

St. Stephen

I take as my text, from the Acts of the Apostles:

And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight O' Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.

Yesterday, we celebrated the Nativity of our Lord, when God took upon himself our flesh, our human nature in an act of pure love; indeed, Jesus Christ is the final revelation of God to man and through whom mankind will find eternal life. He brought to the world the Good News, the Gospel, simply stated in John 3: 16:

So God loved the world that he gave his only Begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Today, on the first day following the Birth of our Lord, we celebrate the very first person to die for him who laid down his life for us. This, too, was an act of love by St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

St. Luke in recounting the martyrdom of St. Stephen does so in great detail. He tells of the appearance before the Sanhedrin; Stephen's testimony to our Lord; the stoning and death of this remarkable Saint.

Omitting no detail, Luke mentions the presence of one who guarded the garments of the stoners. It was none other than St. Paul who first persecuted the Christians and then became the Apostle so responsible for the building up and spread of the Christian Church.

The passage taken from the Acts of the Apostles falls short in representing St. Stephen on his Feast Day. Though it relates how remarkable a martyrdom he suffered, it only tells half the story of St. Stephen's defense of Christianity. The full story is told beginning with chapter six, the passage selected for the reading for Morning Prayer, and chapter seven continuing into chapter eight.

As the number of Christians increased, the Apostles found themselves overwhelmed with meeting the needs of the converts.

In those days of the Early Church, much emphasis was placed on taking care of the widows and poor. That was the meaning of the term used by St. Luke in reference to those duties and responsibilities involved in managing the alms and resources that had been collected.

They decided, in consultation with many of the disciples, that seven men be appointed as deacons. Thus, the Apostles laid their hands on them in a ceremony that has continued to this day in the Church and the seven were ordained to the office of deacon.

The others, in addition to Stephen, were Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas.

St. Luke says of Stephen:

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

Now, Stephen was quite outspoken and did not hesitate to engage in debate in defense of the Faith. But there were certain members of the synagogues, called Libertines who set up false witnesses against Stephen. It was not a question of whether he had said what they reported to the Sanhedrin. It was a matter of their perverting the words of Stephen in order to make it appear that he was guilty of blasphemy.

Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin to answer the charges made against him.

Luke records in chapter seven, verses 2 through 53, Stephen's rich indictment of the Jews in which he accuses the Jews of being rebellious and disobedient of God; he accuses them of limiting God and worshipping the Temple; he accuses them of persecuting the prophets: and, finally, he charges them with murdering the Son of God Himself.

Stephen is very emphatic in this final charge: it was not through ignorance that they killed the Son of God but through rebellious disobedience.

The members of the Sanhedrin and the other Jews present were outraged. Obviously, in this situation, there could be only one outcome.

But Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, saw beyond the angry, distorted faces right into the face of our Lord Jesus Christ. When he described what he saw, the group became an enraged mob intent on lynching him for blasphemy. There was no real trial of Stephen; it was only blind, uncontrollable anger that led to his death.

Led out to be stoned, Stephen prayed and forgave; in his martyrdom, he emulated his Saviour, saying “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.”

And Luke reports of the moment: *And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

It may be noted, that in the Bible, this is the usual way in which the death of saints is recorded, indicating the *peacefulness* of their death.

The martyrdom of St. Stephen reported by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles is remarkable for its detail and more so for being a source of inspiration to all Christians.

From the noble martyrdom of St. Stephen we learn how peaceful and calming it is to know that our Lord Jesus awaits us.

He is always there. It is up to us to seek Him. He is waiting for us to do so. That is the wonder of His Love.

He is ever ready to console us and strengthen us if only we have confidence in Him, if only we commit ourselves to Him.

In his dying words, St. Stephen testifies to what we now know, that to pray to Christ is to pray to God. He confirms the Divinity of Christ. In addressing to Christ the same words our Lord addressed to the Father from the Cross, “Stephen renders to his glorified Lord absolute divine worship, in the most sublime form, and at the most solemn moment of his life.”

Fittingly we celebrate the first martyr immediately following the celebration of the Birth of the Lord and Saviour of the World: St. Stephen died testifying to the truth that in Christ the historic destiny and purpose of the Judaism had been fulfilled.

We must never forget the phrase, *In the fullness of time*. That is what Stephen was testifying to, the “fullness of time,” the completion of the preparation of the Jewish Nation to welcome into the world the Author of all creation.

St. Stephen has given us a glimpse into the universal implications of the Gospel: that Jesus Christ came into the world for the salvation of all mankind and the redemption of all creation.

Even more, Jesus Christ entered this world in an act of love that is reflected in the martyrdom of St. Stephen, in his devotion and faith in our Lord, and in Christ being there ready to receive him in his dying moments. That love is also reflected in each of us who, in turn, put our faith and confidence in Jesus Christ who stands every ready to offer us that peace which passes all understanding and to receive us into the fellowship of all the saints in heaven.