

## **Homily For Tuesday of the Third Week of Easter - Year I**

### **St Peter's 8:30am Mass - April 20, 2021**

**Acts 7:51-8:1** "He knelt and cried out: Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

**Psalm 31:2-7,16,20** "You have redeemed me. Save me in your steadfast love. "

**John 6:30-35** "I am the true bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry."

### **Truly Necessary in God's Plan**

#### **Introduction**

I have carefully removed all the stones I could find in and around the church today, just in case anyone gets angry enough to throw them at a deacon named Stephen.

We began the Easter Vigil, the greatest celebration of the whole year, with some words that have always seemed just a little strange to me. We hear: O necessary sin of Adam, which gave us so great a redeemer. This theology, this way of looking at the big picture of salvation history suggests that we needed the great falling of our first parents, the great turning away from God, the great disobedience of humanity. We needed it so that God would have to provide for us the even greater rising again from the ashes of sin, the even greater turning towards God made possible by the obedience of Jesus Christ, who took on himself that original sin and every sin after that, and turned it into the path to abundant life.

Today's readings provide support for continuing this way of understanding God, and our faith, in the Church. In this sense, God's plan for our salvation runs right through the middle of our rejection of God's plan for our blessing. Everything that happens appears to be necessary in God's plan.

#### **Stephen**

In the first deacon, Stephen, we see a blueprint for the Church. He is ordained to serve the needy, always a number one concern for God. He does signs and wonders among the people, like Christ himself. He is arrested, given a phony trial before the same Council and High Priest, with similar fake witnesses. The

accusations against him are almost identical, blasphemy in the first degree, for speaking against Moses and God, against the temple and the law. Like Jesus, he testifies to the truth about God before them with boldness.

Both finally provide enough evidence to, essentially, accuse themselves, by giving witness to the truth. Both are executed, but now, instead of demanding that the Romans do it, they are so frustrated and angry that the Jesus movement was not crushed by the death of Jesus, that they do it themselves in an act of sheer rage. Rationality has disappeared. Cruelty and anger reign supreme.

This tells us that, outside of those who believe in him, the rest of the world, both secular and religious, will always be against Christ. They will always seek to kill him and our faith. Stephen is the model for the Christian witness, which is the word 'martyr' in Greek.

Christ's life and death and resurrection become necessary as both a sign of obedience to God and a sign of contradiction to the thinking of the world. Like Christ, Stephen, the first martyr, is the sign of how the Christian is to behave when accused. He tells the truth about the world. He explains how everything that has happened in history points towards the coming of the Messiah. He looks beyond the world into the heavenly reality. He asks for mercy even for those who hate him.

Following this thinking further, St. Augustine declares: If Stephen had not done these things, and if he had not prayed the way he did, looking to heaven, the Church would not have gained Paul. As Saul, he had stood by and approved the killing of Jesus.

And what happens next? Because Saul persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem, they fled to other places and founded the Church in those places, spreading the Gospel as they went. Persecution leads to the resistance of faith. And, as has been said many times, the blood of martyrs becomes the seed of the Church.

After his conversion to Christ, Paul never forgets that he stood by while Stephen witnessed to Christ. Later in Acts, he testifies that his persecution drives him to lay down his life as a witness and to proclaim to thousands on his missionary

journeys, that this is how the Christian lives in testimony to Christ, who is the fulfilment of God's great plan of salvation. This plan is not only NOT defeated by persecution but, inspired by God's Holy Spirit, actually thrives and spreads out and BECOMES the blessing to the world, promised from all time.

The final step on this journey rests in our own lives. The saints have frequently reminded us that it is not our achievements that further God's plan. It is our continual turning away from our sin and back to God that makes the outpouring of the Spirit into our lives possible. Our sin becomes the growing edge of our faith. This does not mean we should go out and sin so God can be manifested. It means that our tendency to sin is transformed into our salvation by the power of the Holy Spirit and faith in the saving power of the sacraments of the Church, Christ himself made present.

### **The Bread of Life**

Jesus had just multiplied the loaves and fish but they wanted more signs from him. We always want more. Jesus has more to give but it's a much higher thing than they are asking. God wants us to be really ambitious for things of eternity. The work of God is to believe in the one he has sent. Trust in Jesus is what he has called us to do, no matter what else we do in our lives.

Jesus is offering supernatural food. It's in the Eucharist but, even when that has been made impossible by the concerns of the world, Easter glory now must live in our lives and hearts. We must now be a people who look to heaven and see the Son of Man seated on the throne. Seeing the heavenly reality changes everything. That's why St. Thomas Aquinas stopped writing his incredible theological works. He said: Compared to what I have seen, what I have written is only so much straw.

Dear brothers and sisters, the world looks to vaccines and masks and separation for salvation. But now we are called to be the next part of God's plan of salvation, to present the witness, the martyrdom, of our lives that Jesus is the Saviour of the world.

## **Key Passages**

**Collect:** *O God, who open wide the gates of the heavenly kingdom to those reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, pour out an increase of your grace.*

**Acts:** *Stephen replied to his accusers, "You stiff necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit ... Your ancestors killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers... Enraged, they ground their teeth at Stephen. But, filled with the Holy Spirit, he said, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God! But they covered their ears, rushed together against him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria.*

**Psalm:** *You are indeed my rock and my fortress. Into your hand I commit my spirit. You have redeemed me. Let your face shine upon your servant. Save me in your steadfast love.*

**John:** *After Jesus had fed the crowd from the five loaves, the people said, "What sign are you going to give us?" Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven, which comes down and gives life to the world. They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*