

Usually, on a Good Friday, we would read one of the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus. And you know the story:

- Our beautiful saviour was unjustly accused;
- Jesus Christ was pronounced “guilty”;
- He was given a brutal flogging;
- He had a crown of thorns pushed down into His head;
- He was mocked and ridiculed;
- They dressed Him up as a king and laughed at Him – gave him a little reed as a sceptre;
- And then He was made to carry His own cross outside of the city.
- And there, He was nailed to that cross, and hung up until He died.
- And then, just to make sure He was dead, they stabbed Him in the side with a spear, and blood and water flowed.
- And He was taken down, and laid in a tomb, and a big stone was rolled across its entrance.

You probably also know, that:

- as Jesus died, the earth shook;
- the world went dark;
- the curtain in the temple was torn, from top to bottom.
- Some people who were known to be dead, were raised and were seen walking around....

You know the story.... You've heard the pain and torment that Jesus bore for us on the cross... This year, we're going to do it a bit different. We're not going to read the Gospel stories.... Today we're going to read what God has to say to those who are “stiff-necked” and “uncircumcised in heart and ears”.... You see, **these** are the ones who rejected

Jesus. **These** are the ones who had Jesus crucified. **These** are the ones who continued to disbelieve that Jesus is The Christ, even **after** He was raised from the dead, and even after the Holy Spirit had come in power upon the church...

So today's reading is coming from the book of Acts, and it's mostly a speech that Stephen gave. Stephen was one of the first Christian leaders, in the Early Church. Like Jesus, **he** was falsely accused. Like Jesus, **he** was rejected and executed. And when **Stephen** was put on trial, he said to his accusers "Look, you lot are just like your forefathers – they rejected the prophets who foretold Jesus... And now, you lot reject Him yourselves... And you will not listen to the truth – no matter how much evidence God shows you, you won't believe...."

So, let's read it together, and we're going to begin at Acts 6:8

And Stephen gives a brief summary of the journey of God's people through the Old Testament (so it's quite a long reading)..., and we will learn how this journey has always been a story of God's people, rejecting the activity of God – rejecting the work of the Holy Spirit.

Stephen Is Seized

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Pyreneans, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with

Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Stephen's Speech

⁷ And the high priest said, "Are these things so?"

² And Stephen said:

"Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³ and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.' ⁴ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.

⁵ Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he

had no child.⁶ And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years.⁷ 'But I will judge the nation that they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.'⁸ And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

⁹ "And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him¹⁰ and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favour and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.

¹¹ Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food.¹² But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit.¹³ And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh.¹⁴ And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all.¹⁵ And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers,¹⁶ and they were carried back to Shechem

and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

¹⁷ "But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt ¹⁸ until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. ¹⁹ He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. ²⁰ At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house, ²¹ and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. ²² And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.

²³ "When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. ²⁴ And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. ²⁵ He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. ²⁶ And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarrelling and tried to reconcile them, saying, 'Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?' ²⁷ But the man who was wronging his neighbour thrust him aside, saying,

'Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?' ²⁸ Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' ²⁹ At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

³⁰ "Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. ³¹ When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ³² 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.' And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. ³³ Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. ³⁴ I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.'

³⁵ "**This** Moses, whom they rejected, saying, 'Who made you a ruler and a judge?'—**this** man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. ³⁶ **This** man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. ³⁷ **This** is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.' ³⁸ This is the one who was

in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.

³⁹ Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt,

⁴⁰ saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' ⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. ⁴² But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:

"'Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

⁴³ You took up the tent of Moloch

and the star of your god Rephan,

the images that you made to worship;

and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.'

⁴⁴ "Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. ⁴⁵ Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, ⁴⁶ who found favour in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the

God of Jacob.⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him.⁴⁸ Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,

⁴⁹ " 'Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord,

or what is the place of my rest?

⁵⁰ Did not my hand make all these things?'

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

The Stoning of Stephen

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and

stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Saul Ravages the Church

8 And Saul approved of his execution.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Good Friday, we remember the crucifixion of Jesus.... It's **also** a day which makes very real, the **cost of being** a disciple. Jesus said, "If you want to be my disciple, you have to take up **your** cross, to follow me".... And when we see the crucifixion of Jesus, that gives us a bit of an idea of what that actually can mean for some people. It makes it all pretty real, doesn't it???

