

12.26.2021 The Feast of St. Stephen

It feels a little strange to be commemorating the feast of St. Stephen this morning. There's been a very sudden transition... When you consider that two days ago we gathered on a silent night, and holy night, to listen to the story of our Redemption and to fill this church with carols of praise. Then yesterday, with thankful hearts, we sang *Joy to the World* as we met to celebrate the birth of our Lord. Yet today the church is adorned in red, and our attention turns from the glorious birth of the Christ Child to the brutal murder of the first Christian martyr.

There's been a very sudden transition, and it's not only that, commemorating St. Stephen's death this morning also feels strange because our culture incorrectly views Christianity as nothing more than a relaxing Sunday morning hobby, and the church as a place where a few like-minded people gather to make new friends and to fellowship with one another. If commemorating the death of a saint today feels a little strange, it may be that we've let some of the popular misconceptions about Christianity influence our thinking, and if that's the case, then this feast day can be seen as a precious gift, given to us by the Church, that we may be reminded through the faithful example of St. Stephen that Christianity is not a hobby and the Church is not a club. We are the people of God, and as such, we are called, by His grace, to follow the perfect example of the only-begotten Son of God by denying ourselves, taking up our cross daily, by laying down our lives for our Lord.

When you consider the historical account of the martyrdom of St. Stephen, you recognize how closely he followed the example of Jesus. The parallels between Stephen's martyrdom and the Passion and death of our Lord are many. Here are just a few: Both Stephen and our Lord were tried in front of the Sanhedrin, accused of blasphemy, and of standing in opposition to the teachings of Moses. Both had false witnesses testify against them. Both spoke on the destruction of the Temple. Both faced their trial and death with boldness. Both were killed outside the city. Both prayed that God would forgive the sin of those who killed them. Both called out to God at the moment of their death, entrusting their spirit to Him.

The remarkable way Stephen's story parallels the Passion and death of our

Savior reveals the depth of his love for our Lord, and his faithful, intimate devotion to Him. This fact reminded me of the quote I mentioned last Sunday from Oswald Chambers, a quote in which he stated, “There is only one relationship that really matters, and that is your personal relationship to your personal Redeemer and Lord. If you maintain that at all costs, letting everything else go, God will fulfill His purpose through your life. One individual life may be of priceless value to God’s purposes, and yours may be that life.”

The life of St. Stephen was without a doubt of priceless value to God’s purposes, and for evidence of that fact we look no further than a young man whose name was Saul. The passage we read this morning, which described the brutal execution of Stephen, tells us that “*the witnesses laid down their clothes*” (Acts 7:58) at Saul’s feet. The witnesses were the men who cast the first stones, men who would remove their cloaks so they could more easily, and more forcefully hurl those stones. The witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of Saul of Tarsus. The man who would later be better known as the Apostle Paul was there that day, “*giving approval to Stephen’s death*” (Acts 8:1).

But St. Stephen maintained his personal relationship to his personal Redeemer and Lord at all costs. He let everything else go, even his life, and by doing so he put himself in a position where he could be used by God in a priceless way that he never could have imagined this side of heaven. God is able to bring the greatest good out of the worst evil. God redeems, for our good and His glory, all that He allows and that’s exactly what happened in the moments leading up to Stephen’s death. Imagine what Saul must have thought as he watched Stephen face his martyrdom not only courageously, but graciously. Imagine the seed that was planted in Saul’s heart when he heard Stephen, following the example of our Lord, praying for Saul and the other men who were killing him, saying, “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*” (Acts 7:60). Through the faithful obedience of St. Stephen, God was working to fulfill His purpose. St. Augustine pointed out that fact when he said, “If Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have had Paul!” Augustine’s point of view was this: no Stephen, no Paul.

The first Christian martyr, who we remember today, went to his death never knowing that his life was of such priceless value to God’s purposes, that his

obedience and his faithful prayer would help lead to the conversion of St. Paul, the greatest evangelist, missionary, and theologian in Christian history. By the grace of God we must open our hearts and minds to the reality that God wants to fulfill His purposes through our life, we must consider the example St. Stephen and never underestimate the power of sacrificial prayer, and the future significance of present obedience - what God will bring to pass tomorrow because of our obedience today.

St. Stephen is an example of what every Christian should be. We should all be so willing to let everything else go that God may fulfill His purposes through our lives. We should all be so ready to forgive and to pray for those who persecute us, so willing to lay down our lives for the One we love (John 15:13), and yet as you know, the most difficult part of dying for Christ is living for Christ, offering ourselves, our souls and bodies as a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice to Him.

Christianity is definitely not a relaxing Sunday morning hobby. The Church is not a club. Denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily is a costly endeavor, and yet when we, like Stephen, are willing to let everything else go that we may serve God courageously and graciously no matter the cost, our faith deepens in miraculous ways and our lives are transformed. Charles Spurgeon served God courageously, no matter the cost, and he wrote these words which speak of faithful service in the most difficult circumstances. He said, "Those who navigate little streams and shallow creeks know but little of the God of tempests; but they who do business in great waters, these see His wonders in the deep." By the grace of God may we spend the rest of our days as saints in great waters, to the end that we, like St. Stephen, may see God's wonders in the deep.