

# Breaking Open the Word

Pentecost 8C, Proper 13, Ordinary Sunday 18  
3<sup>rd</sup> August, 2025



## Full of Grace, Aligned with Heaven

A weekly reflection based on the preaching at St Peter's by the Lake, Paynesville, together with a study guide based on the readings, some liturgical resources RCL Lectionary, and a weekly devotion

Dennis Webster



Revised Common Lectionary Related

**Pentecost 8C, St Stephen**

**Proper 13,**

**Ordinary Sunday 18C**

Ecclesiastes 1.2, 12-14, 2.18-23

Psalm 49.1-12

Acts 6.8-10, 7.54-60

Luke 12.13-21



Book of Common Prayer (1662) Collect

BCP

*Grant, O Lord, that in all our sufferings here upon earth, for the testimony of thy truth, we may stedfastly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed: and, being filled with the Holy Spirit, may learn to love and bless our persecutors, by the example of thy first Martyr Saint Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to thee, O blessed Jesus, who standest at the right hand of God to succour all those that suffer for thee, our only Mediator and Advocate.*

## INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to truly align our lives with the heart of God? In today's sermon, Dennis dives deep into the life and martyrdom of Stephen, calling us to embody a spirit of hospitality and selflessness that stands in stark contrast to the world's lure of wealth and self-promotion.

Through the poignant story of Stephen, a man of profound grace and courage, we are reminded that true fulfillment comes not from accumulation but from our commitment to God and serving others.

Drawing parallels between Stephen and the parable of the man who hoarded riches, Dennis challenges us to reflect on our own lives: are we willing to lay aside our ambitions to be conduits of God's love and grace?

With a moving illustration of Stephen gazing into heaven, where he sees Jesus standing ready to welcome him, Dennis urges us to adopt a heavenly perspective in our earthly journeys.

As we navigate challenges, we are invited to live boldly, share generously, and serve humbly. Engage with this powerful message and discover how aligning with God's kingdom can transform your life—listen to the full sermon and let your heart be stirred toward action.

- You can pray for the courage to apply the teachings from the sermon to your daily interactions this week.
- Think about how you can embody the values shared in the sermon and ask for God's guidance in those specific situations.
- You can lift up those in your life who may be struggling, asking for the wisdom to know how to support them as you live out the message of the sermon.
- Think about setting aside time for reflection this week, and pray for clarity and insight in understanding how to grow in your faith.

As we walk on this sacred ground, teach us  
Lord to make known your kingdom, and let  
this reflect in all that we do and speak.

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Full of Grace,

Aligned with Heaven

Today we continue to reflect upon the heart of God, revealed in Christ and exemplified in the life and death of Stephen, the first martyr. This reflection calls us to embrace hospitality, holy vision, and alignment with the kingdom of God.

The book of Ecclesiastes opens with a stark reminder, declaring, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” This profound truth confronts us with the futility of self-centred striving. Psalm 49 echoes this sentiment, advising us not to fear the riches of others, for in the end, we carry nothing away when we depart this life.

Jesus tells a parable about a man blessed with everything—land, harvest, plans, and barns. Yet, he lacks what truly matters: a soul aligned with God.

As we consider the story of Stephen, we often overlook this remarkable figure amid our Christmas celebrations. It may seem inconvenient that the first martyr is commemorated just after Jesus’ birth, yet it beautifully underscores the purpose of Christ’s coming—His name means ‘saves.’

I have a fondness for St Stephen. I was baptised and served at a church dedicated to him in Penguin, and I hold dear memories of St Stephen’s, Wynyard, and St Stephen’s Circular Head in Smithton. This Sunday, we will also be graced by a recital from Chris Trikili, the Director of Music at St Stephen’s Catholic Cathedral in Brisbane.

Stephen was a man full of the Holy Spirit, not chosen for worldly strength or eloquence, but for his spiritual depth. His first task was one of hospitality, ensuring that the daily distribution of food was fair, especially for the vulnerable. In this simple yet crucial act, Stephen embodied God’s concern for the poor and overlooked.

