

Introduction

- I wonder if we sometimes get the impression that in our society **anything goes?**
 - and yet, we have the peculiar phenomenon of people who have made a mistake being hounded in the press, of perfection being demanded, of failure not being tolerated!
 - in fact, in some senses, the standards that are expected of people have never been higher!
 - if you don't perform extremely well then your position, your career, your standing in the community is on the line!
- The voices in the world around as clamour that **performance is everything.... and yet we know from experience that perfection is impossible!**
- **This is not a new tension!**
 - indeed, all of human history is littered with attempts to resolve it

Stephen on trial...

- (Acts 6:13-14) *They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."*
 - and yet, what happens next turns the whole show on its head - and puts his accusers on trial!
 - lets see how...

Moses - the Law

- Stephen faced two charges: (i) **speaking against the Temple**, and (ii) **speaking against the law**, which had been given by Moses
- He answers both charges by going back to the history of God's dealings with his people:
 - starting with God's calling of Abraham, his promises and deepening relationship with the ancient patriarch
 - Stephen then moves on to the events leading up to Moses becoming leader of God's people - Joseph, Abraham's gt-g-son, going down into Egypt, and joined there by his father and brothers...
 - until the time of Moses birth, at a time of great persecution for the descendants of Jacob/Israel
 - how he was raised in the Egyptian court, but fled after murdering an Egyptian official
 - how God met him in the wilderness - and sent him back to **set God's people free**
 - and how God did use Moses to free his people, displaying his mighty power in the process - and even so the people thus freed **resented and rejected Moses!**
- Stephen, rather than speaking against Moses and the Law that God delivered through him, affirms all that his audience would have held dear:
 - **but** he reminds them of the time described in **Deuteronomy 18** where the people remembered back to meeting the absolute awesome holiness and purity of God at Sinai - and couldn't face it!! They couldn't cope with meeting God face to face, there was a gulf between them - they couldn't attain to the blamelessness the Lord called them to. And God says that their insight is good, and so rather than meeting them face to face he **"will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers"** (Deut 18:18)
 - in other words, God will meet them (us) on their (our) terms!
- Stephen, though apparently affirming the Jewish faith through its history, is in fact undermining the understanding his hearers would have had about how **effective** that faith was in bringing people to God:
 - their instinct would be to say: **"God delivered through Moses; the Law is the perfect way and unsurpassed way to gain God's favour"**
 - Stephen's summary reminded them that even at its giving there was a gaping gulf between the perfection the Law demanded and human performance!

- a gulf that, in the prophet like Moses, would one day be bridged...

Temple - this Holy Place

- The second charge against Stephen was that he spoke against the Temple, the heart and focus of 1st Century Judaism.
 - and again his history lesson brings his hearers to the time when the both the tabernacle, the tented prequel to the Temple, and the Temple itself were founded
- And again, even as he did with Moses and the Law, as well as affirming the place of the Temple as a place of worship, a place to come to God, he also reminds them of the unbridgeable gulf between God and man:
 - as the prophets of old knew, how could God live in a house made of rock and baked mud, a house made by men?!
- That gulf between God and man was at the heart of all that the Temple symbolised:
 - sacrifices to pay for the sins and misdeeds, to heal the insult that sin is to God
 - a holy of holies separated from the rest of the world, a God who cannot be approached because of our sin
- So Stephen is saying to his audience, "The Temple was never good enough as a meeting place for God and man"

Jesus!

- Stephen has been charged with tearing up the Law of Moses and scorning the Temple
 - his defence has been to affirm that which is good and from God in both, but he has also pointed out the fundamental insufficiency of both Law and Temple as ways of approaching a holy God!
 - rather, he is saying, Moses and the Law and the Temple all point forward to the culmination of God's dealing with mankind!!!
 - *(they point to his holiness, they point to his desire for relationship with humanity...)*
- The scandal that he confronts the Sanhedrin with is that they have rejected the very one they say they yearn for!
 - for Jesus is the prophet like Moses, Jesus is the only human who was ever pure and holy in the eyes of the Law, in Jesus alone are we able to come into God's presence!

Conclusion

- (Acts 8:1a) *And Saul was there, giving approval to his death*
- Where do we stand?
 - seeking deliverance, seeking access to God, through what we do, through visits to a particular place of worship, through participation in regular patterns of religious observance?
 - or entrusting ourselves into the hands of Jesus, as Stephen?
- Perhaps you've been coming around church for a while - perhaps even for years:
 - but looking honestly at yourself, your seeking to meet with God, to be delivered from your own failure, to be equipped for the trials of life, is not rooted in the gift of Jesus Christ...
 - consciously or subconsciously, you have hoped that being good, upright, good living, attending church will be enough
 - and yet peace eludes you...
- Take today that step of faith, and accept the scandalous offer of forgiveness, the promise of entry into God's presence, of relationship with him, of the only solution to the fundamental disconnectedness of human life without God
 - pray - confess need; Jesus come into my heart!