight of what he already knew in his head
 - That in Christ we're dearly loved by God and free from condemnation
 - But the Spirit took that head knowledge ... and gave him a glimpse of the heavenly reality that's true for every disciple of Jesus
- At that moment,
 - the verdict there at the throne of God became so real and overwhelming to him; that
 - the verdict here, in the earthly kangaroo court, became inconsequential

² Matthew 22:69; Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3

³ Rom 8:34

- And so he was able to face his accusers with not just boldness ... but even with a calmness and joy and forgiveness

Application

- We want to see Peakhurst and beyond transformed by the good news of Jesus
 - It means being bold witnesses to Jesus
 - Yes there will be a cost
- But at that moment you're facing the cost for being bold in your witness for Christ ...
- When you're being accused, mocked, abused, or mistreated...
 - how does this encourage you to be a courageous witness for Jesus?
- Do what Stephen did
- Look to heaven and know and see that the risen Lord Jesus is standing before the Father advocating for you
 - While in the courtroom of life, the world may be condemning you ...
 - In the courtroom of heaven, the King of kings and Lord of lords is commending you to the Father in heaven
- To the degree you're aware of Jesus' work
 - as your advocate,
 - as your saviour before the Father
 - then you will have the courage to bear the cost ... and carry on in joy and peace being a bold and faithful witness for Christ

PRAY