

Sermon for the Feast of St. Stephen – Matthew 23:34-39

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

“Now when [the Jewish council] heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at [Stephen]. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.”

And a merry 2nd day of Christmas to you! After singing loud praises to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords in infant form, after joining the angelic choir singing “Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men,” we now hear of Stephen, the man who loses his life for bearing testimony concerning the Son of God who died for all sins. But isn’t that how it always goes in the church? Not long after seeing the creation of God- from the majestic mountain tops to the tallest trees to the blue skies and seas- Adam and Eve ruined it all by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Our first parents were forced out of the beautiful Garden of Eden forever.

Or what about when Jesus revealed His glory at the transfiguration? Jesus’ face shown like the sun and his clothes were white as light. Peter acknowledges, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents over here, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Let’s make this event permanent! Just don’t make us go down there, where the suffering people cry out for us. But it was necessary to come down again. When they reached the foot of the mount, immediately the father of the demon possessed boy called for help. Yet by now you should realize that the Kingdom of God is shrouded in lowliness. The real work of God was not high upon the mount of transfiguration, but hidden in the dying crowds of people calling out to the Savior. That’s the way it’s always been. After all what did the shepherd’s see in the poor manger? Did they not see God Himself in the flesh? Did they not see the majesty of Christ hidden in humble appearance?

So also, the majesty of Christ hides in the humility of all Christian suffering and martyrdom. The angry Judean council did not see Stephen as God’s messenger or as a citizen of heaven, which he rightfully was. They ground their teeth at him. He saw the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. The angry mob yelled out with a loud voice stopped their ears and ran at him with one accord. They did not want to hear the eternal gospel which he proclaimed. They murdered Stephen. There was chaos, running, shouting, stones flying! But Stephen’s mind was at peace. He spoke in likeness to his Crucified Savior: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

The first disciples knew from their own experience that believing in Christ would cause unrest, suffering, and death. Yet, this Christmas tide, we celebrate the Prince of Peace. How many times have you heard, "Go in peace?" When the pastors dismiss communion, we say, "Depart in peace." Jesus said, "My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give unto you." By "peace" the world means not to be disturbed, to live a comfortable life, and to avoid conflict and trouble. Christ's peace means peace of mind, peace with God, peace with others by forgiving instead of disputing and defending ourselves. That means discomfort, conflict, and trouble in this life. Being at peace with God means being in contention with all the powers that oppose God. That requires a battle of life and death against all the powers which keep us away from God, even our own self perception and relationships.

The second stanza of today's chief hymn names Stephen as the one who could see beyond the suffering of this world, even in the midst of his very own suffering: "The martyr first, whose eagle eye could pierce beyond the grave, who saw his master in the sky and called on him to save. Like Him, with pardon on His tongue in midst of mortal pain, he prayed for those who did the wrong – who follows in his train?" Stephen could see Jesus and forgive as the Lord does. Can you forgive like that? Do you forgive when others revile you, make fun of you, disregard you, or are just rude to you? Or worse? Stephen did. This is how Stephen forgave. This is how Jesus forgives.

And there's the astounding thing about God's forgiveness: He forgives not based upon anyone repenting or feeling sorry; He forgives before this happens. How fortunate for us that the fifth petition of the Our Father is descriptive of you, not dependent upon you. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Our forgiveness from God doesn't depend upon how well we have forgiven others. Rather, this petition describes the new man in each of you, who has been forgiven by the Lord, forgives others.

The Lord still comes and forgives. His forgiveness comes at a great cost: His own righteous blood. You are part of the church whom God redeemed with His own blood. Jesus said, "For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'" And when do we say that? During the ancient communion hymn called the Sanctus we sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth" and conclude, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." In Holy Communion, you see God. Jesus' words again: "For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

"On you may come all the righteous blood that was shed on earth." The blood of Abel? No. The blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah? No. The blood of St. Stephen? No. The Blood of Jesus? Yes. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