However, Stephen did not merely serve at tables; he became a theologian of the kingdom, bearing witness to the crucified and risen Christ in both word and deed. Even as opposition arose, he did not cling to safety but held fast to the truth, even at great cost.

In a culture tempted by the allure of bigger barns and self-protection, Stephen urges us to live differently. He invites us to share generously, welcome strangers, speak truth boldly, forgive wholeheartedly, and focus on heaven while renewing the earth with sacrificial love and faith.

In Acts 7, we encounter the most profound moment of Stephen’s story. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazes into heaven and sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. This vision is not merely a source of comfort before death; it is a revelation.

Stephen sees Jesus standing – not seated as is usual in Scripture – ready to receive Stephen’s testimony and welcome him home. In this moment, heaven opens before him. The veil between earth and glory is pulled back. Stephen observes that the power of the empire and violence is fleeting, while the reign of Christ is eternal.

Though the earthly court condemns him, the heavenly court affirms him. Accused of blasphemy, heaven declares him faithful. This is not just a personal vision; it is a theological statement: God stands with the martyr, not with the mob.

As Paul reminds us in Colossians, “Set your minds on things above... for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Cyprian, in the third century, speaks of Jesus’ prayer as a communal plea for “our” bread, not just mine. To pray for daily bread while forgetting to share it when the prayer is answered is a grave misstep.<sup>1</sup>

Life is not merely about possessions; having more does not guarantee control. Stephen and Paul understood that our dependence on God and duty toward others are inseparable. Without a sense of those we live for and with, we drift away from them and from God.

Stephen’s ministry—from caring for Greek-speaking widows to boldly speaking before the Sanhedrin—shows a new humanity in Christ. As Paul states, all are one in Christ, beyond race, gender, class, or status. The kingdom of God appears not through dominance but through service; not

through wealth but through witness; not through control but through communion with the crucified and risen Lord.

Now, let us contrast Stephen with the man in Jesus' parable—one who built bigger barns but never opened his table. The man spoke only to himself—"I will say to my soul..."—not to God. He wanted to secure his future by hoarding, not sharing. His life ended with a divine rebuke: "You fool!" In contrast, Stephen committed his future to Christ, ending his life with a divine welcome: "Behold, I see the Son of Man."

One man, endowed in riches, was poor in relationship with God. His focus on status blinded him to love for his neighbour. The other, with nothing but the treasure of heaven, overflowed with love to share.

So, how should we live? In a culture tempted by greed and self-protection, Stephen calls us to embrace the Messianic Mission.<sup>2</sup> He urges us to share bread with the hungry, welcome strangers, speak truth at personal cost, forgive amid hardship, and live with heaven in our hearts while renewing the earth. This is the true path of the Messiah's mission, aligning us with the heart of God as we pray, "Your will be done, on earth as in heaven."

This is what it means to pray the Lord's Prayer with integrity—to live as citizens of heaven even now, aligning ourselves with the heart of God revealed in Christ, witnessed by Stephen, and offered to us.

Let us remember that Stephen died with his face toward heaven and his heart full of grace. He aligned his life so closely with Jesus that even his death echoed that of our Lord.

May we strive to become such people—individuals of vision who look beyond worldly values, people of hospitality who generously welcome others with God's kindness, and those of alignment whose ordinary lives shine brightly with the light of the kingdom.

May we, like Stephen, attend to those in need, look up to heaven at our appointed hour, and behold the glory of God, where Jesus stands beside the throne of glory, bidding us, "Welcome, good and faithful servant." Amen.

## End Notes

1 See Andrew McGowan, [substack.com/@abmcg A Greedy \(and Lonely\)](https://open.substack.com/pub/abmcg/p/a-greedy-and-lonely-fool?r=3zdc09&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&showWelcomeOnShare=false)

Fool 29/7/2025

[https://open.substack.com/pub/abmcg/p/a-greedy-and-lonely-fool?r=3zdc09&utm\\_campaign=post&utm\\_medium=web&showWelcomeOnShare=false](https://open.substack.com/pub/abmcg/p/a-greedy-and-lonely-fool?r=3zdc09&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&showWelcomeOnShare=false) In particular, the reference to Edge, an American Lutheran Youth publication of 1967, p. 29.

