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October 28th: Acts 6:1—7:16 & John 14:15-31

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The Seven and Stephen. Jesus' coming to his disciples.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Acts 6.1-7.16 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly

in Jerusalem. And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the freedmen, as it was called, and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking.

Then they secretly instigated men who said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. 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.

And they set up false witnesses, who said, This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law. 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. And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

And the high priest said, Are these things so? 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, and said to him, Go out from your land and from your kindred, and go into the land that I will show you. 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. 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. 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.

But I will judge the nation that they serve, said God, and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place. And he gave them 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. And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt. But God was with him, 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.

Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit. And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh.

And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father, and all his kindred, seventy-five

persons in all. And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers. 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.

In Acts chapter 6 we're introduced to the characters of Stephen and Philip, who will be the most prominent figures in the immediately following chapters. We might see this as beginning a new section. It's loosely paralleled with what preceded it, and it moves on and outward.

Chapters 1 to 5 had Matthias being chosen. Now we have the 7 being chosen. Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost and before the council, and now Stephen is preaching.

The apostles were tried and beaten, and now Stephen is tried and killed. The Spirit came in Jerusalem, the Spirit will later come in Samaria. The greed of Ananias and Sapphira was judged, and later we will see the greed of Simon the Sorcerer being judged.

We might also think back to the Gospel account, where the twelve were chosen, and then alongside the twelve, 70 or 72. Or maybe thinking back even further to the selection of the 70 elders in Numbers chapter 11. The numbers of the disciples are rapidly growing, and with this there needs to be a spread of the gift of the Spirit for leadership within the church.

There are tensions within the early church that arise in part from cultural and linguistic differences. There are Hellenists and there are Hebrews. These two groups seem to be divided primarily by language and also to an extent by culture.

Diaspora Jews would live in Jerusalem, but they would not be speaking Aramaic as their first language. They probably had some Aramaic, but they'd usually be speaking in Greek as their daily language. The Hebrews on the other hand, while they would be able to speak in Greek, would generally be conversing in Aramaic.

In chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost, we read about a great number of Diaspora Jews who were in Jerusalem. Some may have been just there for the feast, but a great number actually lived in Jerusalem. It is this group that is likely referred to by the term Hellenists here.

Craig Keener notes that 10-20% of people in Jerusalem at the time would probably speak Greek as their primary language. Almost 40% of inscriptions from Jerusalem in the period are in Greek. The numbers of Jews in the Diaspora greatly exceeded the number that actually lived in Palestine at the time, but many immigrants of the Diaspora would return to live in Jerusalem.

These are the sorts of people mentioned in chapter 2. They would have been faithful Jews, but acculturated to Greek over Judean culture in various respects. In the early church, there seems to have been a special concern for widows, and great honour given

to them. Without the support of a husband, and perhaps lacking a family network, a widow was a very vulnerable character, and so having a community that would stand in and support such a person was very important.

Throughout the Old Testament, a lot is said about God's concern for the widows and the fatherless. For people who have no man to support them, and could easily be victimized or denied justice, they were quite vulnerable to mistreatment. It is possible that the Hellenist widows would have been more vulnerable than the Hebrew widows.

As immigrants, they might not have had the same strong local kinship networks. Wider disparities in age between marriage partners in the Greek world might have meant that there were more widows of the Hellenists than of the Hebrews. However, the task of overseeing the daily distribution was something that was distracting the apostles from their primary tasks, prayer and the ministry of the word.

As we've seen to this point in the Book of Acts, prayer was absolutely integral to what the apostles were doing. They prayed constantly in the temple. Their ministry was also driven by prayers for boldness, as we've seen in the preceding chapters.

Beyond this, they have the task of proclamation. They are presumably teaching daily in the temple in Solomon's portico, reasoning with others and trying to persuade them of the truth of the gospel of Christ. Perhaps, as those who are entrusted with the word, they're also concerned to write things down at this point.

They are the appointed witnesses, and if they're going to communicate their message, it's important to have it in a solid and enduring form. They need people to oversee this process of administration. The seven need to be gifted administrators, people with a good reputation, people that would be trusted implicitly by those that they were ministering to.

It also is important that they have the spirit. They have to have the same anointing of the spirit that the apostles have, and they need wisdom. This isn't going to be a straightforward task.

There are some tensions between these communities, elements of distrust that need to be addressed, and they need to act with the transparency and trustworthiness that places the process beyond reproach. If the church is really going to have things in common, trustworthy administrators could not be more important. According to Josephus, councils of seven govern towns, and some commentators have seen a connection between this and the seven that are chosen here.

