

THE WITNESS OF SAINT STEPHEN
A Sermon for the Feast of Saint Stephen, 2010
On the Text: Propers for the Day
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As with all of the special saints' days, The Feast of Saint Stephen does not fall on a Sunday very often. It happens exactly as often as Christmas falls on a Saturday, which is, on the average, about once every seven years. The Lectionary is not much help either. An examination of it shows that the story of the stoning of Stephen appears as a reading for either Morning or Evening Prayer first as the Second lesson for Evening Prayer for the Second Sunday after Trinity and then again as the Second Lesson for Morning Prayer for the Friday after the 14th Sunday after Trinity. So, unless you went to a church that had services of Morning and Evening prayer everyday, and you went to each of those services everyday, you would likely not have heard much about Saint Stephen because the Book of Acts is seldom used for the Epistle reading for services of Holy Communion throughout the year; and the early part of the story of St. Stephen is never used as an Epistle reading for a Service of Holy Communion. The Book of Acts is mainly the primary source for Epistles for the Saints' days, the Ascension, and Pentecost.

Most people learned in Sunday School that St. Stephen was the first Christian martyr, but know almost nothing else about him. This happens in Anglican churches because of the low emphasis on reading the Bible because people tend to assume that what they hear read in church is sufficient. Thus, they seldom learned much more than that about him, which is a shame.

The story of St. Stephen begins in Acts 6 and ends in Acts 8 with a one verse statement about his burial. One may wonder why someone whose first mention in the Bible is near the beginning of a short chapter, Acts 6, and who is killed at the end of the next chapter is given the title of Saint. Let's look at all the Bible tells us about Stephen.

Saint Stephen's story really begins in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost just after the disciples have received the Holy Spirit in tongues of fire and are speaking in tongues. The scoffers laugh and accuse them of being drunk. St. Peter denies their drunkenness, preaches, and converts 3000 people. At the end of Acts 2, we are told of many selling all their possessions and giving to whomever was in need as described in Acts 2:44-45 **44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.** This model of early giving is also described in more detail in Acts 4:34-37 and is why I mentioned it as the Acts 4 model in my sermon on the Third Sunday in Advent in which I talked about tithing as the only other Biblical model of giving. In Acts, the Apostles did not ask people to sell all and give to the poor, but many were inspired by the Spirit to do it.

This practice brought with it some problems. All of the Apostles were Jews. Saint Paul was not yet a saint and had not yet written, "There is neither Jew nor Greek." Before St. Paul preached his post-Pentecost sermon, there were likely a few Christians who were not Jews; but there would not have been very many. After that sermon, with 3000 new converts, there were

likely many more Gentiles, who were often called, Greeks”. At the beginning of Acts 6 we find out that there is contention in the church because the Jewish widows are being taken care of with charity from what I’ll call “the community bank” of money that had been given to the Apostles, but that the Greek widows were being neglected. As we read in Acts 6, 1-6, this led to the establishment of the Order of Deacons: Acts 6:1-6 ESV Acts 6:1 **Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.**

This passage is important for several reasons: It shows what might be considered to be the beginning of the conflict between the Judaizers and the Gentile converts; It describes the establishment of the Order of Deacons with one of their explicit functions being to distribute alms to the poor; And it shows that the Deacons were set aside for their job by a ceremony in which the Apostles laid their hands on them. One of the charges laid on a man being ordained a Deacon in the REC is this: “**And furthermore, it is his [the Deacon’s] Office, where provision is made, to search for the sick, poor, and impotent people of his parish, that they may be relieved with the alms of the parishioners and others. Will you do this gladly and willingly?** Deacons are by Canon assigned the job of Almoner of parishes.

So, Stephen is the first one named a Deacon, and he is described as “**full of the Spirit and of wisdom**”, Two verses after the description of their ordination, Stephen is spoken of in verse 8 as having the power to do miracles: Acts 6:8 **8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.** In Acts 6:9-12 we read that Stephen’s work attracted the attention of several groups of Jews who did not accept Jesus. They conspired to lie about him and accuse him of blasphemy so that he was brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, essentially to be tried for these false accusations.