2 Luke 4:16–21

## Summary of the Text

1. Heart of God: The text reflects on God's heart, revealed through Christ and exemplified by Stephen, the first martyr.
  - It emphasises hospitality, vision, and alignment with God's kingdom.
2. Vanity of Striving: Ecclesiastes reminds us that self-centred striving is futile.
  - Psalm 49 advises against fearing others' riches, as we leave this life empty-handed.
3. Stephen's Life: Stephen is a model of spiritual depth and service.
  - He prioritised fairness and care for the vulnerable over worldly strength.
4. Contrasting Lives: The parable contrasts a rich man who hoards with Stephen, who shares and serves.
  - One seeks security in wealth, while the other finds it in faith and love.
5. Living the Mission: Stephen's example calls us to embrace a life of service and generosity.
  - We are urged to share, forgive, and focus on eternal values.

## Discussion Questions

<https://page.church.tech/41e62fd4>

How does Stephen's act of hospitality in ensuring fair food distribution for the vulnerable challenge our understanding of service today?

- Stephen prioritised service to the poor and overlooked, demonstrating God's concern for them.
- In what ways can you demonstrate hospitality and service in your own community?

What does it mean to be 'full of grace' as Stephen was, and how does this quality reflect a life aligned with God?

- Stephen's life was marked by grace, aligning him with the heart of God, as evidenced by his actions and his willingness to forgive.
- Can you think of a time when you showed grace to someone, and how it affected your relationship with them?

In Acts 7, Stephen sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Why is this moment significant for understanding the relationship between heaven and earth?

- Stephen's vision emphasises the affirmation of heaven for the faithful, contrasting with earthly condemnation.
- How does this vision motivate you to maintain faith in your daily challenges?

The sermon shared the contrast between the man with bigger barns who hoarded and Stephen, who shared generously. How does this parable teach us about the danger of greed?

- The parable illustrates that focusing on material possessions can lead us away from meaningful relationships with God and others.
- What are some ways you can combat the urge to hoard or be greedy in your life?

What does it mean to embrace the 'Messianic Mission' as Stephen did, and how can we apply that to our lives today?

- Stephen's actions reflect the mission of the Messiah in sharing love, truth, and hospitality, aligning us with God's heart.
- What specific actions can you take this week to participate in the Messianic Mission in your own life?

## 5-Day Devotional

This five-day devotional will take a deeper look at the teaching from this weekend.

<https://page.church.tech/5002034c>



### Day 1 Acts 7:55-56

As we reflect on Stephen's unwavering faith, we see how his life and death embody the core message of living in alignment with God's purpose. Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, demonstrating a profound connection to the heavenly realm while actively serving those around him. His story challenges us to examine our own lives, asking whether we prioritise divine purpose or earthly pursuits. By gazing into heaven, Stephen models what it means to live fully for God, reminding us that our earthly struggles can be transformed into opportunities for divine revelation.

Stephen's vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God serves as a powerful reminder of who we are meant to be—the witnesses of Christ's love and truth. In our quest for meaning, we must remember that our hearts are called to be aligned with the divine will. Just as Stephen did not cling to self-preservation, we too are invited to take risks for the sake of the kingdom, to share generously, to forgive freely, and to embody the grace that Christ has shown us.

- What does it mean for you to align your life with God's purpose?
- How can you cultivate a spirit of hospitality in your daily life?
- In what areas do you feel challenged to speak boldly for the truth?
- Pray for the courage to embody the love of Christ in difficult situations.
- Reflect on the ways you can better align your heart with God's will.