Others have seen connections with the seven that were appointed to oversee the almsgiving of particular towns. Once again, as in the case of the apostles in chapter 1, it seems to be presumed, if not required, that the candidates will be males. The task of

these men seems to go beyond what is traditionally thought of as diaconal.

They are not just responsible for works of mercy in a very narrow sense. As we see in the cases of Philip and of Stephen, these are ministers of the word, and they seem to oversee the congregation in a broader sense. I think it is appropriate to see these not as deacons, but as elders, and their ministry differs from that of the apostles.

The church is formed around the table, and those who are administering the table are overseeing something central to the life of the church. The apostles themselves explicitly deny that this is their task, it is not their responsibility. The apostles are not actually appointing the seven, they oversee the appointment, but the congregation are the ones that appoint them.

It is because the congregation's task is to engage in this daily distribution that they need to be the ones that appoint representatives to perform it for them. The laying on of hands confers a task that belongs to one party or group, to a person or group of persons who will act on their behalf. Laying on of hands is used in sacrifices, it is used in ordinations, and it has a similar meaning.

Numbers chapter 27 verses 22-23 is a very good example of this. And Moses did as the Lord commanded him. He took Joshua and made him stand before Eliezer the priest and the whole congregation, and he laid his hands on him, and commissioned him as the Lord directed through Moses.

Moses then confers his own authority to Joshua. Moses makes Joshua his representative before the whole congregation. Israel has representatives of the congregation within itself, but Joshua is a representative of Moses.

As Matthew Colvin observes in his discussion of this passage, the apostles are the plenipotentiary representatives of Christ. They represent Christ himself. We might notice the differences between this appointment and the appointment for replacement for Judas.

Many people come to this passage looking for an absolute system of church government, but church government in the New Testament seems to be a lot more organic than people tend to think. It arises out of natural problems that the churches face, to which responses are given from the natural structures that exist within human communities. Church government is more a matter of wisdom and prudence than a matter of absolute law.

However, as in the book of Exodus, where elders are appointed in Exodus chapter 18 and in chapter 11 of the book of Numbers, the overseeing and administration of the life of the people of God in a way that's just and wise is a matter of great importance and of interest to the text on its own terms. One of the results of this response to this problem

within the early church is that the church grows. It's fruitful, it multiplies, it's like the growth of the infant Christ that's described in the book of Numbers.

The priests are converted. Luke begins his gospel with a priestly family and here we still see a number of people who are associated with priestly backgrounds who are drawn to the gospel. Priests were dependent upon the support of the people and perhaps, as many of them might have lived in poverty, what we have in the support of the church in this community of goods is something that is of great appeal to them, a sign of the way things really ought to be, where the Levite and the priest are welcomed in and supported by a community that's faithful to the word of God.

Immediately we see Stephen standing out as someone who's faithful and powerful in his witness to the word of God. He has great wisdom and no one could withstand it. In Luke chapter 21 verse 15, Christ has spoken to his disciples saying, I will give you a mouth and wisdom which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

He has this argument with those of the synagogue of the freedmen and they cannot withstand his wisdom or the spirit with which he is speaking. Perhaps we should imagine a public dispute in which Stephen clearly outwits and outmatches his opponents, demonstrating from the scriptures that Jesus really is the Christ. Accusations are brought against Stephen, accusations that might remind us of those that were made against Jesus.

Accusations are instigated, then the people are stirred up and the elders and the scribes with them, and then there's the setting up of false witnesses. It's very similar to the story of Christ. Stephen is walking in the path of his master.

In Matthew chapter 26 verses 59 to 61, now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus, that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, this man said, I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days. There is some measure of truth to the accusations of the false witnesses.

The accusations have enough resemblance to the message of Christ and the early Christians that it would seem that they were based on some measure of truth. The temple, in Jesus' indictment of it, had been treated as a den of robbers, a place for wicked people to retreat to, to find refuge, rather than as a house of prayer for the nations. Jesus has spoken about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

And so these false witnesses still had some element of truth to what they were saying. The people of the council gaze upon Stephen and they see his face like the face of an angel. This is of course reminiscent of the story of Moses, whose face shone when he had been with the Lord.

It's another sign of having been with Jesus. Stephen also goes on to reference angels on several occasions in his speech that follows. Throughout Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts, an important emphasis is the continuity of Christ, the Gospel, and the Church with that which has preceded it.

Stephen here gives the longest speech of the Book of Acts. Its rhetorical structure is worth noting. As Darrell Bach observes, it begins with a call to hear.

It has a preparatory discourse. It presents a proposition. Then it moves to argument application and then concludes with a polemical application.

Stephen tells the story of Israel here in a very particular way. And by telling the story in the way that he does, the characters are reframed. The ways that stories are told are of great importance.

