

Stephen has so fallen in love with Jesus that he can become, and be used, as the proto-martyr or proto-witness of who Jesus is. He has captured the spirit of the place or person of Jesus or, better, it has captured him. So, ironically perhaps, he is commissioned as a deacon to free up the apostles to preach the word but finds himself as a deacon preaching the word even more effectively than they do. Is this perhaps because his spirit of service as a deacon, ministering to the material needs of the newly emerging church, is the seed ground for true witness? Just a thought. But it does show how the spirit knows no boundaries when it comes to revealing who Christ is. And this Christ as witnessed by the spirit is not merely then a memory of Christ, a pale imitation of what the Jesus of history said and did, but a lived experience which goes all the way back to the very beginning of God's relationship with humankind, to the imagery indeed of us as made to be like God in all of God's goodness. This said partly because of Stephen's long speech to the Sanhedrin detailing the Israelites special relationship with God and partly with the image of the spirit hovering over the water at the very beginnings of creation in mind, at that bringing into being of the material world, including us. The writer of Acts has made Stephen the protagonist of this Holy Spirit throughout history culminating in the Spirit's presence now in the person of Stephen in complete antithesis to its absence in his opponents. So just before his death we hear him say:

*'You stubborn people with uncircumcised hearts and ears. You are always resisting the Holy Spirit just as your ancestors used to do.'*

For his opponents, the locus of the spirit is the temple – a material object which has, ironically again, robbed the Spirit of its freedom and become an object of worship in itself whereas the true purpose of the material world is to be a sacrament of the holy and not an object of worship in itself. Like the bread, perhaps, that Stephen is commissioned to give out to his fellow Christians in need. And like the light of the lit bush that Moses turned towards and keeps on blazing or in the words of RS Thomas:

