

to anything? The stoning of Steven is a stark reminder of the potential for violence in religiously-influenced conflict that the church has also colluded with. Following the Way of God is challenging and can easily be compromised.

- *I wonder which characteristics of God you find most helpful or challenging.*
- *What daily practices help you to follow God's way?*
- *Which saint or person do you have as an example to inspire you to follow the Way?*

### **HYMN MEDITATION FOR EASTER 5** Malcolm Sturgess

Choosing hymns should be a very precise and responsible role. If you were asked to choose the last hymn for an Easter Sunday Eucharist, or for the whole Easter season, what would you choose, and why? My vote goes, not to *Thine be the glory*, but to *Ye choirs of new Jerusalem*.

This apparently simple little hymn has a lot going for it. It was written a thousand years ago, by St. Fulbert, after whom the usual tune is named. St. Fulbert is a sort of unofficial saint, never canonised, given the title in recognition of his having rebuilt Chartres Cathedral after a fire. St. Osmund, Bishop of Salisbury from 1078, included this hymn, in its original Latin form, in the 11th-century Sarum Breviary. It is based on passages from Genesis 3, Colossians I and Revelation - past, present and future? The last verse is a doxology - ideal for rounding things off - plus an extra "Alleluia, Amen".

The tune is by Henry Gauntlett, whose family came from Wiltshire, who also wrote *Irby*, for *Once in Royal David's city*. He chose the key of E flat, which is perhaps the best key for most people for singing at the top of your voice. Three of the first nine chords are the same third inversion chord, giving the basses the leading note, and an overall feeling of upward movement - very clever! And he also had the brilliant idea of finishing off with a double plagal cadence. Not even Haydn thought of that. Even if you don't know what I am talking about, believe me, it all works! One other point: in verse 2 our A & MNS hymn book changes the original "and / CRUSHED" to "crush / ING". Why, oh why? Which fits the tune better? The new A & M restores the original version. I used to love singing "and CRUSHED" as a young choirboy of 8 or 9, envisaging stamping on a snail. Thus are children directed towards adult Christianity!

## **May 10<sup>th</sup> Fifth Sunday of Easter-** **Jesus the Way, Truth and Life**



Ye choirs of new Jerusalem, Your sweetest notes employ,  
The Paschal victory to hymn In strains of holy joy.

How Judah's lion burst his chains, And crushed the serpent's head;  
And brought with him, from death's domains, The long-imprisoned dead.

From hell's devouring jaws the prey Alone our Leader bore;  
His ransomed hosts pursue their way Where he hath gone before.

Triumphant in his glory now His sceptre ruleth all,  
Earth, heaven, and hell before him bow, And at his footstool fall.

While joyful thus his praise we sing, His mercy we implore,  
Into his palace bright to bring And keep us evermore.

All glory to the Father be, All glory to the Son,  
All glory, Holy Ghost, to thee, While endless ages run.  
**ALLELUIA! AMEN.**

Genesis 8 v 1-19, Acts 7 v 55-60, John 14 v 1-14

Reflection from Revd. Becky

'She's got a way about her..' 'Oh it's just his way' are terms we have probably heard or used to describe someone's habits and character. When we come to answer the question 'What are the ways of God?' it is perhaps more complicated.

On the one hand, the Old Testament describes the ways of God in the stories of how God continues to intervene in human history to rescue his people. A major example of 'God's ways' are found in the story of Moses: the Israelites release from slavery; God's provision in the wilderness; the laws that enabled good community relationships. To follow God's way is described as loving God and keeping God's commandments with a promise of blessing and rest. (Deuteronomy 10, Deuteronomy 30 v 16, and Exodus 33)

The prophets in the Old Testament describe God's ways as 'righteous' 'justice' and 'wisdom' unlike the ways of the world. They are something to be desired and available to learn for the humble: '*Teach me your ways O Lord.*' (Psalm 25 v 4)

On the other hand, God's ways seem alien – judgement comes: Adam and Eve are punished for their inquisitiveness; the Israelites are punished harshly in the desert when they disobey God and build a golden calf; the nations are led into exile.

For me it is easier to see the ways of God in the life of Jesus: loving, forgiving, healing, who in the words of John's gospel states 'I am the way' (John 14 v 6) and yet I still ask myself 'How *can the crucifixion of Jesus be God's way? How can this show the love of God?*'

The best explanation I have found in the words of Rowan Williams: 'The cross is the sign of the transcendent freedom of the love of God. This God whose actions, and whose reaction to us cannot be dictated by what we

do. You can't trap, trick or force God into behaving against his character. You can do what you like but God is God. And if he wants to love and forgive then he's going to love and forgive whether you like it or not, because he is free... we are caught up in cycles of tit for tat behaviour but God is not caught up in any cycle. God's mind is focussed upon us for mercy and for life. God will always survive our sin, our failure. God is never exhausted by what we do. God is always there, capable of remaking the relationships we break again and again.'

St Paul describes this way of God as vulnerable and strong. (1 Corinthians 1 v 25) Rowan Williams describes the ways of God as freedom, all powerful and completely vulnerable- love that has nothing but itself to rely on.

And so we turn to St Stephen, the first Christian Martyr to follow Jesus way. Steven was selected as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit as one of the seven who waited on tables (Acts 6:1-6). And yet we hear of him preaching to the Synagogue and Sanhedrin - retelling the story of the ways of God (Acts 7 v 1-53). He calls for the Sanhedrin to turn to Jesus as God. They respond with great violence and stone him to death.

In this retelling, we see that the free forgiveness of the cross was already shaping the way of the early disciples. The non-violent response of Steven is similar to Jesus words of forgiveness. 'Lord does not hold this sin against them.' (Acts 7 v 60)

This leads me onto the church – as followers of the Way. The people who kill Stephen are neither the local hooligans nor the Roman soldiers who nailed Jesus to a cross. They are, seemingly upstanding members of religious communities: regular members of synagogues, elders, religious professionals. They are guardians of vital traditions. So why do these people go to such an extreme? Steven's speech is accusatory and he challenges the theological basis for the centrality of the Jerusalem temple.

But *where* did they ever get the idea that stoning was a justified response