### Day 2 Colossians 3:1-2

The call to focus on things above is reflected in Stephen's story. In a materialistic world, Stephen lived for eternity, not temporary gains. His testimony before the Sanhedrin shows our priorities shape purpose. Prioritising our relationship with God empowers selfless action and inspires others. Looking beyond circumstances reveals God's work, offering peace and reassurance in all seasons.

Reflecting on heavenly values urges us to reconsider our actions and responses. Like Stephen, who allowed the Holy Spirit to guide him, we should open our hearts to God's leadership. This enables us to become channels of

His grace, spreading love and compassion, even in adversity.

- What distractions do you need to set aside to focus more on God?
- How can you remind yourself of your identity as a citizen of heaven?
- In what ways can you ensure that your actions reflect your heavenly calling?
- Ask God to help you refocus your mind on eternal truths.
- Pray for guidance on how to embody these values in your interactions.

### Day 3 **Psalm 49:16-17**

The psalmist's reminder not to fear others' riches echoes Stephen's core message. In a society where wealth is often mistaken for worth, Stephen's life urges us to find value in Christ instead of material possessions. His dedication to service and focus on God's kingdom inspire us to reevaluate our priorities. Recognising the eternal perspective of his life, Stephen acted with boldness and generosity, helping him overcome the fear of loss that many of us experience.

As we contemplate this truth, we understand that our true treasure is in our relationship with God and others. Living generously and openly shows we are part of a greater story beyond personal gain. Consider deepening relationships through selflessness, guided by Christ's love.

- How do you view wealth and possessions in relation to your faith?
- In what areas of your life can you practice generosity?
- How does understanding the eternal context of your life change your perspective?
- Pray for a heart that values relationships over riches.
- Ask God to show you where you can give more of yourself to others.'

### Day 4 **Matthew 6:19-21**

Jesus' teaching on storing treasures in heaven reminds us that our priorities shape our lives and legacy. Stephen's willingness to sacrifice his safety for truth shows a life invested in eternal significance. The treasures we build—relationships, service, spreading love—will outlast our time on earth. Stephen's story challenges us to ask where our treasures truly lie.

Are we chasing earthly accolades or dedicating ourselves to loving and serving others? When aligned with God's purpose, we see opportunities to uplift others, shaping a life of love, humility, and grace.

- What treasures do you find yourself pursuing in life?
- How can you shift your focus from earthly to eternal investments?
- What does it mean to you to store up treasures in heaven?
- Ask God to help you realign your priorities according to his will.
- Reflect on how you can invest in others in meaningful ways.

### Day 5 **Acts 7:59-60**

As we conclude this devotional, we remember Stephen's final moments—a reflection of his faith and commitment to God. His cry for forgiveness for his persecutors shows the Gospel's heart: love and grace in adversity. Stephen's focus on heaven saw him welcomed into eternity, where his sacrifice is celebrated. The message of forgiveness calls us to release bitterness and embrace reconciliation, reflecting Christ's love.

In our final reflection, consider embodying Stephen's legacy daily. As we face world challenges, love fiercely, forgive generously, and witness Christ's redeeming power. Like Stephen, trust in God's promise, live with hope, and share the good news wherever we go.

- Who do you need to forgive in your life? -
- How can you better embody the love of Christ in your daily interactions? -
- What steps can you take to align your life with God's mission?
- Pray for the strength to forgive and to love without condition.
- Reflect on the ways you can share the Gospel in your community.



# End notes and further reading

Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke (St Paul's Press) (Johnson)

Rev Dr Andrew McGowan: Andrew's Version: <https://substack.com/@abmcg>  
David Adams, Glimpses of Glory, Year C

The following authors as featured at The Worship Cloud  
[www.theworshipcloud.com](http://www.theworshipcloud.com)

N. T. Wright,  
Jane Williams,  
P James Woodward,  
Paula Gooder  
Mark Pryce,  
David Perry

## Brabarlung Totem

This is produced on  
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our respects are made to  
the First Nations people  
everywhere.

Prepared by Rev'd Dennis Webster, Rector of the Anglican Parish of Paynesville, Diocese of Gippsland for personal or small group use.

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