

“St Stephen, Proto-martyr”

Acts 6: 8—7: 2a, 51-60

St Stephen, Boise, 2021

I have just a few remarks about the saint whom we honor, because I want to leave time for you to sing some carols on this second day of Christmas. As you probably know, the full season goes until Epiphany, January 6, on the evening of which you are all invited to return for another service, followed by supper and a party. Because of that traditional observance, we don't begin celebrating Christmas earlier, when we are still in Advent.

What is the connection between Christmas and the feast today, between the birth of the Saviour and the death of a martyr? The answer is that a martyr's death day is also the day of his Heavenly birth, when he passes from this world to the next. St Stephen the Deacon was the first of thousands of Christian martyrs, and his story is found in Scripture itself. He was one of the original seven chosen by the Apostles to serve believers who were “Hellenists,” the term used in The Acts of the Apostles for Greek-speaking Jews who moved to Jerusalem from the Diaspora and formed Greek-speaking synagogues there. Jews who grew up in Judaea or Galilee such as Jesus and the Apostles spoke Aramaic.

As the account we read this morning indicates, the trouble began with some Jews in the Greek-speaking synagogues who resisted Stephen's preaching of the Gospel — that Jesus is the Messiah and now risen from the dead. It seems that Stephen also repeated Jesus' prophecy of the city's coming destruction. When he was brought before the Sanhedrin to answer the charge that he had spoken against both the Temple and the Torah, he put Jesus in the line of the prophets whom the people of Judah persecuted or killed for their unwelcome messages. Jeremiah was one of the earlier ones, and John the Baptist and Jesus the latest. With such remarks, Stephen elicited rage from his audience.

“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.” In his next remark, Stephen then identified Jesus with “the Son of Man” in Daniel’s vision, the one who “came to the Ancient of Days” with the clouds of heaven [Dan 7: 13]. What the reference meant to Stephen’s hostile audience was that Jesus and his followers would be vindicated in the judgment with the punishment falling on their persecutors, who were now acting the part of past pagan oppressors such as Nebuchadnezzar, even though they were descendants of Abraham, not Babylonians.

It was too much for these non-believing Jews. “They cast him out of the city and stoned him,” while the young Saul of Tarsus held their coats. But St Luke, the author of the Acts, gives Stephen the last word: “And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’” So like Christ, Stephen at the end asks of God mercy for his countrymen. We know of at least one there who repented: Saul who became Paul.

The entire death scene in the Acts is, in fact, presented as an imitation of Christ’s death. Before requesting God’s forgiveness of his persecutors, Stephen calls upon the “Lord Jesus” to receive his spirit, quoting the same Psalm Our Lord quoted on the Cross. St Paul says we must all die with Christ if we are to live with him — first, in the Sacrament of Baptism, and then later throughout our lives. St Stephen did his dying with Christ with the actual shedding of blood. And that event and St Luke’s telling of it gave rise to a theology of martyrdom in the early Church. Just about every martyr that followed, making a witness to Christ in death, was understood to be a participant in the Lord’s own passion and death.

Stephen the Proto-martyr, along with those others who followed in his train, also bore witness to the truth that we owe all to God, even our very lives, because all that we have comes from him. When we give ourselves to the Creator, in a life of service and at the end of it in death, he will, in return, share

his own eternal life with us through his Son.

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