

Views from the Pews – Who was Jehoiada?

The readings for St Stephen's Day were all pretty confronting, even the Gospel. Martyrdom is not a pretty sight.

But a bit of context for the Old Testament reading may help – just a little bit. Chronicles 2 is full of political and theological drama as Kings and High Priests rise and fall. Chapter 24 begins with a fruitful partnership between young King Joash and his High Priest Jehoiada. The theme of the first 14 verses is that of rebuilding and renewal, albeit funded by a 'voluntary' sponsorship scheme which is in fact a tax. Jehoiada eventually dies though, aged 130 (!), and earns a privileged burial in Jerusalem.

This is where v17 comes in. It speaks of a rapid collapse of all Jehoiada and Joash had built up, of a sudden reversion to the old ungodly ways.

Then we encounter Zechariah, who calls out those who abandoned God. This gets pretty confrontational as he warns them that God has forsaken them – unwelcome news even in an Old Testament story. Compare with the New Testament themes of God returning to save humanity; the very opposite of being forsaken. But Zechariah's listeners (if they are listening at all) do not want to know. They enlist the King's authority to arrange a martyr's death. By stoning. In front of a building erected in Jehoiada's day. Joash appears to have switched sides, having forgotten his partnership with Jehoiada. The reading ends with another cry that sounds alien to those familiar with the Gospels, a wish for vengeance upon the stone throwers.

It is easy also now to understand Jesus' intervention on behalf of the adulterous woman; stone throwing (with its opportunity for anonymity) stands condemned.

Yet we hear that it is still practised, particularly in theocratic Iran, against those deemed to be 'the enemy within'. It has been the preferred way to deal with whistleblowers and other challengers to the (usually theological) status quo.

Jehoiada was lucky. He would have been appalled by his son's fate at the hands of Joash's agents.

Thus what sounds at first like an ancient Jewish story rapidly acquires a contemporary feel. At least Stephen got a hearing (of sorts).

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