By telling stories in different ways, certain characters can be brought to the foreground and others placed in the background. Certain themes can be foregrounded. Heroes and villains can be switched.

This is especially true when you're telling a story of a nation. For instance, you can tell the story of America in a number of different ways. You can tell the story in a way that foregrounds themes of faith and religious liberty, with the Mayflower Pilgrims coming to America in 1620.

Or maybe you could tell the story in a way that foregrounds themes of oppression and slavery, with the story of 1619 being foregrounded. Or perhaps the story is to be told as a story of nation building, focusing upon 1776 and the founding of a new nation. Or maybe it's a story of empowerment of the marginalized, the story of Seneca Falls, Selma and Stonewall.

While they can work with the same historical material, these different ways of telling the story can lead to very different understandings of who the heroes are, who the villains are, how contemporary Americans fit into the story, and how to continue the story appropriately. When reading Stephen's speech then, we need to be very alert to the themes that he has brought to the foreground. Who his heroes are, what his emphases are, what events he misses out, what events he brings to the foreground.

All of these will help us to understand how he sees the different parties in the current conflicts fitting into the story, and how he believes people should move forward. Stephen, in the way that he tells the story, presents himself and other Christians as being fundamentally loyal to the story of Israel. And his opponents as being disloyal to it.

The early Christians also read the scriptures in the light of Christ, and what Stephen provides here is a typological and Christological reading of the Old Testament. We're supposed to see resemblances between the characters presented here and the character

of Christ. The story begins with Abraham.

Jeff Myers remarks upon the relationship between the leader and their kindred. Each one of the great leaders that Stephen picks out is set apart from, or has to leave their kindred in some sense. The story of Israel begins with a promise, a promise given to Abraham, and it also begins promisingly.

This is common ground also with a typical Jewish reading. One can imagine that many of Stephen's readers will be tracking with him, agreeing with him. And then as the speech progresses, subtle themes that Stephen has introduced and highlighted, things that they can agree with in principle in their original context, will be brought to bear upon the current situation in a manner that will put them in a difficult position.

Stephen is reading the tension of the present time back into the narrative. The narrative of Israel, as Stephen tells it, is a narrative of rejection of those appointed by the Lord. It is also a narrative of outsiders.

Abraham must leave his inheritance. He's dislodged from his kindred. He is a man without inheritance who must operate by promise.

From an initial focus upon Abraham, he moves to the character of Joseph. Joseph was initially rejected by his brothers, but later he was raised up by God and had influence with the Gentiles. One can also imagine that the character of Joseph would have invited comparisons with the story of Christ.

Joseph was betrayed for silver by his brother Judah. Jesus was betrayed for silver by Judas. Both Jesus and Joseph were cast into a pit.

Both of them were associated with two criminals. Both of them give bread and wine. Both of them were raised up to the height of power.

In both cases, their brothers must bow before them. Looking through Stephen's speech, we'll also see a double visitation paradigm, as Luke Timothy Johnson has identified. Within this double visitation paradigm, the leader comes the first time and he is rejected.

And then the second time he comes, he is rejected, either to the doom of those who reject him, or he is accepted to their salvation. Stephen includes a number of surprising details in the way that he tells the story. He's clearly joining the dots of the narrative in various ways.

And some of these might initially give the impression of carelessness. For instance, he seems to allied the purchase of the cave of Machpelah near Hebron, which was bought by Abraham in chapter 23 of Genesis, with the purchase of the land near Shechem that was bought by Jacob in chapter 33. Jacob was buried in the cave of Machpelah, but Joseph was buried in Shechem at the end of the book of Joshua.

Stephen, however, seems to conflate these two things, apparently confusing them. However, I think that this sort of elision is a thoughtful one. Stephen is very aware of the fact that it is the burial of Joseph that truly leads to the people being brought back to the land.

At the end of the book of Genesis, it's Joseph's bones that must be brought up. In the book of Exodus, it's Joseph's bones that they carry back with them. And then at the very end of the story of the Exodus, at the very end of the book of Joshua, it's Joseph's bones that are buried at the same time as Joshua is buried.

While Jacob and others are brought back to the land and buried there prior to the Exodus, the true restoration to the land, the true carrying back to the land, occurs when Joseph is buried, and that occurs in the burial plot in Shechem. A question to consider, how might this way of telling the story have helped the early Christians in thinking about their relationship with Jerusalem and Palestine? John chapter 14 verses 15 to 31 And I will love him, and manifest myself to him. Judas, not Iscariot, said to him, Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world? Jesus answered him, If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

Whoever does not love me does not keep my words, and the word that you hear is not mine, but the father's who sent me. These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you, but the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you.

Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, I am going away, and I will come to you. If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the father, for the father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place, you may believe.

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the father. Rise, let us go from here.

The second half of John chapter 14 continues the theme of Jesus' coming. Jesus is responding to the anxiety of his disciples as he has told them that he is going away. However, he is also addressing the reality of the church afterwards, the fact that we do not have Christ physically present with us.

How is it that we can relate to a Christ who seems absent from us? Christ responds to this by speaking of a fourfold coming. We can think about his coming in the resurrection, his coming at Pentecost, his coming in specific acts of power and presence within the history of the church, and then his coming on the final day to take his people to himself.

Jesus speaks about all of these as ways in which he is going to be with and near his disciples, even after he has physically left and gone to his father.

In verses 16 and 17, he speaks about the gift of the spirit. The gift of the spirit will be a way in which Jesus communicates his presence to his disciples. The spirit will be one who calls alongside, to translate the term more literally, or someone who is a helper or a friend or a comforter or an encourager or an advocate.

All of these could be interpretations of the term that is used here. He is the spirit of truth. Themes of witness pervade John's gospel, and the truth of the witness borne by the spirit is given prominence.

Christ bears witness, John the Baptist bears witness, and now the spirit of truth will bear witness. The truth will not be received by the word, as the spirit will not be received by the world. The world neither sees nor knows the spirit.

Earlier on we have been told that the wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes, and that so it is with everyone born of the spirit. The spirit and those born of the spirit will not truly be recognised by the world, but yet the disciples know the spirit. The spirit dwells with them at that moment, as he dwells with them in Christ.

Later on, as a result of Pentecost, he will be in them, empowering them and also giving them a sense of Christ's presence. Christ assures them that he will not leave them as orphans, he himself will come to them. They are going to experience his absence in a very keen way in a few days' time, as he will be in the tomb and they will feel bereft of him.

They will initially have no hope, and yet he will return to them, although the world will not see him, they will see him, and because he lives, they will live. Because of his resurrection, they will be resurrected, and in that day they will know that Christ is in the Father. They will have an assurance of Christ's relationship with the Lord and the Giver of Life, his Father, and they will also be assured in that moment of their relationship with Christ.

Not just that Christ is the true image of the Father and the word of the Father, but also that they are connected with him. In verse 15, Jesus spoke of those who loved him keeping his commandments. In verse 21, he speaks of the same thing.

This connection between love and keeping the commandments of Christ is an important one, which John especially explores in his first epistle. When we look through the Gospel of John, we will have a clearer sense of what the commandments involve. First of all, Christ commands his disciples to receive and believe what he gives them, and then he calls them to love one another.

The keeping of the commandments then refers to these two things, to believing in him and to loving each other. As they believe and receive Christ and love each other, it will be a manifestation of the fact that they love Christ. In John's first epistle, John talks at great length about how we know that we know Christ as we keep his commandments.

Judas, not Iscariot, asked Christ how it would be that he would manifest himself to his disciples but not to the world. And in his answer, Jesus teaches that he and his Father will come to the one that loves him and keeps his word, and that it will be in that person that this presence is particularly known. Jesus has already spoken about the Spirit being given to the disciples as a whole, but here there seems to be more of an individual emphasis.

When the Spirit comes, whom the Father will send in Christ's name, he will teach the disciples all things that they need to know, so that they will be made aware of everything that they need to know. This may be a reference primarily to the apostles, rather than to disciples in general. The apostles will spread their inspired teachings to the rest of the Church, so that the Church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

At the conclusion of this chapter, Jesus returns to the theme with which he began it. At the beginning, he told his disciples not to let their hearts be troubled, and now he gives them his peace and assures them once again that their hearts should not be troubled, that they should not be afraid. He is assuring them that he is going away, but that he will return to them in these various ways.

If they love him, they will rejoice, because he is going to his Father, and his Father will give him all authority and will send the Spirit in his name. Consequently, it is much better for them and for him that he goes. He tells them these things before they take place, so that when they do take place, they will not be afraid, but also so that they will have proof of his words, in order that they might believe.

As if interrupting a conversation to look at a clock, to be reminded of an imminent appointment, Jesus tells his disciples that he cannot talk much longer with them, because the ruler of this world is coming. Satan, however, has no claim upon Christ. Christ does as the Father has commanded him, and so Satan has no purchase upon him.

Satan can't ultimately defeat him. He can't hold on to him. And as Christ does what the Father has commanded, the world will know that he loves the Father.

This is the example that we should follow, as we do what Christ has commanded, so that it will be known to all that we love him. A question to consider, why is it a benefit for the Church that Christ leaves after the resurrection?