At the beginning of Chapter 7 of Acts, the High Priest asks Stephen, Acts 7:1 **"Are these things so?"**. Beginning in verse 2, Stephen states his defense with a Biblically correct digest of the history of the Jews from when Abraham was in Mesopotamia up through Moses and Aaron, Jacob and Joseph, David and Solomon, to wherein talking about the building of the Temple he says in verse 47 **But it was Solomon who built a house for him.** Stephen then launches into a brilliant string of quotations from the OT, a rabbinical argument of the highest order, that indicated an encyclopedic knowledge of Hebrew Scripture. He ranged through First Kings, First Chronicles, Isaiah, Psalms, and Exodus to blast his accusers with this in verses :48-53 **48 Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, 49 "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or**

what is the place of my rest? 50 Did not my hand make all these things?' Then, beginning with verse 51, Stephen turns the tables; the accused becomes the accuser; the Sanhedrin and his accusers get angry; and we hear what immediately preceded our Epistle lesson: 51 "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." 54 Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. It is just after he said this that our Epistle lesson begins: Acts 7:55-60 55 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. 56 And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. 58 Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen spoke the truth to Power and paid the price for speaking the truth to those who would not listen. He spoke the truth in love for them, and modeled his prayer that his killers be forgiven after what Jesus said on the Cross, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." He was indeed a true saint, a *Hagios*, someone set apart by and for God; and, as far as we know, he was the first person to be killed for his faith in Jesus after the Crucifixion.

The last verse of our Epistle lesson is the last verse of chapter 7. St. Stephen's story ends with verse 2 of chapter 8, which says: Acts 8:2 2 Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him.

To pull this all together, let us note a few things about words, some things that may seem unrelated. The seven named men, set aside for certain services that the Apostles considered to be too menial for them have long been called the first Deacons. The reason for that is that the Greek word for servant is **διάκονος**. This word describes someone who was a free servant, not a bond servant or a slave. But it had another meaning as well. Remember when St. Peter said Acts 6:4 **But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.**" The Greek word that is translated as ministry, is **διάκονία**. Well, **διάκονία** is what a **διάκονος** does, namely, service. So, if you have wondered why we call what we do in church a *service*, it is because any ministry is a service; and any minister is, at least in Biblical Greek, a **διάκονος**.

Another interesting thing about all this material in chapter 7 is that in verse 58 is where we meet Saul of Tarsus for the first time in the Bible. In that verse, we read that: Acts 7:58 **And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.** The witnesses spoken of are most likely not just those who heard what Stephen said and were there to witness his execution. Because the Romans had to approve all executions, many commentators think that Stephen died at the hands of a lynch mob. The witnesses were in fact the executioners as St. Paul himself said in Acts 22:20 **20 And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed,**

I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.' Note here that St. Paul calls Stephen, "your witness". Now this is the ESV translation; the KJV gives it as "thy martyr". This is important because the Greek word for witness is **μάρτυρός**. Take off the ending and you have **martur**, **M•A•R•T•U•R**. That **u** was pronounced the same as a **y** in early Germanic languages, **ü**, and it began to be spelled with a **y**; hence, **M•A•R•T•Y•R**. A witness is a martyr, and martyr is a witness. St. Stephen was a witness **for** Jesus Christ and the false witnesses were his executioners.

St. Stephen's death occurred in sometime between 31 and 33 AD. It was not long after that with the persecutions of the Christians that the Greek word for witness took on a new meaning, the meaning that someone's witness for his faith in Jesus Christ was so strong that he was willing to die for that faith rather than renounce it. Martyrdom became to be considered such a mark of honor among the faithful, and many such as St. Ignatius of Antioch actively sought martyrdom, possibly because he had read what St. John had written in Revelation 2:10, quoting what Jesus said to him in that vision, which was part of the Introit: "**be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.**" Ignatius was captured in Antioch and taken to Rome where he was martyred sometime around 107 AD.

St. Stephen's story has enriched our language and given us a bright example of how a faith as strong and deep as his can ignore an impending bloody death to follow his Lord's example to ask for forgiveness for those who were killing him. That faith was strengthened by a vision not of Jesus as a weak and poor baby lying in a manger, but of Him standing in glory next to the Father. He sees not the newborn babe; He sees the risen Lord, for in his day, Christmas had led to Easter; and Christ had risen and ascended into Heaven. His Lord waited for him. May we all grow to have such faith in the face of adversity. Matthew 5:10 **10 Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

May we all be so blessed.

AMEN!