

Day by day, week in week out, year on year, we live and move and breathe in a world where we should be ashamed of ourselves- for our impatience and short tempers, for our hate-filled glares and barbed words, for our queue jumping and tailgating—especially if the car in front isn't old grey Vauxhall. There are, it has to be said though, few more shameful things, than attempting to appropriate the aphorisms of one of the greatest wits of all time and making them your own, by quoting Oscar Wilde. So I hang my head and apologise in advance, for starting this short sermon on St Stephen's day with this Wildean quote:

“We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

On this feast of Stephen, first of Christian martyrs, there are two directions we can gaze. We can peer into the gutter, into the filth of the first century Palestine street, into the hot choking dust which clogs Stephen's breath and clings to the hastily discarded clothes of his lynch mob. We can gaze into the ugly face of hate-in-the-name-of-religion and see the terrifyingly perverted distortion that is murder in the name of God. We can look there and see the results of so much human hate written red in the blood of Stephen, into that casual human destructiveness that is so much a part of our human history as to be almost humdrum. We can stare into the gutter...

Or we can gaze into heaven.

Where shall we look? If we are concerned only with looking in the gutter, at what we see beneath our feet, slowly, inexorably it will drag us down to its level.

What about St Stephen?

*‘I can see heaven thrown open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’*

If we are concerned with looking towards heaven, then perhaps, slowly, inexorably we will be drawn there, because if we gaze into heaven we will see the true nature of our ascended, resurrected humanity, everything we can be, everything we shall be, but are yet not.

Now the more pragmatic might suggest that if Stephen's vision had been at least partly on earth and not so firmly fixed on heaven he might not have found himself the victim of a religious lynch mob. Stephen may not have been gazing at the gutter, the cynical might point out, but he is now lying dead in it.

Perhaps the more Stephen pondered the things of heaven, the more he understood Our Lord's words to his disciples:

*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell*

It is precisely because Stephen's gaze is on heaven that he is able to articulate what is the most astonishing part of the whole sorry Stephen story: he can forgive his tormentors.

*"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*

Those are Stephen's last words. Stephen does not seek martyrdom. Much less does he wish to take a bunch of miserable sinners with him as he dies- a Christian does not become a martyr being a murderer. He does not wish vengeance on his murderers. Instead he begs God to forgive them.

Yes, Stephen's sights are set on heaven, and it is because of that that he can see the earthly reality- even one so horrific and brutal as his own summary execution- in a radically different light: he can see, albeit dimly, in a small and tiny way, the world through God's eyes. He can look on those cruel faces and twisted hearts that are depriving him of bodily life: and know why God loves them, as he loves us all.

It is only through the vision of heaven that we can properly see the gutter, that we can see that our brothers and sisters are not perverts or heretics or fanatics or criminals or rivals or worthless or problems or trash or subhuman or statistics or collateral, but, just as much we are, children of God.

We are all in the gutter: let us fix our gaze at heaven.