You see, we weren't baptised into a manger, to be joined to a baby Jesus. We were baptised into Jesus' death and resurrection... Jesus promised His disciples that they **would**

be persecuted. And Stephen is the first of the disciples, to be killed for the faith.

But today, I want to talk for a moment, on this one paragraph:

51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered.....

You see, Stephen outlined a whole **history** of God's chosen people, rejecting the activity of God. Moses was rejected. The prophets who proclaimed Jesus, were rejected... Jesus Himself, has now been betrayed, and murdered...

“Stiff-necked”, and “uncircumcised in heart and ears” – that’s how he described them – but what does that mean?

*I remember my mum used to often say, “Oh, I’ve got such a stiff neck”, and she’d make an appointment with the chiropractor, and.... That’s **not** what it means.*

It’s probably easier to **show** you what it means to be stiff-necked....

(tense up, set head at angle and cannot be turned)

It means, to be so set in our own ways, and to be so determined on a certain path, that when the Holy Spirit tries to turn us toward God, there’s no way that we’ll ever yield. That’s what it means to be stiff-necked. You cannot be

turned. *A good horse can be controlled with the slightest touch of the reigns on the side of the neck... But some horses, you've got to literally pull hard on the bit to get it to turn the slightest bit...*

Stiff-necked. The stiff-necked won't be turned by God.

And he said they were uncircumcised in heart and ears – that means their hearts were hard to God, and their ears would not listen to the things of God. They were stiff-necked, and there was no way that they would be turned, because they just would not listen to the word of God – no matter how much evidence they were given.

Jesus once said ^{Luke 16:31} '**If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'**"

Let's come forward to today.

Easter is a time when more people than usual, will come to church as a one-off. Shopping trolleys get filled with Easter eggs and other chocolate paraphernalia, to commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ... But how many hearts and minds will be turned in any lasting and meaningful way, to Jesus Christ? How many of the lost will be saved this Easter???

Stiff-necks refuse to turn; uncircumcised hearts are hardened toward God; uncircumcised ears refuse to hear....

Shortly, we're going to sing a grand old hymn "When I survey the wondrous cross". The thing that this song

recognises, is when God acts, God's action demands a response from us. When God acts, we cannot remain neutral toward God. Softened hearts **respond** to God. Stiff necks **refuse** to turn....

And the power of the words of this hymn, is the understanding of what **kind** of a response is appropriate, to the crucifixion of Jesus.

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

You see, that's the story of a soft heart. Today, on Good Friday, a soft heart will see the cross of Christ, and everything else pales into insignificance:

My richest gain I count but loss,

That means my greatest achievement counts as nothing

And pour contempt on all my pride.

The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross has achieved our salvation, and so there's no room for pride.

But the stiff-necked see the cross of Christ, there's nothing wondrous about it. There's too much pride to turn...

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
save in the death of Christ my God;
all the vain things that charm me most;
I sacrifice them to His blood.*

You see, a soft heart gives up **everything** to follow Christ, but the stiff necked sacrifice nothing.

*See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

The soft-hearted gaze upon the cross of Christ, and realise that love so amazing, so divine, makes an enormous demand. It demands our soul, our life, our all....

But the stiff-necked will never yield to such a demand.

So, I've got a question for you this morning. "How's your neck?"

When you gaze upon the cross of Christ,,, how's your neck???? How's your heart???

The cross of Christ makes a demand upon you: Love so amazing, so divine, demands your soul; your life; your all....

How's your neck? Is it stiff, or will it turn?
How's your heart? Is it hard, or is it soft?
How's your ears?

V57, when Stephen had the vision of Christ at the right hand of God, the religious leaders went ahhhh!!!!!, blocked their ears up, and rushed together at Him.....

And some people are like that.... “Ahh!!! I don’t want to hear anything more about this Jesus fella.... Talk to me about anything else – but not about Him....”

Stiff neck. Hard heart. Blocked up ears...

Let’s pray.