

Homily For The Feast of St. Stephen - Year II

St Peter's 8:30am Mass - Dec 26, 2019

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

Psalms 31:2-15 "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."

Stephen, full of Grace and Power

Introduction

It is one of the great problems for Christianity that so many people want to make Jesus into a sweet and loving healer who went around teaching a message of love. It is tempting to leave him there in our minds. This is a great danger for us because if this is all there is to Jesus, he would barely register on history. There would be no Church, no sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, no repair of what was lost by our first parents in the garden, and no salvation or hope of future glory with God. The stakes are very high.

Very quickly, right after Christmas, the Church gives us a direct insight into the battle to declare Jesus as the Messiah who is the fulfillment of the promise of God to the whole world and who would save us from our sins.

The events of St. Stephen's martyrdom flow from our devotion to St. Mary, our appreciation of St. Paul and our worship of Jesus himself.

Stephen and Mary

There are only three references in the bible to someone being full of grace. One is to Jesus in John Chapter One. One is to Stephen as a man full of grace and power. The third is, of course, Mary who is called "full of grace" by the angel Gabriel.

Mary received grace in some complete way and remains completed in that grace. St. Thomas Aquinas notes the salutation of Mary is a complete reversal of roles from the Old Testament, in which men revered angels. In revering Mary, then, then Angel Gabriel is showing that she surpasses the angels in these three aspects. Only someone "full of grace" could merit such extraordinary reverence.

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (Jn1:14)

Like the sword that would pierce Mary's heart, the stoning of Stephen is a sword that stabs at the Church itself. Remember that Mary is called the mother of the Church. So, her sorrow must have been great at Stephen's death.

Stephen and Paul

Stephen was transformed from servant of the poor to dynamic and persuasive teacher who did great wonders and signs among the people. Stephen's powerful preaching is comparable to Paul's own transformation from persecutor to one who suffers to proclaim the Gospel.

There is a beautiful reflection on Stephen and Paul as brothers in faith, eternally rejoicing in their service of Christ and the Church. This is a result of Stephen's prayer of forgiveness.

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.

Much of the speech confirms Jesus as the new Moses, leading people out of the bondage of their sin.

Stephen and Jesus the Messiah

Stephen is the only one to use Jesus' reference to himself as the Son of Man.

He had the grace to speak the truth and the power to work signs and wonders.

They falsely accused Stephen of attacking sacred institutions and the law.

He was hauled before the Sanhedrin.

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.

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

Stephen receives the punishment in Jewish law due for blaspheming, the same charge that was brought against Jesus.

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

He had the grace to pray for his enemies. It goes without saying that Jesus was full of grace and power. In fact, Jesus is the source and manifestation of all grace and power. He prayed for those who hated him and saints throughout the ages have done the same. That is the path of perfection that we walk.

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.

And yet in all these comparisons, the point is not to say how much Stephen is like Jesus. The greater issue is that they were rejecting their Messiah a second time.

Call To Action

As Jesus promised, when they hand you over, do not worry about what you are to say. Stephen did not write a speech that would summarize all of salvation history. Rather, it came to him that Jesus was the fulfillment of all of the people and events of God's people. This is what we believe, that all of history was moving towards the complete revelation of God. This insight, the result of being full of grace, had the result that they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.

Our walk of faith comes with the promise that we will never be abandoned.