

# Homily For The Feast of St. Stephen - Year I

## St Peter's 8:30am Mass - Dec 26, 2018

**Acts 6: 8-10; 7: 54-59** "Filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God."

**Psalms 21: 2-15** "Into your hand I commit my spirit. You have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God."

**Matthew 10: 17-22** "Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say."

### Introduction

If there was going to be a first martyr of the Church after the resurrection, wouldn't you think that it would have to be an exceptional witness to Jesus Christ? Should it be someone who loved and cared for the poor and the marginalized with Jesus' own heart? Maybe it would be a powerful teacher who spoke the truth with such authority that listeners would be inspired to either love him or hate him but no one would be neutral, as happened with Jesus himself? Or again, what about someone whose prayer life was so deep and intimate with God that, even while alive, would see a vision directly into heaven, of angels and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God? Finally, would the witness of that martyr be, with his last breath, to forgive those who were in the very act of executing him? In St. Stephen, we have all of these saints in one. What we have is the disciple who so identifies himself with his Saviour that every part of his life and death is both a mirror of the life and death of Jesus and a sign pointing the way for all disciples to come.

This is a very difficult week in the Church. We have been lulled a little bit to sleep by the wonder of a baby in a manger and angels and shepherds and God's arrival among us. But the Church has given us these passages about anger and hostility and martyrdom and rock throwing.

However, we should not be upset. It is not that we have to go from sweetness and light to a raging inferno of battle. It's that our lives already are engaged in the spiritual battle against sin. This battle was already going on in the world and in our hearts. But, through the birth of the saviour into our human nature, we know that we are not alone. We can face that battle with strength and courage and joy, knowing that the stage is now set for our victory over death.

### Gospel

The Gospel message in Matthew is quite unsettling. The social cost of being a disciple will mean being persecuted by authorities and there will be divisions even within families. The physical cost of discipleship will be huge. Is there to be no comfort, no joy along the way? Is it all waiting until, as Jesus puts it, until we have persevered to the end"?

## **Acts**

Especially in the synagogues, Jerusalem at that time was embroiled in an intense struggle to understand the Gospel. Some accepted Jesus as the long awaited messiah and some were hostile to the idea. Does that sound familiar? Even the Jewish Christians were divided between those who were Hebrew speaking local Jews and those Greek speaking Jews who came from outside of Jerusalem.

Stephen was in the middle of that. He was the first named of the seven deacons, men of outstanding character, who were ordained by the Apostles themselves, to care for the widows and marginalized. This is a spirit of service which the Church desires to recapture with the restoration of the diaconate today.

In a very short time, Stephen went from caring for widows to being a witness for Christ in a most powerful way. His speech is a recapitulation of salvation history, with the emphasis on stubbornness before God and now before the messiah- their reluctance to see God's hand. And, while they were rushing Stephen to stone him, they had to block their ears because they could not stand to listen to the truth. As a result, Stephen receives the punishment in Jewish law due for blaspheming, the same charge that was brought against Jesus.

But today's greater message must not get lost in Stephen's personal witness. It is Jesus to whom he is the witness. He reflects and reminds us of the ultimate witness of the cross of Christ, the reason for which he was born, to be the ultimate witness of God's love for us, His desire that we be reconciled to him and to receive his own blessed life in our lives.

## **Psalm**

The psalmist gives us a hint of the cross, but also of Jesus' life of prayer. Remember Psalm 22? "My God my God why have you forsaken me?" Of course, that is Jesus on the cross. In Psalm 31 we hear "into your hand I commit my spirit." What we see is that, even on the cross, Jesus is continuing his life of prayer on the cross and in Stephen's life and death.

## **Call To Action**

Since my ordination to the diaconate, I have very slowly grown in my commitment to look to Stephen as a model for being a disciple of Christ. I think that is why we have the tradition of a Christian name, so we would have an intercessor and a model with whom to connect in a meaningful way in our Christian walk. My mother reminds me frequently that, in her culture, the Saint 'Name Day' is even more important than the birthday. When we went to Israel, I wanted to go to St. Stephen's Gate so I could imagine that scene. After three years, I still

remember the impact that had on me. So that is first today. Do you have a saintly model for your walk with Christ? Find ways to ask your saint to intercede for you.

Yes, the call comes quickly after the joys of Christmas. Like Mary and Joseph who have to move almost immediately after Jesus is born, evil knows that the light is present and has to strike while there is weakness. Strengthened by the knowledge of the king of kings, our champion, our salvation, our joy, our strength in time of battle. It's not an easy day in the life of faith, but the Prayer of the Church reminds us of how important it is in our life of discipleship, with Saints like Stephen as a model:

Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father.

Stephen fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice: Lord Jesus, do not hold this sin against them.

No one was able to resist the wisdom of blessed Stephen, for the Holy Spirit spoke through him.

Ultimately, it is about Jesus, who died for us, and who lives with us.