

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

St Peter's 8:30am Mass- May 7, 2019

Acts 7: 51 - 8: 1 "While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed: Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Psalm 31 "Into your hand I commit my spirit. I trust in the Lord. Let your face shine on your servant."

John 6: 30-35 "It is my father who gives you the true bread from heaven."

A Circumcised Heart

Introduction

I was determined to spend some time there at Stephen's Gate, one of 7 openings in the Eastern wall of Jerusalem, and the presumed location of his witness to Jesus Christ, and his own death by stoning. Also called the Lion's Gate, it has significant meaning for both Arab and Jewish history. But one can also walk from there along the Via Dolorosa, Christ's painful journey to the place of his crucifixion.

So, I did stand outside the city wall for a long time and imagined what it was like for my holy namesake, the very first named Deacon. I thought about how he was one of seven men of high character, who were designated simply to serve the community, making sure no one was ignored or left out. But, a very short time later, had become this powerful preacher and evangelizer who was seen by some of the religious leaders as the same kind of threat as Jesus himself. Luke sees all kinds of parallels between Stephen and Jesus.

Stephen's Death

At the beginning of our passage today, Stephen is already two full pages into his recapitulation of Jewish history, which he boldly declares points to Jesus as the longed for messiah. It is by far the longest speech in the New Testament. Someone suggested to me after my ordination that, if I wanted to take him as a model for my diaconal ministry, I should be concerned that possibly Stephen wasn't stoned for his faith but because it was the only way to get him to shut up.

Why shouldn't they have been enraged at him. Who wouldn't have been? The movement was spreading rapidly. Even many of the priests are followers. And now this nobody has the nerve to teach the PhDs of the time about their own subject of expertise and their own history.

He called his accusers every name in the repertoire of the prophets. They were the names God had applied to those of old who had persecuted the prophets: You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised of hearts and ears. What a strange image, but even in the time of the old covenant, there was the expectation that the outward sign - circumcision - must be lived out in spirit.

Stephen adds his own insults by calling them betrayers and killers of The Righteous One, and accusing them of opposing the Holy Spirit, which had just recently come with power on the people at Pentecost.

The Bread of Life

Jesus had a different kind of audience from Stephen. They weren't violent, but they were just as dumb. He had just fed a huge crowd from a few small loaves. But what did they say right after receiving an amazingly miraculous sign but, Hey what sign are you going to give us so that we may see it and believe you?

So, Jesus makes his attempt to get through those 'uncircumcised' ears: Who do you think fed you in the desert? Moses didn't feed you. God did. And what about what just happened. Were you fed by bread which you already possessed? No, it was I who multiplied your pathetic little offering into a feast to satisfy you fully. (Does that remind anyone of what happens at mass in the great exchange of bread and wine for Jesus' body and blood?)

In both cases, you were not saved by the bread you ate. But there is true bread, which comes from heaven. That's the bread you should desire. That will satisfy you in ways you can't imagine and has the power to save you. "Give us that bread, they ask." Where will that kind of bread come from? Again, from the Father, but this time his only begotten Son, the true bread from heaven, the Bread of Life itself.

Interpretation

Uncircumcised hearts and ears? Not seeing the miracle of bread? it is about perceiving, or understanding. Two different audiences. Both fail to perceive the miracle in front of them - the timeless one in heaven.

The manna perished, and so would they if they trusted in it. The wilderness manna was not false bread. It was merely a sign of the imperishable Eucharistic bread that the Father sends down from heaven in Jesus.

Call To Action

The sign points the way. Don't believe in the sign. Believe in the reality. Stephen was able to gaze into heaven and see the reality. 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.

Instead of circumcision as an outward sign of the covenant, we have the waters of Baptism. Instead of an outward mark which only men wore, we have the profound seal of the waters of Baptism, to which men and women are all invited.

The Church Fathers saw Jesus everywhere in the psalms. The psalms formed the foundation of Jesus' own prayer life, and obviously it did for Stephen as well. Today, let us sing with the psalmist, who sees the reality of God long before Jesus' life. Let us say with all of them, You are my rock and my fortress. I trust in you, Lord. Let your face shine upon your servant. And let us say with the conviction of those who see God, Into your hand I commit my spirit.