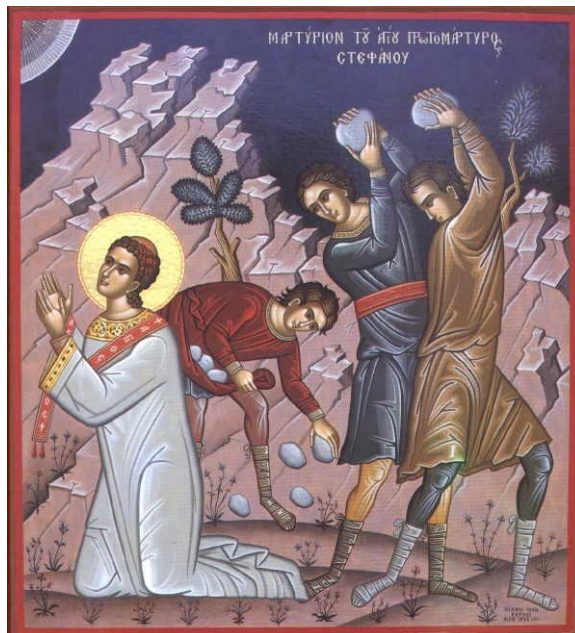


5th Sunday of Easter

Acts 7.55-60

But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.



What's going on?

This passage reminds us that being a Christian is not all sweetness and light. The first Christians were persecuted and ridiculed. This story is one

example of the kind of treatment Christians endured for their faith. Stephen has been preaching to the Jews and by the time this passage opens, has already angered them by pointing to flaws in Jewish religion. Here he tries to tell the people around him about his vision of the heavenly kingdom, in which he can see Jesus standing with God in heaven as Stephen himself is filled with the Holy Spirit. The people react violently and drag him away and stone him to death. The man called Saul is at this point one of those who will vigorously persecute Christians, until he himself is converted to Christianity.

The passage ends with the death of Stephen, who is since called the first Christian martyr. He dies using the words of Jesus asking for his spirit to be received and asking for forgiveness for those who have killed him.

Psalm 31

Prayer and Praise for Deliverance from Enemies

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

**In you, O LORD, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.**

**Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.**

**Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.**

**You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,
take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.**

**Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.**

What's going on?

After the violence of the last reading culminating in the death of Stephen, we have this psalm in which the psalmist affirms God as saviour. God is where we can take refuge in trouble, the one who wants to save us from danger, a place of safety. There are all kinds of perils and dangers in life, but faith can make a difference. So the psalm contains the words that are spoken both by Jesus and Stephen at their life's end 'into your hand I commit my spirit'. The psalmist ends in confidence in God's faithfulness. God can and will save us.

1 Peter 2.2-10

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,

a cornerstone chosen and precious;

and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

'The stone that the builders rejected

has become the very head of the corner',

and

'A stone that makes them stumble,

and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Once you were not a people,

but now you are God's people;

**once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.**

What's going on?

This letter offers a series of images of the new Christian community. New Christians will be brought up on the gospel; 'tasting' God's word was a common image in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here it is also nourishment that allows Christians to grow and mature into faithful people.

Another way of thinking about the new Christian community is as living stones, building the Church. Christians become the foundations of the 'spiritual house' of God and also its priesthood, worshipping God within it. Christians create the strength and endurance of the Church and also its energy, taking the gospel forward through Word and worship. Christians are chosen ones with a mission to tell what God has done in Jesus.

John 14.1-14

Jesus the Way to the Father

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of

the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

What's going on?

This is a controversial passage of scripture that requires careful thought. Jesus is talking to his disciples about God and heaven. In the first section, Jesus talks about heaven and that Jesus intends his followers to have a place in heaven where their fellowship together will continue. Thomas says that he doesn't understand what Jesus is talking about, - how will they get to heaven? Jesus replies that he is the way (to heaven), the truth (of God's promises about eternal life) and the life (eternal life with God through him). He then says that no one comes to the Father except through him (Jesus).

Some Christians think that this statement means that no one can go to heaven unless they accept Jesus as saviour, implying that people who belong to other religions cannot be saved. Other Christians believe that Jesus is talking about being crucified and rising again, overcoming human physical death and through his sacrifice all will be saved. Yet others believe that because Jesus is God he is present in other religions.

It is important to remember that Jesus is trying to reassure and explain to his disciples about his relationship as Son to the Father who is God. *Relationships* are at the heart of this passage. The disciples are worried about losing Jesus but he promises them that their fellowship and loving relationships with one another will be retained in heaven. When they don't really understand what this means, he explains that knows how it works because he has a continuing relationship as Son to the Father.

Again, the disciples are confused. Philip asks to be shown the Father. Jesus explains that they don't need some separate vision or miracle. The perfect relationship Jesus has with God is all the evidence they need. Because of this relationship, Jesus is able to heal and restore the sick and perform other miracles. More than this, if it seems impossible that we can know a transcendent, almighty God, then we can make it easier for ourselves by

knowing Jesus, who is a human being just like us, whose physical presence with his disciples and his words in scripture give us the kind of relationship we are used to from daily life. By listening to Jesus and learning about his life on earth, we can come to know the divine life and come to know God.